

Ewa Kujawska-Lis

G. K. Chesterton's games with identities

Acta Neophilologica 11, 107-118

2009

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Ewa Kujawska-Lis

Instytut Neofilologii

Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski

G.K. CHESTERTON'S GAMES WITH IDENTITIES

Key words: detective story, Chesterton, identity, intertextuality, Catholicism

Gilbert Keith Chesterton, the author of detective stories featuring a Catholic priest, Father Brown, frequently creates situations where a double identity is a key element either in the crime itself or in the solution of the crime. This writer appears to be fascinated with the ideas of having different identities, changing them, creating alternative worlds as well as misconceptions that mislead the human mind and eye. This fascination takes divergent forms in his stories and is manifested through various devices, thus making the double identity one of the recurring motifs. This article aims to investigate how and for what purposes Chesterton uses various identities in selected stories of the Father Brown cycle.

In the first story of the cycle, *The Blue Cross*, published in the volume *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911), Chesterton introduces his two main characters: Father Brown, a Catholic priest – amateur detective and Flambeau, a thief, later to emerge as a detective. Immediately, a reader is arrested by the fact that, unlike in other stories typical of the genre, the protagonist is not a professional detective, and actually his vocation as a priest is as important to him and as pronounced in the stories as his position as a detective. Father Brown stands out significantly in a long gallery of fictional detectives, including C. Augustine Dupin created by Edgar Allan Poe, Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Hercule Poirot by Agatha Christie, to name the more important ones. If the others are amateurs, like Dupin, their actual occupations are unimportant (in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* Dupin investigates a crime to prove the innocence of an accused man and solely for his own satisfaction; only later does he do such work for financial gain). If they are professional detectives, like Holmes or Poirot, the focus in the stories is highlighted on this particular sleuthing activity. Father Brown is conspicuous in this respect since he evidently acts in both capacities in the majority of the stories: as priest and detective. This, of course, influ-

ences his intentions and aims: not only is he interested in solving the criminal puzzle, but also, or actually predominately so, in saving yet another soul.

The two identities of Father Brown are thus openly emphasised throughout the stories and become a constructive element; each having a specific function, whereas their combination introduces a novelty to this genre. Unlike other detectives, whose main functions are to solve crimes and who use logical reasoning to do so, Father Brown resorts to both logic and illumination. In addition to pursuing a criminal, he generally wants to initiate some positive change in the wrongdoer's conduct and system of beliefs. He is concerned with saving the culprit from punishment in moral terms consistent with the Catholic creed rather than as regards the secular legal system. Consequently, unlike other fictional detectives, he is not interested in financial gain, but in disseminating Catholicism by showing its elemental truths. Thus in the opening story he provokes the thief using the Seventh Commandment "'Thou shalt not steal'" [*The Blue Cross*, 12]; in *The Secret Garden* rather than interrogating Valentin, the suspected murderer, as a detective might have done to prove his suspicions, he "must ask him to confess, and all that" [*The Secret Garden*, 30]; whereas in *The Queer Feet* answering Colonel Pound's question whether he caught the criminal, he confirms "I caught him, with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread" [*The Queer Feet*, 42]. The Colonel, thinking rationally, is anxious to confine the villain physically, whereas what is important for the priest is creating the spiritual bond with Catholicism which would prevent the thief from any misconduct in the future. Thus for him the law of God takes precedence over the physical incarceration and any human-made laws as evidenced in another story: "'Shall I stop him?" asked Flambeau [...]. "No; let him pass", said Father Brown [...]. "Let Cain pass by, for he belongs to God'" [*The Eye of Apollo*, 134]. Such an approach is, of course, not to be found in other detective stories where once the crime is solved, it is only natural to accuse, try, convict and imprison the felon, if possible.

