Chapter V

Conclusion
This dissertation on G.K. Chesterton has tried to study him as an English man of letters with special reference to his creation of the Father Brown stories. The background for this study was set by sketching the origin and development of what is loosely known by the Stevensonian expression the 'police novel'. Its origin was traced to the Gothic novel of the 18th century if not much earlier to proto-religious myths and classical tragedy. But definitely beginning with Edgar Allan Poe as a recognizable and unique genre it has had a chequered career in the 19th century. It has grown through short stories and long novels; through novels in which the police are the heroes and stories in which the private detective is the hero; from a family of literary types which includes mystery, terror, horror, espionage, detection etc.; it separated itself by slow degrees and became a literary genre by itself. The family is known as sensational literature. The _Moonstone_ of Wilkie Collins gave it a large shape and classic complexion and Charles Dickens toyed frequently with the detective theme but he could write only an unfinished
full-length detective novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. But it was to receive its definitive form and character at the hands of A. Conan Doyle the creator of Sherlock Holmes. The impetus given by Conán Doyle's successful handling of the genre as well as the post-Victorian changes in the social, intellectual ethos of the western society resulted in a spate of detective novels in the literary market. All kinds of detective fiction high and low, learned and cheap, sophisticated intellectual and hard-boiled appeared on the scene; and that was the golden age of detective fiction. Ever since then it has been popular among most varieties of readers.

G.K. Chesterton as an author created poems, novels, essays and detective stories besides a lot of ephemera which appeared periodically in journals. The number of such articles of passing interest penned by him was so vast that it has become habitual to associate him with ephemera. But the quality of whatever he wrote is so high that he cannot be so dismissed. The element of crime and detection can be traced in most of his writings and this was openly expressed in his Father Brown stories. He had tried his hand at detective fiction even before he thought of Father Brown in whom he finally realised his ideal detective. Simultaneously with the growth of his
interest in this genre, his involvement in Roman Catholicism was also deepening. His wife was an early influence. His friendship with Hilaire Belloc accelerated it. Father O'Connor, a friend of his, received him into the Roman Church. These two trends confluenced in the creation of Father Brown. In fact Father O'Connor was the prototype of the great detective. This brief outline of Chesterton's interest in the genre shows that he was steadily and all along forming the basis of the Father Brown stories and it was an abiding interest for him. We find him sending a Father Brown story for publication almost in the last year of his life.

The fortyeight stories which comprise the Father Brown series are divided into five groups and these groups have an integrity and a significance, of their own. The place of Father Brown, among the great fictional detectives has to be studied from the point of view of the unique nature of the stories in which crime is considered sin and confession saves the criminal. The motives for and the methods of detection were so different for Father Brown that these stories have become a class by themselves.

Among the successors of Conan Doyle, G.K. Chesterton was the most distinguished writer of
detective fiction notwithstanding the immense popularity of writers like Agatha Christie, Austin Freeman, Dorothy Sayers and Edgar Wallace. While detectives like Poirot and Thorndyke could be said to have evolved through centuries Father Brown was the unprecedented and inimitable creation of G.K. Chesterton, symbolically transporting the theme from a strictly secular to a quasi-theological level. So Father Brown had neither models nor imitators and that adds to his importance as a sleuth intent on discovering and saving instead of punishing. The Father Brown stories have become as memorable as the Sherlock Holmes stories but for different reasons.

One of the postulates of this dissertation is that, of all the works of G.K. Chesterton his Father Brown stories are not only the most popular but the most important even from a strictly literary point of view. Even if his poems, a large percentage of which are merely clever verses, his essays and novels recede to the background in the history of 20th century literature. His Father Brown stories being unparalleled will hold the stage and can be ignored neither by those specially interested in that genre nor the general literary critic. The artfully
contrived plots have the added advantage of being set in Chesterton's own charming language. Those who dismiss all detective literature as *infra dignitatum* - are surely prejudiced. If art can save Picasso and D.H. Lawrence from unintelligibility and evident obscenity it should have no difficulty in being just to detective fiction which is neither higher social psychological nor sheer melodramatic mush, but appeals to the intellect as just a problem for solution. So an objective evaluation of Chesterton's Father Brown stories can be in order.

Chesterton's literature has two features: (1) the purely literary excellence; and (2) the propaganda of cherished social and religious values. The literary art has suffered from the mannerisms of language and the propagandist content of the stories, though the glamour of the style keeps these at a high level of literary achievement.

Between Daniel Defoe's 'Man who was Friday' and G.K. Chesterton's 'Man who was Thursday' two and a half centuries have lapsed; and in the meantime the modes and norms of English literature had not stood still. But the problems of human isolation and crime and punishment had eternally stood their ground; it was the latter which received classic treatment at
The hands of Chesterton. He has raised the genre of detective fiction to new great heights of respectability, and with it he has risen in the estimate of sympathetic critics.

Objection to detective fiction per se must not be allowed to sink to obsessive and uninformed levels resembling Tony Weller's allergy to poetry. If one remembers that the man who wrote like genius on 'poetry' and 'fiction', namely E.A. Poe was the father of detective fiction, and an immortal figure in English prose fiction, Sherlock Holmes was a hero in that genre; eminent men of letters like Dickens had thought fit to write detective novels, it must be enough to rebut all sentimental objection to detective fiction.

