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Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol.15(5)

<https://jett.labosfor.com/>

Date of reception: 15 Sep 2024

Date of revision: 10 Oct 2024

Date of acceptance: 02 Dec 2024

Meriem Salemi (2024).The Detective Novel: Origins and Evolution. Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol.15(5). 147-156.



Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol. 15(5)

ISSN 1989 –9572

<https://jett.labosfor.com/>

The Detective Novel: Origins and Evolution

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to explore the detective novel's origins and development through the ages, examining how it has interacted with social and cultural transformations up to the modern era. The detective novel is one of the most exciting and captivating literary genres for readers. It combines suspense with crime investigation to uncover mysteries and solve puzzles by following and interpreting clues. Since its emergence in the 19th century, it has undergone numerous evolutions reflecting literary and societal thought changes.

Keywords: Crime literature, detective novel, 19th century, transformations and changes.

INTRODUCTION

The detective novel is a literary genre that investigates crimes, solves mysteries, and tracks criminals. This type attracts readers due to the combination of suspense and excitement with intelligence and the ability to solve puzzles. The origins of the detective novel date back to the 19th century, and it is regarded as one of the most popular and diverse literary genres in modern literature. In this article, we will explore the origins of the detective novel, its definition, its most prominent pioneers, and its impact on media and popular culture.

The detective novel, as a literary form that appeared and evolved in the 19th century, is represented by one of the first novels of this genre: *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) by Edgar Allan Poe. This novel is the starting point of the modern detective novel, as it introduced the first literary detective, "C. Auguste Dupin," in an attempt to solve a mysterious murder. Poe used an analytical, investigative style, which became a hallmark of detective novel.

With the development of the detective novel, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character of Sherlock Holmes emerged. In his novel *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle introduced Holmes, the brilliant detective who relies on logical analysis and solving complex puzzles. This character became a model of superior intellect and the ability to solve crimes, significantly

contributing to the widespread popularity of detective novels.

While we may agree that the art of detective novel is a product of industrial civilization, the exact origins of the genre remain uncertain. Delving into these origins would likely lead to a complex search, possibly leading to inconclusive results and fraught with potential dangers that cannot be fully addressed.

1. The Early Signs of the Appearance of the Detective Novel:

The discussion of the emergence of the detective novel in the early 19th century does not negate the presence of some of its crucial components in ancient literary works. Instead, this period marks its flourishing, which some attribute to the advent of storytelling. As Abdel Rahmane Fahmy states: "*We notice that its significant elements are present in ancient works of art. In fact, we can say—regarding the structure—that the detective novel has existed since humanity first mastered the art of storytelling.*"ⁱ For instance, *The Iliad* addresses themes of the hero's forced exile and the subsequent search and investigation. It also explores crime and mass murder, often in the pursuit of winning a princess or securing a position of power. In the same context, in *King Oedipus*, the protagonist faces a daunting trial imposed by the enigmatic Sphinx, using primitive logic to solve its riddle, ensuring his survival and eventual ascension to the throne of the city-state.

Many Arabic folk tales and stories from *One Thousand and One Nights* also delve into themes of crime, exploring its various causes and consequences. These tales frequently depict the pursuit of criminals, whether to exact revenge or administer justice, highlighting the methods used to uncover wrongdoers and restore orderⁱⁱ.

A. Among Arabs:

When we consider the detective novel in terms of its constant inclusion of crime, its origins can, in our belief, be traced back to the beginning of humanity when Cain killed his brother Abel. This is also the view of François Rivard, who states: "Without a doubt, the birth of the detective narrative is linked to the first human, particularly with the first nucleus in society. The Bible mentions that Cainⁱⁱⁱ killed his brother Abel^{iv}."

