THE MAN IN THE CHAIR:
THE PLOT TWIST AS LITERARY FETISH IN EARLY EDOGAWA RANPO

by

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Abstract

In the history of crime-and-mystery fiction in Japan, few are as influential as Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965). Despite this, Ranpo is often left out of discussions on crime-and-mystery fiction as a global genre; further, when he is discussed, his more orthodox detective fiction tends to be the focus of study. By examining four of Ranpo’s non/pseudo-detective early narratives, this thesis seeks to expand and nuance academic understanding of his significance in both the broader context of crime-and-mystery fiction and that of late Taishō (1912-1926) and early Shōwa (1926-1989) Japan. In critiquing tendencies to sum up Ranpo as an Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) facsimile, I propose innovation as a mediating factor between the analytic categories of “imitation” and “inspiration.” Exploring Ranpo’s sociohistorical background and positioning him within the nascence of ero-guro nansensu (“erotic-grotesque nonsense”), I elucidate how Ranpo at once influenced and was influenced by ero-guro sensibilities.

Most crucially, I consolidate the concept of the literary fetish. Drawing on previous academic theorizations of the fetish, which position its critical aspect as an implicit, paradoxical, and inherently epistemological duality—the simultaneous recognition and disavowal of knowledge—I reformulate the fetish as a narrative device, arguing that, in these four stories, Ranpo elevates the plot twist to a literary fetish. Sensational and often sensual, the plot twists of these narratives occupy the climactic position in their narratives, and the climax they express cannot be satisfactorily resolved. Instead, the plot twist foregrounds questions of subjectivity, reality, and Truth, speaking to ero-guro sensibilities and to Ranpo’s contemporary sociopolitical flux. It is through intertextual analysis of Ranpo and Poe’s respective plot twists that I address their complicated history of identification, ultimately locating in those twists the strongest case for Ranpo’s distinction from Poe. And it is through intertextual analysis of Ranpo’s own works,
and close examination of his plot twists, that I suggest narratives like these—which I term “mystery-plays” for the way that they play with mystery—most seductively encourage his readers to think critically of what they have read, of their world, and of themselves.
Lay Summary

Few authors are as significant in the history of Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction as Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965). However, discussions of this genre as a global phenomenon tend to overlook Ranpo, focus on his detective fiction, or position him as a “Japanese Edgar Allan Poe.” This thesis challenges the reader to reevaluate Ranpo’s relationship with Poe, and to (re)consider the potential significance of four of his early narratives as they relate to the particular contexts in which they were written. In this thesis, I argue that Ranpo’s stories played a critical role in distinguishing an originally Japanese crime-and-mystery genre. I also suggest that the way a plot twist ends each story, leaving its plot unresolved, in fact most seductively encourages his readers to think critically of what they have read, of their world, and of themselves.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Katarina Lacy Klafka.
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Acknowledgments

The first story I read of Ranpo’s was “The Human Chair,” discussed at length in this thesis, and I was immediately taken with his flair for the twisted—and for the twist. Yet at the same time, reading Ranpo frustrated me. My favorite part of a mystery has long been attempting to unravel it; most of all, I love trying to predict an Agatha Christie plot twist before her detective figures out the solution. I felt thwarted by stories like “The Human Chair,” with their lack of clear resolution. Last year, when I reencountered Ranpo in another course—this time as a Master’s student—I began to consider that frustration again. Why was I so invested in the detective, in knowing—and what is it about Ranpo’s fiction that so interests and needles me?

This thesis marks the beginning of my academic exploration of that interest. It is a convergence of scholarly inquiry and longtime fandom, and it would not have been possible without the support of a multitude of wonderful people. First and foremost, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my committee members and readers, Dr. Christina Yi, Dr. Sharalyn Orbaugh, and Dr. Christina Laffin, who have provided me with invaluable feedback, guidance, advice, critique, and encouragement throughout my extensive drafting process, and for whom I am truly grateful. I would also like to thank our department’s M.A. Graduate Advisor, Dr. Stefania Burk; the staff of Asian Studies, especially Jasmina Miodragovic, Shirley Wong, Pam Francis, Oliver Mann, and Lyndsay Bocchinfuso; and the librarians and staff of the Asian Library, especially Naoko Kato, Phoebe Chow, and Shirin Eshghi. I am grateful, too, for Dr. Rebecca Copeland, who taught the course that introduced me to Ranpo, and to all the other educators who have supported and encouraged me in thesis writing, including Dr. Ross King, Dr. Marvin Marcus, Dr. Jamie Newhard, Ginger Marcus-sensei, and Masumi Abe-sensei. My cohort in the University of British Columbia’s Asian Studies Department, especially Alice Zhou, Elsa
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In the processes that led to this draft, I am most indebted to, glad of, and grateful for two people. I have benefited inestimably from the keen and kind supervision of Dr. Christina Yi, who through her generous and insightful feedback has been my greatest guide in articulating myself clearly, tactfully, and well. As always, I also depend on my mother, Ann Lacy, for her role as the ultimate copyeditor. She may wish “tropological” were struck from humanity’s collective memory, and she may find “opaque and fibrous” academic language just as vexing, but her editing acumen invariably improves my drafts to the point that even I like them.

It is my hope that this thesis does all of you on whose strength I have drawn proud. Thank you.
Dedication

This thesis is gladly and gratefully dedicated to Christina and to my mother for their warm encouragement, invaluable feedback, and unwavering support.

I also write in memory of Margaret Lacy, who read Christies with me and probably wouldn’t have liked Ranpo, but would have read my thesis anyway and whom I sorely miss.
Chapter 1: Introduction—Deductive Oversight

_Detecting Paradigms, Mystery-Plays, and the Literary Fetish in Context_

1.1—Deductive Overview: Enter Ranpo

Imagine this: a beautiful woman, her face at ease, sits down to read. Glancing around her study, she settles herself further into the supple leather of her favorite armchair and looks through the day’s correspondence. One letter, larger than the others, catches her attention, and she takes it up. Yet what she reads disquiets her. The letter-writer claims to have embedded himself _in_ a chair, not unlike the one in which she rests. He explains that while his initial aim was to conceal and to steal, his purpose has changed: he now wishes to create as comfortable a seat as possible to beautiful women—one _particular_ woman—a lady of means—an author... as she reads on, the woman becomes more and more frightened, for this human chair has revealed he is fixated on her to whom he sent his missive—_herself_!—and that he wishes to meet with her. Having already left her study (and the chair within it), she stands frozen, snared in gruesome wonderings. Suddenly, her maid enters, and the woman’s blood runs cold when she is presented with a new letter in the same dread hand. The woman opens it, ready to bolt, yet instead experiences a second shock: the “chair” now characterizes his previous letter as a manuscript, a work of pure fiction, and asks her for her input and critical support in the future.

And—_scene._

So ends “The Human Chair” (_Ningen isu_ 人間椅子, 1925), a short story written by the godfather of Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction, Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965). What do we make of the story’s frame narrative? What effect do the creepy contents of the first letter have on us? And most of all—_why_ the twist?
I believe that “The Human Chair,” like other examples of Ranpo’s early fiction, twists the boundary of fictional narrative and reality as deftly as it twists its readers’ expectations. In twisting that boundary, and those expectations, these stories function not just as narratives, but also as commentaries: on the genre of crime-and-mystery fiction, nascent in Japan; on the nature and existence of a higher, objective Truth; and on the constructedness of narrative, modernity, and identity alike. Thus, this thesis will utilize four of Ranpo’s early standalone works—“The Two-Sen Copper Coin” (Ni-sen dōka 二銭銅貨, 1923), “The Red Chamber” (Akai heya 赤い部屋, 1925), “The Human Chair,” and Beast in the Shadows (Injū 隠獣, 1928)—to explore the method and the effect of his plot twists. Through investigation of these narratives, their twists, and their implications, I argue that Ranpo deserves his mantle as the progenitor of original Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction not just because of the impact of his straight detective stories, but also for these non/pseudo-detective twist narratives, which I term mystery-plays. In these stories, and in their twists specifically, Ranpo complicates and articulates Truth, identity, and mystery at a time in Japanese history when genre formation and nationalist identity politics were at a crossroads, encouraging his readers not only to think critically of his characters—but to think critically of themselves.

There are a few terms and concepts I will introduce, utilize, and/or repurpose in pursuit of illuminating Ranpo’s use of the plot twist in these stories. I have already mentioned “mystery-play” as a categorization of fiction, and will explore it further in Chapters 2 and 4. For now, I advise the reader to keep in mind that I do not mean “play” in the sense of a play (although I appreciate its implicit performativity); rather, “mystery-play” refers to a work that plays with mystery.
This notion of “play” is also present in the concept of *ero-guro nansensu* (“erotic grotesque nonsense,” hereafter *ero-guro*). *Ero-guro*, a pervasive sensibility in the late Taishō (1912-1926) and early Shōwa (1926-1989) eras of Japanese history, can be (and often has been) defined as what it sounds like: a strange cross-coding of sexual desire with the surreal or obscene and the ridiculous. In this thesis, however, I follow Miriam Silverberg, Gregory Pflugfelder, Seth Jacobowitz, and others in arguing that *ero-guro* had both a deeper meaning and a deeper role in contemporary Japanese societal, cultural, and literary ideologies. Thus, while the sexual desire inherent in “erotic” is still valid, the term could also refer to sensual pleasures beyond sex—declaring support for, and promotion of, general intimacy—and (more revolutionarily) could indicate renouncement of the repressive policies and mores from the Meiji era (1868-1912), which had repudiated public demonstration or illustration of sexuality. “Grotesque,” for its part, refers not just to the obscenely strange, but also to the grotesque economic and social inequalities of the time—embodying both those inequalities themselves and a rejection of the dominant aesthetic norms that construed to obscure them. Finally, “nonsense” is not just nonsensical: it is also consciously parodic, ironic, and politicized, and signals “discontent with the constraining nature of received moral and epistemological certitudes.”

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1 Gregory Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 290, emphasis added. For more information, please refer to Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 28-31, and Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire*, 290-91. I must note that *ero-guro* was not popularized in the press until the early 1930s—by which point all four of the stories I will discuss in this thesis had already been published (Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*, 4). While this may make my application of *ero-guro* seem anachronistic, even essentialist, I believe the concept of *ero-guro* is neither of these things and is relevant to my discussion of these four mystery-plays, as I will discuss in Chapter 2. Finally, I would also like the reader to keep in mind *ero-guro*’s (eventual) role in the sphere of literature specifically, where Seth Jacobowitz argues *ero-guro* became a “literary master code” that balanced “potentially prurient entertainment with scientific edification or its approximation” (Jacobowitz, “Translator’s Introduction,” *The Edogawa Rampo Reader*, trans. and ed. Seth Jacobowitz (Fukuoka: Kurodahan Press, 2008), xxxi).
In this thesis, I will also be differentiating between “crime fiction” and “mystery fiction.” I define “crime fiction” by the centrality of a legally-defined crime, such as murder, arson, or robbery, and the attempts to resolve it, justly or unjustly, and “mystery fiction” by the centrality of a mystery—which may be mysterious to its characters, but must be mysterious to its reader—and the (possibly futile) attempts to gain the knowledge necessary to understand it. While these genres frequently overlap, it is possible to have a mystery story that is not criminal and that, at least narratively, is not impacted by questions of justice; similarly, it is possible to have a story about a crime that is neither committed nor motivated in ways mysterious to the reader. Most often, however, crime and mystery are united in the subgenre of “detective fiction,” which I define by the presence of a detective, professional or amateur, who is confronted with a crime, a mystery, or something that is at once criminal and mysterious, which the detective seeks to solve. In other words, I believe crime fiction and mystery fiction are sibling categories—genres that are related, but are not synonymous—for which reason I use the term “crime-and-mystery fiction” as a catchall for works in the crime and/or mystery genres when a subgenre (like detective fiction or mystery-play) is not indicated by context.

Finally—and most critically—the “fetish.” For this thesis, a literary fetish is an epistemological element of narrative itself. Imbued with a sensuality that promises, but does not necessarily provide, satisfaction, this narrative element is above all inherently seductive; further, its author must deploy it in order to question or challenge an aspect (or aspects) of their contemporary reality. Each of these aspects has its basis in some aspect of either the Freudian psychoanalytic theories that most formatively (initially) defined “the fetish,” or the scholarly reevaluations of the fetish and fetishism in poststructuralist feminist theory, which I will unpack briefly here.
In Freud’s estimation, the fetish was an object of displaced sexual desire—a literal object or (female) body part on which a heterosexual man fixated. Freud regarded this fixation as essentially a substitution, with the fetish substituting for the penis every man assumed his mother possessed, and was traumatized to discover she lacked\textsuperscript{2}: a “willing suspension of knowledge in favor of belief.”\textsuperscript{3} The intrigue of the Freudian fetish thus lies in its contradictory duality: the fetish emblematizes simultaneous, irreconcilable recognition and disavowal.\textsuperscript{4}

Poststructuralist interrogations of this duality have variously examined the fetish as subject rather than object, deconstructed it, stripped it of its heterosexist and phallocentric implications, and discussed its strategic employment in film, philosophy, and literature. Further, these interrogations have expanded the focus of the fetish from the solely or primarily sexual to the realm of affect and experience—that of the (meta)physically sensual, pleasurable, and satisfying—in which the sexual is indexed.

In my own evaluation of the fetish, I have drawn on Anne McClintock, Laura Mulvey, Christopher Kocela, and others.\textsuperscript{5} However, because the plot twist is a textual device, I am less

\textsuperscript{2} For the rest of Freud’s (equally Freudian) analysis of the fetish, please see his 1927 paper “Fetishism,” available in his Collected Papers Volume V: Miscellaneous Papers, 1888-1938 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1959), 198-204.

\textsuperscript{3} Laura Mulvey, “Some Thoughts on Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture” (October 65 (Summer 1993)), 3.


\textsuperscript{5} See Anne McClintock’s seminal book Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995), esp. 184-88, and Laura Mulvey’s influential article “Some Thoughts on Fetishism.” To briefly summarize, McClintock’s approach to fetishism focuses on reinterpreting and complexifying the Freudian fetish object, particularly with regard to the interlocking webs woven by race, gender, sexuality, and time as subjective history. Kocela and I draw from McClintock her keen exploration of the fetish’s necessary embodiment of irreconcilable, and irresolvable, contradiction, which McClintock describes as “the historical enactment of ambiguity itself” (McClintock, Imperial Leather, 184). Mulvey, meanwhile, has pioneered discourses on the fetish in the realm of film studies. “Some Thoughts on Fetishism” has provided me with invaluable insight into the substitutive, seductive, and symbolic aspects of the fetish object, repurposed here to speak about the literary fetish as narrative device. (As I draw most directly on Kocela, I will introduce his approach in more detail later in this section.)
interested in the physical (as an object) or psychoanalytic (as a substitution) elements of the fetish. Rather, I have drawn on the “fetish” as a conceptual mechanism—and one specifically emblematic of that paradoxical recognition/disavowal itself—in forming my practical definition for this thesis. The fetish, as I conceive it, both produces and represents sensual satisfaction. Yet while the fetish is deeply linked to (and coded by) ideas of pleasure, contentment, and satisfaction, its simultaneous acceptance and rejection of knowledge also constitutes a “failure of resolution.” Thus, I would like the reader to keep in mind that although the fetish (as I use it here) is sensual, seductive, and implicitly satisfactory, it cannot satisfy completely.