The notions of confession, sin and repentance are omnipresent in Chesterton's stories. Father Brown does not camouflage his doctrine; he refers to it explicitly: "Even the most murderous blunders don't poison life like sins" [*The Three Tools of Death*, 160] which can be treated as a motto for his actions and his internal driving force. What he sets his heart by and consequently his actions on is the very act of confession, and so he explains to John Boulnois: "The little sins are sometimes harder to confess than the big ones – but that's why it's so important to confess them" [*The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, 112]. In another story he urges the suspect: "Go on – in God's name, go on. The foulest crime the fiends ever prompted feels lighter after confession; and I implore you to confess" [*The Eye of Apollo*, 134]. Occasionally, however, Chesterton plays with language and he introduces the idea of confession humorously. Father Brown says for instance: "I've got to go back to the Deaf School" [*The Three Tools of Death*, 160], which he uses as an excuse for being unable to stay for the official inquiry. It is not the case of his disregarding legal order; it is just a different hierarchy of priorities that he epitomizes. Since he is not a representative

of the official line of investigation, he does not consider it important for him to be involved in it. At the same time, by using metonymy he shows his peculiar sense of humour and distance to himself and the way people use language. Additionally, confession is also used as a means to enable Father Brown to understand humanity with all its beautiful, noble, ugly, and selfish behaviours. It gives him some advantage over culprits. Discussing freely some tricks used by criminals with Flambeau, himself a thief at this point, the priest and his knowledge actually shock Flambeau: ““How in blazes do you know all these horrors?” cried Flambeau. [...] “Oh, by being a celibate simpleton, I suppose,” he [Father Brown] said. “Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men’s real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?”” [*The Blue Cross*, 15].

Moreover, the notions of confession and repentance allow the priest to influence the identities of others. Consistently with his creed, he never renounces a human being; rather he attempts to guide one to become a better person. He says to Flambeau: “I want you to give up this life. There is still youth and honour and humour in you; don’t fancy they will last in that trade. Men may keep a sort of level of good, but no man has ever been able to keep on one level of evil” [*The Flying Stars*, 55]. The motif of changing identities is thus represented at the level of the entire cycle by Flambeau. It is not a type of Dr Jekyll – Mr Hyde metamorphosis. Flambeau does not represent the goodness and evil separately in different impersonations and he does not change them as he pleases. Rather he has traces of both, just like any human being, and Father Brown’s intention is not to erase this duality of human nature but to show that it is possible to self-control one’s actions. He wants human beings to be conscious of the outcomes of their activities and to be able to suppress negative patterns of behaviour. Flambeau epitomizes the moral conversion. In the first story of the cycle he is introduced as a cunning criminal whose actions were reported in daily papers since “he had escaped the consequences of one extraordinary crime by committing another” [*The Blue Cross*, 1]. Yet the narrator hints that there may be a change involved since he refers to Flambeau as a “colossus of crime” [*The Blue Cross*, 1]. The metaphor functions here as a foreshadowing of what is to happen in other stories of the cycle. It not only hints at the extraordinary height of Flambeau but, more importantly, at his fate as a criminal. The Colossus of Rhodes was destroyed by a natural force and so will be the doom of any wrongdoer. Sooner or later the natural law, that is the internal law of one’s own conscience, will destroy one who follows the wrong path. “That road goes down and down”, says Father Brown [*The Flying Stars*, 55]. Yet the priest saves Flambeau by destroying him as a criminal in order to allow him to be resurrected as a detective. Consequently, in later stories of the cycle Flambeau takes up a new identity as Father Brown’s friend, thus following the pattern of other stories in this genre, where a detective is generally accompanied by a friend who facilitates his reconstruction of the crime. Chesterton again is innovative, as he creates a pair of detectives, rather than a detective and a layman.

The very motif of a double identity reworked variously in Father Brown stories is also initiated in the plot of the first one. Flambeau the criminal attempts to steal