There is a Quranic verse confirming this event in Surah Al-Ma'idah: "Relate to them in truth 'O Prophet' the story of Adam's two sons—how each offered a sacrifice: one's offering was accepted while the other's was not, so he threatened 'his brother', 'I will kill you!'" His brother replied, "Allah only accepts 'the offering' of the sincerely devout. If you raise your hand to kill me, I will not raise mine to kill you, because I fear Allah—the Lord of all worlds. I want to let you bear your sin against me along with your other sins, then you will be one of those destined to the Fire. And that is the reward of the wrongdoers." Still, the other convinced himself to kill his own brother, so he killed him—becoming a loser. Then Allah sent a crow digging 'a grave' in the ground 'for a dead crow', in order to show him how to bury the corpse of his brother. He cried, "Alas! Have I 'even' failed to be like this crow and bury the corpse of my brother?" So he became regretful^v."

The story of "The Three Apples" from *One Thousand and One Nights* is regarded as one of the earliest examples of crime literature. It is narrated by Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights. In the story, a hunter discovers a heavy box sealed along the Tigris River and sells it to the Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid. When the box is opened, it is found to contain the dismembered body of a young woman. Harun orders his minister, Ja'far ibn Yahya, to solve the crime and identify the killer within three days, or face execution if he fails. The story is described as a murder mystery under the title "Who is the Culprit?" with numerous twists and turns, containing elements of detective fiction.

Furthermore, The two Arab stories, "The Merchant and the Thief" and "Ali Khawaja," include some of the earliest fictional detectives who uncover evidence and present it to catch

or convict the criminal. The typical narrative structure begins with the crime becoming apparent, and the criminal is already known to the audience. The story's climax unfolds when the honorary detective hero, Ali Khawaja, delivers expert witness testimony in court. *The Story of the Hunchback* is also among the earliest examples of courtroom drama, skillfully presented as an engaging comedy.

B. In the West:

One of the earliest known modern crime novels is *Mademoiselle de Scudéri* (1819) by Ernst Hoffmann. Another early work is *The Unknown Richmond, or Tales of the Life of a Rue Bo Officer* (1827). In this genre, there is also the complete short story *The Dean of Vilsby* by Danish author Steen Steensen Blicher, published in 1829. Among the most notable contributors to early crime fiction is Edgar Allan Poe, whose dark tales feature the eccentric and brilliant detective C. Auguste Dupin. Poe's works, including *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* (1842), and *The Purloined Letter* (1844), laid the groundwork for the classic detective story. Dupin's stories are narrated by an unnamed companion, a prototype for Dr. Watson in Arthur Conan Doyle's later Sherlock Holmes series.

Wilkie Collins published his epistolary novel *The Woman in White* in 1860, while his novel *The Moonstone* (1868) is considered his masterpiece. The French author Émile Gaboriau's *Monsieur Lecoq* (1868) laid the foundation for the methodical and sensory detective.

The development of locked-room mysteries is an important milestone in the history of crime literature. It is said that Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mysteries were individually responsible for the genre's massive popularity. This was preceded by the works of Paul Féval, whose series *Les Habits Noirs* (1862–1867) featured Scotland Yard detectives and criminal conspiracies there. The best-selling crime novel of the 19th century was *The Mystery of the Hansom Cab* (1886) by Fergus Hume, set in Melbourne, Australia^{vi}.

In the United Kingdom and the United States in the latter half of the 19th century, the development of printed media was significant in popularizing crime novels and related genres. Literary magazines such as *The Strand*, *McClure's*, and *Harper's* became central to the overall structure of popular fiction and its function in society, offering affordable, illustrated publications.

Like many works by other influential fiction writers of his time, such as Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories first emerged as serialized installments in *The Strand Magazine* in the United Kingdom. The series quickly attracted a large following on both sides of the Atlantic. When Doyle killed off Holmes in *The Final Problem*, public protests were so strong that they demanded more of the highly captivating stories, forcing him reluctantly to revive the character.