In this thesis, I follow Kocela in locating epistemological disruption, challenge, and destabilization (if not outright transgression) in the fetish—both overall, and as it functions in literary contexts. In his monograph *Fetishism and Its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction*, Kocela reevaluates prior views of the fetish, which positioned it as an irrational response to a rational world. Exploring how several American authors have utilized fetishism and fetish objects within narratives to destabilize and challenge social or political mores, he argues that, because the fetish is defined by its irreconcilable paradox of recognition and disavowal, it is inherently unstable. He goes on to suggest that this inherent instability not only embodies difference in the fetish itself, but also provides the fetish with the capability to engender

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6 Mulvey speaks of the fetish as a “sign” (Mulvey, “Some Thoughts on Fetishism,” 11). However, while her illuminating discussion of the fetish as sign also focuses on what (substitution for “the thing thought to be missing”) the fetish signifies, I am interested solely in the nature of the fetish as inherently significant, and not in what it may signify.

7 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 184. I will discuss the epistemological nature and implications of this paradox next.

8 McClintock wisely cautions that the contradiction inherent in the fetish object does not “necessarily guarantee its transgressiveness” (Ibid, 67). However, I believe that the fetish as I am considering it here—that is, as a deliberate element of both plot and narrative structure—is likelier to be transgressive than the fetish object, as I would argue it is the context of the object that most aids in labeling its paradox as transgressive or not, and narrative formation is more (meta)contextual than objective.

difference: in other words, that the fetish is both inherently unstable and inherently destabilizing.

While I have found his exploration on the whole invaluable, his discussion of the fetish (and fetishism) as fundamentally epistemological has been by far most useful to me. Kocela reminds us that the fetish, as it was originally conceived, represents the jarring revelation of a preconception as a misconception; its “recognition” and “disavowal” are both of knowledge. What the young boy has believed to be reality (the maternal phallus) is proven false, yet he cannot fully accept its falseness; instead, he creates the fetish to embody this paradox of (not) knowing, as an interpretation of reality. In this way, the fetish poses a challenge to the subject-individual and his subjectivity, for it emblematizes both the disintegration of the subject’s own reified “Truth,” and his realization that “reality” may be—and can be—(de)constructed and (re)interpreted.

In my study of Ranpo, I build on this framework of the fetish as epistemological destabilizer by examining the fetish at the level of the text. While the fetish object exists solely within the diegesis, the device of the plot twist as literary fetish bridges, influences, and highlights the relationship between textual narrative (plot) and narrative structure. For this reason, I believe the literary fetish, as a narrative device, emphasizes the elements of disruption and subjectivity Kocela ascribes to the fetish object—at once facilitating a more direct

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11 Ibid, 8.
12 Ibid, 22.
13 Additionally, I believe the plot twist calls attention to the specific deliberations behind the formulation of plot vis-à-vis narrativity. Particularly when we, as readers, encounter an unexpected twist, like those in the stories I will later explore, the twist makes us ask ourselves not just question of plot (“What does this mean for the story?” or “Do I believe it?”) but demands reappraisal of the specific method of enacting the twist: “How did the author trick us?” or, to foreground agency, “How did the author choose to trick us?” (In Chapter 4, I will also bring in an extratextual level, adding a “why” to the “how”: “Why did the author (choose to) trick us?”)
extratextual impact on a text’s audience, and allowing the fetish as a concept the potential for greater significance and impact.

Because, then, Ranpo’s plot twist is an element of plot and of structure, deliberately constructed; because it uses the sensuous appeal of mystery to seduce his audiences; because it ends each of the narratives I explore here, a climax that significantly does not bring relief to the quest to know; and because its emblematic and narrative lack of resolution challenges those audiences to question their own pretensions and preconceptions, I argue that the plot twist in Ranpo constitutes a literary fetish.

I will explore all of these aspects as they specifically apply to Ranpo in depth in Chapter 4. First, there are two issues—both involving the relationship between Ranpo and the West—that I would like the reader to consider. One involves the (lack of) attention paid to Japanese crime-and-mystery authors outside of Japan, while the other concerns an ongoing debate within Japanese studies about imitation and inspiration. Both are, to my view, critical factors in understanding the contexts in which Ranpo is studied today; his potential significance as an author; and the potential significance of this thesis in those contexts.

1.2—Deductive Oversight: Positioning Ranpo in Global Crime-and-Mystery Studies

Nearly all considerations of crime-and-mystery fiction’s origin as a genre begin with Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). An American poet, author, critic, and editor whose work was little recognized during his brief life, Poe has been immortalized in literary history as one of its most tragic and gothic figures—at once proud and self-loathing, a man brilliant yet brooding, misanthropic, prone to addiction, irritable, darkly passionate, and deeply lonely. For this and further biographical information on Poe, please see Wilbur S. Scott, The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Castle Books, 2002), i-xiv.
widely regarded as the progenitor of the modern (Western) detective story, with his 1841 story “Murders in the Rue Morgue.”\(^\text{15}\) In amateur private detective C. Auguste Dupin, a hyper-intelligent, rational man who uses a scientific and (supposedly) deductive method\(^\text{16}\) to solve crime, Poe created both prototype and archetype. When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle crafted Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie fashioned Hercule Poirot, and countless others imagined their own sleuths, it was of Poe’s Dupin they thought; Poe had, through Dupin, defined the detective\(^\text{17}\).

The scholarly compendium *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* suggests that Poe is also originator of another type of mystery, one that thwarts much of the detective’s quest for the truth: the “metaphysical detective story.” In their introduction, Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney define these stories thus:

A metaphysical detective story is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader—with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot. Metaphysical detective stories often emphasize this transcendence, moreover, by becoming self-reflexive (that is, by representing allegorically the text’s own processes of composition).\(^\text{18}\)

Merivale, Sweeney, and the other scholars who analyze detective stories “from Poe to postmodernism” in *Detecting Texts* are, like me, intrigued by the specific questions (and questioning) of identity, interpretability, and epistemology raised in and by un(re)solved mysteries; like me, they give special focus to the role of the author in specifically, parodically,


\(^{16}\) I say “supposedly” because, as with Sherlock Holmes later, most of Dupin’s “deductions” are, logically-speaking, *inductions*.


\(^{18}\) Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, “The Game’s Afoot,” 2.
and deliberately crafting stories. Indeed, it would be easy to apply the concept of the “metaphysical detective story” to at least two of the stories I will consider in this thesis, not only because many of my main concerns parallel Merivale and Sweeney’s so neatly, but also because one of Ranpo’s greatest inspirations was Edgar Allan Poe himself: positioned in Detecting Texts as the originator of the “metaphysical detective story.”

Yet while Detecting Texts covers a wide range of early modern to postmodern writers across national and linguistic borders, almost all19 of the authors discussed are either European, British, or (North) American: in other words, “Western.” In part, then, my intention in writing this thesis is to address this lacuna by expanding the scope of crime-and-mystery fiction as conceived of in the West to include another non-Western—here, Japanese—author: and one who is specifically formative of this genre of fiction in his geographic sphere. As I will explain further in Chapter 4, I will not be positioning Ranpo as an author of “metaphysical detective stories”20; instead, I will explore how Ranpo’s use of the plot twist functions as a literary fetish, which epistemologically reflects, and plays with, the sensibilities and anxieties of his specific historical context.

Of course, there are potent—and pertinent—issues inherent in invoking the binary of Japan vs. “the West.” I am acutely cognizant of how such an invocation risks both being

19 Detecting Texts does touch on a few Latin-American authors, and does discuss one specifically Japanese author: Abe Kōbō (1924-1993). He is mentioned in the introduction’s genealogy of the metaphysical detective story, and Merivale, in her later chapter, considers Kōbō in relation to Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” (Merivale and Sweeney, “The Game’s Afoot,” 18; Merivale, “Gumshoe Gothics,” 109-110). However, this consideration is brief, and all discussion of Kōbō implicitly presumes he was influenced only by Western authors like Poe; Ranpo receives no mention, despite his relevance to (I would argue) any discussion of global crime-and-mystery fiction, and particularly to any discussion of Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction.

20 This is partially because Detecting Texts, like most of the current scholarship on Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction, focuses on “detective fiction,” while half the narratives I explore here are not “detective stories.” I will discuss the implications of this focus—which I believe differentiates between supposedly “serious” (and thus, legitimate and worthy of academic study) and “frivolous” crime-and-mystery fiction—in Chapters 2 and 4.
reductionist and perpetuating Orientalist essentialism. At the same time, because the texts I examine in this thesis often explicitly and self-reflexively foreground the network of relationships between Japan and “the West”—and because those connections and conflicts formed a consistent focus of policy, societal, and cultural concerns in the Meiji and Taishō eras, as I will explore further in Chapter 2—I believe a critical exploration of the discourses that inform this binary is crucial to understanding these texts as a whole.

For the purposes of this thesis, the most critical ground of binary contention lies in the academic debates, still ongoing, about Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction in relation to Poe/the West. At the heart of these debates is the question of whether—or to what extent—Ranpo’s fiction can be called “original”: in other words, the extent to which one views the undeniable influence of Poe and other Western authors on Ranpo and his Japanese contemporaries as primarily “inspiration” or “imitation.” As the way in which a reader views this influence will inevitably factor into their expectations of the texts under consideration, I believe it is one of the most crucial issues to address before attempting to analyze any of Ranpo’s works.

As I will discuss in Chapter 2, cultural borrowing—and specifically, the borrowing of ideologies and technologies coded as “Western”—was a dominant sociopolitical force in early modern Japan, particularly during the Meiji era (1868-1912). This borrowing was also evident in literature. The first of two “booms”21 of Japanese detective fiction in Meiji was explicitly borrowed, coming largely from translations and transliterations of Western crime, mystery, and detective narratives, and even as late as 1951, Ranpo himself complained that Japanese authors

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would never be considered as legitimate as their Western counterparts. This relationship between cultural borrowing and crime-and-mystery fiction in Japan has led many scholars to suggest that Ranpo’s fiction, in particular, is primarily imitative. Mark Silver, for example, argues that Ranpo was afraid, or even unable, to try and create a “Japanese” detective fiction genre. Instead, Silver writes that Ranpo tried—and failed—to attain access to the “club” of Western mystery authors by using Western narrative modes and methods, suggesting that the detective fiction of the 1920s and 1930s in Japan (epitomized by Ranpo’s own fiction) was characterized by “self-conscious imitativeness.”

Ranpo himself acknowledged some elements of his stories were based in “self-conscious” imitation—and of no author more than Edgar Allan Poe. From Ranpo’s essays (such as the 1952 short essay *Dikenzu no senben* or “Dickens as Pioneer”; translated by Seth Jacobowitz as “Dickens vs. Poe” in 2008), it is plain that he admired Poe; from his writings (such as “The Two-Sen Copper Coin,” which uses a cipher similar to that in Poe’s “The Gold-

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24 Ibid, 142.

25 Ibid, 6. Silver also speaks of this “imitation” as “impersonation,” as in his discussion of *Beast in the Shadows*: “The central mystery of the novel … whether Shundei [the primary antagonist] has an independent existence of his own or is merely a phantasm created through impersonation—can be read as posing the same question about Ranpo’s identity as a writer” (ibid, 153).

I would like to note that Silver does “[contend] that the conventional notion[] of imitation … [is] incomplete at best and cannot be applied equally to all the instances of borrowing [he] explores”—although I would still suggest that his analyses of Ranpo, while interesting and well-argued, indicate that Ranpo is an author who does fall more under the purview of conventional imitation (ibid, 20). Ultimately, Silver posits that works like “The Human Chair,” “The Red Chamber,” and *Beast in the Shadows* indicate “deep ambivalence toward Western cultural influence—and more specifically toward that influence’s enablement of the narrative and its underwriting of Ranpo’s own identity as an author” (ibid, 157).

26 For example, in “Dickens as Pioneer”—although Ranpo’s focus is how Dickens, in Barnaby Rudge, “stole a march on” Poe in crafting a story with an iconic trope of detective fiction (the presumed victim as the true murderer)—Ranpo still refers to Poe in admiring terms, calling him a “master of innovation” and speaking of his “careful deliberation” in all matters literary (Jacobowitz, “Dickens as Pioneer,” in *The Edogawa Rampo Reader*, trans. and ed. Seth Jacobowitz (Fukuoka: Kurodahan Press, 2008), 201; ibid, 200).
Bug” (1843), the parallels between which I will reevaluate in Chapter 4), it is also plain that he was inspired by Poe. The pseudonym “Edogawa Ranpo” is itself an homage to Poe, given that it is in part a transliteration of Poe’s name as pronounced in Japanese, *Edogā Aran Pō*.

Yet Ranpo’s pseudonym, while an homage to Poe, is also a decidedly Japanese pun: the kanji he chose, taken as a sentence, evoke an image of “staggering [drunkenly] along the Edo River” (江戸川乱歩). Of course, I cannot, and do not intend to, ignore the reality of the anxieties (and negative impact thereof) of Japanese critics and authors with regard to the standing of Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction vis-à-vis the West, which Silver insightfully reveals lingered long after the genre was established in Japan as a “full-blown category of popular literature” with monthly output of stories in the hundreds and a readership in the millions.²⁷ Likewise, I do not intend to downplay the extent to which the genre, even in Japan, was regarded as an imitation or facsimile, or the extent to which Ranpo freely did imitate Western authors. Rather, what I am suggesting is a conciliation between “inspiration” and “imitation” through a third, mediating term: innovation.²⁸

In this thesis, I argue that Ranpo’s fiction constitutes the rise of an originally Japanese crime-and-mystery genre. According to Satoru Saito, Ranpo utilized the expectations of his audience—raised, as he was, on translations of Western detective stories, courtesy of Kuroiwa Ruikō (1862-1913), and whose expectations were thus formed by the “formal and thematic elements” of Western fiction—as “foils,” analyzing the tropes of Western detective fiction and

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²⁸ This position is shared by Sari Kawana in her insightful monograph *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction & Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). As she notes, “[the analytic] framework [of intercultural influence] … fails to account for the self-awareness of Japanese detective fiction authors who did not necessarily see themselves as indebted cultural underlings” (Kawana, *Murder Most Modern*, 19).
turning them on their heads. Undeniably, this Japanese genre was both inspired by Western fiction of the detective sub-genre and imitative of it. However, I posit that “originality” lies not in complete and radical newness, but in the methods by which an extant foreign genre was adopted, adapted, and twisted into something definitively its own. In the genre Ranpo pioneered, imitation, when it occurs, is carried out consciously and (in Ranpo’s case) with a gleefully deliberate aim to twist, build upon, and surpass perceivedly-Western devices and characters, specifically within the framework of the expectations of a Japanese readership: a readership who—informed by their historical, political, and social position in modern Japan—are likewise manipulated by reading.

In pursuit of exploring that manipulation, this thesis will first situate Edogawa Ranpo’s mystery-plays in the sociopolitical and historical context of the Taishō era and the literary context of Ranpo’s other crime-and-mystery fiction in Chapter 2. Providing a brief overview of Taishō history and engaging specifically with its burgeoning sense of ero-guro, this chapter ends with an assessment of previous scholarship on Ranpo’s crime-and-mystery fiction as a product of Taishō modernity, in which I critique the tendency to privilege his more orthodox, “rational” detective fiction in academic analyses of Ranpo as an author and historical figure.