The morbidity which is congenital or acquired during the early childhood of authors tends to determine to a great extent the nature of their work. David Copperfield by Dickens is his masterpiece for it is autobiographical in nature and lets us into how his childhood experiences shaped his attitude to life; and mystery and detection of crime enthralled him. Similarly Poe who was morbid by nature and Conan Doyle
whose interests in parapsychology and other weird things is well known took to detective story writing; and Agatha Christie the queen of crime suffered temporarily from mental setback; and the experience of G.K. Chesterton who confesses\(^1\) to having "dabbled in spiritualism" and being used "to play with planchette" says "the progress of the preternatural has gone on spending and strengthening through my whole life".\(^2\) All this confirms that truly great detective story writers write them because of an inner subconscious compulsive urge. Mere contrivers of detective fiction for the fancy of it or for pot boiling may be left out of this reckoning. But G.K. Chesterton was born to write detective fiction and he called his life itself a detective story.

Chesterton put the crime-detection theme in a religious context and the Church was the great private detective which was to correct the errors of the state which was the secular police. This connection with the Church was a new dimension to the genre introduced by Chesterton; but long before him, when the first gothic story came to be written, the

\(^1\) G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, p. 82.
architecture of the church provided opportunities for quiet and unobserved commission of crime. Students of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* and Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* will recall the association of the church and the churchyard with crime. P.D. James gave expression to this frankly by wanting to put her 'bodies' in the church. The Church reminds one of the temptation of man to commit crime and remain also the final redeemer of erring man.

Chesterton's attention to the genre had subtle religious and spiritual motivations; and he could write with an air of conviction.

The Father Brown stories, for all their brilliance rank second only to the Sherlock Homes stories; because of the parity between style and subject which is a consistent feature of Conan Doyle's writings. In the case of Chesterton the disparity between language and content leads to an inappropriateness which is a kind of failure of aestheticism. It becomes a huge exercise in mock-heroism like a beggar in royal robes. The plots of the stories, the character of the detective and the author's diction agree with each other exquisitely in the case of Conan Doyle. But the character of Father Brown and the
literary style of Chesterton are disproportionate to the theme; this was rectified to a great degree by transporting crime and punishment to the level of sin, confession and absolution. In Chesterton crime had to become sin so that Father Brown could handle it; or perhaps Father Brown was created to handle this transformed theme.

As for the charge of Chesterton's misuse of literature to serve the purposes of religious propaganda it is not as objectionable as it looks at first sight. In the first half of the 20th century, reformers like Hardy, Shaw and Ibsen spread their cherished views using literature as a medium for their gospel. So it would be at least unjust to accuse Chesterton alone of this practice. But the beauty of his language has earned a pardon for that lapse, if lapse it was.

To conclude it may be recapitulated that this thesis emphasizes the following aspects of G.K. Chesterton as a writer of detective fiction. It lays down that detective fiction is as good a literary genre as any other; it is not to be despised as juvenile in taste and puerile in effect. In regard to the controversy whether Chesterton can be
considered an Edwardian, it is admitted that though he was born in the Victorian age and passed away only at the end of Georgian times, as a literary man his place is among the Edwardians: for the short story (the Father Brown stories also are in that form) and the essay are his strong points. It cannot be denied that Chesterton does introduce an element of propaganda in all his writings and particularly his Father Brown stories; but it is held that these stories have such overriding virtues as to render the intrusion of propaganda immaterial to the general reader. It is further admitted that Father Brown stories constitute the cream of his literary works and he will be remembered for them.

A study of the lives and writings of certain major contributors to detective fiction shows that a certain inherent morbidity of the author is at least partially responsible for the choice of the genre namely detective fiction as a means of expression of his/her personality. This is seen in Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Like them and for the same reason Chesterton had a natural aptitude for the genre and that accounts for the convincing quality of his literary art seen in the Father Brown stories.
Another interesting point emerges from a study of the evolution of the sensational story from the Gothic to the detective. The Gothic mystery syndrome is extended from the structure called the church to the institution bearing that name, and crime came to be associated with it as can be seen in *The Woman in White* of Wilkie Collins, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* of Charles Dickens and some of the detective novels of P.D. James. Chesterton extends it further to include the relationship between the Church and crime in the context of sin and absolution.

While admitting the undoubted excellence of Chesterton's literary diction on the one hand and the intricate construction of the stories on the other hand as two separate artistic endeavours it is felt that these stories suffer from an artistic imbalance when these two come together; because his language and style are far more sophisticated and involved than the content. This incompatibility is absent in Sherlock Holmes series. Its presence makes the Father Brown stories, relatively less artistic. This is further compounded by the presence of the elements of propaganda. But is is also correct to say that discriminating readers will separate these elements, and the stories will cater to different categories of readers. So Chesterton has an assured future in
English literature. His recent eclipse was entirely due to a reaction which sets in after a very popular writer passes away.

In addition to providing the historical background for the evolution of detective fiction in detail, the evolution of Father Brown and his methods is also studied in this thesis in equal detail. It is also stressed that the deceptively mock-heroic treatment thinly veils the element of allegory in the Father Brown stories.

The following epitaph of Walter de la Mare on Chesterton sums up the man and the artist.

"Knight of the Holy Ghost, he goes his way
Wisdom his motley, Truth his loving jest;
The Mills of Satan kept his lance in play,
Pity and Innocence his heart at rest".