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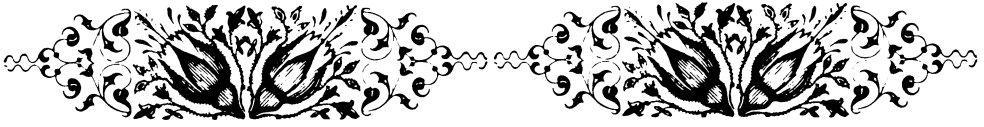
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LEGACY Profile
Anna Katharine Green
(1846-1935)

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Anna Katharine Green
Photo Courtesy of Mary Alice Rohlf's

In 1878, a young woman stepped off the Fifth Avenue Coach and proceeded to George Putnam's publishing house on lower Broadway. She carried a weighty manuscript caught up in a shawlstrap. The woman was Anna Katharine Green, a 32 year old New Yorker. The manuscript was *The Leavenworth Case*, which would sell over half a million copies and was to become a pioneering work in the field of detective fiction. By the end of the nineteenth century, Green

became known to thousands of readers as the "Mother of Detective Fiction." During her prolific career, she published a wealth of detective fiction including 34 novels and three collections of short stories; in addition she published a volume of poetry and a play. Her detective fiction was very popular with nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century readers. For modern readers, Green's novels and short stories offer not only the classic structure of the detective story, but also a rich social history of the period from the point of view of a woman sensitive to the plight of both the single and the married woman.

Wilkie Collins was among the first to acknowledge Green: "Her powers of invention are so remarkable—she has so much imagination and so much belief (a most important qualification for our art) in what she says Dozens of times in reading the story [*The Leavenworth Case*] I have stopped to admire the fertility of invention, the delicate treatment of incident—and the fine perception of event on the personages of the story . . ." (Collins 152). Although *The Leavenworth Case* brought her immediate recognition, Green had not come by her achievement easily. Writing in secret in order to avoid the disapproval of her father—New York attorney James Wilson Green—she filled old notebooks with her story. Her entree to George Putnam came through critic Rossiter Johnson, who agreed to listen to her story; she spent two days reading to him in his hotel room. After he had listened to the story and considered its merits, he contacted Putnam.

Green seemed an unlikely person to write detective fiction. She was diminutive, plain, and sheltered—hardly a woman who would know about crime and detection. However, she was the daughter of an attorney whose home was filled with talk about the courts and the emerging New York Metropolitan Police Force. And she was a college graduate, educated at Ripley College in Vermont. But more important, she saw herself as a professional writer. At first, her medium was poetry: romantic poems of love and adventure. In 1868 she sent some of her poems to Emerson, whom she had met when he visited Ripley College. Emerson responded evasively—avoiding a critique of specific poems, advising her to consider whether writing poetry “is to be made a profession—whether one may dare leave all other things behind and write . . .” (*Letters of RWE* 23). Ironically, she wrote her first novel in an attempt to gain enough recognition so that her poetry might be published. In 1888 Putnam did issue a volume of her poetry, *The Defence of the Bride*, but the praise for which she had hoped was not forthcoming.

A resilient and determined woman, Green was not one to give up easily or to allow circumstances to divert her. She was born Anna Catherine Green, the fourth child of Catherine Ann Whitney and James Wilson Green, in Brooklyn across from Plymouth Church on November 11, 1846.¹ In 1849, after the death of her mother and new-born brother, the family moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan, to Albany, to Buffalo, and then back again to Manhattan. Anna’s older sister Sarah Elizabeth became her “mother-sister” until their father remarried. While her family was middle class and relatively comfortable, they were not wealthy or socially prominent.

Though catapulted to fame by her first novel, Green faced a dilemma common to women writers of her day. If she wanted a career, she had to choose a ready market for her work. Detective fiction was not a field that was especially open to women. According to Alma E. Murch, “publishers seemed to feel there was something peculiarly indelicate about tales of crime or criminals being written by a woman, though stories of social or

domestic life were readily accepted” (152). When Green chose detective fiction—a genre dominated by men—she took a calculated risk, but her timing was right. European writers such as Wilkie Collins, Emile Gaboriau, and Charles Dickens were setting the pace at home and abroad as the popularity of the genre increased. According to Howard Haycraft, “American fields lay fallow from Poe’s ‘Purloined Letter’ (1844) to Anna Katharine Green’s *The Leavenworth Case* (1878)” (83). Although admittedly influenced by Emile Gaboriau whose “romans judiciaires” were appearing in translation and in pirated editions in the United States (Bleiber xx), Green was not an imitator. She observed the conventions of the genre—the puzzle, the locked room, the red herrings—yet her work (unlike Poe’s detective fiction) is distinctly American.