Chapter 3 builds on the background of Chapter 2 and analyzes four of his less “rational” narratives. By evaluating and comparing these stories, I expose complex narratives of identity,

30 Or, as Kawana elegantly frames this: “[These narratives] encourage us to rethink the [conventional Romantic ideal] of originality by suggesting that in detective fiction, the measure of originality is not how ‘new’ the story is but rather how existing tropes and narrative structures are reorganized and reconceived in artful and unexpected ways” (Kawana, *Murder Most Modern*, 19, emphasis mine). Jacobowitz puts forward a similar idea when he suggests that, to an extent, “Ranpo was an unabashed genre writer ... [who recognized] that the way to do genre well was not to invent something new, but to reorganize the pieces of familiar puzzles into unexpected arrangements,” although this formulation does not account for the “reconceiving” Kawana notes (Jacobowitz, “Translator’s Introduction,” xxxvi).
readership, and authorship, and lay the groundwork for my discussion of the plot twist as literary fetish in Chapter 4, which explores Ranpo’s plot twist as a trope (informed by emerging *ero-guro* sensibilities) that at once seduces, frustrates, and inspires its reader. In this chapter, I also discuss Ranpo in terms of his literary connection to Edgar Allan Poe, and use direct comparison of their plot twists to directly address, and refute, the popular reading of Ranpo as the “Japanese Edgar Allan Poe.”

Finally, I conclude with Chapter 5, which re-situates Ranpo in the greater contexts of Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction and the paradigmatic mystery fiction of the West. Highlighting his status as the “man in the (authorial) chair,” I contend that the narrative strategies and devices Ranpo employs in his mystery-plays deserve better recognition, and more scholarly attention, for the ways in which they question identity, truth, modernity, authorship, readership, and mystery itself.
Chapter 2: Draw Up a Chair

Edogawa Ranpo, Detective Fiction, and Taishō Modernity

2.1—Crafting “The Chair”: Ranpo in His Historical Moment

Hirai Tarō was born in 1894, at the midpoint of the Meiji era. His formative years were shaped by sickliness, a vivid imagination, and his mother’s love of the works of Kuroiwa Ruikō, a Japanese author, translator, and critic, and the engineer of Japan’s first “boom” in detective fiction. While prior to Ruikō, authors such as Okamoto Kidō (1872-1939) had written tales that featured detective-like characters, these stories—largely set in the late Tokugawa era, and following a structure similar to that of a police procedural—were considered by both critics and the reading public to be a subset of period fiction called torimonochō (most often translated as “casebook”) rather than examples of a natively Japanese crime-and-mystery genre.¹

It was the fascination in early Meiji with all things Western that set off the first detective boom, giving Ruikō his lasting influence and fame.² By the time of Ranpo’s birth, “there was a pervasive awareness [in the strata of Meiji government] of the need to develop a culture that would be new, modern, and yet also Japanese.”³ Throughout Meiji, political, infrastructural, and sociocultural concerns most often pertained to issues concerning tasks of “modernization”;
additionally, the various projects of modernization (initially signified by bunmei kaika, the first of several Meiji era ideological slogans) were in large part predicated on the idea that “Western,” “modern,” and “civilized” were deeply (but not inextricably) linked. Thus, by the time of the Taishō era, Japan had established itself as an imperial power and colonizer; electric lights and telephone lines netted much of the country, while an ever-expanding network of trains carried people hundreds of miles each day; and in literature, one of the most pervasive themes was the examination of the nature of identity in a “modern” world.

As authors and critics like Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935) debated the nature of “the novel” (and more grandly, that of “literature” itself), Ruikō capitalized on his knowledge of English and the popular desire for more (and Western) things to read. An avid reader of Western mystery fiction, particularly of detective stories, Ruikō made a lucrative career as the pioneer translator, transliterator (e.g. changing Western names and settings to Japanese ones), and general adaptor of English-language detective fiction into Japanese, introducing the Western-style detective (tantei) and his tropological rationality, intellectuality, and focus on physical

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4 Most often approximated in English as “civilization and enlightenment.” For a nuanced exploration of bunmei kaika as it relates to both (supposed) “Westernization” and empire, please see David L. Howell, “Civilization and Enlightenment,” in Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 154-171.

5 While “cultural borrowing” (as I discussed in Chapter 1) remains the dominant narrative, Miriam Silverberg proposes the more agentic “cultural strategizing,” which foregrounds the subjective, complex, and above all strategic ways in which Japan incorporated, (re)constructed, and (re)interpreted elements of Western culture, politics, infrastructure, etc. as Japanese (Silverberg, Erotic Grotesque Nonsense, 30). For further astute complications of this narrative, please see Silverberg, Erotic Grotesque Nonsense, and Seiji Lippit, “Fissures in Japanese Modernity” from Topographies of Japanese Modernism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1-36.

6 I would like to iterate here that although I am focusing on crime-and-mystery fiction specifically in this thesis, many excellent academic discourses exist on the formulations and formations of “Japanese literature” in Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa—as well as the question of whether “crime-and-mystery fiction” is even a part of “literature” or “the novel” in the first place—and I encourage curious readers to examine these for a deeper background than I will provide here. (Please see Satoru Saito, Detective Fiction, and Seiji Lippit, Topographies, for more information.)
evidence and (scientific) methodology to the Japanese public.\(^7\) While critical reactions were mixed, the sheer volume of translations and transliterations Ruikō and those he inspired produced in subsequent years—and the volume of their readership—had, by the time of the Taishō era, solidified the place of, and demand for, these “reconstructed” tales within the Japanese reading sphere.\(^8\)

It was not until 1923, the middle-end of the Taishō era, that the detective magazine *Shin Seinen* (新青年 or “New Youth,” 1920-1950) would publish a story by new author “Edogawa Ranpo.” Titled “The Two-Sen Copper Coin,” Ranpo’s maiden work took inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Gold-Bug” in its use of a cipher and its centering of an amateur detective (although, as I will argue in Chapter 4, the differences between these stories are greater than they might seem). Wildly successful, “Two-Sen” set off the second detective fiction boom,\(^9\) beginning the processes by which Ranpo’s 1920s fiction would shift Japanese detective fiction from largely translations to predominantly original works—and by which those original works would solidify into a recognized genre.\(^10\)

I believe the sociopolitical flux of the Taishō era both informed and was informed by Ranpo as a writer. The shortest of Japan’s four current modern eras, Taishō was not only fluctuating, but fleeting, and the more unstable for its brevity. In the words of Jeffrey Angles, the people living and working in Taishō “witnessed tumultuous changes and tremendous cultural


\(^8\) This word is Schreiber’s, who aptly describes the processes of transliteration and adaptation as “reconstructing” narratives (Schreiber, “Introduction,” xi).


\(^10\) Jacobowitz, “Translator’s Introduction,” xv.
developments on virtually every front.”¹¹ In the realm of the political, for example, these changes included the founding of Japan’s Communist Party in 1922 and the concurrent (and often conflicting) rises of socialism, Marxism, and imperialist nationalism.¹² Legally, universal suffrage for certain men was attained in 1925, while the Japanese economic sphere was rattled by a portentous stock market plunge in 1920¹³, and the devastating Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 (and subsequent process of rebuilding) wrought change on even the architectural and natural fronts.¹⁴ Societally, the people of Taishō saw the rise of women in the workforce and that of the *modan gāru*/*modern girl* (and the fears about patriarchal destabilization through her independence and forthright sexuality that were her constant companion), while culturally, Taishōites witnessed a parallel rise in romanticizing passionate romantic love over family duty and experienced renewed tensions surrounding the place of “tradition.”¹⁵ Most critically to this thesis, however, Miriam Silverberg and Marius B. Jansen locate much of the sociocultural change of the 1920s in the specific rise of mass culture, which facilitated “a network of pleasures” (including cafes, bars, movie theaters, ready-made clothing shops, and a flourishing print cultures), and was also used to draw “an increasingly tight web of state controls on freedom of expression and consumption.”¹⁶

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¹³ Gordon describes the subsequent economic turmoil as “the economy sputter[ing] from crisis to crisis” (Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 140).

¹⁴ See Kawana, *Murder Most Modern*, 35, for a discussion of the architectural impact of the earthquake on Tokyo (“a radical facelift”).


¹⁶ Quotes from Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense*, 4. See Jansen, *Modern Japan*, 568-574, for more information on the specific networks facilitated by and within mass culture.
Overall, then, the 1920s—late Taishō and early Shōwa—were defined by near-manic instability, both combated and encouraged by the decade’s skyrocketing literacy (and access to written information, more generally)\(^\text{17}\): and I believe the instability inherent in the fetish of Ranpo’s early works recursively reflected, added to, and critiqued the instability of the time.

I will discuss this question of instability further in Chapter 4. For now, I would like to return to the place of ero-guro nansensu with regard to Ranpo in the 1920s—because although I believe Ranpo’s early mystery-plays are interlaced with (and themselves influenced) nascent ero-guro sensibilities, the formal conceptualization of “erotikku gurotesuku nansensu” in the press did not occur until the early 1930s. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, it could be argued that it is either anachronistic or essentialist to try and force “ero-guro” as a term onto fiction that predates it. I understand this concern. I believe my use of ero-guro is appropriate, however, for three reasons. Although ero-guro was not generally recognized in the press or as a set phrase until the 1930s, scholars of ero-guro trace its ideological and phenomenological roots, prior to canonization as a concept, to the sociocultural change and political unrest of the Taishō era discussed above. Silverberg specifically sees it symbolized in the iconic, and to politicians and cultural critics, dangerous, modan gāru.\(^\text{18}\) Thus, in its adolescence as a vital sociopolitical force and after its maturation as a formalized concept, ero-guro characterized—and was characteristic of—Ranpo’s specific cultural, social, and political context. I do not mean to imply Ranpo’s early

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\(^{17}\) Silverberg explains that by the 1920s, “print culture was almost universally available,” while Jansen comments that by 1930, over 90% of the population of Japan was literate (Silverberg, Erotic Grotesque Nonsense, 23; Jansen, Modern Japan, 570). I believe that in large part, it was the propagation of the printed word—particularly the printed word as circulated in for-pay periodical publications like Shin Seinen—that facilitated Ranpo’s rise to, and cementation in, fame.

I also encourage the reader to keep in mind that the rise of print culture has an epistemological angle, as well, for it involves the proliferation, dissemination, and legitimization (in print) of knowledge.

\(^{18}\) Silverberg, Erotic Grotesque Nonsense, 51.
work is intentionally, explicitly “ero-guro”; rather, I suggest that Ranpo’s work illustrates a burgeoning sensibility of the erotic, grotesque, and nonsensical, which would in time become formalized as “ero-guro nansensu.”

Further, I believe ero-guro is appropriate because, as a formal conceptualization—at least, in the literary sphere—the term has become closely associated with Ranpo himself. By the time ero-guro was popularized in the press, it was Ranpo who was the “premier writer” and “forerunner” of ero-guro narratives. With clearly erotic, grotesque, and nonsensical stories like “The Human Chair,” Ranpo’s work not only interacted with, but actively influenced and helped shape the literary heritage of what would become ero-guro nansensu.

For these reasons, I believe Ranpo embodies the spirit, not only of ero-guro by itself, but of growing ero-guro sensibilities—in all their sensual, parodic, political, and literary significance—emblematic of the “urge to create” that was both product of and response to the dual promotion and constriction of sociocultural pleasures in the 1920s. For Ranpo, this urge, beginning with “Two-Sen,” would lead to the publication of “The Red Chamber,” “The Human Chair,” and Beast in the Shadows: stories that alternately incorporate elements of ero, guro, and/or nansensu. Before I consider these works, however, I would like to address the issue of genre, and to further contextualize these ero-guro sensibilities in the literary realm.

2.2—Frivolity, Seriousness, and the Legitimating Detective: A Note on Genre

The reader may have noticed a tension between my use of the terms crime-and-mystery fiction and detective fiction. This is because my secondary sources are concerned almost

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19 Saito, Detective Fiction, 273; ibid, 237.
20 Silverberg, Erotic Grotesque Nonsense, 8.
exclusively with the subgenre of detective fiction. Satoru Saito, for example, has cogently shown how “the detective fiction genre provided the Japanese authors [of these time periods] with structural and conceptual frameworks, both explicit and implicit, with which to examine and critique the nature and implications of this overarching process [of modernization]”; Sari Kawana, meanwhile, proposes the intriguing framework of “the imagined guild” for exploring “the awareness [of Japanese detective fiction writers and proponents] that they were participating in an international genre.” At the same time, I believe it is crucial that we also consider how Ranpo’s non-detective crime-and-mystery fiction—and his less orthodox “detective” stories—affected the actual development of the genre as a genre.

That effect, to me, is exemplified by the four stories I will soon be exploring—all four of which, I believe, can be considered a part of the same sub-category, distinct from detective fiction, of crime-and-mystery fiction. “The Two-Sen Copper Coin” and *Beast in the Shadows* both feature amateur detectives, each of whom investigates the mysteries surrounding indisputable crimes—a robbery and a murder, respectively—primarily in order to satisfy their own egos. Thus, both of these stories could be considered to fall under the multiple headings of crime fiction, mystery fiction, and detective fiction. “The Red Chamber” and “The Human Chair,” meanwhile, seem to concern themselves with crime (theft, psychological torture, murder,

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21 Interestingly, while most of these sources do consider *Beast in the Shadows*, they do so as an example of a parodic, but ultimately fairly orthodox detective narrative—and one with a generally determinable ending, as they tend to read the identity of the murderer as revealed by the story’s penultimate twist. I would also like to acknowledge that Silver does consider “The Red Chamber” and “The Human Chair,” and provides well-argued interpretations of those texts as illustrating the very real impact of Western images and tropes on Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction. However, these interpretations are also based on readings that accept the final twists as the “truth” of these stories. Perhaps because of this acceptance, he reads their plot twists as the ultimate sign that Ranpo was unconvinced of these stories’ (and his own “worth,” purposefully “deflat[ing]” these narratives at the last moment (Silver, *Purloined Letters*, 146): a reading of Ranpo in stark contrast to my interpretation of these texts as powerful forces of deliberate manipulation, representative of Ranpo’s innovation and originality.


confession) and mystery (mysterious letters, mysterious tales, mysterious men): yet the “crimes”
detailed may not have even happened outside the grotesque imaginations of their frame narrators.

These four stories—particularly “Two-Sen” and Beast in the Shadows, with their amateur
detectives—also illustrate a sub-genre categorization within Japanese detective fiction: that of
the orthodox (honkaku 本格) versus the heterodox (henkaku 变格) narrative.24 A distinction first
made in the early 1920s, debates about defining these terms continue to the present day.25 As I
see it, the basic difference between honkaku and henkaku seems to revolve around the
straightforwardness and dependability of the detective—and narrator—theirelves. In honkaku
fiction, the detective uses rationality, objectivity, and the deductive method to solve the crime;
the narrator is typically reliable; and the detective is good (or at least, in the right), while the
criminal is deplorable. Henkaku narratives, on the other hand, “deliciously [blur]” the
tropological binaries—good/evil, innocent/guilty, right/wrong—of honkaku detective fiction.26
Their narrators are typically unreliable, and although the crime appears solved, mysteries remain.

While the distinction between the orthodox and heterodox has not always been drawn
explicitly in Western (or Japanese) scholarship on detective fiction, implicitly, it is perpetually
present. When detective fiction boomed in the 1920s and 1930s, critics tended to disparage or
dismiss henkaku/heterodox narratives27: and when current discussions frame “the detective” as a
necessarily rational and just figure—and as someone who satisfactorily resolves crimes and/or

24 Most often translated in English as “orthodox” and “heterodox,” the binary distinction of “honkaku” vs.
“henkaku” has also been approximated in English as “authentic” and “inauthentic” (see Satomi Saito, “Culture
and Authenticity: The Discursive Space of Japanese Detective Fiction and the Formation of the National Imaginary
(PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2007)).