a silver cross with sapphires carried by Father Brown by pretending to be a priest himself. This is, of course, a typical trick. After all, thieves do not go around announcing that they are stealers. They do generally resort to some sort of game intended to hide their true identity and intentions. Yet in Father Brown stories this type of deception is not a monotonous device. It is shown in many variations. Even Father Brown himself pretends to be someone else. Although, as he admits, he suspected Flambeau from their first encounter, throughout their trip he simulates being a totally ignorant simpleton and, at the same time, slightly unstable emotionally. Thus he misleads the thief by making him believe the priest is someone who can be easily manipulated. This game based on cheating each other is represented in the story also physically at the level of objects. Thus Valentin, the policeman, finds salt in the sugar bowl in a restaurant and misplaced placards at the greengrocer's (both are the result of Father Brown's actions). Also the brown parcel (the colour of the packing paper is not necessarily coincidental – it definitely corresponds with the priest's name) with the cross is switched twice, once by the fake priest attempting to steal it and then by the real priest who wants to keep it safe. This clever usage of the misplaced objects only strengthens the conceptual level of the stories. Truth is always safe; thus, the true brown parcel is safely deposited with the police and the true priest Brown exposes the impostor. The key to solving the puzzle is Father Brown's knowledge of humanity as well as the sham of the lie. The impersonator is unable to trick the priest by pretending to be one himself since he is simply too ignorant: "You attacked reason [...] It's bad theology", explains Father Brown to the surprised Flambeau [*The Blue Cross*, 15]. Consequently, the opening of the cycle at various levels introduces the leading motif of playing with identities.

A mirror image of Flambeau's conversion is the change of the policeman into a lawbreaker. Chesterton is not one-sided. His intention is to demonstrate that the duality of human nature is indeed destructive if one follows the wrong path. The Valentin who is featured in the first story as "the head of the Paris police and the most famous investigator of the world" who had "one of the most powerful intellects in Europe" [*The Blue Cross*, 1] is turned into a murderer and a suicide in *The Secret Garden*, the second story of the cycle. Valentin has a double identity as a lawful policeman and as mad antagonist of Catholicism. The hatred of the Cross takes precedence over the life as a guardian of the order and so he breaks the law himself. Chesterton investigates a number of issues in this story. First and foremost, one who fights Catholicism must inevitably lose, which seems to impose a preaching function upon the story. But he also shows the tragedy of an honest man whose secret hatred is inflamed daily and who finally snaps, thus providing some psychological motivation for the crime. Following the brutal murder, its concealment and a futile effort of escaping its consequences, Valentin must face the truth, knowing his opponent to be Father Brown. Either out of fear of confronting the horrors of his sin or out of repentance following his deeds, he kills himself. Chesterton is not interested here in a stream of character culminating in a tragic hero. Rather he emphasises the negative attitude to Catholicism as being the driving force in creating a destructive double identity. By implication, anybody who rebels against, it seems, the only true religion is doomed.

Similarly, anybody who is a follower of a different religion must also be ill-fated. This issue is investigated in *The Eye of Apollo* where Kalon is the Prophet of the cult of the sun and a swindler. His double identity is foreshadowed by the catch phrase attached to him when he is introduced in the story: "a fellow calling himself Kalon (I don't know what his name is, except that it can't be that)" [*The Eye of Apollo*, 125] and later repeated as "the man called Kalon" [*The Eye of Apollo*, 128]. "Kalon" in Greek means "the beautiful" or "noble" and so is not to be treated as a real name, which by implication signifies the false nature of the man himself. Typically for Chesterton, the character is given a telling name. In this case it represents the opposite of the true nature of the character which is to be deciphered only on the basis of the hermeneutic analysis of the entire text. A leader of a false religion is a sinner in terms of Catholicism. Yet being the son of Apollo (the beautiful) is just a cover for a swindler whose real objective is to trick Miss Stacey out of her money (reversal of "the noble"). Chesterton here skilfully combines the criticism of pagan rituals as inconsistent with Catholicism and the role-playing of most wrongdoers as a vehicle for committing a crime.

