

ENG4C-A

**13**

**“The Affair of the  
Twisted Scarf”**



# Introduction

This story features Nero Wolfe. Wolfe is an armchair detective—someone who solves crimes just by thinking about them and figuring out everything in his head. The typical armchair detective is not *always* found sitting, of course; but his specialty is thinking, not doing. Sherlock Holmes is sometimes like that, but he also often gets down on his knees with his magnifying glass, and he knows how to handle himself in a fight. Nero Wolfe is of a “purer breed.” He almost never leaves his house, and his main physical activity is eating and drinking, not gathering clues. As you will see, he is so sedentary, so lazily self-absorbed, that at times he can barely be bothered even to talk.

So where is the action? Wolfe has an assistant, Archie Goodwin, who, in most respects, is Wolfe’s opposite. Archie not only tells the stories, he acts them out. Generally obedient, Archie also knows how to keep himself amused when his employer is preoccupied or absent, and he often acts on his own initiative.

Since Wolfe knows only what Archie tells him, and since Archie also tells the story to us, the readers, we normally know as much as Wolfe does and ought to be able to solve the mystery ourselves. Well, Wolfe is a genius (he says so himself), and so he is able to outdo us. But consider what a challenge this is for the writer—if we ever prove to be as intelligent as Wolfe, then the story will fall apart. How can Rex Stout, the author, maintain Wolfe’s superiority, with all the intelligent readers out there? One way is to have Archie tell the reader *more irrelevant* details than he tells Wolfe—as every magician knows, the secret of a successful performance is to distract the audience with a lot of talk and gestures, and Archie is a master at this. You’ll do best if you keep your eye on what Wolfe himself knows. Then you will be able to focus on the trick and (maybe) figure it out. Don’t worry that all the irrelevant details will get boring, either—Archie is a very entertaining guy.



## What You Will Learn

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- select the right reading strategy for a text
- explain how a writer uses a variety of literary elements to enhance meaning
- use a logical process in your writing

# “The Death of the Hat”

## by Billy Collins

Wait a minute—this is a poem, not a detective story, and it has nothing to do with a twisted scarf! Why is it here? The main reason, frankly, is that it is a good poem, and in an English course, you should read a poem or two. So, you will study it on its own terms and let the detective story wait a bit. There *is* a connection, though, between the poem and the story—the poem contains a little extra clue that is relevant to the story, if you know how to pick it up. Now, read the poem.

### **The Death of the Hat** by Billy Collins

Once every man wore a hat.

In the ashen newsreels,  
the avenues of cities  
are broad rivers flowing with hats.

The ballparks swelled  
with thousands of straw hats,  
brims and bands,  
rows of men smoking  
and cheering in shirtsleeves.

Hats were the law.  
They went without saying.  
You noticed a man without a hat in a crowd.

You bought them from Adams or Dobbs  
who branded your initials in gold  
on the inside band.

Trolleys crisscrossed the city.  
Steamships sailed in and out of the harbor.  
Men with hats gathered on the docks.

There was a person to block your hat  
and a hatcheck girl to mind it  
while you had a drink  
or ate a steak with peas and a baked potato.  
In your office stood a hat rack.

The day war was declared  
every one in the street was wearing a hat.  
And they were wearing hats  
when a ship loaded with men sank in the icy sea.

My father wore one to work every day  
and returned home  
carrying the evening paper,  
the winter chill radiating from his overcoat.

But today we go bareheaded  
into the winter streets,  
stand hatless on frozen platforms.

Today the mailboxes on the roadside  
and the spruce trees behind the house  
wear cold white hats of snow.

Mice scurry from the stone walls at night  
in their thin fur hats  
to eat the birdseed that has spilled.

And now my father, after a life of work,  
wears a hat of earth,  
and on top of that,  
a lighter one of cloud and sky—a hat of wind.

The poem, obviously, is about hats—men’s hats. It starts from a simple observation: that once every man wore a hat, but now no one does. Time passes and things change. Big deal. You might expect the poem to ask *why* this particular change has occurred, and what it means, but instead there seems to be just a movement from the general to the specific. The poem first talks, in the past, about masses of men, as seen in old newsreels and pictures, and then considers a typical everyman (“You bought them from Adams or Dobbs/who branded your initials in gold/on the inside band”). Then it moves on to the poet’s father (“My father wore one to work every day”). Then, it shifts to the present (“But today we go bareheaded”), and makes the same progression from the general (“we”) to the specific case, as before, of the poet’s father, now dead. The poem takes an odd turn near the end, though. It tells us that no one wears hats any more, but that hats remain. Now, the snow on mailboxes is a “hat,” the fur on a mouse’s head is a hat, and the earth over his father’s grave is a hat.

