Imperial Nostalgia and the Detective Genre: 
Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans* 

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**Introduction**

Kazuo Ishiguro’s fifth novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000) tells the story of Christopher Banks, a private detective, who embarks on the ultimate case of his career, the puzzle of his own life. Set in the 1930s, the novel contains all the classic ingredients of the so-called golden age detective genre, such as an archetypal English private detective, equipped with fierce deductive skills and a magnifying glass, as well as suspects, criminals, and victims. And yet on the other hand, it also deviates in significant ways, above all in the sense that the actual detective narrative merely seems to be a subplot to another, much more dominating, narrative of identity, memory, and loss. In the following, I will attempt to make some links between *When We Were Orphans* and the genre paradigm of the golden age detective story, arguing that Ishiguro’s novel offers an exploration of the genre’s tacit ideological connections to a larger historical discourse of imperial nostalgia and decline.
The Golden Age Detective Story

I want to start by framing some of the political and formal aspects characteristic of the so-called golden age detective genre. In this genre, Stephen Knight observes, the “wider politics of the context are ignored. The elements of capitalist malpractice ... are rarely represented in the classic clue puzzle” (78). Emerging around the First World War, at the time when the British Empire was at its height, the golden age detective genre promotes an idealized image of England, an escapist image that was cultivated ever more intensively, as it was gradually eroding in real life during the interwar years.\(^1\) In contrast to its illustrious 19th century predecessors, the golden age detective genre expands— not only its medium, from short story to novel form, but also—the scene of crime, from metropolitan centres like Paris or London, in Poe’s and Conan Doyle’s short stories respectively, to the quiet and peaceful country side, and more specifically to the country house.\(^2\) In the golden age detective genre, the well-known Victorian image of the country house finds a refuge in the twentieth century, as Raymond Williams has observed:

It was in its very quality of abstraction, and yet of superficially impressive survival, that the country house could be made the place of isolated assembly of a group of people whose immediate and transient relations were decipherable by an abstract mode of detection rather than by the full and connected analysis of any more general understanding. (249)

Williams makes an illuminating link between the abstract dynamic

\(^1\) See Easthope and Thomson.
\(^2\) See Knight 80.