

## OLYMPIADS SCHOOL/GRADE 9 ENGLISH/HANDOUT 13

Read the following discussion about essential elements of a mystery. It is a basic (and somewhat simplistic) discussion, but useful for us to begin to think about the detective novel. Starting this week, we will be reading and studying Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. As we become more familiar with the text, we will be thinking about more complex ideas about the detective novel. Please ensure that you have a copy of the novel.

### The Five Essential Elements of a Mystery

(Web resource:

<http://www.penguin.com/static/packages/us/yreaders/camjansen/CamDownloadables/FiveEssentialElementsOfAMystery.pdf>)

**A mystery is a story that has five basic but important elements.** These five components are: the characters, the setting, the plot, the problem, and the solution. These essential elements keep the story running smoothly and allow the clues to the solution of the mystery to be revealed in a logical way that the reader can follow.

#### *Characters*

The characters are the individuals that the story is about. The author should introduce the characters in the story with enough information that the reader can visualize each person. This is achieved by providing detailed descriptions of a character's physical attributes and personality traits. Every story should have a main character.

The main character determines the way the plot or mystery will develop and is usually the person who will solve the problem the story centers upon. However, the other characters are also very important because they can provide clues to solve the mystery or they may even try to throw the main character (and the reader!) off track.

All characters should stay true to the author's description throughout the story so that the reader can understand and believe the action that is taking place—and perhaps even predict which character may do what next.

#### *Setting*

The setting is the location of the action. An author should describe the environment or surroundings of the mystery in such detail that the reader feels that he or she can picture the scene. Unusual settings (such as a fantasy world) can be interesting, but everyday settings can help a reader to better visualize the story. It can be especially fun to use a familiar setting for a mystery so that the reader feels even more connected to the plot!

#### *Plot*

The plot is the actual story around which the entire book is based. A plot should have a very clear beginning, middle and end—with all the necessary descriptions and suspense—so that the reader can make sense of the action and follow along from start to finish.

**Problem**

Every mystery has a problem to solve, usually who committed a crime and why. Authors should fill mystery stories with clues, so that the reader can try to solve the puzzle along with the characters. Sometimes, an author may insert a false clue just to throw the character (and reader) off.

**Solution**

The solution to the problem is the way the action is resolved—finding a missing item or the person who stole it, for example. It is important that the solution be believable. Authors must be sure to include all the clues necessary for finding the solution in the story somewhere (even if they are hidden very sneakily!).

**Discussion**

Share with your teacher and peers your thoughts about any mystery or detective novel you have read, or mystery or detective movie you have watched. Do they have the elements above?

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**Reading**

Read the first few paragraphs of *Murder on the Orient Express*.

**One**

## **AN IMPORTANT PASSENGER ON THE TAURUS EXPRESS**

**I**t was five o'clock on a winter's morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining car, a sleeping car and two local coaches.

By the step leading up into the sleeping car stood a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform, conversing with a small lean man, muffled up to the ears, of whom nothing was visible but a pink-tipped nose and the two points of an upward curled moustache.

It was freezingly cold, and this job of seeing off a distinguished stranger was not one to be envied, but Lieutenant Dubosc performed his part manfully. Graceful phrases fell from his lips in polished French. Not that he knew what it was all about. There had been rumours, of course, as there always were in such cases. The General—*his* General's—temper had grown worse and worse. And then there had come this Belgian stranger—all the way from England, it seemed. There had been a week—a week of curious tensivity. And then certain things had happened. A very distinguished officer had committed suicide, another had resigned—anxious faces had suddenly lost their anxiety, certain military precautions were relaxed. And the General—Lieutenant Dubosc's own particular General—had suddenly looked ten years younger.

Dubosc had overheard part of a conversation between him and the stranger. "You have saved us, *mon cher*," said the General emotionally, his great white moustache trembling as he spoke. "You have saved the honour of the French Army—you have averted much bloodshed! How can I thank you for acceding to my request? To have come so far—"

To which the stranger (by name M. Hercule Poirot) had made a fitting reply including the phrase, "But indeed do I not remember that once you saved my life?" And then the General had made another fitting reply to that disclaiming any merit for that past service, and with more mention of France, of Belgium, of glory, of honour and of such kindred things they had embraced each other heartily and the conversation had ended.

As to what it had all been about, Lieutenant Dubosc was still in the dark, but to him had been delegated the duty of seeing off M. Poirot by the Taurus Express, and he was carrying it out with all the zeal and ardour befitting a young officer with a promising career ahead of him.