27 For more information on the history of honkaku vs. henkaku, please see Gōhara Hiroshi, “The Honkaku x
solves mysteries—they implicitly foreground the orthodox as somehow a more “authentic,” and thus legitimate, form of detective fiction.\textsuperscript{28}

With the \textit{honkaku/henkaku} distinction—and the historical dismissal of the heterodox—in mind, let us return to \textit{ero-guro}. Parallels between \textit{henkaku} and \textit{ero-guro}, particularly in their epistemologically critical capacities, are clearly evident. Indeed, I would argue that the early \textit{henkaku} narratives of the 1920s—including at least two of those I discuss in this thesis—played a part in shaping the \textit{ero-guro} sensibilities I discussed in Section 1.1. Why, then, have I chosen to foreground \textit{ero-guro} over \textit{henkaku} as a discursive framework for understanding these stories?

As I mentioned earlier, my choice is in part because Ranpo himself is so closely associated with \textit{ero-guro}. Yet it is also because I believe \textit{henkaku} is in a way limited by its use as a genre categorization—and particularly, one with a somewhat murky overlapping relationship to its supposed opposite. I suggest that \textit{ero-guro}, because it is recognized as a sensibility within and outside the sphere of literature, has greater fluidity; greater recognition; and greater potential for impact. Further, I would argue that as the heterodox, however difficult its definition, seems to be articulated as a counterdiscourse to the orthodox detective story, \textit{ero-guro} too constitutes a similar counterdiscourse: but to the representative figure of the orthodox, rational, legitimizing detective himself. Where the rational detective is serious, his aims moral and just, \textit{ero-guro} counters with its surface frivolity (that is, its nonsensical eroticism and grotesquerie); where the rational detective seeks—and discovers—Truth, \textit{ero-guro} counters with its deeper implications of sensual sociopolitical critique and the rejection and \textit{twisting} of conventional morality, justice, and Truth.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} Saito, “Culture and Authenticity,” 19.

\textsuperscript{29} This is not to say that \textit{henkaku} is not a valuable primary framework—and I have only scratched the surface on the relationship between \textit{henkaku} and \textit{ero-guro}. For a nuanced exploration of their interconnections (and an excellent
Taking all of this into account, I propose that these four stories can, and should, be considered examples of the subgenre of the mystery-play. As I said in Chapter 1, “play” does not refer to the narrative structure of a play, but rather to the way in which these narratives play with their characters, readers, and generic sensibilities. Their unreliable narrators and commitment to eventual obfuscation, rather than illumination, of the “reality” or “Truth” of the situation; their ero-guro imagery and epistemological implications—both of these inform the ultimate sense of play I read in these narratives. I say “mystery,” meanwhile, because none of these works primarily concern themselves with the pursuit of justice as motivation, a mainstay of the genre of crime fiction (as I will discuss further in Chapter 3). Instead, crimes are resolved (or remain unresolved) due to curiosity, fear, lust, egomania, or practical jokes.

Since not all of Ranpo’s non-detective oeuvre falls under the mystery-play heading—and indeed, at least two of these stories could also be considered a form of pseudo-detective fiction—I will be making use of “crime-and-mystery fiction” when “mystery-play” is not suggested by context. However, I think it is no coincidence that four major examples of Ranpo’s early stories—stories that formed the foundation of the Japanese crime-and-mystery genre—all fall under the mystery-play heading. Although Saito and other scholars have focused on (orthodox) detective fiction, I believe the impact of crime-and-mystery fiction generally, and specifically of these four mystery-plays, can be described in similar terms. I argue that these four narratives function as examinations and critiques of modernity just as much as his honkaku tantei shōsetsu do, as, by their plot twists, these stories question the “rational” modern bulwarks of individual identity and objective Truth.

Further, I would argue that these stories, through those plot twists, may ironically have more to do with detecting and deduction than the most brilliant of “detective fiction,” as the placement of at least one plot twist—particularly one less-predictable plot twist—at the end of each narrative all but ensures that Ranpo’s readers, reeling from a final surprise, will turn detective themselves, reviewing the story and analyzing its narrative in order to figure out how, why, and to what extent Ranpo’s twist has thrown the preceding narrative into doubt. It is in part through this twisting of the frameworks of modernity—and the direct meta- and extratextual impact of such twisting—that I call Ranpo’s plot twists in these narratives fetishes, for they function as shocking and often sensual climaxes, devices in complete control of both the characters’ and readers’ understanding of the narrative.

I will explore this twisting and the concept of Ranpo’s plot twist as a literary fetish in Chapter 4. First, however, I intend to turn to the four narratives themselves, and reveal through intertextual analysis the conversations between, and complexity of, these works.
Chapter 3: Four Twisted Tales

Of Human Chairs, Shadowy “Beasts,” and Uncommitted Crimes

3.1—Twisting Through Time: Ranpo’s Successive Mystery-Plays

I will begin my analysis by considering “The Two-Sen Copper Coin,” Ranpo’s first published work. The story, broken into three sections, is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator. He and his roommate Matsumura are virtually penniless students; both are fans of detective fiction, and so are thrilled to hear of a sensational robbery. We hear from our narrator that a man has disguised himself as a newspaper reporter, walked into the payroom of a factory producing electrical goods, and boldly walked out with that month’s payroll. Although the “Gentleman Burglar” is eventually caught, the money is nowhere to be found, and he refuses to give up its location. We watch through our narrator’s eyes as Matsumura takes a deep interest in a two-sen coin (which our narrator explains he himself received as change from buying tobacco). In a series of increasingly odd events, Matsumura calls a blind masseur, borrows half his and our narrator’s savings to buy a shopkeeper’s outfit, and then disappears for the night. When he returns, he crows his superiority over our narrator, for the coin was hollow; it contained a cipher, he declares, based on the six characters of the Buddhist prayer 南無阿弥陀仏 (Namu Amida Butsu), which have been arranged into strings of sounds representing the six dots of

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1 Where necessary, I have retranslated from the Japanese (courtesy of the Edogawa Ranpo zenshū, or Collected Works of Edogawa Ranpo, hereafter abbreviated as “Zenshū”). Otherwise, I have striven to maintain the words of the stories’ official English-language translations, with which English-language readers are already familiar, and into which other scholars have put their time, skill, and considerable effort.

2 These are numbered I, II, III in translation, and are divided as 上、中、下 (literally “top,” “middle,” “bottom”) in Japanese.

3 “Hail to Amida Buddha” or “I take refuge in Amida Buddha.” This is the Japanese pronunciation of the nenbutsu, a Buddhist prayer invoking the Amitābha Buddha that Pure Land Buddhists recite in the hopes of being reborn in the Pure Land when they die (Damien Keown, A Dictionary of Buddhism (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2004), 186). Here, Ranpo triply twists this most recognizable Buddhist prayer, first by turning it into a playful cipher, and second, by having it conceal money—the crudest of worldly things. Finally, Ranpo twists the nenbutsu through our
Japanese braille, and which—when decoded—revealed the location of the stolen money. That money, Matsumura explains, had been ingeniously taken to a place where fake money is made: but he has found the real money, which he smugly proffers in a bag to his friend.

Matsumura assures our narrator that he quickly discovered the coin’s true nature, but concealed it—and the message it contained—out of a desire to prove once and for all that he is the smarter of the two. Our narrator at first seems pleased by Matsumura’s joy, if a little frightened by his mania. Yet as our narrator tells us, “a far different reality was already at work”—and he suddenly begins to laugh. Smiling, he shows Matsumura an alternate reading of the cipher: when only certain syllables are counted, it spells out the word gojōdan, or “Joke’s on you.”

Our narrator reveals that he has engineered the cipher (and its path to the “money”) in order to prove his own intellectual superiority. The origin of the coin itself, however, which housed the cipher, he refuses to reveal to us, explaining that to do so might someday inconvenience the “certain person” (aru hito) who presented it to him. That person’s identity, and the location of the real money, remain unknown.

Brought into the story by our narrator’s acknowledgment of our presence (addressing his “readers” or dokusha), we may feel that we are only witnesses, like the narrator, to Matsumura’s deduction. That our narrator is keeping something back from us, however, is apparent in a statement he gives when Matsumura requests money in order to go about some mysterious

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5 Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 1, 23.

6 Ibid, 25.

7 Ibid, 11.
business: “I did not protest,” he explains, “because I was profoundly interested in Matsumura’s strange behavior for reasons I have yet to reveal to you, my reader.”8 While such a statement should be a red flag for any reader of crime-and-mystery fiction, the sheer extent of our narrator’s control of the situation still comes, if not as a shock, as a surprise. Further, although we are led to believe that the money in the bag is indeed fake, our narrator’s final refusal to provide us with detail about the two-sen copper coin itself only raises more questions. Will he not tell us about the coin because it previously contained a different cipher, which did reveal the location of the money? Did he really let Matsumura spend half their savings in order to carry out his prank? Can we trust the statement—for example, that he made up the story about the man who received the coin from the burglar—of someone who has concealed from us his true intentions so thoroughly? Yet with the mysteries of the true location of the money and the origin of that crucial coin unresolved, the story ends.9

Two years later, Ranpo released “The Red Chamber” (Akai heya 赤い部屋, 1925). Like “Two-Sen,” “The Red Chamber” makes use of a final twist and double-narrator frame—yet that frame, too, is twisted, as the misguided party is not the framed narrator (like Matsumura), but the framing narrator. In “The Red Chamber,” a group of seven men gather regularly in a bloodred room (the eponymous “chamber”) in order to share horror stories with each other. As our framing narrator, a nondescript and unnamed member of the group, listens, their newest addition, a man called “T.” (rendered as “Tanaka” in the English-language translation), launches into an

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9 While some scholars have suggested “Two-Sen” is an early example of honkaku/orthodox detective fiction, due to Matsumura’s dedication to the deductive process and to rational thought, I would argue its final twist—and the unreliable narrator who sets it up—positions “Two-Sen” more firmly in the henkaku/heterodox category. In this way, however, “Two-Sen” is a strong example of how nebulous the distinction between the categories has been, and thus, is strong evidence for why debates about honkaku vs. henkaku continue today.
account of the method of play (ゆうぎ) he has discovered to fill his tedious days. In his framed narration, T. lovingly describes how he seized upon his great amusement, which we find out is murder—but murder through accidents. T. declares that, by psychologically inducing or manipulating people to unwittingly take actions that lead to their own deaths, he has discovered the perfect crime. He speaks at length about the great pleasure he takes in contriving ways to murder without murdering, explaining that in three months, he has become responsible for the deaths of ninety-nine people. Age, sex, and ability mean nothing to him; only opportunity and the relative ingenuity of the crime have merit. Eventually, however, he declares that he shall even out the lives he has taken to a hundred by killing himself. To the astonishment of our framing narrator and his companions, T. draws a pistol and shoots at the woman who at that moment has entered the room with drinks for the group. The shot is a blank, and after the woman’s shock wears off, she takes up the gun and shoots at him playfully in return—only to have him collapse, apparently dead.

Just as our framing narrator realizes that this particular murderous “accident” is exactly what T. must have engineered, the corpse begins laughing. T. rises from the ground, leering at the group, and declares that his story has been a fabrication from start to finish; he merely wanted to stimulate them out of their own boredom. The Japanese ends with a statement about

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10 Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 1, 161.
11 Ibid, 162-63.
12 T. also details many of the ghoulish methods he uses. Several involve the employment of reverse psychology, as when he killed an old woman by crying out “Look out!” when she was trying to cross a street—startling her to a stop, and causing her to be hit by a car—and when he murdered an ornery blind man by teasingly saying that there was a hole ahead, manipulating the man to believe that he is joking, and causing him to walk head-on into the hole; some involve careful scoping out of environmental factors, as when he induces a friend to dive from a cliff onto a sharp formation of rock hidden just beneath the surface. One of his methods—killing a young boy by urging him to urinate onto an electric fence—was ghoulish enough to be left out of the English translation.
13 Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 1, 176.
the Red Chamber itself, once a place of such tales as T.’s\textsuperscript{14}; yet now, “Within the Red Chamber—whichever corners we tried to look in—not even dreams, phantasms, or shadows now remained.”\textsuperscript{15}

Thus we realize that T. (which could very well could stand for “Tarō,” Ranpo’s birth name) has been intentionally manipulating his audience’s (and our) expectations. Like the narrator of “Two-Sen,” he has set up a mysterious crime for the purpose of tricking a like-minded man (or, here, set of men); the framing narrator of “The Red Chamber” even wonders whether T.’s “death” is a joke (jōdan, the same word used in “Two-Sen”) before deducing that T. must have indeed engineered his own death in such an incredible manner.\textsuperscript{16} However, T. tricks his audience not by sitting back and hoping they follow the maze he has constructed (as the narrator of “Two-Sen” does while Matsumura monologues about his discoveries), but by relating the story himself, and thus inverting the narrative structure Ranpo introduced in “Two-Sen.”

“The Red Chamber” also goes further than “Two-Sen” by making use of the double twist. We learn that T.’s gun seems to have been loaded with one blank, and one “real” bullet, in order to induce the waitress to kill him unwittingly. Yet then T. rises as if from the dead, and mocks the room: our framing narrator’s “deduction,” seemingly so rational, is in fact a joke. To me, T., by his rise from death, pokes fun at crime-and-mystery fiction itself—saying that the ridiculous stories, which our framing narrator (and we) have accepted as a gruesome truth, are far more likely to be nonsense than even literary reality. While no shadows remain in the Red Chamber,

\textsuperscript{14} The English ends differently, with the unanimous disbanding of the group as the final sentence (Harris, “The Red Chamber,” 170).

\textsuperscript{15} From Ranpo, \textit{Zenshū Volume 1}, 176. In Japanese, this reads: 「『赤い部屋』の中には、どの隅を探しても、夢も幻も、影さえとめていないのだった。」

\textsuperscript{16} Ranpo, \textit{Zenshū Volume 1}, 175.
the shadow of the truth—and the question of our own credulity—continue to plague the reader long after the storytelling group has disbanded.

Ranpo revisited this particular double twist, by which an inner-frame narrator denies the reality of his own gruesome account, six months later with “The Human Chair” (Ningen isu 人間椅子, 1925), previously dramatized in Chapter 1. The protagonist of “The Human Chair” is Yoshiko, a beautiful authoress more successful in her career than her bureaucrat husband is in his. While working through her morning correspondence, Yoshiko comes across a manuscript-like package that on second glance seems to be a letter addressed to her. As she reads it, she becomes engrossed in what the author describes as a confession of an awful crime. Like the narrator of “Two-Sen,” the letter-writer is conscious of the constructedness of his words— all the more so, as his words are written in a letter being read by Yoshiko. From the beginning, he both explicitly states his grotesqueness and hints at nefariousness to come. First, however, he launches into a story about a certain chair. He is a master craftsman of furniture, chairs in particular, and this chair is his pièce de résistance, a seat that epitomizes the meaning of comfort. Yet this chair also contains a secret compartment, large enough for him to sit inside the chair without alerting the chair’s occupant. Eventually, the chair (and he inside it) are bought for the near-exclusive use of a young and beautiful woman, with whom he soon falls in love. As revealing himself to her would be foolish, he determines to make her fall in love with him as a chair. Striving to make himself the most comfortable seat possible, the Chair soon believes the

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17 For example, “First, let me explain” in English, or 「ともかくも、この起こりから、順を追って、書いて行くことにいたしますよ」 (“Nevertheless, I shall try to proceed from this beginning, ordering [the events] chronologically as I write”) in Japanese (Harris, “The Human Chair,” 5; Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 2, 10, underlining added).

