

# Development of Detective Fiction

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## Abstract

Detection is not uncommon for human beings. Since the very beginning, it has been connected to their origin. All the discoveries are the result of human beings' detection. The field of literature is also not untouched by it. Though the elements of detection have been evident in the literary pieces since the origin of literature, but the concrete structure is provided by the nineteenth-century American writer, Edgar Allan Poe. Poe produced *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841 which is considered as the very first detective story. The total number of Poe's detective story is three: *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marié Rogêt*, and *The Purloined Letter*. C. Auguste Dupin is portrayed as the hero in all these stories in the form of the detective. These stories are narrated by an unnamed narrator who happens to be Dupin's friend. Dupin is not a professional detective. He decided to solve his first case in order to help one of his known persons who helped him once, and obviously his love for detection. The aim of this research paper is to present the development of detective fiction in the field of literature.

**Keywords:** Detective Fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, C. Auguste Dupin, detective, Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Golden Age, Hard-Boiled Fiction.

## Introduction

Detective fiction has been a very discussed genre of literature. It's also famous as "whodunit" and readers get to grasp the story by the detective's point of view. Different people had different opinions about the very first detective story but the majority of opinions point out towards Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The term detection is closely associated with crime. Detective literature is the product of crime fiction and that's why it's called as one of the branches of crime fiction. The elements of detective fiction can be found from the Biblical stories to the contemporary stories. But the question lingered for a long time about its origin. All the concerned writers specially of the nineteenth and the twentieth-century pondered over this question and proposed their theories about the originator of detective fiction.

Detective fiction has its own characteristics such as depiction of crime, hidden identity of the criminal, suspenseful elements, thrill, and last but not the least an impressive detective who happens to be the most intelligent personality in the story. After the portrayal of crime, the detective is called upon to solve the case. Mostly writers present a case which seems quite complex to be solved. And that is one of the main reasons behind the impactful appearance of the detective. The detective character can be of any gender and they can be professional or amateur. Mostly the accused person in a traditional detective story turns out to be the innocent one who was either framed by the real criminal or just caught in the situation. The crime spot seems to be clueless in the first glance but with the observation power, the detective finds clues which ultimately lead him to the perpetrator. Throughout the stories, the doubt falls on so many

people which puzzles the minds of the readers and at the same time binds them around the story tightly. A good detective story always leaves clues for the readers for their participation. The resolution part plays a very important role as the motive behind the crime must be logical otherwise all the time readers spent on the book seems to be a waste. One question that lingers around any crime is ‘why’. The answer of this why is mostly answered in the end of the story when the detective discloses the identity of the culprit, and the motive behind the crime. Motive plays an important role in crime and detective literature as it is the foundation of the plot.

The element of detection can be seen in one of the Biblical stories- *Judgement of Solomon*. King Solomon solved a case with reason and logic when two women came to him claiming to be the mothers of one single child. Solomon told the women to cut the baby in two different halves. In that case, they both will be able to keep the baby. Solomon knew that the real mother would never want anything like this, and on the basis of motherly pain, Solomon declared the woman as the real mother who was totally against the judgement. King Solomon’s technique has the elements of detection. With the passage of time, one could see the development in the portrayal of crime in stories and at the same time its place and status too. Previously, it used to be a part of the story; but slowly and gradually it became the centre of the story and the tradition of crime fiction started.

Especially in the nineteenth-century, the portrayal of crime became more prominent in the stories and so many writers started writing crime fiction. Wilkie Collins’ *A Woman in White* has been seen as the foremost example of detective fiction along with *The Moonstone*. Charles Dickens’ Inspector Bucket in his *Bleak House* is also seen as an example of a detective who used his skill to solve the case. But all the analysis stopped with the arrival of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. When Edgar Allan Poe published this story in 1841, it was received as a new form of literature as the readers found it quite fresh. The gruesome murders portrayed in the story shocked the readers:

*Nothing farther of importance was elicited, although several other persons were examined. A murder so mysterious, and so perplexing in all its particulars, was never before committed in Paris-if needed a murder has been committed at all. The police are entirely at fault-an unusual occurrence in affairs of this nature. There is not, however, the shadow of a clew apparent.*<sup>1</sup>

The suspect was an acquaintance of C. Auguste Dupin, the detective in the story. The entire police department got tired but couldn’t find out the real culprit. But Dupin with his skill solved the story in the end. He observes the crime spot minutely where he found some clues which became the guideline of his investigation. The other two detective stories written by Poe are *The Mystery of Marié Rogêt* and *The Purloined Letter*. Poe used Paris as the background of all these stories. *The Mystery of Marié Rogêt* is based on the real murder mystery. The dead body of Mary Cecilia Rogers was found in Hoboken River, New Jersey, which sensationalised the nation. Dupin is a Parisian detective who had developed his skill with a vast reading. There is an unnamed narrator in all the detective stories of Poe who met Dupin at a library and became his companion. Poe named his detective stories as ‘Tales of Ratiocination’. The technique used by Dupin to solve the mysteries come under the procedure of ratiocination. He was highly observant who observes all the nooks and corners of the crime spot to find out anything which would lead him to the criminal. His approach towards the crime is similar to the way he tackles puzzles. His crime solving method is different from the police which makes him an updated version of the investigators. Dupin’s skill is beyond the understanding of normal human beings as he is presented as a person with extraordinary qualities. Even the narrator gets dumbstruck to see Dupin’s crime solving method.