However, the double identity of Chesterton's characters does not operate only on a criminal axis. On numerous occasions the author investigates the outcomes of hiding some secret feature, either physical or emotional, which allows the character to form different identities. Pauline Stacey in *The Eye of Apollo* is seemingly a strong, emancipated woman of "spit-fire self-dependence" who does not need the assistance of boy, man or any "props and plasters the doctors sell" [*The Eye of Apollo*, 127]. She creates the air of someone entirely self-reliant. However, she has a secret which she hides from almost everyone. The truth is that she is blind and this turns her into a helpless creature totally dependent on others and their plans. This hidden identity of someone quite fragile is taken advantage of by the two persons who know her secret and who eventually turn into criminals – her younger sister and Kalon, acting independently. The outcome is tragic – Pauline dies because of her own impairment. She falls into Kalon's trap, i.e., stepping into an empty lift shaft. There seems again to be some moral teaching involved here. Concealing one's impairment or imperfection is destructive; thus, consistent with Catholic preaching, one should accept one's failings rather than constructing an alternative identity for oneself based on a denial of the truth. Secrets are never safe and denying one's problems always leads to graver ones. It is as if Pauline is being punished for her own sin. Living a secret life equates to living a lie and lying is always treated as a sin.

Chesterton, in his literary craft, draws the readers' attention to Pauline Stacey's secret at the lexical level. Whenever her description appears, there is always some attention given to her eyes: "She had eyes of startling brilliancy, but it was the brilliancy of steel rather than of diamonds", "this bright-eyed falcon of a girl", "Her bright black eyes blazed with abstract anger", "She asked if she was expected to wear wooden legs or false hair or glass eyes; and as she spoke her eyes sparkled like the terrible crystal", "The sun is not my master, and I will open my eyes and stare at him whenever I choose" [*The Eye of Apollo*, 126–127]. In each description a hint is given, yet the

reader is able to decipher all the clues only after Father Brown's explanation of the manner in which the crime was committed. Thus in the first example the key noun is "steel", which unlike diamond, would not let any light-ray pass through the eye, making the light reflect from the eyes as if from a steel surface, which suggests blindness. In the second phrase, a conceptual paradox is introduced: Falcons are renowned for their exceptional vision; yet, Pauline's vision is heavily impaired. Falcons are also birds of prey, whereas it is Pauline who becomes the prey of human predators. The reader is able to grasp these semantic interrelationships only in connection with Father Brown's explanations at the end of the story. Initially, the metaphor is actually misleading as if suggesting a perfect sense of vision and sharpness on the part of this character. In the third example, the clue is the adjective "abstract" which hints at the inability of Pauline's eyes to focus on anything, and the attention of the reader is forcefully drawn to the eyes by the double alliteration in the phrase. Next, there is a direct reference to artificial eyes, following the action of stamping upon her sister's eyeglasses. Yet again the hint is blurred by the addition of other objects of assistance. Finally, her proud statement that she could easily stare at the sun who is not her master sums up Pauline's attitude and condition. Only someone who lives in the dark because of being blind can unflinchingly stare at a powerful source of light without fear of losing sight. Pauline's darkness is of a dual nature: It is the physical darkness and the emotional emptiness which force her into the arms of the trickster, the New Priest of Apollo. The theory which he disseminates is: "that if a man were really healthy he could stare at the sun" and that his new religion "can cure all physical diseases" [*The Eye of Apollo*, 125, 126]. Father Brown sums it all up, matter-of-factly: "If a man were really healthy [...] he would not bother to stare at it" [*The Eye of Apollo*, 125], thus emphasising, at the very beginning of the story, that anyone who falls prey to the prophet must suffer from some kind of ailment.

The motif of an internal, rather than physical, ailment which leads to the creation of a double identity is investigated in *The Three Tools of Death*. Sir Aaron Armstrong an "entirely entertaining" figure, "was entertaining to the point of being comic; and popular in such a manner as to be almost legendary" [*The Three Tools of Death*, 151]. He was an incurable optimist, or at least this is what he made the world believe. Thus his outward face was that of a smiling cherub with sparkling spectacles. However, for all his external gaiety, his true identity was quite the opposite. The happiness, smiles and extraverted behaviour, that is "the Religion of Cheerfulness" [*The Three Tools of Death*, 160] were only a cover, for he was actually a depressed man who suffered from a suicidal mania, nobody knew of. He lived a double life: putting up a merry mask in public and sinking into his depression privately. The consequence of the internal struggle was a successful suicide.