18 For example, “if and when you do grant my ultimate request and do see me” (Harris, “The Human Chair,” 5).

19 Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 2, 12.
woman feels a deep, sensuous joy each time she settles into his leathery folds; yet he still desires to reveal himself to her. Finally, the Chair declares that it is Yoshiko herself with whom he is in love\(^{20}\); he explains that he has absented himself from the chair and is awaiting her signal in order that he may meet her once, face to face. As Yoshiko (who has already fled the study) tries and fails to convince herself she must go back and examine the chair, her maid enters with a new letter. Recognizing the Chair’s handwriting, Yoshiko reads it—only to once more see a surprising and strange message jotted within\(^{21}\). The Chair begs her pardon for sending such an “impolite” message before, and explains that his previous message was, in fact, nothing more than his own humble and clumsy creative work\(^{22}\): in other words, a complete fiction, based on his knowledge that she had come into possession of such a chair. Speaking to her as a fan to an author, he asks her opinion of his work, and signs off cordially; the narrative ends with the last words of his letter.

This final twist is, in fact, subtly predicted by Yoshiko’s initial thought that the letter is a manuscript, as it is of a similar size, and as a popular author, she is used to receiving manuscripts from fans who ask for her authoritative criticism\(^{23}\). As this thought appears within the first few paragraphs, however, and Yoshiko decides it perhaps is only a letter after opening it and seeing it addressed to her, readers likely would not pay this hint much mind. Similarly, another such small narrative detail (although alas, only in English)—when Yoshiko is drawn to the letter with a “magnetic force” that parallels the “powerful magnetism” of the Chair’s idea to enter the chair—

\(^{20}\) Although he also has “no doubt” that she “must certainly have guessed the object of [his] mad passion” already (Harris, “The Human Chair,” 21).

\(^{21}\) Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 2, 21.

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 21.

\(^{23}\) Ibid, 10.
only stands out upon repeated reading. Yet that detail of “magnetism” could perhaps stand as
evidence that the Chair’s story is not merely fiction, as it ties together Yoshiko’s reality with the
account he provided. What are the “certain reasons” for which he gave her the manuscript prior
to any explanation, and without any indication that it is—if we believe him—a manuscript? What significance is there in the fact that he also intends to title his story “The Human Chair,”
and what should we make of the fact that Yoshiko’s maid—who appears only once, at the end of
the narrative—addresses her mistress in the same way as the Chair: “Madam”? Is it not
convenient that, just as Yoshiko was about to check the inside of the chair, the second missive
arrives? And most of all—why should we accept his second message as the truth?

Like “Two-Sen,” the ending of “The Human Chair” raises more questions than it
answers; like “The Red Chamber,” the ending calls into doubt the veracity of its framed
narrative. Ranpo goes further in “The Human Chair” than in “The Red Chamber,” however, by
ending with the Chair’s second epistle, thwarting our desire to see inside the chair (or Chair)
it/himself and leaving the ending even more broadly up to reader interpretation.

Ranpo’s increasingly complex layering of twists is perhaps epitomized by the serialized
novella Beast in the Shadows (Injū 陰獣, 1928), which contains not one, not two, but three
separate, narrative-altering twists. In Beast in the Shadows, we follow another first-person

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24 These quotes are from Harris, “The Human Chair,” pages 4 and 8 respectively. I find Harris’s translation
particularly fascinating, and frustrating, because it was completed in cooperation with Ranpo himself—yet while
Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination, the product of that collaboration, flows well in English, a cross-reading
of the translation with Ranpo’s original reveals Harris’s version to be full of odd renderings, highly subjective poetics, lacunae, and other translation issues. Thus, the “magnetic force” Yoshiko feels in English is Harris’s
approximation of the causative tense in Japanese: 「何気なく二行三行と目を走らせて行くうちに、彼女はそこから、なんとなく異常な、妙に気味わるいものを予感した。そして、持ち前の好奇心が、彼女をして、ぐんぐん先を読ませて行くのであった」 (Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 2, 9); the “magnetism” the Chair feels, meanwhile, is rather an indescribable appeal that entices him: 「それは、夢のように荒唐無稽で、無意味な事柄でした。でも、その無意味さが、言い知れぬ魅力となって、私をそのかすのとございま」 (ibid, 12).

narrator, detective fiction writer (*tantei shōsetsu-ka*) Samukawa. First explaining that he is noting down his horrific experience in order to gather his thoughts, as well as to use it in a future novel, Samukawa recounts how he meets, befriends, and falls in lust and in love with the beautiful Oyamada Shizuko, who claims she is being stalked by a vengeful lover from her past. Shizuko believes her stalker is a man named Hirata Ichirō, who has been writing criminal detective fiction under the pseudonym Ōe Shundei and appears to have been watching her from the attic of her own home. When Shizuko’s rich husband, Rokurō, is found dead, Samukawa first suspects Shundei/Hirata; after discovering in the first twist of the narrative that the button he picked up from the attic belonged to a unique pair of gloves owned by Rokurō, however, he shifts his gaze to Rokurō, positing that the businessman posed as the author in order to terrify his wife and thus satisfy a darkly sadistic sexual desire. Samukawa himself begins a sadomasochistic affair with Shizuko, only to discover (in the second twist) that the timeline of the glove button falling off, and the gloves’ departure from the house as a gift for a chauffeur, do not match up. Samukawa grows paranoid and becomes oddly reticent, unwilling to see Shizuko; we follow him as he questions Honda, a reporter friend, about the appearance of Shundei’s wife. Finally, Samukawa agrees to meet Shizuko at the home they have rented for their sexual romps. She continually begs him for sex, but he refuses her. Instead, he (like Matsumura) outlines each aspect of his deductive process, revisiting his prior deduction that Rokurō was posing as Hirata/Shundei with an increasingly anxious Shizuko as his audience. Finally, he arrives at the crux of his narrative. Reiterating the impossibility of the button, Samukawa explains the

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26 That is, fiction by an author who “could [be called] the criminal [type], whose only interest is in the crime and who cannot be satisfied when writing a detective story of the deductive kind unless depicting the cruel psychology of the criminal” (犯罪者型とでもいうが、犯罪ばかりに興味を持ち、たとえ推理的な探偵小説を書くにしても、犯人の残虐な心理を思うさま描かなければならないでは満足しないような作家) (*Hughes, Beast in the Shadows*, 177; *Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 3*, 21).
suspiciousness of Shundei’s wife. The woman Honda described is a hodgepodge of disparate, ugly elements: a Western hairstyle, a gold tooth, a poultice on her cheek. All of these, he says, correspond suspiciously to the pleasures (a Japanese hairstyle, large white teeth, a sensual mole on the cheek) of Shizuko’s own visage. Further, every residence in Shundei’s name is within ten minutes’ drive of the Oyamada house—and Shundei disappeared entirely from the public eye only when Rokurō returned home after two years overseas.

Samukawa’s deduction is shocking: it is Shizuko, he declares, who has been writing as author Ōe Shundei, pretending to be his wife when editors come to collect manuscripts, and who fictionalized a past lover called “Hirata” as a backstory for her pseudonym. She has, he accuses, killed her husband in order to live in the multiple identities to which she had grown accustomed while he was away on business, and has been willfully manipulating Samukawa himself since she contrived to meet with him all those months ago. Shizuko throws herself at Samukawa’s feet, weeping, but does not confess; instead, she whispers “Hirata, Hirata,” and Samukawa, seized with rage, whips her bloody. When he sees her laid out before him, he is overcome with guilt, and explains almost paternally what he believes went through Shizuko’s mind as she committed these crimes. Eventually, he leaves Shizuko in the house without hearing her utter another word, confident in his deduction but wandering along as if mad. Yet the next chapter turns this deduction, too, on its head. In twist number three, we learn that Shizuko has committed suicide without leaving a note. The narrative ends with Samukawa doubting each of his deductions, and trying in vain to find Hirata/Shundei, his “awful doubts about what cannot be changed deepen[ing] every day.”

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27 Hughes, _Beast in the Shadows_, 277. In Japanese, this reads 「取かえしのつかぬ恐ろしい疑惑」 (Ranpo, _Zenshū Volume 3_, 81).
Thus the narrative ends without definitive proof against any potential murderer. Of the three suspects Samukawa has proposed—Hirata/Shundei, Shundei/Rokurō, and finally Hirata/Shundei/Shizuko—the evidence seems most damning against Shizuko.28 Yet she does not confess, and Samukawa discovers that at least one part of his deduction was incorrect; Hirata, whom he had declared to be “a fictional character,” is in fact a missing person in the village where he and Shizuko reportedly grew up.29 Further, Honda—on whom Samukawa has depended for positive identification of Shizuko as a doppelganger of Shundei’s wife—has previously joked about incorrectly identifying a vagrant as Shundei.30 Although Samukawa makes room for this in his deduction (claiming that Shizuko hired a vagrant to play Shundei when she could not avoid having someone meet “him”), it adds a further layer of tenuousness to his claims. And what should we make of Shizuko’s last words, “Hirata, Hirata”? Was she addressing Samukawa himself? If so: is there a fourth twist concealed in her whisper? Of the four main characters, Shundei, Rokurō, and Shizuko are all accused by Samukawa of being Hirata. What if this is all a ruse on his part, and he himself is the true “beast in the shadows”?

Samukawa’s accusation of Shizuko is the climax of Beast in the Shadows’ penultimate installment, and it seems to wrap up the narrative’s main mystery in the kind of extended revelation sequence typical of detective fiction. Yet like the twists of “Two-Sen,” “The Red  

28 Kawana, for example, reads Shizuko as the undeniable culprit, whose silence at the end of the narrative does not call her criminality into question, but rather reinforces it (Kawana, Murder Most Modern, 95). In truth, I am also of the opinion that Shizuko is the criminal mastermind behind Rokurō’s death: but only as a reader, particularly a feminist reader who wants to see in Shizuko someone empowered, brilliant—a woman who uses expectations of her gender to take control of her own life. And while the evidence against Shizuko does seem strong, I would argue that the presence of the last chapter—and the fact that believing Shizuko to be the criminal necessitates we trust the deductions of bumbling narrator Samukawa—obviates any determination of the “true” criminal, necessitating that any such claim be presented as interpretation, rather than as fact. (For more of Kawana’s compelling analysis, please see Murder Most Modern, 69-110.)

29 Hughes, Beast in the Shadows, 269; ibid, 276.

“Chamber,” and “The Human Chair,” the story’s final installment—with the news of Shizuko’s suicide and Hirata’s existence—throws all that has come before into doubt: a final, prolonged twist that brings the narrative to a close, but brings no closure in its wake.

In this section, I have shown how these four narratives can be taken to reveal a chronological development of Ranpo’s use of the plot twist. Next, I will undertake a deeper intertextual analysis, revealing both parallels between the narratives, and the implications they entail.

3.2—Twisting Together: Intertextual Parallels

I am sure that even from the basic plot summaries provided in the previous section, the reader will have recognized parallels between these four texts. For example, all of the stories make use at one point or another of a frame narrative, where the framed tale is always in first person, and the framing tale is almost always in first person. In “The Two-Sen Copper Coin,” our narrator spends much of the second half listening to Matsumura give his deduction, editorializing infrequently but generally letting Matsumura take center stage. “The Red Chamber” and “The Human Chair” have the narrative structures most recognizable as frames, given that their frames are separated visually with a blank line in both Japanese and English; Beast in the Shadows, meanwhile, provides a meta-frame, where Samukawa frames both of Shundei’s letters, and one of his own deductions (sent as a letter to an inspector acquaintance), with his normal narration.

Three of these texts (all but “Two-Sen”) also feature explicitly ero-guro-esque elements. The (sexual) excitement and grotesque horror of the man fantasizing in the chair; T.’s gloating over his murderous accidents, which themselves are intensely grotesque, often nonsensical, and occasionally erotic; the violently sexual, and grotesquely disturbing, image of a leering Shundei
(supposedly) looking down on Shizuko from the attic: all of these are commented upon narratively. The Chair, for example (whose entire narrative is a study in erotic grotesque) speaks at length about the bodies and scents of those who sit on him in the hotel lobby, often comparing them to animals; he also compares himself to beasts like a “freak monster-crab.”

Samukawa, meanwhile, frequently refers to the red, birthmark-like weal—eventually revealed to be a whip-weal from sadomasochistic sex—just visible snaking from the nape of Shizuko’s neck into the darkness of her back. It is a glimpse of this weal, “infused with a mysterious eros,” which initially cements Samukawa’s interest in Shizuko, and which spurs him on to vow to help her rid herself of her (supposed) stalker. And the ideas of someone murdering through accidents, of a man secreting himself within an armchair, of Samukawa’s increasingly desperate attempts to determine the true identity of the “beast in the shadows”: all of these seem infused with the counter-rationality of nonsensicality.

Yet all four of these stories also display a consciousness of a deeper ero-guro sensibility. The poverty in which Matsumura and the narrator of “Two-Sen” live illustrates the grotesque socioeconomic inequalities of 1920s Tokyo; the Chair’s conviction that he is destined to live as a humble craftsman because he was born to humble craftsmen also implicitly critiques persistent class stratifications, Taishō discussions of democracy, and Meiji/Taishō rhetoric about “raising oneself up” in the world or risshin shusse (to be discussed further in Chapter 4). The dire straits of Matsumura and the “Two-Sen” narrator contrast sharply with the sheer luxury and excess of the human Chair’s chair itself—which, if you will recall, is large enough to hold a man within it and made wholly from leather and expensive wood—as well as with Yoshiko and Shizuko’s

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31 Harris, “The Human Chair,” 10.

32 In Japanese, 「不思議にもエロチックな感じを与えた」 (Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 3, 23).
expansive houses, which were themselves implicitly possible due to the dual salaries of Yoshiko and her bureaucrat husband and the fruits of Rokurō’s shipping empire. All of these things—Matsumura’s costumes and the two-sen coin itself, the chair, the luxurious houses—as well as the “Two-Sen” narrator’s seemingly blasé treatment of their meagre savings in order to play a prank on his roommate, also speak to the Taishō cultivation of a commodity/consumer culture that was, at times, all-consuming. Further, while T.’s devious, horrifying schemes were originally a reaction to his deep-seated boredom with the world, his boredom itself was caused by the excess of time with which he found himself, and his schemes themselves were facilitated by both idleness and spare income. And as I will explore in Chapter 4, most of all, the final twists of these stories realize nansensu’s implicit rejection and critique of epistemological “Truths.”