In Italy, early translations of English and American crime stories, along with local works, were published in inexpensive yellow covers, leading to the genre being dubbed *gialli* (yellow books). During World War II, the fascist regime banned these works, but the genre experienced a significant resurgence after the war, heavily influenced by the American hard-boiled school of crime fiction. A wave of notable Italian writers emerged, using the detective genre to craft stories featuring flawed detectives and unsolved crimes, leaving readers with the task of piecing together the mysteries. Among these prominent authors were Leonardo Sciascia, Umberto Eco, and Carlo Emilio Gadda.

In Spain, *El clavo* and other mystery and crime stories were published by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón in 1853. Crime literature in Spain (limited to Francoist Spain) acquired some features reflecting the country's culture. Spanish writers emphasized the corruption and incompetence of the police and portrayed the authorities and the wealthy in highly negative expressions.

In China, modern crime fiction first developed from translations of foreign works in the 1890s. Cheng Xiaoqing, considered the great master of Chinese detective fiction in the 20th century, translated *Sherlock Holmes* into classical and vernacular Chinese. In the late 1910s, Cheng began writing his detective series, *Sherlock in Shanghai*, mimicking Conan Doyle's style but with a Chinese audience in mind. During the Mao era, crime fiction was suppressed, especially the Soviet and anti-capitalist styles. In the post-Mao era, Chinese crime stories focused on corruption and the harsh living conditions during the Maoist period (such as the Cultural Revolution).

2. Its Names:

The detective novel, with its different names (crime literature, noir novel, adventure novel, horror novel, black series, spy novel, etc.), is one of the most controversial genres. The prevailing view in literary criticism is that this genre is wholly excluded from high literature, receiving little attention from critics, who tend to be reserved in their opinions and judgments concerning crime novels. In the German-speaking world, this genre is considered weak literature, if not of little value, as it often seeks mainly to entertain through excitement. The terminology for the crime novel varies depending on periods, cultures, regions, and subgenres:

A. Spy Novel: This genre focuses on investigating political and military cases of an intelligence nature, with a nationalistic dimension, unlike the traditional crime novel, which investigates personal issues and leans toward adventure stories. The protagonist is typically a sharp-witted intelligence officer with logical and analytical skills. Among the prominent figures in this genre are Ian Fleming, author of the *James Bond* 007 series, and Agatha Christie, regarded as a pioneer of crime fiction with her great detectives: the Belgian Hercule Poirot and the British spinster Miss Marple. She single-handedly established an entire school of writing crime fiction and developed its techniques. Christie is one of the world's most widely read and translated authors. According to UNESCO statistics, she ranks third after Lenin and Tolstoy among the most translated authors worldwide^{vii}.

B. Noir Novel:

Noir fiction is a genre that introduces the peak of crime novels and their possible variations in Europe and America, such as private detectives, crime literature, psychological analysis of criminals, solving mysteries, and prison literature. American author Raymond Chandler identified it in his 1950 article *The Simple Art of Murder* as the novel of the professional world of crime.

The term "noir fiction" derives from the genre's pervasive sense of mystery and the challenges involved in unraveling its complex puzzles. It also reflects the frequent setting of its events in the shadows of night, a time traditionally related to crime and its darker components. Unlike traditional crime novels, noir fiction often de-emphasizes solving the mystery. Instead, its plots tend to be highly violent, with a noticeable moral ambiguity blurring the distinction between good and evil. Protagonists are typically flawed, often facing personal decline as they attempt to uncover—or merely suggest—the truth. Noir fiction is regarded as an early form within the crime genre, focusing less on the crime itself and more on the investigation process. In this subgenre, the detective plays a central role, embodying the heroic figure. It retains the classic structure of its predecessor, the mystery novel, which intertwines two main narratives: the crime and its investigation. However, noir fiction minimizes the importance of the crime narrative, instead intensifying the investigation's psychological and dramatic dimensions.