The Leavenworth Case pivots on the murder of Manhattan millionaire, Horatio Leavenworth, whose body is found in the locked study of his Fifth Avenue brownstone. The lure of Fifth Avenue, the public intoxication with the escapades of the “400,” New York’s inner circle, the opportunity to visit (even vicariously) the inside of a brownstone—these features provided a rich background for the novel. By choosing Manhattan as her setting, Green effectively projected the glamor of Gotham in the way that writers like Collins and Gaboriau had featured London and Paris. The setting of the novel reinforces the puzzle, the methodical plot, and the rich characterization.

From the beginning, the primary suspects are Horatio Leavenworth’s nieces, Mary and Eleanore, the apparent heirs to his fortune. The “fair” Mary and the “dark” Eleanore evoke the traditional associations of light and darkness, beauty and mystery, but Green develops the characters of the two women beyond stereotypical roles. Agatha Christie, who became a master at weaving sets of doubles into her stories, recalls in her autobiography how the two cousins fascinated her when she first read the novel (198). The young lawyer who assists the women perceives them as mysteriously unique: “like a double vision of light and darkness that, while

contrasting, neither assimilated nor harmonized" (143). The cousins share a secret which neither one of them will reveal even though the threat of "scandal" might sully their good names and ruin their chances for a successful match. Green focuses on an element that Joyce Warren develops in her study of nineteenth-century women, namely that the marriageable girl had to maintain the "conventional image of the lady," yet was powerless to act for herself (9).

Readers of detective fiction expected not only glamor and intrigue but also verisimilitude, especially in realistic details of the crime and evidence gleaned from scientific procedures. Green more than fulfilled reader expectations. In *The Leavenworth Case*, she presents a facsimile of police procedures from the inquest held at the deceased's home, to the examination of clues and the pursuit of the murderer.

Ebenezer Gryce was among the first serial detectives. (Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes arrived a decade later in 1887.) Gryce's appeal lies in his ordinary human qualities, his upright character, and his realistic demeanor. A widower bothered by chronic arthritis, a man with a penchant for looking around rather than directly at the person addressed, he is likely to have been based on a real model. Green had the opportunity to meet policemen, and her father was a friend of the New York City Chief of Police ("Why Human Beings Are Interested in Crime" 84). An ordinary American, not eccentric or snobbish, Gryce is different from his European peers and from Poe's Dupin. The public was charmed by him and looked forward to seeing more of this self-effacing detective. Thus between 1878 and 1917, Ebenezer Gryce appeared in 12 novels and one short story, "Staircase at Heart's Delight"—an often anthologized classic.

In effect, Green's work brought classic detective fiction to a newly established maturity; as Murch points out, "in Miss Green's work we can discern for the first time, in its entirety, the pattern that became the characteristic of most English novels written during the following fifty years" (159). *The Leavenworth Case* appealed to a variety of

readers—men, women, Americans, Europeans, the young and the old. Its classic form, its rendering of the American scene, its puzzle, its characterization—especially that of Detective Ebenezer Gryce—all contributed to its success. In his study of American bestsellers, Luther Mott recounts that "25 years after publication of *The Leavenworth Case*, its publishers announced that they had worn out two sets of plates reprinting the regular edition and were making another" (263).

A dramatic change occurred in Green's life after 1884, when the 38 year old writer surprised her fans by marrying Charles Rohlf, an actor seven years her junior. Rohlf promised to give up his acting career in order to support his wife. For a brief time they lived in Connecticut where he worked as a designer of iron stoves; then they moved back to the South Park section of Brooklyn, a working-class neighborhood. While setting up a home and giving birth to three children, Green continued to write daily. In 1888, the family moved to Buffalo and eventually built a house at 156 Park Street. Throughout the marriage, Green provided the major financial support. Charles Rohlf attempted to resume his acting career in the 1890s², but he finally achieved fame, if not wealth, as a furniture designer. While he pursued his interests, Green continued to produce fiction for the magazine and book markets.