When what you read in a poem seems odd or puzzling, the first thing to do is to think about it some more. That's right, act like a detective—look, and then look again. When you do that, you notice that the second part of the poem is *cold*—men sink into an “icy sea”; the father returning from work has a “winter chill radiating from his overcoat”; people today venture hatless into “winter streets” and stand on “frozen platforms”; mailboxes and trees are covered with “cold white hats of snow”; the fur on the mice is “thin”; and the father's dead body must also be cold. This feeling of coldness begins when war is declared—before that there is comfort in the ballpark and the steakhouse; life is expansive—rivers are “broad,” and ballparks “swell” with men. People are together in the community and do not have to question the way they live—“Hats were the law. They went without saying.” After the war, everything is different.

Well, this is a little clearer. The pre-war period is secure, while the post-war period is insecure. In the poet's individual life, the security of childhood, marked by his father's unvarying routine of going out to work and coming home, likewise gives way to adult insecurity. What happened to the world thus happened to the poet, as it happens to everyone. This sense of the interrelationship between the individual and his environment is common in all literature—we make the world, and the world makes us. So, the poet is not just talking about hats; he is talking about life. There is a lot more going on in this poem than a discussion of hats.



**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)

22. Styles of clothing and what is considered “proper” public attire change over time. In the days described at the beginning of the poem, it was considered appropriate for men and women to wear hats when they went out in public. In those days, women wore gloves as well, winter and summer. Men working in offices wore shirts with collars and neckties, and women wore skirts or dresses. In a paragraph, describe a clothing fashion that used to be considered stylish or “right” and no longer is. Write in a personal style, and link your description to the social conditions or attitudes that went with the fashion, which are no longer common. Try for about 150 to 200 words.

**There are Suggested Answers to Support Questions at the end of this unit.**

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## **“The Affair of the Twisted Scarf” by Rex Stout (pp. 239–284)**

Now, in your textbook, read “The Affair of the Twisted Scarf.” I trust that you will see the connection between the story and the poem—was the little extra clue helpful?

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**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)



23. As usual, you will begin by answering some questions to make sure that you understand the basic story. Give point-form answers, and look back at the story, if you have to.
- a) Why has Nero Wolfe opened up his house to so many people?
  - b) What is Archie's main complaint about the people who have come to the house?
  - c) What is Archie's main attitude to Cynthia Brown when she follows him to Nero Wolfe's office?
  - d) Why does Cynthia want to talk to Nero Wolfe?
  - e) What do the police do that irritates Wolfe?
  - f) How does Wolfe retaliate?
  - g) What special talents do Saul and Archie display?
  - h) How does Nero Wolfe know who killed Cynthia?
  - i) Why does he send Archie to meet the killer?
  - j) Why is Archie given such complicated instructions on how to proceed to the meeting place?
  - k) Why does Archie want an I.O.U. from the killer?
  - l) How does Archie turn Skinny and W-J against the killer?
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## Character

Armchair detectives don't go in for a lot of action, though normally there is enough action in the story to keep the reader awake. Most of the interest in this type of story is aroused by the characters, and there are plenty of them. Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin are the main ones, of course, but there are also Fritz and Saul, who, along with Theodore, the orchid man (mentioned here but not seen), are members of the household and appear in several other Nero Wolfe stories. Then there is Cynthia Brown, all the possible suspects, and Skinny and W-J, at the end. Inspector Cramer and his underlings complete the cast.

Stout provides most of his characters with

- an identifying physical characteristic or characteristics
- a characteristic speech pattern
- a dominant interest (or more than one)

This is the way in which nineteenth-century writer Charles Dickens presented his characters in his novels. Such characters are memorable because they are simple, and both Dickens and Stout create enough of them to give the impression of a rich social tapestry.