"Today is Sunday," said Lieutenant Dubosc. "Tomorrow, Monday evening, you will be in Stamboul."

It was not the first time he had made this observation. Conversations on the platform, before the departure of a train, are apt to be somewhat repetitive in character.

"That is so," agreed M. Poirot.

"And you intend to remain there a few days, I think?"

"*Mais oui*. Stamboul, it is a city I have never visited. It would be a pity to pass through—*comme ça*." He snapped his fingers descriptively. "Nothing presses—I shall remain there as a tourist for a few days."

"La Sainte Sophie, it is very fine," said Lieutenant Dubosc, who had never seen it.

A cold wind came whistling down the platform. Both men shivered. Lieutenant Dubosc managed to cast a surreptitious glance at his watch. Five minutes to five—only five minutes more!

What are you curious about? How does Christie's writing encourage readers the turn the page?

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## ANALYSING CRIME FICTION AS A NARRATIVE GENRE

### 1. WHAT IS CRIME FICTION?

**“Crime fiction”** is one of several names given to one of the most popular of narrative genres today. This term is very broad, as it includes any story that has a crime and its solution as a central feature of its plot. Theoretically, William Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*, which depicts the murder of a king and the eventual revelation that this was done by Macbeth and his wife, could be called crime fiction. However, literary specialists reserve the term crime fiction for a more recent genre that developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which there is more mystery about the crime that has taken place. In these narratives, a good deal of the text is concerned with the effort to solve the mystery of the crime. In *Macbeth*, although Macbeth tries to throw the guilt on other men, those around him almost immediately realize that he is the real murderer and start to collect an army against him.

Therefore, the necessary elements of crime fiction in the past one hundred years have included the following.

- A crime, most often murder, is committed early in the narrative.
- There are a variety of suspects with different motives.
- A central character formally or informally acts as the detective.
- The detective collects evidence about the crime and its victim.
- Usually the detective interviews the suspects, as well as witnesses.
- The detective solves the mystery and indicates the real criminal.
- Usually this criminal is now arrested or otherwise punished.

Since the element of mystery is so important, and the crime or crimes are most often murder, these narratives are also known as **“murder mysteries.”** The role of detective is also considered essential; therefore, another term, **“detective fiction”**, is also common.

### 2. ARE SUSPENSE THRILLERS ALSO PART OF CRIME FICTION?

**Suspense thrillers** are closely related to crime fiction. One can find literary specialists who argue that they form a separate genre with its own characteristics. Certainly, crimes do take place in a suspense thriller, and the central character or characters often function as detectives trying to solve these crimes. Still, the primary interest in thrillers, as the name suggests, is very rapid action in which the main characters are often in danger of being killed themselves. Traditional crime fiction, beginning with Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, includes some exciting events, but is more concerned with the intellectual game of trying to puzzle out the crime. A suspense thriller like Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* or the novels of writers like John Le Carre and John Grisham moves rapidly from place to place, often over different cities and countries. The crimes, too, are more likely to be ones committed by some international organization of criminals like the Mafia, people within government organizations, directors of big business and the like, while the main characters are often pursued or attacked by the criminals. The hero of a suspense thriller

needs a good deal of luck as well as physical strength and courage, while the detective in a crime novel needs mostly intelligence and keen observation.

Nevertheless, most specialists on crime fiction are now inclined to include the thriller into the general genre. This can be seen in a reputable overview of the genre like *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003), edited by Martin Priestman, which has an article on the thriller along with more traditional forms like Golden Age crime fiction. Furthermore, as time passes, there are more and more examples of novels and films that can be called **crossovers**, combining features of both crime fiction and suspense thrillers. Still, most writers work in one sub-genre or the other, as readers often prefer, as with most **popular or mass literature**, to be sure that they will get the kind of narrative they want.

### YOUR INPUT: 1

THINK ABOUT NOVELS YOU HAVE READ OR FILMS OR TV SERIALS YOU HAVE WATCHED.  
ARE ANY OF THEM “CRIME FICTION” OR “SUSPENSE THRILLERS”?  
WHY DO YOU DECIDE TO PLACE THE BOOK OR FILM IN ONE GENRE OR ANOTHER?

### 3. ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S SHERLOCK HOLMES STORIES AND THE BEGINNINGS OF DETECTIVE CRIME FICTION IN ENGLISH

The first stories in English that are truly detective crime fiction are three published by the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), of which the first, "Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), is the most famous. It includes a number of the elements that have been mentioned as characteristic of modern crime fiction: a crime is committed, a detective collects information and eventually reveals who the real criminal is. However, for a time Poe was more influential for French than English writers, and crime fiction stories and novels appeared in French before they began to appear in English. It was only with the publication of the Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle from 1887 to 1927 that crime fiction as the genre that is now recognized really appeared.

Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), the son of a poorly-off Scottish architect, became a doctor, but was not very successful at this profession. While waiting for patients, he began to write stories. The first Sherlock Holmes works were novels, but it was the series of short stories that appeared in the *Strand Magazine* from 1891 and were then re-published as collections of stories that made his detective Sherlock Holmes not only famous but a cult figure whose popularity has continued through reprints and versions in cinema and television films up to the present day.

Because most of Conan Doyle's crime fiction takes the form of the short story, features that are now considered typical of this genre are not so significant. Since a short story has a limited number of pages in which to develop its plot, it is not possible within its confines to present a larger number of suspects who can be investigated by the detective. In fact, most detective crime fiction appears as novels, not short stories. However, Conan Doyle managed to establish what, in effect, was a new genre and to give his detective hero a distinctive stamp of individuality that has been imitated by countless writers in the century afterwards.

It was the idea of having a series of mystery stories united by the same detective, Sherlock Holmes, that proved to be the foundation of the new genre. This also helped Conan Doyle overcome the physical limits of the short story genre in developing his hero, for readers gradually learned more about Sherlock Holmes from one story to the next. Although there are many crime fiction novels that do not have a detective who appears again in another book, the ones that do continue from one novel to another have proved to be the best-selling of the genre. This is because crime fiction, like a popular literature, attracts readers who want more of the same – a different story, but with the assurance that the detective whom they find appealing or interesting will be there again. Agatha Christie, for example, uses a variety of detectives in her works, but the most popular of her novels have been those that feature the arrogant professional Belgian detective Hercule Poirot and the apparently innocent but very shrewd elderly spinster Miss Jane Marple.

In addition, Conan Doyle offers a solution to the technical problem that confronts all writers of detective crime fiction. These stories involve a crime, and part of what keeps the readers turning the pages is the desire to find out who committed the crime. Sherlock Holmes, like Agatha Christie's detectives, is exceptionally brilliant and very quickly notices clues and makes interpretations that readers, if they knew them, would lead them too fast to the correct solution. Therefore, it is important that the story not be told by these

detectives as first-person narrators, because then readers would know what they are thinking. However, the narrator has to remain very close to the detective, or guessing at a solution to the mystery becomes too difficult. Therefore, Conan Doyle gave Sherlock Holmes a friend and assistant, Dr. Watson. The two young men share a comfortable apartment in Baker Street in London. Often the stories begin with a client coming here to seek Holmes' help. For example, after some introductory remarks, two stories start in this way:

*'Holmes,' said I, as I stood one morning in our bow-window looking down the street, 'here is a madman coming along.' [...] 'What on earth can be the matter with him?' I asked. 'He is looking up at the numbers of the houses.'*

*'I believe that he is coming here,' said Holmes, rubbing his hands.*"(Doyle, "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet" 282).

*It was a wild, tempestuous night towards the close of November. Holmes and I sat together in silence all the evening, he engaged with a powerful lens deciphering the remains of the original inscription upon a palimpsest, I deep in a recent treatise upon surgery. Outside the wind howled down Baker Street, while the rain beat fiercely against the windows. [...] A single cab was splashing its way from the Oxford Street end. [...] The cab which I had seen had pulled up at our door.*

*"What can he want?" I ejaculated, as a man stepped out of it.*

*"Want! He wants us."* (Doyle, "The Adventure of the Golden Pince-nez" 351)

Then, when Holmes heads out to investigate the crime or mystery, Dr Watson almost always goes with him. Watson is the first-person narrator of the story so that he can provide the reader with an account of the client's and other characters' conversations with Sherlock Holmes, descriptions of the crime scene and clues found at it, as well as whatever Holmes tells him as he reflects on the mystery.

Dr Watson is not a stupid man, but he seems only average in intelligence. Often he jumps to hasty conclusions or misinterprets the evidence. Sometimes Holmes corrects him, but other times he simply makes mysterious remarks that neither Watson nor the readers can interpret. In effect, Dr Watson stands in for the readers, who enter the story but are still puzzled to find a solution – and so keep turning the pages until the great detective explains it all.