The term originates from its publication in *Black Mask* magazine in the United States and the *Black Series* published by Gallimard Publishing. The gloomy and dark nature of the

setting is also reflected in the environment where the events occur, far from the luxurious homes typically found in traditional crime novels. Some refer to it as the "crime novel."

The detective novel introduces a puzzle that suggests great mystery and a sense of closure, blocking all possible solutions and enlightenment. The effort to unravel this mystery forms the core artistic technique upon which crime fiction is constructed. It shapes the framework of investigation and inquiry, structuring the narrative to present compelling arguments and tangible evidence. These elements serve to aid the detective in identifying, apprehending, and ultimately convicting the perpetrator. The process involves deconstructing the mystery by tracing the sequence of events and examining their progression through the interplay of characters within the crime novel's framework. This ultimately leads to uncovering the solution and presenting compelling, logical evidence^{viii} to secure the criminal's conviction. The central character in the novel is the detective, and the most famous authors who represent this trend are Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James Hadley Chase.

C. Thriller Novel:

A thriller novel includes suspense or puzzling mysteries about how the crime occurred, the clever methods employed by the murderer, and how the truth is uncovered. "Suspense is a term that refers to the techniques used by the narrator to stir the curiosity of the audience and grab their attention, encouraging them to continue reading or enjoying the story^{ix}." The suspense element in a crime novel depends on the pursuit of the victim and the traps set to ensnare them. It is a novel built on suspense and excitement, presenting the crime mysteries the reader seeks to solve and decode throughout the reading process. The central character in the novel is the victim. Prominent writers in this genre include Stanley Gardner, William Irish, and Boileau-Narcejac.

D. Analytical Novels:

In the early crime novels, the detective first appeared as an amateur, such as Dupin, where the focus was not on the criminal's character. The criminal was often absent or, in some cases, even symbolized by an animal, like the gorilla in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The detective is similar to a researcher in an investigative role, relying on hypotheses and comparing their outcomes to arrive at a provisional theory. The detective links observations and physical and psychological phenomena to the results derived from previous phases of the investigation.

The central character in this type of novel is the detective. Famous authors representing this genre include Edgar Allan Poe, Gabriel, Conan Doyle, A. Freeman, and Gaston Leroux.

3. Sources of the Detective Novel:

In the 19th century, two main factors contributed to the appearance of the detective novel in Europe: folk heritage and universal heritage.

A. Folk Heritage:

This refers to the literary legacy in texts sung by vagrants and wandering poets, which generally included stories of outcasts. It is similar to picaresque literature. Furthermore, there was a tendency toward criminal tales that intrigued the working class due to their often deviant nature. These tales reflected the struggles of marginalized individuals in society. These are stories of the oppressed living in a civilized environment within densely populated cities.

B. Universal Heritage:

This refers to high-quality literary works that influenced the creation and development of the detective novel. According to the *Larousse Encyclopedia*, the 19th century experienced the convergence of two factors in the birth of the detective novel: folk heritage and universal heritage. Under the first factor, the public's taste leaned toward bizarre issues and criminal

cases, which were embraced by the *Canard* group for an entire century, as well as the folk songs of wandering poets who relayed extraordinary news from one city to another. The second factor is introduced by characters like *Karl Moor*, highwaymen as portrayed in *Schiller's* works, and English novels such as *The Castle of Otranto*^x.

Furthermore, there were social and economic factors, primarily the migration to cities, which led to various problems due to the dense concentration of people in narrow spaces. This caused social issues such as diseases, unemployment, the rise of immorality, prostitution, and the dissemination of crime and violence.

Therefore, the city became a refuge for certain deviant behaviors such as sex, gambling, alcohol, and drugs of all kinds. These urban areas became the stage for these social aberrations, especially in the dark, narrow alleys. The growth and danger of these phenomena were fueled by the high population density, the mental distance between individuals, and their differing concerns and tastes^{xi}.