### Support Question

(do not send in for evaluation)

24. Fill in the following table for each character in the story. Point form is fine, and no evidence is required.

<b>Character</b>	<b>Physical characteristic(s)</b>	<b>Speech pattern(s)</b>	<b>Dominant interests</b>
<b>Nero Wolfe</b>			
<b>Archie Goodwin</b>			
<b>Cynthia Brown</b>			
<b>Saul Panzer</b>			
<b>Fritz Brenner</b>			
<b>Inspector Cramer</b>			
<b>Mrs. Orwin</b>			
<b>Gene Orwin</b>			
<b>Colonel Percy Brown</b>			
<b>Homer Carlisle</b>			
<b>Mrs. Carlisle</b>			
<b>Malcolm Vedder</b>			
<b>Doctor Nicholson Morley</b>			
<b>Skinny</b>			
<b>W-J</b>			

## Plot

The plot of “The Affair of the Twisted Scarf” is not free of loose ends; there are lots of places in it where the plot seems too coincidental or too loosely connected. Cause and effect are not much in evidence. It is sheer coincidence that Cynthia sees the killer at Doris’s apartment and meets him at Nero Wolfe’s house. Archie’s scoping out of all of the men at Wolfe’s house goes nowhere. The scam (whatever it is) that Cynthia and Percy Brown are attempting on Mrs. Orwin has nothing to do with the murder. The involvement of the police introduces neither evidence nor clue. Likewise the interviews with the Orwins, Malcolm Vedder, and Dr. Morley provide no further information. Saul accompanies Archie part of the way to his meeting with the killer and then disappears.

Although the plot is a loose one, however, the usual stages exist:

- **Initially stable situation:** Nero Wolfe’s household caters to his needs; everyone knows his or her job and performs it flawlessly.
- **Disturbance:** The Manhattan Flower Club invades.
- **Complication, or series of complications:**
  - Archie sees Cynthia, and Cynthia sees the killer.
  - Cynthia talks to Archie.
  - Cynthia’s body is discovered.
  - There is a lot of talk with police, suspects, and members of the household.
  - Wolfe writes a letter to the killer, who telephones in response.
  - Archie goes to meet the killer.
  - Archie convinces the henchmen to tackle the killer.
- **Climax:** The killer is subdued.
- **Dénouement:** Wolfe explains it all to Archie and the Inspector.



**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)



25. As just noted, the plot is not built on cause and effect; it dwells more on everyone's reaction to the murder than on the solution to the murder. There are also some logical gaps; things that just do not make sense. Your job now is to identify and explain them.
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## Setting

There are three physical settings in “The Affair of the Twisted Scarf”: 1) Nero Wolfe’s house (orchid room, entryway, and office), 2) the lunchroom where Archie receives instructions, and 3) the room in which Archie confronts the killer. None is described in any detail, but there is a downward progression from elegance to grunge. There are also four social settings: 1) the well-oiled machinery of Wolfe’s household is paralleled by 2) the somewhat less well-oiled machinery of the police department. Outside these two small social realms is 3) the Manhattan Garden Club, whose members and hangers-on are basically nuisances—they break flowers, create disturbances, make demands, and come up with nutty theories. Finally, there is 4) the underclass (“rummies”), represented by Skinny and W-J, who are moderately freakish.

## Theme

Remember that the theme is what the story is really about—the general idea behind it. It may be difficult to find a theme in this story, because the main idea seems to be that Nero Wolfe is a genius. However, see if you can find a theme that relates either to intelligence, disguise, communication, transgression, or co-operation.



**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)

26. State a theme for the story (using a single sentence), and then explain how it is appropriate.
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## Style

The French have a saying: “La sauce, c’est tout,” meaning the sauce is everything. They are talking about cooking, of course—the sauce provides the finishing touch to the meal, and is the best indication of a chef’s skill. Style is like that. In the last story, “Don’t Know Much about Art,” the style was embodied in the cockney voice of Billy. This story also uses first-person narration, but Archie’s personality is different from Billy’s. Billy, you will recall, likes his own little world. Billy is bored when something new is presented to him and only reluctantly takes notice of other worlds, like that of Lord Harbinger.

Archie, by contrast, is all eyes. He is always interested, and his interest is contagious. Archie’s way is not to ingest the world but to encounter it, and that sense of encounter forms the style of the whole story. Often the encounters are between opposites—male/female, or cop/private-eye—and the dialogue, as Westlake notes in his introduction to the story, “crackles” with tension. The opposites do not always involve people, either. There are long sentences versus one-word expletives, questions versus answers, and names versus physical characteristics. Archie thinks

there were a lot of names in this world that could stand a reshuffle. Calling that overweight, narrow-eyed, pearl-and-mink proprietor Mimi was a paradox.

If wit consists of the artful juxtaposition of opposites, then Stout is a master of it.