Another related triad (all but Beast in the Shadows) involves the time of publication, for three of the stories were written and published in the relatively fleeting Taishō era. As I explored in Chapter 2, it was in Taishō that detective fiction (and crime-and-mystery fiction in general) was established as a genre, largely due to the popularity and influence of stories like these. As Saito explains, in Taishō, detective fiction was reworked from pre-Meiji narratives of shifty police informants into tales of men who, by use of rationality and psychoanalysis, illuminated the unknown (the “Other”) and stood forth as “hero[es],” a shift that Saito argues, and I agree, was enabled and informed by the turbulence of the time.33

Particularly given Saito’s emphasis on the detective in Taishō as hero, truth-seeker, justice-giver, and clarifier of the “Other,” then, I find it interesting (and significant) that all four of these narratives feature, in one way or another, obfuscating narrators who—whether or not

33 Quotes from Saito, Detective Fiction, 6 and 11 respectively.
they identify themselves as (amateur) detectives—outright lie, withhold information, explicitly either cast doubt upon or directly doubt their own statements, or are otherwise unreliable. The Chair and Samukawa both comment on their own sincerity, the irony of which appears to be lost on (at least) Samukawa, who tells us from the outset that “there are few as virtuous” as he is, and assures us that he lacks even “the slightest trace of evil” within him—claims that ring hollow when he describes the debauched lifestyle he and Shizuko come to maintain at their sexual den, in particular the way he whips her on their last night together. The Chair, meanwhile, initially beseeches Yoshiko to believe that, despite his ugliness and the depth of his crimes, he has “burned with a fervent, consuming passion,” which, although placed in contrast to his ugliness, seems to make him all the more twisted by the end of his narrative. His passion seems even more suspicious just two sentences later in Japanese (cut from the English), when he declares that he has always been attracted by a variety of luscious, luxurious “dreams,” and his sincerity seems fake when his second letter arrives. Samukawa, by couching his story as notes for a future novel, blurs the line between fact and artistic license even more, while the Chair and T. commit the ultimate act of unreliability when they gleefully refute their entire narratives, claiming that both were acts of fiction.

Further, the Chair and the “Two-Sen” narrator each say at one point that they will comment on something at a later date—signifying both that they have more information and are refusing to give it to us at the time, and that they are aware of their extra-textual audience. The narrator of “Two-Sen,” after introducing himself, Matsumura, and their shared envy,

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34 Both quotes are from Hughes, Beast in the Shadows, 177.
35 「世にも烈しい情熱を燃やしていたのでございます」(Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 2, 10).
36 「甘美な、贅沢な、種々さまざまな「夢」に憧れていたのでございます」(ibid, 10). As can be seen here, the quotation marks around “dream[s]” are present in the original.
interrupts himself. Saying “let me begin, first, with a brief account of the thief’s story,” and explaining that this story “has important bearing on the tale that I am about to tell,” he launches into an account (drawn from the newspapers) of the thief’s brilliant scheme—frequently editorializing with remarks like “[the manager] should have known better” and “so much for what [the thief’s disguise would] reveal!” After this, he continues to acknowledge his external audience, most crucially—as previously stated—when he remarks that he holds information he has not yet revealed to us.38

Samukawa, as well, is prone to editorializing and interruption, yet rather than cementing his position as the narrative mastermind, his editorializations make him seem all the more foolish. With each new declaration that he has found the true beast in the shadows, his credibility drops39; further, throughout his narrative, he ends sentences with kashiras (“…, I wonder”) and de-arōs (“…probably”), turns of phrase that are approximated in the English translation more-or-less uniformly with the word “perhaps.” The specifically sentence-final position of these words in Japanese, however, means that each of these sentences ends with Samukawa’s doubt—making him seem less assured than he purports to be, and likewise throwing his claim that his interest in the case is like the (rational and assured) “scientific deduction of a sleuth” into suspicion. While in the very first paragraphs, Samukawa declares that he is “a detective type,” an author “of very sound character whose only interest is in the intellectual process of deduction and who is indifferent to the criminal’s psychology,” it is that very psychology which tortures him at the

37 Quotes are from Angles, “Two-Sen,” pages 271, 272, and 273 respectively.
38 As in statements like “let me skip ahead,” “Doubtless you, my reader, have already guessed,” “[the location of the money] has tremendous bearing on the plot of my narrative,” and “As my readers have no doubt surmised” (Angles, “Two-Sen,” pages 273, 274, 275, and 279 respectively).
39 Hughes, Beast in the Shadows, 177.
end—and his particular interest in Shizuko, while it turns (at least, to Samukawa) more rational and detective-like, begins on a lustful note.40

Finally, I would like the reader to note that while the orthodox detective is a figure of justice, his aims generally moral, in these narratives, justice is never satisfied. Although the robber in “Two-Sen” is apprehended, justice is unfulfilled: the stolen money (so far as we are aware) remains missing, Matsumura’s deduction disproved as a “joke.” In Beast in the Shadows, Samukawa purports to be motivated by the just and moral purpose of finding and revealing Shizuko’s stalker, and later, Rokurō’s murderer; I would argue, however, that his primary motivation is not moral justice, but rather a consuming (and relatively immoral, by society’s standards) lust for Shizuko. Further, although he eventually claims she is the murderer, her suicide prevents him from bringing her to justice—as do his increasing doubts about his final series of deductions. Like Samukawa, T. does concern himself with justice. Yet T.’s concern is with an almost anti-justice: the gleeful, grotesque, and deliberate flouting of justice through his insidious, and definitely amoral, methods of murder. Thus, although the pursuit of justice is peripheral to “Two-Sen” and “Red Chamber,” and (supposedly) central to Beast in the Shadows, ultimately, their narrators—in stark contrast to orthodox detectives—reject, defy, or parody that quest; similarly, by their often gleefully unrepentant criminal, sadistic, or otherwise transgressive actions, these narrators reject the orthodox detective’s conventional morality.

The final parallel to which I would like to draw attention is the internal and external presence of readers—and of writers—in these narratives. The “Two-Sen” narrator, as I have said, speaks to “[his] reader,” while both he and Matsumura himself are professed fans of detective

40 Both quotes are from Hughes, Beast in the Shadows, 177. C.f. Ranpo, Zenshū Volume 3, 21.
fiction (Matsumura comparing himself to Sherlock Holmes at one point); the Chair directly addresses Yoshiko, his reader, who is herself an author, and in his final letter, claims to be an author himself; and *Beast in the Shadows* features two authors, Samukawa and Hirata/Shundei, who refract into at least one more: Shizuko (if we believe Samukawa’s final deduction, that is).

All of these parallels work to aid the most critical of them all: the plot twist. The use of frame narratives, the addressing of a disembodied “readership” by first-person narrators, the explicit narrative selection of what information is being conveyed and when, and the presence of writers and readers itself all call attention to the nature of the narratives as both deliberately constructed, and keenly aware of their own construction. The unreliability of the narrators, meanwhile, casts doubt on the veracity, believability, and (fictional) reality of the narratives they relate. Especially in “The Red Chamber” and “The Human Chair,” this doubt involves problematizing and complicating the issue of an external and objective “Truth” itself; in all four narratives, the narrators’ unreliability helps to complicate, articulate, and disarticulate questions of *identity*.

Here, “identity” refers to identities writ large—including positional identities, like “reader” or “listener”; professional identities, like “author” or “detective”; ontological/existential identities, like “human” or “chair”; sexed/gendered identities, like “man” or “woman”; identities of consequence, like “murderer”; and the (supposedly objective) individual identity encapsulated in a name—and the blurred, complicated, and otherwise twisted relationships between them all. In “Two-Sen,” a robber disguises himself as a reporter and makes off with thousands of yen. Two students—also readers—become detectives; one disguises himself as a shopkeeper so thoroughly that his friend has trouble recognizing him at first; and, at the last hurdle, one of them

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reveals that he has been in the position, not of the adoring schmuck, but of the puppeteering author himself. In “The Human Chair,” a writer becomes a reader becomes a victim (or does she?) of a crime; a man becomes a chair becomes an author; and a chair—once beloved of our frame protagonist, Yoshiko—seems to take on human agency and identity of its own. In “The Red Chamber,” a group of storytellers become listeners; a storyteller becomes a murderer, and reverts back to being a storyteller (or does he?). He relates chilling narratives of murderous orchestration, where death is carried out unwittingly by its victims, questioning even the identity of his crimes as crime.

In *Beast in the Shadows*, identity takes on an almost farcical role, as Raño twists ideas about and relationships between positional identities (“reader”), action-based identities (“author” or “murderer”), gendered identities, and individual identities. Samukawa alternately ascribes the real identity of “Ōe Shundei”—the “beast in the shadows”—to jilted lover Hirata Ichirō, sadistic businessman Oyamada Rokurō, and masochistic, devious beauty Shizuko, ultimately being unable to determine if his final deduction—that Shizuko has played the triple roles of herself, Shundei as Hirata, and Shundei’s wife—holds any validity. Every deduction he makes is complicated and caricatured on a metatextual level, as well, as the names “Hirata Ichirō” (平田一郎), “Ōe Shundei” (大江春泥), and “Samukawa” (寒川) all bear some level of resemblance to either “Hirai Tarō” (平井太郎) or “Edogawa Ranpo” (江戸川乱歩), and every story ascribed to Shundei/Hirata is also parody of a story by Ranpo himself. Saito and others have also commented on the textual implications of this self-insertion, whereby Ranpo can be identified at once with Shundei/Hirata, Samukawa, and—via Shundei—Shizuko.

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42 I am grateful to Jacobowitz for clearly delineating these puns (Jacobowitz, “Translator’s Introduction,” xxxix).
In these stories, Ranpo questions not only issues of how his characters see or identify themselves (as detectives, heroes, saviors, students, authors, murderers), but of how they are seen by, and interact with, others. Students become detectives, become storytellers; storytellers become pranksters; humans become chairs (or do they?); chairs are startlingly, frighteningly human; murder is an accident; accidents are murderous; women become male authors, and male authors portray themselves as women—and throughout everything, readers become writers, and writers become readers. In this way, I believe “identity” in Ranpo works both at the level of the plot, with what occurs within his narratives, and also at the level of the text. By foregrounding and complicating the positional relationship between author and reader, these stories invite us to recognize and rethink ourselves as the readers of the text at hand: and, more broadly, of how we exist in, and relate to, our extratextual world.

Thus, throughout these stories, “identity” is articulated onto, only to be disarticulated from, chairs, crime, and pseudonyms; “Truth” is discovered, only to be disproved, denied, or complicated, and is never fully revealed; Ranpo’s readers’ horizon of expectations—the set of expectations articulated by the specific historical, social, political, and literary moment in which a reader reads, and lives—43—are manipulated, even ridiculed: and the crux of these articulations, disarticulations, complications, and manipulations is the story-ending plot twist.

Chapter 4: We’ve Been Ranpo’ed

*Ranpo, Poe, and The Plot Twist as Epistemological Fetish*

4.1—Ran/Poe: An Intertextual Distinction

I believe that the plot twist in these stories, like Ranpo’s articulation of identity, works on two levels, which, taken in conjunction, allow its influence and significance greater scope. At the narrative level, these twists—aided by previous suspicions that their narrators are not all they appear to be, and by the other narrative parallels I have explored—are most significant in that they complicate questions of fact, identity, and of an objectively-extant “Truth” itself. However, it is at the textual level that I locate the most significance in these stories: specifically, the fact that, although our narrators construct their narratives, it is Ranpo, as author, who constructs our narrators. All of their unreliability, their doubt, their refutations, their jokes, are due to the deliberation of an external, authorial force. It is a force, furthermore, that *deconstructs* tropes of Western crime-and-mystery fiction—the cipher; the double-identity; the rational detective and his sycophantic friend; the author as truth-seeker; the femme fatale; the unreliable narrator; the perfect crime—even as it *reformulates* them in the streets and homes of Tokyo, with a simple two-sen coin, with the sultry dip of a kimono’s neckline: in other words, an iconographically Japanese context, intimately familiar to his city-dwelling readers, which Ranpo both articulates and complicates by that same twist.1 Thus, like the Human Chair himself, a frame that may seem objectively Western in fact is more actively, autonomously, and authorially Japanese than meets the eye.

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1 While I will not be going into the complexities of biological sex or gender in this thesis, I would like to note that Ranpo’s use of Japanese iconography is informed—and complicated—by the fact he is a man. For example, in *Beast in the Shadows*, Ranpo’s use of Shizuko’s kimono as the specific facilitator of her body’s *eros* both objectifies her sexually and fetishizes the kimono in the more straightforward articulation of a fetish discussed in the Introduction.
This reformulation alone, however, is not enough to distinguish Ranpo from his punny namesake, Edgar Allan Poe. It is thus here that I would like to resituate Ranpo in consideration with Poe. I stated in Chapter 1 that I reject the designation of Ranpo as a “Japanese Edgar Allan Poe”—a designation that has taken not only directly nominative, but also referential and visual forms over the years. I would argue that considering Ranpo a Japanese version of Poe implicitly presumes (at best) that Ranpo only has merit insomuch as he reflects the so-called standard created and symbolized by Poe, lacking value of his own, and (at worst) that Ranpo is little better than an imitation of Poe. I also reject this reading of Ranpo as Poe on more practical grounds: for even if we disregard the iconographic and geographic “Japaneseness” of Ranpo’s stories, is Ranpo as an author actually that much like Poe?3

As I discussed in Chapter 1, Poe is positioned generally as the originator of both the classical and metaphysical detective story paradigms, as well as of most of the tropes of crime- and-mystery fiction.4 In particular, Detecting Texts makes a strong and nuanced case for Poe’s works, in their “self-reflexive, philosophical, consciously literary” configuration, as the historical foundation (or, as Merivale refers to it, “prefiguration”) of the metaphysical detective story.5 While I agree that Poe originated this type of mystery, I do not believe that the “metaphysical detective story” label is appropriate for Ranpo’s work—at the very least, not for those stories I

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2 For example, the first translation of Ranpo’s tales available in English, Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination, directly positions (through its title) Ranpo’s works as “Japanese” versions of Poe’s Tales of Mystery and Imagination, and by extension, positions Ranpo as a “Japanese” Poe.

3 Other scholars, including Kawana and Jacobowitz, have adeptly and aptly challenged this “Ran/Poe” narrative in passing in larger analyses; to my knowledge, however, no formal academic attempt has been made to refute this reading on the grounds of literary analysis.


5 Merivale and Sweeney, “The Game’s Afoot,” 4; Merivale, “Gumshoe Gothics,” 104.
discuss in this thesis. At the most basic level, I am reluctant to apply “metaphysical detective story” to Ranpo because that conceptual categorization privileges the narrative role of a detective. In Chapter 2, I framed this privileging as “the legitimating detective,” referencing the pattern in crime-and-mystery studies where scholars tend to focus on the more rational subgenre of orthodox detective fiction, often discounting or downplaying the potential impact of heterodox and non-detective stories. Thus, “metaphysical detective story” would only possibly be nominally accurate for two of the narratives (“Two-Sen” and Beast in the Shadows) I analyze here.

Even if we set aside the issue of detective-favoring, I believe Ranpo’s mystery-plays go much further than the typical metaphysical detective story. If the metaphysical detective story “parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions,” Ranpo enhances that subversion by also playfully deconstructing crime-and-mystery’s now-conventional tropes, like the femme fatale (in Shizuko) and the unreliable narrator (in the Chair and others)⁶; similarly, if a metaphysical detective story’s confounding of the quest for closure through this subversion effectually “ask[s] questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot,” in Ranpo, it is not only the subversion of conventions, but the deliberate framework of the narrative that confounds this quest.⁷ As I have argued, I believe this conscious framing is epitomized by his judicious use of the plot twist. And it is in the specific deployments of the plot twist in his mystery-plays—their contexts, their placements, and their psychological and epistemological effects—that I perceive the most critical distinction between

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⁶ Merivale and Sweeney, “The Game’s Afoot,” 2.
⁷ Ibid, 2.
metaphysical detective stories, represented by their progenitor Poe, and the tales of Edogawa Ranpo.