4. Prominent Pioneers and Figures:

In addition to Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, many other pioneers contributed to the development of the detective novel. Among them are:

A. Agatha Christie:

Agatha Christie is regarded as one of the greatest pioneers of the detective novel. She presented famous characters such as Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and the "Queen of Crime." Her novels, such as *And Then There Were None* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, have become some of the most famous and significant works in this literary genre.

B. Raymond Chandler:

Raymond Chandler is one of the prominent names in noir detective novels. He created the character Philip Marlowe, who is known for his realistic style and honesty. His works, such as *Goodbye, My Lovely*, and *The Big Sleep*, contributed to developing detective novels with a darker and more complex flavor.

C. Dashiell Hammett:

Dashiell Hammett significantly influenced the development of the detective novel through his creation of the "hard-boiled" detective genre and his focus on crime and social corruption. His works, such as *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man*, highlighted the darker aspects of crime.

5. Elements of the Detective Novel:

The detective novel is regarded as a distinct literary form. It draws the reader into intellectual adventures where the human psyche delights in the game and exercises thought, stability, and coexistence. The reader also engages with the characters as they attempt to unravel the mystery and find the real culprit. In essence, it is distinguished by excitement and suspense.

Despite the variety of detective novel types, there are common characteristics among them, especially in their structure and narrative elements. Some of these include:

A. The Crime:

The occurrence of a murder is the central theme around which events unfold in the detective novel. It is introduced as a mystery that the investigator attempts to solve. Thus, the detective novel immerses the reader in the world of crime, as no detective novel is devoid of the crime element. It is a significant feature that fuels the reader's curiosity about mysteries and secrets. Often, the crime emerges on the novel's first pages to stimulate the reader's mind, prompting him to ask questions and create a desire to uncover the hidden truth or discover the solution to the mystery. Therefore, the detective novel is "a rational narrative of

a police investigation into a problem caused mainly by the existence of a crime.^{xii} " In this literary genre, the crime serves as its foundation, around which the plot revolves, with attempts to solve its mystery throughout the narrative. Without this element, the novel would cease to be a detective story.

B.The Criminal:

Every detective novel revolves around the conflict between the forces of good (embodied by the justice system) and the forces of evil (represented by the criminal who commits heinous acts). The criminal is the individual who has committed the crime or the murder, serving as the antagonist in the story. They are typically pursued by the hero of the plot, usually the detective, who works throughout the narrative to catch and expose them. In the end, the hero identifies the criminal despite multiple attempts by the latter to mislead him. In the detective novel, the criminal obstructs the investigator's efforts to solve the case. The criminal is often the protagonist in his own story, which is crucial for the writer to understand—he should not be portrayed as foolish, helpless, or unintelligent.

C. The Victim:

The victim is the person on whom the crime is committed for a specific purpose, such as revenge, theft, or other motives. He is someone who has been injured, killed, shocked, involved in an accident, or harmed due to a mistake or dispute. Victims include those who are injured or killed. "In a detective novel, the victim is either a character loved by the reader or one who is disliked. The victim is one of the fundamental components of the detective novel, as he is the party on whom the crime is committed or the person who is killed for the purpose of revenge. His identity may or may not be revealed through the events of the novel, and he can simply be a symbol, as criminal attempts by the perpetrator may be repeated on other characters appearing in the story." The key to a detective novel lies in suspense and excitement. To achieve this, the victim is often placed at the center of the narrative to attract attention and prevent the story from becoming boring.^{xiii}. "Sometimes, the victim is the main protagonist in the story, making the victim the most attention-grabbing part of the novel^{xiv}." Thus, the element of the victim in the detective story often stands out significantly, particularly when the victim is also the protagonist of the detective novel.