Look at Archie's and Cynthia's first conversation on page 240, which provides a good example of Stout's style of opposites. Archie has already met Cynthia in the orchid room, and she has already given him conflicting messages. Archie noticed then that "the first quick, slanting glance she gave me said plainly that she could tell the difference between an orchid and a man," yet she rejected his offer of conversation. Now she has pursued him to Nero Wolfe's office, and been greeted with "a friendly leer." Cynthia heads for Archie, stops, sits down, and "squeaks" a request for a drink. Invitation is followed by avoidance, avoidance by pursuit, and advance by a jerking halt. Cynthia's squeak is followed by a hearty utterance: "Did I need that!" Her shaking hand nevertheless allows her to drink her whiskey neatly, without spilling. Her eyes are "moist," but she gives Archie a "full straight look with her head tilted up." The pattern is pretty clear; everything about Cynthia is followed immediately by its opposite. She is giving Archie contradictory messages, presenting herself alternately as a weak woman open to, and in need of, male protection; and as a strong, direct woman ready to engage with the man or to keep him at bay, just as she chooses.

This variant of the mating dance is familiar enough, and Archie is ready to play. When Cynthia states, "You're Archie Goodwin," in her direct, strong-woman mode, he responds, "And you're the Queen of Egypt?" We get ready for a little male/female thrust and parry; but no. "I'm a baboon," Cynthia declares. "I don't know how they ever taught me to talk." This is not exactly romantic, though at the same time, she holds out her empty glass helplessly, so that Archie is drawn towards her to take it. Then she "complains" about her shaking hand, again not romantically, but keeps it held out so that Archie takes it in his own with "some friendly but gentle pressure" and manages a short sentence before she jerks it away. And so it goes—a step forward, a step back, and a step sideways.

Conversations between men are also characterized by sudden connections followed by equally sudden disconnections. Look at the following dialogue between Inspector Cramer and Archie, from page 257.

“I would hate to tell you what I think of the fact that Goodwin sat there in your office and was told he was right here on these premises and all he did was—”

“You’re irritated,” I said charitably. “Not that he was on the premises, that he *had* been. Also, I was taking it with salt. Also, she was saving specifications for Mr. Wolfe. Also—”

“Also, I know you. How many of these two hundred and nineteen people were men?”

“I would say a little over half.”

“Then how do *you* like it?”

“I hate it.”

Both Cramer and Goodwin start off with attempts at extended monologues, and both get interrupted. Then, suddenly, they are talking *to* each other. Wolfe interrupts with a grunt, and informs Cramer that he knows something Cramer does not and that he wants to “consider it a little.” Cramer issues an invitation—“We could consider it together”—but is cut off abruptly: “Later.” You see how it goes—apart, together, together, apart. Wolfe’s next remark shows the connection/disconnection quite neatly. “Those people in the front room are my guests,” he says solicitously. “Can’t you dispose of them?”



**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)

27. Now you try it. Write a dialogue between two people who are opposite in one way or another. They could be of different gender, age, ethnicity or social class, or they could be from different gangs or different schools. The point is that there should be some gap between them that neither is sure he or she wants to bridge. But they do have some things in common: they are both human beings, and they share the same situation—they are in the same place and are involved in the same conversation.

Have them connect, pull back, connect, pull back, and so on. Of course, you will have to give them a reason to talk at all. Think it over before you begin, and decide where you want the conversation to end—with them together, apart, or still hesitant. Aim for about 200 words.

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## Manipulating the Reader

This section is about the reader's feelings, curiosity, and judgement—that is, *your* feelings, curiosity, and judgement. How do you feel about the characters, and why? What are you curious about and why? What judgements do you make about the characters, the crime, and society in general?

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**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)



28. This time, you will be given a lot of freedom. Write approximately 200 words about the feelings, curiosity, and judgements aroused in you by “The Affair of the Twisted Scarf.” You do not need to be systematic about this—that is, you do not need to deal with *all* your feelings, *all* the characters, *everything* that makes you curious, or *every* judgement you can think of. Write about what is important to you. Do make sure, however, that you cover all three areas—feelings, curiosity, and judgements—and organize your writing into five paragraphs.
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## The Logic of Detection

When Nero Wolfe speaks of his “calculation,” one might imagine him doing complicated mental arithmetic or algebra, especially as there is such emphasis on the sheer *number* of possible suspects (around 110), and as the ones we actually see have such variety. But all this is misleading—Wolfe’s genius is not of a mathematical kind. His genius doesn’t involve working through a complicated chain of logic; rather, it involves noticing a key or crucial point. The crucial point is a hat.



**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)



29. Now that the genius has done his work, explaining the logic should be a simple task. Try to write out the thinking process (the logical steps) that Wolfe followed in figuring out who the strangler was.
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## When Do You Know?