Initially it is believed that Sir Aaron Armstrong was murdered and the violence of the act is compared to "hearing that Sunny Jim had hanged himself; or that Mr. Pickwick had died in Hanwell" [*The Three Tools of Death*, 151]. The reader is provided with intertextual and extratextual clues rather than metaphorical ones. Sunny Jim

was a comic cartoon character created in 1902 to promote Force cereal. One of the rhymes that accompanied the picture was as follows:

Jim Dumps was a most unfriendly man,
Who lived his life on the hermit plan;
In his gloomy way he'd gone through life,
And made the most of woe and strife;
Till Force one day was served to him
Since then they've called him "Sunny Jim".

Sir Aaron Armstrong, when introduced to the readers is the converted "Sunny Jim", yet what is hidden both from the readers and other characters in the story is the fact that the traces of the gloomy Jim Dumps are very vivid and heavily influence the quality of life of the optimist and philanthropist. Actually, Sir Aaron Armstrong is Sunny Jim on the outside but still Jim Dumps inside. Moreover, one cannot miss a Chestertonian sense of humour. Sir Aaron Armstrong apparently used to have "a Drink problem". Yet in his depressed condition "he fell back on that dram-drinking he had abandoned long ago" [*The Three Tools of Death*, 160]. It is almost inevitable to associate the name of the advertised cereal with drinking. Once he serves Force, that is whiskey, to himself he becomes acutely aware of his problems: "But there is this horror about alcoholism in a sincere teetotaller: that he pictures and expects that psychological inferno from which he has warned others" [*The Three Tools of Death*, 160]. The Force is thus all but sham.

The second intertextual reference compares the absurdity of Sir Aaron Armstrong's death to the would-be death of one of the most famous characters in English literature. The suggestion that Mr Pickwick might die in Hanwell, that is in the asylum, seems to be totally unthinkable. Yet Mr Pickwick, for all his cheerfulness, is not free from other feelings. As evidenced in the chapters dealing with his experience in the Fleet, he actually becomes depressed by the foul prison life. In order to survive there and not become corrupt as other prisoners have, Mr Pickwick consciously escapes from prison-life mentally, which is treated as "the definitive act of withdrawal" [Miller 1958: 30]. Not only does he retreat to his cell and then refuses any contact with the prison environment, but he also, by necessity, withdraws emotionally. Dickens introduces the idea of double imprisonment, or prison within prison: "The psychological imprisonment, shutting oneself in one's world of morals, is the only way to defend oneself from the literal imprisonment and its influence" [Kujawska-Lis 2004: 135]. Had Mr Pickwick been unable to protect himself in this way, had his faith in humanity been not genuine, he might have ended up in Hanwell.

Chesterton shows a different face of depression and self-imprisonment. While Mr Pickwick is on the whole cheerful and gets depressed by particularly inhumane circumstances, Sir Aaron Armstrong is actually permanently depressed and only takes up a pose as a cheerful man. Thus what was a virtue of the Dickensian character, leads to the doom of the Chestertonian one because it is false. The public mask of cheerfulness does not allow Sir Aaron Armstrong to fully express his emotions, fears and doubts

and so he resorts to alcohol which only exacerbates them and facilitates his nervous breakdown.

Characteristically, Chesterton also provides this character with a telling name, which points to his double identity. Armstrong explicitly suggests a strong personality, whereas this character's strength is evidenced only as the fake public identity. In fact, he is quite the reverse – his true identity can be only referred to with the antonym of his surname, i.e. weak. Also his first name is somewhat indicative of this double identity. The Biblical Aaron, the brother of Moses, performed miracles just like Sir Aaron in his public life. Nevertheless, it was Aaron who sinned against his God by worshipping a golden calf, thus he was both the highest priest and the condemned sinner. The phrase “the House of Aaron” has become synonymous with the priest's house. Chestertonian Aaron has created his own religion, “the Religion of Cheerfulness”, of which he was the unbeatable highest priest. But, as Father Brown explains, “behind that merry mask was the empty mind of the atheist” [*The Three Tools of Death*, 160]. Sir Aaron Armstrong did not believe in his own religion, hence his two irreconcilable identities. The tension between them drove him to take his own life.