Beginning with the sensational twist of “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe made use of frequent plot twists in his work.\textsuperscript{8} However, while both “Rue Morgue” (and its popular successor, “The Purloined Letter”) contain clear plot twists, both are revealed—and are explained in full—by their protagonist, detective Dupin, in the middle-end of the narratives.\textsuperscript{9} Through their ultimate resolution, therefore, I would argue that neither twist raises specifically epistemological questions in the way Ranpo’s use of the twist invariably does. Instead, I believe that the most frequent epistemological questioning arising in Poe’s works involves events that precede—rather than, as in Ranpo, occur within—his narratives, particularly the prior circumstances (and from those, the motivations) of his characters. For example, I invite the reader to consider Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” (1840). Although “Man of the Crowd” predates “Rue Morgue” (the ostensible original “detective story”), Merivale and others in Detecting Texts comment extensively on the lack of motivation provided in “Man of the Crowd,” and argue that this lack cements the story’s place in the lineage of both Poe’s “tales of ratiocination,” and the metaphysical detective story at large.

\textsuperscript{8} All citations of Poe in the following paragraphs are taken from The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Castle Books, 2002), hereafter abbreviated as “Complete Tales.”

\textsuperscript{9} “Rue Morgue” (which, like “Two-Sen” and “The Red Chamber,” is related entirely by an unnamed narrator) first introduces Dupin to Poe’s readers. The narrative begins with a lengthy, glowing summary of the qualities of the “analyst,” whose primary pleasure and pursuit is in “disentangling” puzzles (Poe, Complete Tales, 117, emphasis in original). We then meet (through our narrator) C. Auguste Dupin, an eccentric “young gentleman” residing in Paris, and (as we discover) a first-rate analyst. When presented with a horrible, and seemingly impossible, crime—the double murder of a wealthy woman and her daughter—Dupin uses Poe’s signature method of “ratiocination” to deduce the circumstances, and perpetrator, of the crime (Scott, “Introduction,” x). While the circumstances are extraordinary, it is the perpetrator who most astounds our narrator, for Dupin reveals an orangutan, escaped from a seafaring vessel, is responsible (Poe, Complete Tales, 134-135). His deduction soon proved to be fully correct, Dupin slyly comments on the bumbling police prefect whose authority he has (somewhat) flouted. In “The Purloined Letter,” the twist comes even earlier (when Dupin unexpectedly produces the titular letter, to the consternation and grudging respect of the prefect), and is similarly neatly resolved by the end of the tale (ibid, 190).
The story itself follows an unnamed and unidentified narrator as he notices, tails, and analyzes the eponymous (and also unnamed and unidentified) “man of the crowd.” Our narrator is sitting in a café, engaged in idle and inquisitive people-watching, when at length he notices a man who repulses—and compels—him like no other. The man’s expression inspires a cacophony of feeling, including “the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of supreme despair.” From this confusion rises an intense desire to know more about the man and the “wild … history” that must be “written within [his] bosom.” Our narrator, who has followed the man until even daybreak, ultimately ceases pursuit, concluding mysteriously that the man’s ability to melt into the crowd marks him as “the type and genius of deep crime.” Yet we never learn precisely who our narrator is, or what has transpired in his life to make him so interested in crime; likewise, we do not know the prior circumstances of “the man of the crowd,” and must take our narrator’s word that the man—who we only witness walking innocuously around the streets of London—must be a criminal genius. According to Merivale, these unresolved mysteries form the greater part of the narrative’s metaphysicality.

“There are some secrets,” our narrator tells us at the outset, “which do not permit themselves to

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10 Poe, *Complete Tales*, 430.
11 Ibid, 428.
12 Ibid, 428.
13 Ibid, 430.
14 This argument that could also be applied to stories like “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846), wherein our (named) narrator Montresor relates to us the execution of a devious, murderous revenge plot. In “Amontillado,” Montresor takes his friend Fortunato down to the cellars of his home, ostensibly in order to provide him with some fine Amontillado; in fact, Montresor’s goal is to exact revenge for unspecified injuries and wrongs. Once in the cellar, our narrator chains a highly inebriated Fortunato to a wall, and methodically, ghoulishly bricks his “friend” in to perish in his forced tomb. The epistemological questioning in this tale arises by contrast between the cruelty of Montresor’s crime against his friend and the general lack of clear motivation for his heinous deed, for although we know our narrator Montresor’s name, we do not know why he wishes to kill Fortunato—so horribly, or in the first place.
be told.” If we follow Merivale, however, it is precisely these unknowable secrets—secrets that come from events that precede the narrative, and are not revealed within it—that encourage the pursuit of knowing.

Further, I maintain that—however much Poe’s readers might question his characters’ motivations—Poe’s particular incorporation of plot twists into his narratives, even at the end of his narratives (which I will discuss more with regards to Ranpo in the next section of this chapter), does not elicit the same epistemological questioning of plot as “reality” (and through that reality, of narrative itself), which Ranpo’s plot twists do. Take, for example, Poe’s story “The Black Cat” (1843). An unsettling tale of alcoholism, animal slaughter, and murder, “Black Cat” follows an unnamed narrator who relates to us his deep love for animals—particularly a large black cat, Pluto, who is his constant companion. Years of alcohol abuse, however, twist the man’s personality; he becomes moody, resentful, and violent. As Pluto ages and becomes needier, the man comes to hate him (even gouging out one of Pluto’s eyes), until eventually, in a fit of mad rage, he hangs his faithful cat in the garden. That night, his home burns down, leaving on the wall an image of what is apparently a cat in a noose.

Deeply troubled by this image (which he attempts to rationalize away as Pluto’s body falling into some lime on the wall), our narrator again descends into drink, until one day another black cat—identical to Pluto in every aspect but for the white patch on his chest—appears before him. Our narrator takes him home, but while his wife grows fonder of this second Pluto, he comes to hate and fear the cat. One day, unable to bear his “darkest and most evil of thoughts,” and incensed by the cat running in front of his feet on the stairs, the man swings an axe at the

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15 Poe, Complete Tales, 425.
creature—missing and instead killing his wife with a single blow.\textsuperscript{16} Terrified of the consequences, our narrator decides to wall his wife’s body up within their unfinished cellar. When days have passed, and the cat has not reappeared, our narrator rejoices… and in a spurt of reckless joviality, shows the policemen who have come to question him about his wife’s disappearance the sturdiness of the walls in the cellar, knocking on the wall that conceals his wife’s corpse. A monstrous wailing arises, and our narrator watches in horror as the policemen tear down the wall and reveal his wife’s corpse—and the cat sitting atop her head. The story ends as the man declaims in despair that he has unwittingly “walled the monster [the titular cat] up within the tomb.”\textsuperscript{17}

While in “Black Cat,” the way in which the cat entered the tomb (and the question of whether or not that cat is, spookily, the reincarnation or zombification of his wife’s dead cat Pluto) remain a mystery, the narrative presents as fact that the man did kill Pluto; that he has murdered his wife; and that, caught out in front of the police, the cat was walled up with her corpse. Although the narrator may not “expect or solicit belief” for his tale from us, the elements he expresses are unbelievable are the potentially supernatural elements, not the twist itself.\textsuperscript{18} Thus—unlike Ranpo’s twists—the narrative twist in “Black Cat,” although it ends the story, does not change the presentation of the plot that has preceded it.

The ways in which Ranpo and Poe utilize first-person narrators are also distinct, particularly in their discrete formulation of how narrators experience with terror (Poe) or relate with pleasure (Ranpo) elements of psychological horror. That is, in Ranpo, the horrifying—

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 207.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 209.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 203. Those elements—specifically, the image of the hanged cat on the wall, the potential reincarnation of Pluto, and the growing shape of the noose on the second cat’s chest—could also be rationalized as evidence of the narrator’s fraying mental state.
grotesque—elements are related by first-person narrators who present themselves as methodical, precise, and rational, and who either (like T. and the Chair) take pleasure in the horror they describe—horror that, according to them, has already happened—or else (like Samukawa) are less psychologically horrified than they are physically repulsed. In Poe, however (most famously in “Black Cat,” “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842), and “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843)), it is most often a first-person (male) narrator who draws his audience into his own trepidation and terror, as he himself experiences them. Recall “Black Cat.” While the narrator does position his story as something that has already happened (and thus, as something he is relating), the horror of the story is something he experienced as horror, not pleasure; further, what he fears (the gibbet on the wall and on the cat’s chest; the reincarnation of Pluto for purposes of revenge) is related to psychological horror through involuntary psychosis or madness, rather than through deliberate psychological manipulation (like T.’s murderous tricks, or the Chair’s deceptive manuscript).

I would also argue that this narrative distinction (with regard to psychological horror) is not only one of surface guro, but one of nansensu. The events related by Poe’s narrators, like walling a cat inside a makeshift tomb, are gruesome and horrifying. However, the potentially “unbelievable” elements are unbelievable because of the spooky supernaturality they suggest—while what is unbelievable about a narrative like “Human Chair” or “Red Chamber” is how their

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19 And Samukawa himself is also relating events that have already happened.

Yoshiko, while terrified, is described with the more distant third-person narration, and the ghoulish elements of “Human Chair” are related by the Chair himself. While the frame narrator of “Red Chamber” is somewhat afraid of T., he is mostly ghoulishly intrigued (and, similar to “Human Chair,” T. himself is the one who relates the ghoulishness of his murders). Samukawa, while at times fearful, is not controlled by fear in the way Poe’s narrators often are; further, his fears are based—not in potentially-supernatural hallucinations, such as a heart beating beneath the floor or a patch on a cat’s chest turning into a gibbet—but in questions more grounded in practicality and reality: how deeply is the woman with whom he is in lust/love involved in the series of crimes being committed?
narrators present darkly, humorously twisted misdeeds grounded in our shared, and supposedly rational, reality. There is nothing supernatural about a man secreting himself inside furniture, or another murdering through psychological manipulation. Instead, the Chair and T., through their ghoulishly pleased, seemingly rational presentation, mix “reality” with a nonsensicality absent in Poe’s narratives: and, through their affectation of reasonableness, accentuate the actual counter-rationality of their claimed actions.

Even “The Gold-Bug” (1843), the story of Poe’s that most obviously and directly inspired Ranpo, is crucially distinct in narrative formulation from Ranpo’s “Two-Sen”—and again, through Ranpo’s use of the plot twist. “The Gold-Bug” features an unnamed, male narrator who has made the acquaintance of William Legrand, a scion of a once-illustrious Southern family whose finances have fallen more or less into ruin. One rainy night, when our narrator is dining with his friend, Legrand excitedly tells him about a fascinating “scarabæus” that has come into his possession: a glittering golden bug, which Legrand’s servant Jupiter declares might be made from real gold. Unfortunately, as Legrand has lent the bug to another friend, he cannot show it to our narrator at the moment; instead, he pulls a scrap of paper from his pocket and draws an approximation of the bug upon it. Yet instead of the drawing Legrand has made, our narrator sees a death’s head depicted. Legrand, picking up the scrap again, is suddenly taken with a frenzy of thought, and retreats to a corner of the room for some time with a candle and the little paper.

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20 Poe, *Complete Tales*, 76.

21 Another distinction between “Two-Sen” and “Gold-Bug”: the former does not include a racist caricature like Jupiter, who is black, and speaks in the infamous approximation of African-American Vernacular English semi-canonized in much of 19th- and 20th-century literature.
Some time after, Legrand invites our narrator to go out to the coast with him and Jupiter. Seeing his friend cheerfully, manically carting shovels and a scythe, our narrator despairs of Legrand’s sanity, yet curiosity impels him to follow. Eventually, they reach an impressively large tree, and Legrand commands Jupiter to climb it. To our narrator’s shock—and Legrand’s delight—Jupiter finds a skull on a high branch. However, when Legrand commands his servant to drop the gold-bug through the skull’s left eye and the group digs a hole at the site where it lands, they discover only dirt. Just as they are about to leave, Legrand questions Jupiter, and realizes that he had mistaken right and left. Sending the man back up the tree to drop the bug through the correct socket, the three dig furiously once more—and discover, to our narrator’s utter astonishment, “a confused heap of gold and of jewels,” and many more treasures besides, with a combined value of more than a million and a half dollars, beside a few human skeletons.  

Once they have returned to Legrand’s home with their booty, our narrator demands the “solution of this most extraordinary riddle,” and Legrand wastes no time expounding upon “a full detail of all the circumstances connected with it.” He reveals that the scrap of paper—which had encircled the gold-bug when they first discovered it at the coast—had in fact turned out to be a scrap of parchment. While it had appeared blank when he attempted his drawing of the bug, heat had brought a layer of invisible ink to the fore, revealing both the death’s head our narrator had seen—and a cipher linked somehow to the infamous, and famously wealthy, Captain Kidd. When our narrator eagerly asks about the difficulty his friend had in solving it, Legrand dismisses his concern, saying that he has in the past “solved [cryptographs] of an abstruseness ten thousand times greater.” By process of elimination (starting with the most

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22 Poe, *Complete Tales*, 87-88.
23 Ibid, 88.
24 Ibid, 92.
common letter, “e,” and the most common word, “the”), Legrand walks our narrator (and us) through the process of deciphering the note; then, he explains how he made sense of the similarly cryptic message the cipher revealed; and finally, the narrative ends with a brief rumination on the identity of the skeletons discovered with the treasure chest.25

In both “Gold-Bug” and “Two-Sen,” the location and nature of the cipher—discovered within an unassuming and monetarily valuable object (the gold-bug/the two-sen coin)—is similar. Similar, too, is what the cipher reveals—the location of a vast sum (pirate’s gold/cash paychecks)—as is the basic structure of an unnamed narrator who relates the clever deduction of a rational, non-narrating figure (Legrand/Matsumura), whose erratic behavior throughout the early part of the narrative is eventually revealed to be sane and purposeful. However, while Poe’s narrator admiringly relates to us Legrand’s successful expedition in search of gold, Matsumura’s hunt for the stolen money is foiled—his deduction humorously, embarrassingly repudiated—by Ranpo’s narrator. “Gold-Bug” ends with a question, as Legrand, in response to our narrator’s question, asks “who shall tell” who the skeletons discovered alongside the gold might have been.26 Yet this question is one of backstory and history; an interesting question to ponder, it nevertheless has no direct impact on the plot. This is in clear opposition to the final words of “Two-Sen,” in which our narrator refuses to reveal the identity of the person from whom he received the trick coin—if, that is, such a person existed in the first place: an ending that has a direct, and epistemological, impact on the narrative itself as we know it.

It is for these reasons that I believe Ranpo is neither an imitation nor a Japanese version of Poe. While Ranpo was influenced, and inspired, by the genres Poe originated, the specific

25 Ibid, 93-98.
26 Ibid, 98.
construction of his fiction distinguishes him from his inspiration. Thus, rather than labeling Ranpo “a Japanese Edgar Allan Poe,” it would be more accurate to say that Ranpo’s role in Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction is analogous to, but not the same as, the role played by Poe in the formation of the genre. It is perhaps ironic that although Ranpo’s mystery-plays (and non-detective stories in general) do not seem to have received as much scholarly attention as his detective stories, it is in these mystery-plays that I find the best methodological and narrative distinction from Poe (and, symbolically, from the West). I would argue, however, that it is precisely because these narratives are not, in construction or in aim, traditional detective stories they are able to challenge the Ran/Poe formulation as they do.