Having an assistant close to him is also useful for presenting the personality of the detective himself. The detective is the hero of most crime fiction and, like heroes in literature in general, has to be an interesting, not a dull character. In addition to his extraordinary intelligence, Conan Doyle made his Sherlock Holmes an eccentric person with many vivid features. Stephen Knight, in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, describes Holmes as a "romantic artistic persona [...] the model of a superior being, a superman [...]" (1980: 79). Holmes is not married and only once shows a passing interest in a woman. His interests are narrow but very deep: he is an expert in the new science of identifying fingerprints, and can also distinguish different kinds of tobacco as well. He often publishes an article on some very specialized topic. He has a laboratory in Baker Street and acts as a kind of scientist, though the science in the Holmes stories is not very profound. At the

same time, Holmes is subject to deep fits of depression and dreaminess, in which he plays the violin for hours, smokes one pipe after another and sometimes uses narcotic drugs. Not rich, he has just enough money from investments (four hundred pounds a year) to be able to live without working so that he can afford to take up only those cases that interest him.

In a class sense, Holmes belongs to the upper middle-class; he is perfectly comfortable dealing with the highest ranks of English society, but also seems at ease with shopkeepers, servants and working-class people. Indeed, he employs a network of street boys and other agents who collect information for him. His clients come from all classes, though they are mostly from upper-class ones.

Morally, it is important that Sherlock Holmes is always on the side of the good. In this way the new genre of crime fiction has moved far from the earlier centuries of fiction that was fascinated by and often sympathetic to criminals. As a detective, Holmes functions as the guardian of middle-class order, the values that dominated the England of his time. For example, in "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton" (1899), Holmes calls the criminal Milverton "the worst man in London", explaining to Watson that the man is "the king of all the blackmailers" and "as cunning as the Evil One" (Doyle 558-559). Crimes of any kind – and they are by no means always murder in the Sherlock Holmes stories – disrupt and threaten social order. By solving the crime, Holmes restores order to society. Very occasionally, when the victim of the murder turns out to be far more evil than the murderer, Holmes lets the murderer escape punishment. This is the case in "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton", where Holmes and Watson enter the villain's house as burglars, and wind up witnessing the man's murder by a beautiful upper-class woman. Approached by the police to try to solve Milverton's murder, Holmes for once refuses: "I think there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge." (Doyle 570). Normally, however, he is relentless in making sure that crime is punished.

In this way, the murder or crime puzzle allows the readers the pleasure of witnessing criminal acts, while the detective's skill at solving the mystery and indicating the guilty person satisfies the readers' need for order, for rational solutions and for the victory of good over evil and innocence over guilt. Generally speaking, the criminal in the Sherlock Holmes stories is never very attractive as a human being. Later writers change this formula to some extent, but for a long time, and even today, crime fiction follows Conan Doyle in being on the side of good.

Although brilliant intelligence, acute perceptiveness and an excellent memory are the dominant features that make Holmes a successful detective, he is also an active man who visits the scenes of crimes and carefully searches them for clues. In "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot" (1897), for instance, after he and Watson enter the room where the dead man is, Holmes bursts into action:

*He was out on the lawn, in through the window, round the room, and up into the bedroom, for all the world like a dashing foxhound drawing a cover [...] He carefully scrutinized with his lens the talc shield which covered the top of the chimney and scraped off some ashes which adhered to its upper surface, putting some of them into an envelope, which he placed in his pocket-book. (Doyle 518)*



Sometimes he even disguises himself in order to approach suspects. In his attempts to stop the blackmailer in “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton”, he disguises himself as a workman and courts Milverton’s housemaid to get the necessary details about the layout of the house. Later he usually spends days smoking pipes and thinking over what he has seen and learned. Still, he is described as a young man who can be strong and athletic when he wants to, though he is rarely engaged in physical violence or carries a weapon.

Conan Doyle’s models of the narrative and characters in crime fiction have had a major impact on writers in the genre. Indeed, it may be asserted that the intellectual side of his creation led to Golden Age crime fiction, while the image of Holmes as a young, vigorous man physically collecting evidence affected the American hard-boiled detective genre.

## **YOUR INPUT: 2**

### **ASK YOUR FRIENDS OR FAMILY**

- 1. HAVE THEY EVER HEARD OF SHERLOCK HOLMES? IF SO, WHAT IS HE LIKE?**
- 2. HAVE THEY EVER READ ANY SHERLOCK HOLMES’ STORIES IN ENGLISH OR ANY OTHER LANGUAGE?**
- 3. HAVE THEY EVER SEEN A SHERLOCK HOLMES STORY ON TV OR IN THE CINEMA?**