If in the previously discussed stories the double identity is only hinted at, there are also those in which the narrative involves theatrical performances or quasi-performances, during which characters take up various identities in order to commit the crime. In *The Strange Crime of John Boulnois* both types of presentations are evident. The eponymous crime pivots on John Boulnois's quasi-performance. Choosing his privacy rather than keeping his appointment with Calhoun Kidd, a journalist, John Boulnois takes up a false identity of his own butler. Thus he successfully disposes of the interviewer in order to spend an evening with his book. The act of pretending to be someone else is treated as a crime because it is purposeful, yet Father Brown shows his full understanding: “I know it was a strange crime [...] Your crime is committed by every fashionable hostess six times a week”. Nevertheless, the priest is intent on the philosopher's confession as this is the only way to show one's regret: “The little sins are sometimes harder to confess than the big ones – but that's why it's so important to confess them” [*The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, 112].

The more serious crime, the true crime in the story, is that of John's antagonist, Sir Claude Champion. He commits suicide, but before his death he accuses John Boulnois of murdering him: “Boulnois . . . with my own sword . . . he threw it . . .” [*The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, 107]. In this case Chesterton resorts to a different way of introducing the recurring motif. It is an explicitly assumed identity in a theatrical performance. There is also an internal flaw involved – it is Sir Champion's hatred of John Boulnois that pushes him to set a trap for his former friend; nevertheless, it is the play that makes the cunning plan possible. In Pendragon Park, an open-air show of *Romeo and Juliet* is to be performed, with Sir Claude Champion playing Romeo and Mrs Boulnois, a professional actress, playing Juliet. The choice of the play is, of course, not accidental. Sir Champion desires to be Mrs Boulnois's lover; though whether he truly loves her is questionable. Perhaps his sole motivation is envy rather than affection. Though rich and popular, he seems to be deeply unhappy and is intent

on destroying John Boulnois's life and marriage. Thus he unsuccessfully attempts to win Mrs Boulnois's affection by expensive gifts and flowers, yet she remains faithful to her relatively poor husband. Finally, maddened by his hatred he decides to kill himself during the staging of *Romeo and Juliet* only to accuse John of the murder¹.

Becoming Romeo is the only way for Sir Champion to fulfil his desires. At least for one moment he can become the lover of a woman he obsessively wants. In his story, Chesterton reverses the situation of Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare shows a tragedy of two people genuinely in love who die because of misunderstanding. In Chesterton's story the true love of the Boulnoises survives and none of the true lovers gets hurt. The original Romeo poisons himself because he believes his beloved to be dead, and it is Juliet who kills herself with a dagger, again motivated by grief over the death of her beloved. In the story, it is the false Romeo who commits suicide by stabbing himself to death and, of course, his motivation is quite different. Thus every element of the intertextual reference is reversed; the play staged in Pendragon Park is the antithesis of the original mixture of love and tragedy. The tragedy that Chesterton portrays is one in which a person's life is driven by uncontrollable hatred of another human being – obviously a sin.

The consequences, consistent with Catholic doctrine, are predictable. The sinner is punished; the innocent ones are saved. Chesterton again toys with the reader by giving his character a telling name. Sir Champion is far from being victorious. He is the only loser since not only is he unable to win the affection of Mrs Boulnois, but he also takes his own life in vain because his attempt to incriminate John is totally unsuccessful. Chesterton shows here some of the Ten Commandments at work. The most pronounced one is, of course, the tenth: "Thou shall not covet thy neighbour's wife"; but also the eighth: "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbour". Although the Biblical "neighbour" is metaphorical, embracing all people, Chesterton presents a singularly literal interpretation of it. Equally important is the fifth commandment: "Thou shall not kill": in Roman Catholic creed suicide is treated as a form of murder. For all these sins Sir Champion must be punished. Paradoxically, what ruins his plan is the minor sin of lying, i.e. impersonating a butler by John Boulnois, which reflects the sin of Sir Champion, yet on a smaller scale. Chesterton presents an attitude toward sinners exercised by Catholicism. John Boulnois lies and assumes a false identity because he needs some peace of mind. He truly repents this and so Father Brown, having listened to his confession, says: "I shan't inflict any penance" [*The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, 112]. Sir Champion, on the contrary, has no chance to confess his sins, and his final words are those of slander. Thus there is no saving grace for him. Chesterton pinpoints yet another issue, that is, the fact that identifica-