Nero Wolfe lets Archie, but not the reader, know who the letter is addressed to. And he does not explain *how* he knows who to send it to until the end of the story. Is he playing fair? Could you have known who the killer was before Archie called out her name?



**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)

30. Explain when you could have figured out the identity of the killer, if you were smart enough.
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## Key Question



**Save your answers to the Key Questions in your Course Journal or e-Journal.**

13. This story is told by a man. In fact, all three stories so far have been told by men (or, at least, from a man's point of view, in the case of "The Leopold Locked Room"). For this Key Question, you must tell Mrs. Carlisle's version of the events in Wolfe's house, in her words, and from her point of view. We do not know very much about her, but there are some details that might give you a hint as to how she would tell the story, and how she would explain what she did to Cynthia. **(50 marks)**
- a) Start by checking through the story to find references to Mrs. Carlisle that will give you clues to her personality and voice. Make a list of five references and what you learn from them, using a table similar to the one that follows. **(25 marks)**

Page reference	What is said about Mrs. Carlisle (point form)	What this tells you about her character and voice

- b) Then write Mrs. Carlisle's story, in about **300 words**. You can write it as if she were talking to someone, or writing in her diary. She is telling the truth, and is speaking in the first person. Begin with her arrival at Wolfe's house and let her take the reader through the events that happened, until

shortly after she and her husband arrived home that day. Let her tell her thoughts and feelings at each stage of the events. Remember that only she knows her own motive and how she was feeling. Let her tell it her way. Make sure that the story facts are not changed, but do create and tell details that only Mrs. Carlisle could know about the murder and the motive.

Your answers to the Key Question will be marked according to the following Marking Guide and rubric.

### **Marking Guide for Part a) (25 marks)**

- Each reference and its accompanying information is worth **5 marks**, so give as much detail as you can.
- The completed table is worth a total of **25 marks**.

### Rubric for Key Question 13, Part b) (25 marks)

Categories	Below Level 1 (0–49%)	Level 1 (50–59%)	Level 2 (60–69%)	Level 3 (70–79%)	Level 4 (80–100%)
<b>Knowledge/ Understanding</b>	facts of original story are not told accurately and relevant facts are not incorporated into Mrs. Carlisle's account of events	facts of original story are told with only minimal accuracy and only a few relevant facts are incorporated	facts of original story are mostly told accurately and most relevant facts are incorporated	facts of original story are told accurately and all relevant facts are incorporated	facts of original story are told accurately and some details from original are selected for expanded treatment to reflect writer's perspective; all relevant facts are incorporated
/6	0–2	3	4	4.5	5–6
<b>Thinking/Inquiry</b>	there is no, or very little plausibility in the development and expression of Mrs. Carlisle's perspective, feelings, and motive	there is minimal plausibility in the development and expression of Mrs. Carlisle's perspective, feelings, and motive	there is some plausibility in the development and expression of Mrs. Carlisle's perspective, feelings, and motive	Mrs. Carlisle's perspective, feelings, and motive are plausibly developed and expressed	Mrs. Carlisle's perspective, feelings, and motive are developed and expressed with insight and originality
/7	0–3	3.5	4	5	6–7
<b>Communication</b>	writing is not organized logically—it is difficult to follow and understand; voice does not reflect what is known about Mrs. Carlisle's character	writing makes some attempt at organization, either logically or chronologically; voice occasionally reflects what is known about Mrs. Carlisle's character	writing is mostly organized logically and chronologically although there may be lapses; voice is mostly consistent with what is known about Mrs. Carlisle's character	writing is organized logically and chronologically; voice is consistent and in keeping with what is known about Mrs. Carlisle's character	writing is organized logically and chronologically, and flows smoothly in a conversational or confessional way; voice is consistent and both reflects what is known, and deepens our understanding of Mrs. Carlisle's character
/6	0–2	3	4	4.5	5–6
<b>Application</b>	errors in spelling and grammar obscure meaning in places, and/or account is not written in first person	errors in spelling and grammar distract the reader, and/or there are lapses in the use of first person	there are several errors in spelling and grammar but they do not distract reader; first person is used throughout	few errors in spelling and grammar; first person is used throughout	almost no errors in spelling and grammar; first person is used throughout
/6	0–2	3	4	4.5	5–6

**Now go on to Lesson 14. Remember, you do not send your journal to the Independent Learning Centre until you have completed Unit 3 (Lessons 11 to 15).**