Green's attitude toward women evolved throughout her writing career, and her portrayal of them is bolder following her marriage. Her early fiction presents women in passive roles. In *The Leavenworth Case*, for example, the two main characters are traditional nineteenth-century literary heroines. The "fair" Mary and the "dark" Eleanore are reminiscent of Cooper's Alice and Cora; they represent a dichotomous view of the two sides of the female character—beauty and intelligence. Thus Green presents her early heroines as "mainstream" male writers usually characterized American upper-class women. We see this repeated in *A Strange Disappearance* (1880), Green's second novel, in the portrayal of a young wife who lives as a hermit in her own house—a nine-

teenth-century patient Grizelda—rather than risk her husband’s rejection. Among those works which reflect provocative change is *The Circular Study* (1900). This novel, featuring Ebenezer Gryce and Amelia Butterworth, offers a telling contrast to *The Leavenworth Case*. Murder once again occurs on Fifth Avenue, but now there are street lights and the locked door to the victim’s study is controlled by a series of hidden electrical switches. Not only has “time” provided new dimensions to the setting, but the victim becomes the focus of the family psychopathology. Doubles complicate the puzzle with two brothers and two sisters, two detectives, and two settings: the present in New York City and the past in rural Ohio. However, the motive—retribution for the rape of a young woman by her guardian—reveals a shocking, though real, evil. Although Green’s work had always portrayed social history, as she matured her revelation of injustice, particularly to women, became more pointed.

Green also became more sympathetic to women trapped by failed marriages and subjected to psychological and physical abuse. For example, *Miss Hurd: An Enigma* (1894) depicts a battered wife, a run-away, whose husband proclaims, “she belongs to me” (28). Thomas Murdoch perceives his wife as motivated by “an almost masculine desire for independence” (205). The portrait of Vashti Murdoch is tempered by reality—she is beautiful (though not dainty) and knowledgeable; although she evokes sympathy, no one can legally prevent her husband from reclaiming her. By revealing this woman’s desperate attempts to free herself, Green presented the situation for public scrutiny—to an audience of both men and women.

With the creation of her female detectives, Green also presents women who are independent, capable, and successful. Though Ebenezer Gryce is an original character, he still has peers, whereas Green’s women sleuths are pioneers in a fictive world peopled by men. While individual female sleuths appear throughout the Green canon, her two serial characters are Amelia Butterworth and Violet Strange. Amelia Butterworth, Green’s

most famous amateur detective, despite her Grammercy Park origins, is a gutsy individual not above checking out a Chinese laundry at midnight in order to locate important evidence (*That Affair Next Door* 1897). An unmarried sixty-ish woman of means, she assists Gryce in three cases where her social status and insight into character help to solve the puzzle (*That Affair Next Door* 1897), *Lost Man’s Lane* 1898, and *The Circular Study* 1900). A highly credible character, Butterworth was modelled after a New York City matron who confidentially assisted the Metropolitan Police (“Why Human Beings Are Interested in Crime” 39). Green’s second female serial detective is Violet Strange, a young debutante who is featured in a 1900 volume of short stories entitled *A Difficult Problem and Other Stories*. Strange is more independent than Butterworth, representing the newer generation of assertive women. Her father, Peter Strange, is tyrannical and controlling; Violet earns her money secretly—often at risk to her own safety—in order to help an older sister disowned by her father. Both Strange and Butterworth might be considered what Laurie Crumpacker calls “domestic feminists” since their “activity” distinguishes them from their peers (78-79). They step out of the roles expected of women of their class and become risk-takers. As fictional characters, the elderly genteel woman and the young independent woman established a literary heritage. In her study of the genre, Joan Mooney considers Carolyn Wells and Mary Roberts Rinehart to be Green’s immediate successors among American women writers, creating female sleuths of comparable stealth (101). Certainly Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple and the host of young aristocratic female sleuths who people her novels bear resemblance to Green’s two heroines.

As a basis for her plots, Green used real life situations, often developing ideas from newspaper articles. While her rendering of situation and character may seem romantic to the reader of the 1980s, to the people of her own generation she represented real social problems. Her appeal was not directed only to female readers. Detective fiction had

a predominantly male readership, and Green had a strong following among male readers—Stanley Baldwin, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, to name a few. Since her fiction portrays injustices, particularly those suffered by women, readers—even those readers most interested in the mystery puzzle—were made aware of social issues. In *The Mill Mystery* (1886), for example, young women either become pawns in the marriage game or struggle to make a living in order to maintain their independence. The heroine of this novel laments, “Oh!, the deep sadness of a solitary woman’s life! The sense of helplessness that comes upon her when every effort made, every possibility sounded, she realizes that the world has no place for her, and that she must either stoop to ask the assistance of friends or starve!” (5-6). While some novels involve cases of desertion and bigamy, in others Green presents abused women, unwed mothers abandoned by lovers and family, girls swindled by guardians, and heiresses made prey to fortune hunters—women of all ages and social classes who became victims. Her message to her readership is in a sense a call to action.

