



Detective Fiction: Birth and Rise

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ABSTRACT

Detective fiction, nowadays, is considered to be a subject of academic research. Detective Fiction has always maintained immense popularity among the readers. Despite its popular status, the genre never encouraged academic research during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This paper tries to attempt a study on the birth of detective fiction ; its growth and rise.

Keywords: Detective fiction, Genre, Eighteenth century, Nineteenth century, Mystery

Detective Fiction is a subgenre of crime and mystery fiction. A detective story supposedly has a detective of some kind, an unsolved mystery in the form of a puzzle, and an investigation that leads to the unfolding of the mystery/crime (Rzepka 130). In his book *Detective Fiction*, Rzepka defines four components that contribute in building a detective story (Rzepka 130). Firstly, the presence of a self-proclaimed detective. Secondly, occurrence of a crime of baffling nature. Thirdly, introduction of various characters along with a detailed description of their behaviours to lay the groundwork for suspicions on various characters in the plot (Ahmed 175). The last element of a detective story is the investigation through which the mystery is solved. According to Kenley, during the second half of the twentieth century, researchers and scholars began to notice the detective fiction genre as having more worth for study and analysis (Kenley 100). Crime has been a part of stories that were written much before the genre of detective Fiction came into being.

Oedipus Rex written by Sophocles had elements of revenge, crime and death. Vedic Literature such as Mahabharata and Ramayana had elements of crime. Be it the Elizabethan Literature such as *The Spanish Tragedy* or Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet*, crime is almost always there in the plot. What was missing in these texts was the presence of a dedicated detective whose aim is to solve the singular or multiple crimes that happened in the story. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has close resemblance to the modern-day detective fiction stories. The play starts with a murder and eventually the victim's son, Hamlet goes on not only to find the perpetrator of the crime, who happened to be his uncle but also punish him. Before killing his uncle Claudius, Hamlet makes sure that his uncle's involvement in murdering his father is proved (Scaggs 12). The manner of investigation undertaken by Hamlet is very close to the investigation process followed by modern day fictional detectives. The difference however, was the motive of investigation. For Hamlet, it was revenge. For the modern-day detectives, it is the sense of duty towards humanity or just a challenge to their brain. The idea of a detective did not find any presence in the literary texts in the aforementioned ancient literary works (Goşa and Percec 87).

Most Scholars credit Edgar Allan

Poe with inventing the subgenre of detective fiction. Poe published a series of short stories in the 1840s. Many critics believe that these stories lay the foundation stone for the detective fiction subgenre. Poe published a short story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in 1841. This story featured Auguste C. Dupin, who is coined as the first fictional detective by many literary critics and scholars. According to Huang, when Dupin first appeared in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the word "detective" did not even exist (Huang 128). Dupin's manner of investigation is very similar to the procedures followed by many famous fictional detectives in modern detective fiction. Dupin never found anything by chance. Poe devised "a plot formula that's been successful ever since, give or take a few shifting variables" (Ramazan 19). Although texts written prior to Poe's stories had elements of crime, they were part of the story and not the central plot. Poe's stories always started with the commitment of a crime. The crime would be a murder, kidnapping or a theft. The story then goes on to introduce various characters. Every character seems to be a suspect. Not all of them will be guilty in the end. The detective in the story stumbles upon the case somehow. The detective not only finds who committed the crime but also finds out the motive for committing the crime. It is the motive that leads the detective to the perpetrator of the crime eventually. This method of presentation of the story is almost continued to the present

day in the detective fiction sub-genre and it is this method which sets this sub-genre apart from the ancient literary works which had some elements of crime but never had a proper investigation process.

Literary critic Catherine Ross Nickerson credits Louisa May Alcott for writing the second oldest work in the detective fiction, second only to Poe's first story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue". Alcott anonymously published the story "Plots and Counterplots". The story follows an aristocrat who was trying to prove that a mysterious woman was involved in the murder of his fiancé and cousin. British author Wilkie Collins' novel *The Moonstone* is often considered as the first detective novel. It was first serialized in Charles Dickens' "All the year around" as a story, and in 1868, it was released as a complete novel (Roberts 156). This novel introduced a famous fictional character, Sergeant Cuff. Colin's *The Woman in White* is regarded as the first sensational novel in English by many critics. Collins is considered by many as "the grandfather of English Detective fiction". The 18th century saw the growth of urban cities due to industrialisation. This led to migration of population from the rural to urban and shortage of resources. This eventually led to rise in crime rates. According to Danewid, crimes such as theft, burglary, and even bigger crimes such as murders started happening, and thus cities such as London and New York saw Police forces being established around this time. Ernest Mandel states that large scale urbanization, unemployment and poor urban conditions are considered to be the main reasons for the rise in criminal activities (Messkoub 20). The social and cultural chaos were printed in the form of "Newgate Calendar" stories. Although Newgate novels were criticised by many critics and they believed that these stories and novels motivated notorious elements and promoted criminal activities, it cannot be denied that they had a major influence in the development of the detective fiction. Readers were taking a keen interest on reading stories involving crimes. These stories offered the readers sensationalism. It can be argued that no other subject has the elements of sensationalism as crime does. It could also be possible that readers wanted restoration of law and order in the society. This is what the detective stories offered to them in the end. Poe's detective, Dupin, appeared in two more stories, "The Mystery of Marie Roget" and "The Purloined Letter," both in the year 1845. Gradually, the detectives in the stories and novels started being featured as civilians and private citizens who work outside the influence of government forces and organizations such as the Police force. This also showcases the failures and difficulties that Police forces were facing in stopping the rising crime rates. This gave birth to heroes who work without being associated with the governments. These heroes bring back the order in the society and a sense of calm and assurance to the readers. Charles Dickens wrote "Bleak House" in the year 1853. This novel was another notable entry in the long line of successful detective fiction s. It featured an Inspector Bucket. Another detective story "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" by Dickens remained unfinished.

Later part of the nineteenth century saw a rise in Detective Fiction in many countries. French Author Emile Gaboriau wrote *L'Affaire Lerouge* in 1866 and then followed it with many successful sequels. Emile Gaboriau later came to be considered as one of the pioneers of the detective fiction genre in France. Anna Katharine Green was one of the first American Detective novelists. She penned *The Leavenworth Case* in 1878. Australian writer Fergus Hume wrote *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* in 1886. Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* and *Hercule Poirot* stories have been best sellers ever since they were first published. The fictional Detective who actually shaped the way we see modern fictional detectives today is someone who would appear in a person's mind as soon as he or she reads, says, thinks about the word, Detective (Krishna 156). He is Sherlock Holmes.

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