D. The Detective:

The detective story centers on the investigation and the discovery of the truth. This aspect brings it closer to real life, as the plot is driven mainly by logical and intellectual elements. The investigation, one of the most dynamic elements of a detective story, often takes place away from the crime scene. "In every detective novel, the investigation forms the backbone that should make up the majority of the story^{xv}." The detective is the one who leads the investigation and collects the information needed to uncover the details of the mysterious case. Without the detective character, the story would no longer qualify as a detective novel. Detectives in these stories are renowned for their expertise and intelligence in confronting criminals and lawbreakers. They often put themselves and their associates in great danger, with many of their closest allies becoming victims.

H. The Police:

The police are often secondary characters in detective stories, typically portrayed as confused and ineffective, appearing baffled and relying on the secret detective to help unravel the mysteries or solve the crime. Detective novels are frequently set in cities due to their association with the police, who are mainly involved in the pursuit of criminals. However, it is the detective who always takes the lead in solving the mystery. Both the police and the detective share a common goal: the investigation, which is to identify the

criminal and uncover the truth.

I. The Solution:

The solution involves piecing all the collected information together, reshaping the mystery, breaking down the puzzle and events again, and revealing the criminal. In the end, the detective novel's writer untangles the crime's knot or decodes the enigma.

Therefore, these characteristics confirm that this genre distinguishes itself from others through components that compel the writer to adhere to specific rules, which form the detective novel. These include: "avoiding any romantic subplots, as they distract from the main elements and divert the reader's attention from the core mystery. The criminal should never be a member of the police or the secret detective force, as this would undermine the integrity of the profession. The resolution of the detective problem should be grounded in strict realism and objectivity, steering clear of unrealistic, fantastical components^{xvi}."

Conclusion:

The detective novel is regarded as one of the most significant and famous genres of literature. Its complex plot and intriguing characters capture readers. The genre has evolved over time, from its early roots in Arabic, Greek, and European literature to the considerable development it experienced in modern Western literature. Thanks to authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie, the detective novel has become an integral part of world literature.

The detective novel includes multiple names, such as the "black novel," "spy novel," and "problem novel," reflecting the diversity of styles, perspectives, and forms within the genre, showcasing the richness that detective literature can offer.

The detective novel contains several key elements that make it engaging and intriguing. The fundamental characteristics that define this literary genre include the crime, the criminal, the detective, the victim, the police, and the resolution.

The detective novel is renowned for maintaining suspense and excitement as the events unfold and the mystery deepens. Despite the variety of styles and approaches, this genre remains a vast space for innovation and creativity. In the end, it is more than just stories of crimes and investigations; it is a journey into the complexities of the human soul and its hidden secrets.

ⁱ Abdel Rahman Fahmy, "The Detective Novel," Fussol Literary Criticism Journal, Volume 2, Issue 2, March 1982, p. 42.

ⁱⁱ Mythologies of the Detective Novel, pp. 12-13.

^{iv} François RIVIERRE, *The Detective Fiction, Europe*, No. 571-572, Paris, p. 10.

^v Surah Al-Ma'idah, verses 27-31.

^{vi} https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A3%D8%AF%D8%A8_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A9

^{vii} Ali Al-Qasim, *The Detective Story*, Department of Cultural Affairs and Publications, Baghdad, Iraq, 1984, p. 29.

^{viii} Abdelkader Cherchar, *The Detective Novel*, Arab Writers Union Publications, Damascus, 2003, p. 63.

^{ix}Mohamed Al-Qadi et al., *Dictionary of Narratology*, Dar Mohamed Ali for Publishing, Tunis, 2010, 1st edition, p. 65.

^x*Encyclopédie Larousse*, Op. Cit., p. 8265.

^{xi}Abdelkader Cherchar, *The Detective Novel*, p. 48.49

^{xii}Chouaib Helifi, *The Detective Narrative in Arabic Literature*, Narratology Lab, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, 1st edition, 2012, p. 47.

^{xiii}Abdelkader Cherchar, *The Detective Novel*, p. 53

^{xiv}*Ibid.*, p. 131.

^{xv}*Ibid.*, p.

^{xvi}*Ibid.*, p. 11.