As I have explained, while both Poe and Ranpo play on idealizations of “rationality,” unlike Poe, Ranpo subversively deploys (and critiques) the expectations and methods of rationality and reasonableness themselves in the deliberately nansensu formulation of his mystery-plays. I will now re-situate Ranpo’s mystery-plays with his detective fiction, contrasting their aims and effects, and elucidating, finally and fully, my estimation of the plot twist as an epistemological literary fetish.

4.2—Zashin chōse: The Plot Twist as Literary Fetish

Saito, Schreiber, and others argue convincingly that the deductive process of the orthodox detective story, and its methodological determination of truth via “rationality, justice, and science,” gained popularity because it allowed readers of Meiji and Taishō to fulfill an “epistemological desire to understand the Other … where [that] knowledge[,] as truth of the crime[,] is posited as undiscovered, concealed, or withheld from the subject,” and, over the
course of the narrative, is discovered or revealed. Saito goes on to suggest that the detective, reworked by Ranpo in the figure of Akechi Kogorō, became at once a “hero who symbolized how Western knowledge can be utilized for the good of the nation,” an intellectual who employed his rational mind and psychoanalytical ability for the “good of the state and its people,” and an embodiment of the success the state claimed would be attainable through the contemporary ideology of *risshin shusse* (立身出世, literally “Raising oneself up and going out into the world”).

I posit that while (as Saito has compellingly argued) Ranpo’s detective fiction follows this path, the four examples I have given do not. Ranpo wrote tales with narrative stability and definitive resolution like “The Psychological Test” (*Shinri shiken* 心理試験, 1925), but he also produced “Two-Sen,” “The Red Chamber,” “The Human Chair,” and *Beast in the Shadows*, stories that—through their twists, unreliable narrators, and unsolved or denied crimes—defy resolution and destabilize narrative. If, as Saito claims, detective fiction of the 1920s emblematized *risshin shusse*, then I suggest that Ranpo’s standalone mystery-plays of the same period perhaps compel a different, punny ideology from its readers: one that I would term *zashin chōse* (座身調世), “Sitting oneself down and examining the world.”

What is it, then, that most compels a reader of Ranpo to “sit down and examine the world”—and most defines Ranpo’s plot twist as a fetish? I believe the critical factor is the placement of at least one plot twist at the end of each of these narratives. Ending with a plot twist means that all information has been given; that which lingers in the mind of the reader is the

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27 Both quotes are from Saito, *Detective Fiction*, 6.
twist, ensuring that she will be left questioning, and reinterpreting, the whole of the story she has just read. In reinterpreting, the reader of Ranpo must necessarily question her assumptions about what was “true” or “real” in that story; in questioning those assumptions, she must ask herself not just how she was tricked, but why she holds those assumptions—about the world of the story, and about her own, extratextual world—in the first place. I say “compels” and “must” because ending with a plot twist, unexplained and unresolved, ensures that the mystery cannot be satisfactorily solved, understood, or known. It is this confounding of the search for knowledge that I argue forms the basis of the “epistemological project” at play in these four stories: the way in which Ranpo, through the plot twist, inspires his readers to question reality and search for “Truth” even as he denies them knowledge of it. As Samukawa is a writer who takes up the role of the detective, so the re-reader of mystery fiction, spurred on by a final plot twist, takes up the role of the investigator as she scours the narrative she has just read for hints of the plot twist to come. Because these particular plot twists also prevent resolution of the narratives in which they occur, this reinterpretation places the reader-cum-investigator in the position of a detective, hunting for evidence in support of her own theories. In this way, these four narratives might actually promote a more analytical mind than would a straight detective story. Through the ultimate ambiguity—or, to put it in more agentic terms, the (un)interpretability—of the final, unresolved plot twist, Ranpo encourages his readers to (re-)re-read his stories, inspires debate…and turns us into detectives in our own right.

The detectives these stories create differ radically and fundamentally from the orthodox type. The reader may set out to reexamine the text, but precisely because these narratives cannot be resolved on their own evidence, her quest for resolution is likewise unresolvable; she is a

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29 Saito, *Detective Fiction*, 257.
detective in that she deduces and detects, and paradoxical in that she can never solve the mystery at hand. In this unresolvability lies both the inherent paradox—and the pleasure—of the fetish. The lack of a predetermined, or otherwise determinable, solution is unsettling and frustrating, but it also freeing in that, even as it forces the reader to confront the limitations of her knowledge and ability to know, the unresolvability of the mystery-play also encourages her to interrogate and expand those limitations through her own analyses. She can never know the “right” answer, but neither are her interpretations necessarily “wrong.” The reader-detective created by a mystery-play thus seeks what she knows she will be unable to discover, because she will be unable to discover it—the play of reading, and her power as a reader, are in the quest.

I believe that Ranpo, like T. of “The Red Chamber,” ultimately concerns himself with a deliberate sense of play in these stories. It is in this playfulness that I locate the most critical aspect of Ranpo’s interaction with nansensu—where nansensu is at once a surface nonsensicality, parody of reality, sense of unbelievability, and countering of rational thought, and a deeper codification that emblematizes, as I defined in Chapter 1, critique and rejection of received epistemological “Truths.” Through the plot twists of these narratives as they relate to fact, Truth, and identity, Ranpo creates for his readers a unique vision of Truth, whereby “the Truth” is something that, rather than simply and objectively “existing,” is a mutable and subjective entity, one to be manipulated, played with, and (de)legitimized by the combined efforts of characters, author, and reader. Similarly, identity is not a dependable and unchanging existence, but an epistemological phantasm deliberately (de)constructed by the author. Through the final placement and unresolvedness of his twists, meanwhile, Ranpo induces his readers to take up the game of deduction—played at by Matsumura’s roommate, Samukawa, and others—and revisit the narrative from the beginning. The dark, often-nonsensical humor that infuses
these stories, particularly the humor that colors their plot twists, further indicates the extent to which Ranpo savors the meta-play of his authorial enterprise. T. and the “Two-Sen” narrator’s laughter as they reveal their tricks; the ghoulish joy with which the Chair describes his furniture-bound life, and with which he makes his final claim of fictionality; the meta-humor of Samukawa, Shundei, and Hirata’s names: all of these, to me, exemplify Ranpo’s deliberate and gleeful enactment of playfulness.

I argue that, through all this, Ranpo elevates the plot twist beyond a narrative trope or gimmick. It becomes a literary fetish, the narrative build-up to which is an extended study in fiction foreplay. Sensational, often sensual, the plot twists of these four stories occupy the climactic position in their narratives—yet, like the inherent contradiction of the historical fetish itself, the climax they express cannot be satisfactorily resolved. Instead, the plot twist foregrounds questions—and, through these questions, an implicit nansensu questioning—of subjectivity, reality, and Truth. If the historical fetish object represents “contradictions that the individual cannot resolve on a personal level,” then the plot twist, as a literary fetish, embodies both the unconscious preconceptions of the individual, and the startling revelation of the existence of those preconceptions.\(^{30}\) Likewise, if the fetish, as object, “embodies a complex and creative interpretation of a threatening reality,” then the plot twist, as an emblematic and seductive narrative device, twists this, linking as it does the realms of plot and structural narrativity.\(^{31}\) And it is the plot twist, as literary fetish, which threatens, and implicitly proposes a complex and creative need to reinterpret, reality.

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\(^{30}\) McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 184.

Thus—shaped by contemporary expectations of detective fiction, by developing *ero-guro nansensu* sensibilities, and by the preconceived concept of Truth itself—these plot twists allow Ranpo to critique and complicate the boundaries between West and Japan, truth and lies, fiction and reality. Through the retroactive machinations of these plots twists, even the most undeniable of identities, the most “factual” of Truths, can be made nonsensical, pliable—and through their pliability, can reveal the artificiality of genre conventions, genre itself, Truth, fact, identity, even the fluctuating Japanese nation-state.

Ultimately, I believe that—if Ranpo’s detective stories succeed a line of Japanese authors who dealt with the issues of modern individualism and subjectivity—then his standalone, twist-ended mystery-plays, in their deliberate constructedness, teasing unresolvedness, in-jokes, and cheerfully *ero-guro* nonsensicality, play with, and play on, those issues. Yet play, as we see only too well in the machinations of T., Shizuko, and the Human Chair, is by no means innocent or simple. In these stories, Ranpo is playing, but the stakes—the identity, individuality, and Truth of Japanese crime-and-mystery fiction as a genre—are deadly serious.

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32 Saito posits that, against a Taishō “backdrop of rapid urbanization and radical transformation of the city,” Ranpo’s early detective stories “emerged and developed as successors to [Natsume] Sōseki’s project of dealing with the psychological problematic of modern subjectivity founded upon the tenuous relationship between individuals and their external environment” (*Detective Fiction*, 262). While I do not deny the influence that Sōseki has had on conceptions of “literature” (and the place of the subject-individual within it), I do think it is important to note that many other authors discussed issues of individualism and subjectivity—and many authors combined these more “rational” issues with discussions of topics germane to Ranpo’s early mystery-plays. Shiga Naoya’s “Han no hanzai” (“Han’s Crime,” 1913), Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s “Watakushi” (“Me,” translated as “The Thief,” 1921), and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s “Yabu no naka” (“In a Grove,” 1922), for example, all deal with crime, mystery, sexual intrigue, intensely unreliable narrators, the subjectivity of experience, and the futility of being able to say for sure what is “real” or “true” (the lattermost epitomized by “In a Grove,” in which six people give their wildly different accounts of the same murder—the three primary suspects each claiming they committed it—and nothing is concretely, or even remotely, resolved). Stories like these have similar readerly impacts to Ranpo’s mystery-plays—questioning truth, reality, and the individual, often in a nascently *ero-guro* context—and stories like these would have undoubtedly inspired Ranpo as did Poe; however, although the impacts may be the same, none of these authors (to my knowledge) make use of the same fetishized method that Ranpo does: the plot twist.
Chapter 5: Conclusion—The Man in the Chair

*Edogawa Ranpo as a Master of Mystery*

“I wonder: how did you find my tale? If I might presume that my humble story has been able to make an impression on you, Sensei—however small an impression it may be… oh, how happy I would feel!”

——*the Human Chair*¹

In this thesis, I have suggested that stories like “The Human Chair” work beyond the plot twist as a simple mystery trope. Rather, they twist the idea of the twist itself: at once elevating the twist to the level of a fetish, and exposing it as a deliberate narrative device. I have also reassessed scholarly evaluations of Ranpo’s relationship with Western crime-and-mystery authors, most prominently challenging his popular framing as a “Japanese Edgar Allan Poe.” By exploring the ways in which these mystery-plays build upon, reformulate, and twist the tropes and paradigms of the extant Western genre, I have highlighted the cruciality of considering innovation in discussions of “imitation” and “inspiration”—and, by extension, of merit as a subject of academic study.

To me, this innovation is best illustrated by Ranpo’s deliberate formulation and deployment of the plot twist. Epistemological and self-aware, the mystery-play’s final, unresolved twist turns its readers into meta-detectives, even as it savor its gleeful frustrating of the quest for Truth, the knowledge of the Other, that is integral to Western and Japanese detective narratives alike. In this way, although Ranpo’s orthodox detective fiction has received more scholarly attention, I suggest it is instead his heterodox and non/pseudo-detective stories—

¹ My translation. The original reads: 「如何でございましたでしょうか。もし拙作がいくらかでも、先生に感銘を与え得たとしますれば、こんな嬉しいことはないのでございますか」 (Ranpo, *Zenshū Volume 2*, 21).
emblematized by the plot twists of the four mystery-plays I have explored in this thesis—that most seductively, and thus, most effectually, encourage his readers to sit down and question the ever-changing world in which they live.

Certainly, this argument has limitations, most obviously that of scope (for I examine only four of Ranpo’s stories here). Even so, it is my hope that this thesis inspires others to (re)engage with crime-and-mystery fiction at large, and with Ranpo himself. Further explorations could, for example, expand my focus on these four stories to include a greater number, if not all, of the works in Ranpo’s oeuvre. What impact do his more explicitly ero-guro 1930s/40s narratives, and his postwar shift towards more orthodox detective fiction, have on my discussion of the plot twist as literary fetish? How might expanding the focus in this way nuance, challenge, or otherwise change the arguments I have presented here? Future research could also reevaluate the literary fetish more generally as a theoretical framework in further authorial, generic, or tropological contexts. For example, a valuable line of inquiry could be to examine the transmedia functionality of the plot twist, interrogating whether its fetish effect persists—or is even able to persist—across cinematic, artistic, and other more visual adaptations of Ranpo’s mystery-plays. How does a concrete visualization of, say, the Human Chair impact our interpretation of what “really” occurs in the story?

Finally—although there is a rich field of scholarship already linking gender and ero-guro articulations—I believe further discussion of the interplay between gender and ero-guro in Ranpo’s works would be productive. What does it mean that Yoshiko is a successful author (and a figure better-known even than her diplomat husband), and yet functions narratively as at once the initial subject of the narrative, and the object of the Chair’s gaze? How would “The Human Chair” differ if the Chair had been purchased for the use of Yoshiko’s husband—or would his
strange epistle-cum-manuscript have existed at all, without the inspiration provided by the beauty, softness, sensitivity, and otherwise-stereotypical femininity of Yoshiko herself?

A labor of love, of personal pleasure, and of academic inquiry (and I do not think any of those categories are mutually exclusive), this thesis encourages the reader to engage in a contemporary reenactment of zashin chōse. Whether or not that involves pondering what you believe constitutes “legitimate” crime-and-mystery fiction, whether that be on the world stage, in scholarly circles, or in generic terms, or perhaps expanding on, critiquing, repositioning, or reinterpreting the mystery-play, the literary fetish, and other ideas forwarded in this thesis, I hope it has at least caused you to (re)consider your own understanding of mystery and narrative; of the plot twist, and the implications of its deliberate construction; and of Edogawa Ranpo himself.

* * *

One of Ranpo’s most memorable creations is a man who claims to take up residence within a chair—a fitting description, as I believe Ranpo, with the plot twists delineated above, becomes a sort of chair-man himself. As we read, he supports us, encouraging us to continue, until he counters our expectations—turning the narrative chair in which we sit into a living, agentic creature. Yet Ranpo is also the man who sits in a chair—an author at work, who knowingly crafts the twists for us to encounter. Ultimately, Ranpo’s use of the twist employs his audience as a legion of reader-detectives, amateur investigators who have become all the more genre-savvy by the tricks and twists for which they have fallen.

The Human Chair assures Yoshiko—and through her, us—that his work in crafting chairs, though complicated and difficult, is worth his efforts because he, instilled with the “urge to create” that Silverberg ascribes to the Taishō zeitgeist, delights in the act of completing some
wonderful creation\(^2\); and the same could, perhaps, be said of Ranpo himself. The twists detailed above are complex, grotesque, at times unbelievable; the criticism Ranpo faced from early contemporaries was harsh, some going so far to say that his twists seemed to represent “slip[s]” in his creativity.\(^3\) Yet the fetish of the plot twist allowed Ranpo to not only create amateur detectives in fiction, but to create them in real life. Through its intricacies and controversies, it allowed him to solidify his position as the godfather of crime-and-mystery fiction in Japan. And through its complexity, it may have given Ranpo that same thrill of the craft: doing something pleasurable so thoroughly, and so well, that you end up becoming a part of it.

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\(^3\) Saito, *Detective Fiction*, 240.
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