¹ Sir Champion and his actions are compared to those of Haroun Alraschid of *The Arabian Nights* (as refers showing off his wealth to win Mrs Boulnois's attention) and the Biblical Haman (with reference to his hatred of John Boulnois). A more extensive analysis of these intertextual references and relationships is to be found in my article *Translation of Biblical References in Literary and Non-literary Texts*, published in *Acta Neophilologica* in 2008.

tion with a given religion does not automatically make one a virtuous person. Upon the fake Romeo's death it is pronounced that a priest must be fetched because "All these Champions are papists" [*The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, 108]. Yet as Father Brown emphasises "Anybody can be wicked – as wicked as he chooses" [*The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, 109] so it does not matter which religion one follows. What matters is that "We can direct our moral wills" [*The Strange Crime of John Boulnois*, 109], that is, the human being is endowed with free will and this can become our best friend or worst enemy.

The motif of identity is also connected in Chesterton's stories with the notion of invisibility. The author is particularly interested in the ability of a human being to be invisible to others while being in their presence, which often stems from a pre-established stereotypical categorisation of men. The two stories which investigate the motif of invisibility within the visually accessible are: *The Invisible Man* and *The Queer Feet*. The evocative title of the former draws the readers' attention to it. Chesterton shows how people may be deceived by appearances. Four people, guarding the entrance to the building: the chestnut seller, the policeman, the commissioner and the man in shirt sleeves, all swear that they did not see anybody enter or leave the building. Yet the murder has been committed and, even worse, the body of the victim has disappeared. Laura Hope swears she is haunted by the voice of a man she has refused to marry; yet, she has never seen him around since the day she refused him. There seems to be some supernatural power involved. Yet, Father Brown, with his typical simplicity, proves that all of these people are misled and blinded by their own stereotypical thinking. The fact is that we do not notice others who are perhaps inferior to us, as exemplified by a story he tells to make his point:

"Suppose one lady says to another in a country house, 'Is anybody staying with you?' the lady doesn't answer 'Yes; the butler, the three footmen, the parlourmaid, and so on,' though the parlourmaid may be in the room, or the butler behind her chair. She says 'There is nobody staying with us,' meaning nobody of the sort you mean. But suppose a doctor inquiring into an epidemic asks, 'Who is staying in the house?' then the lady will remember the butler, the parlourmaid, and the rest" [*The Invisible Man*, 68].

Father Brown analyses this situation in terms of human communication. People tend to provide the answer which is expected of them: "All language is used like that; you never get a question answered literally, even when you get it answered truly" [*The Invisible Man*, 68]. Yet at the same time, it is clear that for some representatives of society others are as if non-existent. They are unnoticeable because they are unobtrusive: they fit where they should. Thus a lady does not notice the presence of her servants if they do what they are supposed to do; the four watchers and Miss Hope do not notice the presence of a postman because apparently he only does his job. Even the policeman is deceived as easily as the others, although he states emphatically that he "had had experience of crooks of all kinds, in top hats and in rags; he wasn't so green as to expect suspicious characters to look suspicious; he looked out for anybody, and, so help him, there had been nobody" [*The Invisible Man*, 65–66]. A human being cannot be invisible; if he is, it is only because others do not take notice of him. Thus,

the moral seems to be that everyone counts; the appearances are misleading. The murderer takes advantage of this categorisation of people into important, i.e. visible, and less important, i.e. invisible, and assumes the identity of a postman in order to haunt his beloved as well as to destroy his rival.

