

Classic Detective Fiction

Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of the 'typology' of detective fiction: generic structure/characteristics (in *The Poetics of Prose*, 1971):

Difference between the 'classic detective fiction' and other forms of crime fiction

Classic Detective Fiction's Form:

- Two stories:
 - "The first story, that of the crime, ends before the second begins. But what happens in the second? Not much. The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn."
 - "The first-the story of the crime tells 'what happened,' whereas the second story explains 'how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it.'
 - fable and plot: story of the crime is the fable and the investigation the plot (the latter occupies a particularly important status)
 - Story begins with real murder (victim) and ends with the symbolic 'murder' (criminal)
 - Story of crime told in reverse (the absent story or the 'fable')
 - The 'absent' story of crime is in realism. Investigation—usually a memoir, an explicit 'book' or 'account' written by the companion/assistant—is literary.
 - Story of investigation is told chronologically.
- Geometric architecture
- Leads with curiosity: 'whodunit'
- Investigation is rational: Procedural part of it is important
- No real danger to investigator (unlike in a thriller)

Comparison to a 'Crime Thriller'

- Created in America just before and particularly after WWII and France ("série noire")
- Begins before the crime (which the detective must prevent; sometimes cat and mouse chase after a criminal event to prevent the next)
- Fable and plot unfold together at once
- Moves by suspense rather than curiosity

A suspense novel

Combination of the two 'pure' forms of the classic detective story and the thriller, as it were—are possible and common, bringing together *curiosity* with *suspense*.

Precursor: Sensational Novels in 18-19th century.

Genre Formation and Characteristics: Sherlock Holmes

- Arthur Conan Doyle (1859 – 1930): Sherlock Holmes: genre forming (1887 – 1927; stories set between (1880 – 1914)
- Conan Doyle wrote *A Study in Scarlet* when he was 27. Irishman by birth, a doctor by profession, studied practical botany with medicine, a robust literary career. Political Views. Advocacy of justice (exoneration of George Edalji and Oscar Slater). His University Professor Joseph Bell.
- The detective story as a distinct genre is a product of the nineteenth century; only a small amount of the detective fiction produced at the time is still read and studied. (See Pittard, "Victorian Detective Fiction," Crimeculture.com)
- Father Brown (published between 1911 and 1935)
- Retrospectively we can detect other precursors: Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens. Even earlier (see the crime culture website listed below)
- Socio-political (and ideological contexts)
 - Post Industrial Revolution. Post-Enlightenment values. Empiricism. Rationality.
 - Colonialism
 - Masculinity
 - Role of the state (and the police): Professional police force found in 1800 in Glasgow; in 1823 in London. Slow development.
 - The City as a location
 - Conservative genre
- Rules of the genre?
 - Parodies/Subversions?

- Narrative Contract
- Pierre Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* (1998) and *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong* (2000)

Other Contemporary Examples: Parallels/alternatives:

- Agatha Christie (1890 – 1976): Novels between 1920-1976 (66 novels). Golden age: 1920s-1940s
- Alongside Christie: Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, Also: John Dickson Carr

Afterlife:

- Michael Dibdin, *The Last Sherlock Holmes*
- Jamayang Norbu, *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*

A wonderful resource for anyone interested in this topic:

<http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/CrimeFiction.html>

See especially the sections ‘Victorian Crime Fiction’ and Classic Detective Fiction’, which is on the topic we discussed in class.

The following is a course outline on crime fiction with additional secondary readings:

<http://www.crimeculture.com/359/CrimeStories359.html#hitch>

Special Mention: Scandinavian Crime Fiction

Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo (Swedish): Inspector Martin Beck

Henning Mankell (Swedish): Inspector Wallander

Stieg Larsson (Swedish) *Millennium Series*

Arnaldur Indriðason (Icelandic): Inspector Erlendur (Though not Scandinavian)