A shrewd observer, Green spent a lifetime recording and reshaping her ideas. As a professional writer, she matured in her art—refining the form of detective fiction and raising public awareness of significant social issues. She published her last novel, *A Step on the Stair*, in 1923 when she was 77 years old. Except for one trip to Europe, from 1890 until her death on April 11, 1935, Green observed the American scene from her home in Buffalo—living quietly, spurning the limelight. However, she managed to capture a slice of America, often focusing on the vulnerable—especially on the problems of women. Her detectives are strong men and women—shakers and movers—distinguished by their common sense and unaffected demeanor. Her legacy to readers of her generation was primarily her detective fiction; for readers today, that legacy endures and is enhanced by the intimate social commentary of her characters who testify to the American experience.

Notes

¹Green changed the spelling of her middle name to “Katharine” at the publication of *The Leavenworth Case*. For the family trees of the Green and Whitney families, see S.W. Phoenix, *The Whitney Family of Connecticut* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1878) 1517-1518, 712.

²See Charles Rohlf’s letters to Augustin Daly, Folger Library, Washington, D.C.

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from Chapter 1
That Affair Next Door
 by Anna Katharine Green

She trembled; I saw that she trembled, and naturally became excited. Something was wrong in the Van Burnam mansion, and I was going to be present at its discovery. But her next words cut my hopes short.

"I have no objection to *your* going in," she said to the policeman, "but I will not give up my keys to *her*. What right has she in our house any way." And I thought I heard her murmur something about a meddling old maid.

The look which I received from the policeman convinced me that my ears had not played me false.

"The Lady's right," he declared; and pushing by me quite disrespectfully, he led the way to the basement door, into which he and the so-called cleaner presently disappeared.

I waited in front. I felt it to be my duty to do so. The various passers-by stopped an instant to stare at me before proceeding on their way, but I did not flinch from my post. Not till I had heard that the young woman whom I had seen enter these doors at midnight was well, and that her delay in opening the windows was entirely due to fashionable laziness, would I feel justified in returning to my own home and its affairs. But it took patience and some courage to remain there. . . .

. . . I was beginning to feel I was paying dearly for my virtuous resolution, when the front door burst violently open and we caught sight of the trembling form and shocked face of the scrub-woman.

"She's dead!" she cried, "she's dead! Murder!" and would have said more had not the policeman pulled her back, with a growl which sounded very much like a suppressed oath.

He would have shut the door upon me had I not been quicker than lightning. As it was, I got in before it slammed, and happily too; for just at that moment the house-

cleaner, who had grown paler every instant, fell in a heap in the entry, and the policeman, who was not the man I would want about me in any trouble, seemed somewhat embarrassed by this new emergency, and let me lift the poor thing up and drag her farther into the hall.

She had fainted, and should have had something done for her, but anxious though I always am to be of help where help is needed, I had no sooner got within range of the parlor door with my burden, than I beheld a sight so terrifying that I involuntarily let the poor woman slip from my arms to the floor.

In the darkness of a dim corner (for the room had no light save that which came through the doorway where I stood) lay the form of a woman under a fallen piece of furniture. Her skirts and distended arms alone were visible; but no one who saw the rigid outlines of her limbs could doubt for a moment that she was dead.

At a sight so dreadful, and, in spite of all my apprehensions, so unexpected, I felt a sensation of sickness which in another moment might have ended in my fainting also, if I had not realized that it would never do for me to lose my wits in the presence of a man who had none too many of his own. So I shook off my momentary weakness, and turning to the policeman, who was hesitating between the unconscious figure of the woman outside the door and the dead form of the one within I cried sharply:

"Come, man, to business! The woman inside there is dead, but this one is living. Fetch me a pitcher of water from below if you can, and then go for whatever assistance you need. I'll wait here and bring this woman to. She is a strong one, and it won't take long."

"You'll stay here alone with that—" he began. But I stopped him with a look of disdain.

"Of course I will stay here; why not? Is there anything in the dead to be afraid of? Save me from the living, and I undertake to save myself from the dead."