The same motif is used as a tool to commit a crime in *The Queer Feet*. The thief assumes two different identities simultaneously: that of a waiter and that of a gentleman. What makes it possible is the similar evening dress of gentlemen and the professional outfit of waiters. The outward appearance is the same so the thief is "invisible" as such to the gentlemen when he pretends to be a waiter, and his true identity remains invisible to the waiters when he impersonates a gentleman. The difference lies in the manner of walking and in the behaviour of the two social groups: gentlemen walk slowly and with the air of self-assuredness, whereas waiters run quickly in a subservient posture. Thus the thief, while keeping the same appearance, changes the manner of movement and this is sufficient to mislead others. He creates invisibility within visibility and proves how insignificant, apparently, is the difference between various social groups [Kujawska-Lis 2007: 243–244]. Naturally, the social distance between the two described groups is vast; nevertheless, Chesterton again makes readers aware of the misleading path of stereotypical thinking. If a waiter can be mistaken for a gentleman, then one needs to look beyond appearance to plumb the true meaning of things. Any form of superficiality leads to self-deception.

Chesterton's games with different identities is far from monotonous. A criminal rarely enters a scene explicitly pronouncing himself to be an assassin, a thief or a swindler. Detective fiction seems to necessitate the assumption of some identity to cover the true identity of the wrongdoer; yet in Chesterton's stories the play with identities is not only necessitated by the genre conventions but also proves amusing and intriguing. Moreover, there is always some moral teaching to be mined. The writer uses different levels at which the changes take place and their various forms. The transition can refer to one character in a single story, or it may involve the metamorphosis of the character within the cycle (Flambeau, Valentin). It refers to assuming a false identity in order to commit a crime, or shows the duality of human nature where the suppressed, hidden identity finally surfaces. There seems to be a pattern where those characters who hide their true selves are generally driven to suicide or provoked suicide (Pauline Stacey, Sir Aaron Armstrong, Sir Claude Champion) as if they are being punished for living a life of lies. Being true to oneself, accepting one's failings on equal terms with one's successes, seems to be one of the teachings that permeate the stories.

The models of the fictional world created in the stories, and in the cycle as such, rest on the essential duality of the human being encompassing both good and evil. Any person is capable of misconduct and then he assumes the 'evil personality', or at least he allows its performance. Even a wrongdoer is capable of goodness; yet, the essential element in the conversion is, of course, repentance. Any stereotypical evaluation of a human being leads one astray. An optimist may in fact be suicidal, a thief may become a detective, a policeman may turn into a murderer, a religious leader may in truth be a swindler, and a paragon of independence may be totally emotionally and physically handicapped. Nothing is as it seems to be.

Bibliography

- Chesterton, G.K. (1911; 2001). *The Innocence of Father Brown*. USA: Quiet Vision Publishing.
- Chesterton, G.K. (1914; 2001). *The Wisdom of Father Brown*. USA: Quiet Vision Publishing.
- Kujawska-Lis, E. (2004). *A Tale of Two Visions. The Individual and Victorian Public Institutions in the Novels of Charles Dickens*. Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo UWM.
- Kujawska-Lis, E. (2007). *Translator's Nightmare: G.K. Chesterton's "The Queer Feet" and its Cultural References*. In: A. Blaim, J. Kokot (ed.) *Texts in/of Texts*. Lublin: Maria Skłodowska-Curie University Press.
- Miller, J.H. (1958). *Charles Dickens. The World of His Novels*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Summary

G.K. Chesterton's Games with Identities

Gilbert Keith Chesterton, the author of, amongst others, the Father Brown detective stories is generally analysed, with some exceptions, by Polish criticism in terms of ideology and Catholicism. His literary technique is treated with less attention, though his artistic output as such is perhaps valued even more in Poland than in England. This article attempts to fill in the gap by examining the ways in which Chesterton structures some of his stories and the way he introduces and inserts elements of Catholic doctrine into them. This article investigates the recurring motif of various identities for the same character both in selected stories and within the framework of the whole Father Brown cycle. Chesterton's characters epitomise the dichotomy of human nature: one and the same character may transition from an honest person into a criminal and vice versa. The author also shows the implications of leading a double life and, of course, employs the notion of a double identity as a vehicle for committing a crime.