One of the greatest fictional detectives of all time- Sherlock Holmes arrived few years later. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created this detective in his *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Holmes' sidekick is Dr. Watson who sometimes tolerates Holmes' tantrums too. After the portrayal of Dupin, Sherlock's character was the most prominent one as a detective and the way Doyle has presented it, it marked the landmark of detective literature. Holmes mostly solves cases in London. Doyle presents Holmes in a mysterious way which is similar to the portrayal of Dupin too. The mysterious element attracts readers towards them.

Detective fiction became quite popular amongst the readers which influenced a lot of writers to write detective stories. Specially in the 1920s and 1930s so many writers emerged in this field- both male and female authors. Since it was quite popular, publishers were also looking for good numbers of detective stories. British writers were writing traditional detective stories. Their version of detective fiction is considered as 'cosy' detective stories as the depiction of crimes was not on extreme level. People could read these stories with ease and without getting disturbed by the portrayal of crimes. Among the Golden Age writers, Agatha Christie became the representative of this age as her detective stories are the most famous ones. Also known as the "queen of crime", She delighted the readers with varieties of detective stories; she experimented with her setting, detective characters, and crime portrayal. Most of her stories are limited around a close circle. The victim is murdered mostly because of money and the culprit turns out to be either one of the family members or close friends. One could detect the feminine approach in Christie's stories as it always revolves around a house and its members. Personal vengeance and materialistic profit have been strong motive in Christie's stories. Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are Christie's most famous detective characters. Though she has created many detectives but Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are considered as the most famous ones. Both of them are quite opposite to each other. Hercule Poirot has worldly knowledge who is an ex Belgian cop and started working as a detective in London. Some of his best known cases can be seen in *The Mysterious Affairs at Styles*, *Murder in the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile* etc.

Miss Marple is quite different from him. She doesn't have experience of the outside world. She has lived in the village St. Mary Mead and she is an old lady. She looks quite domestic but she is an extraordinary detective. She can solve the cases while getting indulged in her domestic work. In *The Tuesday Night Club: A Miss Marple Short Story*, Miss Marple shocked everyone including her nephew who never considered her intelligent enough to solve a mystery; that too a mystery that no one could solve successfully. According to Miss Marple, she has learnt everything through observation; she has observed people of her village for a long time and that's why she can understand human behaviour quite well: 'No, dear', said Miss Marple, 'but you don't know as much of life as I do. A man of that Jones's type – coarse and jovial. As soon as I heard there was a pretty young girl in the house I felt sure that he would not have left her alone. It is all very distressing and painful, and not a very nice thing to talk about. I can't tell you the shock it was to Mrs Hargraves, and a nine days' wonder in the village.'<sup>2</sup>

The character of Poirot is more popular than Miss Marple but their creator loved Miss Marple a little more, according to Julian Symons.

During the Golden Age, American writers started writing detective fiction in their own ways commonly called as Hard-Boiled fiction. Their stories were quite different from the British writers as they portrayed crimes in violent manner. The impact of urbanisation was vivid in their stories. Dashiell Hammett created Sam Spade as his detective who became quite popular amongst the readers. Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald who created Philip Marlowe and Lew Archer respectively extended the tradition formed by Hammett. Their detective characters are distinct from the traditional ones as they

believe in violence. They are presented as tough men who can talk harsh and at the same time they can give physical fights to the hooligans and criminals. The traditional detectives are famous for their technique of solving crimes. While the hard-boiled detectives are famous for both mental and physical abilities. In the search of jobs, people were moving towards the cities. The crime rate of cities was higher than the crime rate in the rural areas. In fact the element of violence was also greater in cities. Hard-boiled writers presented the reflection of crimes taking place in the urban areas.

## Conclusion

To conclude, detective fiction has been quite impactful and reigning in the field of literature. People like reading detective literature and that's the reason a large number of writers have been producing detective stories specially novels. Apart from being famous in the field of literature, detective stories are famous in all the sectors of entertainment: movies, TV shows, serials, series etc. Detective fiction plays a significant role in human life. Precaution is always necessary for one's well-being. Detective fiction makes people aware of the crimes happening in the society almost on daily basis. It makes them more active and alert so that they won't be a victim of illegal actions. Though the elements of detection can be discovered in so many ancient stories but the perfection was provided by Edgar Allan Poe in his *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). Previously crime literature aimed at the development of moral values; it used to be the main theme. But with the passage of time, so many changes occurred in the form of detective fiction including the subject matter and central idea. Characters who used to solve any matter were not presented in any special context before the portrayal of Dupin. After the creation of Dupin, a new trend started to weave a character who is amazingly intelligent. Their heroic quality lies in their thought process.

Poe provided a scientific structure to this genre which made him the 'father of detective fiction'. Poe's detective stories have been an inspiration for so many writers and his detective character, C. Auguste Dupin has been considered as the model for a lot of detective characters including the most famous one, Sherlock Holmes. The Golden Age of detective fiction covers the span from 1920 to 1939. Two categories of detective stories were famous: Cosy fiction that was started by the British authors and Hard-boiled fiction initiated by the American writers. As the name suggests, cosy fiction didn't involve violence and too much aggression in it but violence and boldness were the highlights of hard-boiled stories. Even the detective characters are quite different from each other. Detectives of the cosy fiction are more subtle in comparison to the hardboiled detectives. But one thing about detective fiction is common in every subdivision- it's highly popular amongst the readers and the writers.

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