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## **Rationalism and Romanticism in Detective Fiction**

Detective fiction has consistently been one of the most popular literary genres of the time since Poe revolutionized the idea in the 1800s. This subset of crime fiction attends to the investigation of a crime by a character acting in the role of detective, whether he or she is a professional or an amateur. The crime in question is typically a murder because, in addition to being the most thrilling and frightening crime of all, it is an archaic and fundamental aspect of every society, a destroying force that is present everywhere and across all time boundaries. Most importantly of all, though, murder is highly variable. There exists an infinite number of motives, methods, punishments, and emotions associated with the simple act of taking another's life. Consequently, the genre of detective fiction can establish and follow a definitive formula that readers never tire of due to the unlimited takes and variations an author can spin for the purpose of originality.

The formula of a standard detective story consists of an investigator unlocking the connections among crime scenes, witnesses, victims, motives, and *modi operandi* into a single coherent scheme that guides him to suspects and ultimately to a perpetrator. In addition, detective fiction involves a uniquely retrospective aspect in which the story of investigation occurs in the present tense as the rising action in contrast to the story of the crime, in which the conclusive findings of the detective take us back to the past. Because of the variation that murder (or crime in general) permits, many authors have taken their works to extremes, where their novels waver on the edge of the genre. But despite the fact that literature is a creative outlet, the genre of detective fiction still must be held to specific regulations and adherences to the formula. Therefore, in order for a literary work to truly follow the framework of a detective story and be included unquestionably into the genre of detective fiction, it must separate rationalism from romanticism and focus primarily on the former. Rationalism can be defined as the use of reason as a source of knowledge and justification. It is a logical theory of mind in which events and statements appeal to the philosophy and science of making inferences. Romanticism, on the other hand, is the literary incorporation of imagination, intuition, speculation, and at times the idea of a supernatural.

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According to Charles Rzepka in his book, *Detective Fiction*, romanticism encourages “emotional expression, the exercise of the imagination, spontaneity, and the placing of love before duty.”<sup>1</sup> These two ideals must be separated in order for a plot to be accepted by readers as worthy of inclusion into the category of detective fiction.

In her Oxford speech entitled “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” Dorothy Sayers, the renowned English crime writer, stresses the fact that detective fiction is ultimately based on the fact that we live in a rational universe. This goes hand in hand with the premise that detective fiction is meant to bring order from disorder, to rescind the chaos created by crime. Aristotle’s ideas that “[t]he first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of the detective story is the plot, and the characters come second,”<sup>2</sup> and “[t]he story should never be made up of improbable incidents”<sup>3</sup> lead Sayers to conclude that “the impossible-probable is better than the improbable-possible.”<sup>4</sup> Basically, the detective story must have accuracy (or the deception of accuracy) of scientific detail in order for readers to believe the narrative. The aficionados of detective fiction might be those intrigued by popular culture, yet they are still an extremely intelligent crowd. In order to keep them amused, the author must create a logical labyrinth of clues and twists that entangles their intellect and reasoning. Sayers suggests that we look to Aristotle’s idea of *paralogismos* in order to do so. A paralogism, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a piece of false or erroneous reasoning, especially one which the reasoner is unconscious of or believes to be logical.”<sup>5</sup> Paralogisms are false syllogisms that deceivingly lead the reader into willingly accepting a falsehood as the truth. Sayers explains it as seducing the reader into “telling the lie for himself.”<sup>6</sup> Without the employment of logic and rationalism, the readers would have no incentive for picking up on what the author desires them to assume. Just by buying a detective novel at their local bookstore, readers are already demonstrating their belief that the world is based on rationales and their desire to follow a character that uses this same belief to restore order to a society or world upset by a crime.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series and Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot novels are prime examples of detective fiction that utilize rationalism as the foundation of their stories. And it can be no

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<sup>1</sup> Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Sayers, “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” *English* 1, no. 1 (1936): 23-35, 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>5</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “Paralogism.”

<sup>6</sup> Sayers, “Aristotle,” 31.

coincidence that Conan Doyle produced fifty-six short stories and four novels with Holmes as the eccentric mastermind and Christie's Poirot appeared in thirty-three novels. More significantly, the fame of these characters has proven to be transcendent through time. The Hercule Poirot stories have been translated into over fifty-six languages and made into fourteen movies, while the Sherlock Holmes series has been adapted into over 200 films and just as many or more adaptive works such as graphic novels, books, screenplays, etc. The popularity of these two characters and the recordings of their investigations is no doubt a result of the authors' meticulous attention to detail and logic.

In "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," Holmes himself states, "I shall take nothing for granted until I have the opportunity of looking personally into it."<sup>7</sup> His method is founded on the observation of "trifles" and he never overlooks even the most minute of details. Through scientific methods, observations, and linguistic analyses, Holmes is able to solve any mystery presented to him with the smallest amount of physical effort on his part. Upon visiting the murder scene across from the Boscombe Pond, he determines that ash on the scene is the remnant of an Indian cigar that was rolled in Rotterdam. After evaluating the impressions in the damp grass, he also is able to conclude the physique of the murderer to be one with a left sided limp. In every Holmes mystery, the reader, along with Watson, is left in the dark as to Holmes' line of deduction until the conclusion when Holmes provides a comprehensive explanation of his reasoning. Conan Doyle is only able to string his readers on in this manner because they trust that Holmes is using scientific reasoning and secretly wish that they were capable of the same analytical capabilities.

Agatha Christie developed Hercule Poirot as the same type of detective. His philosophy of reality is depicted in *Murder on the Orient Express* when he pronounces, "The impossible cannot have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances."<sup>8</sup> Throughout each story, he works to rationalize the irrational. He never accepts anything other than concrete facts or data and therefore, his readers, similar to those of Holmes', devotedly follow and trust his logic.

Conan Doyle and Christie owe much of their success to their validation of Holmes' and Poirot's inferences with scientific verifications that appear true enough for an intelligent reader to accept. For example,

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<sup>7</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," in *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892): 76-103, 77.

<sup>8</sup> Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2006), 164.

in *Murder on the Orient Express*, Poirot reconstructs a burnt letter using two mesh hat forms and a candle. The readers cannot know for certain if this process would actually be successful, but it seems like a legitimate scientific procedure. Similarly, when Sherlock Holmes determines the specific brand of cigar that left ash on the scene in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," he explains his conclusion by stating that he was able to deduce the fact because he has painstakingly conducted chemical analyses on over 140 varieties of pipe, cigar, and cigarette tobacco. It is highly unlikely that any reader of this story will just so happen to be a specialist in tobacco, yet most readers with scientific knowledge will find it highly credible that if one were to elaborately and chemically examine tobacco, one would be able to match the tobacco to the specific manufacturer. In other words, Conan Doyle and Christie successfully incorporate "impossible-probables" into their plots rather than "improbable-possibles," as Sayers would say. Not one of their stories contains any speculation, "gut-intuitions" on the part of the main detectives, or any feature that cannot be given a scientific or worldly explanation. Furthermore, each of the detective novels by these two popular authors fits the detective formula to a tee. Readers know in advance what they are in for (and yet continue to read all of both series). They anticipate the fact that they will encounter a story, in which either Holmes or Poirot is called to a case, follows clues, conducts interviews, determines suspects, and ultimately reveals the culprit at the end of the narrative by taking the reader back in time to the episode of the crime.

On the other hand, the presence of romanticism in a detective story disrupts this formula and the ensuing comfort of the reader. The inclusion of the supernatural, the mythical, or the transcendental into detective fiction diminishes any possible trace of realism and diametrically opposes any use of logic in the story. This is by no means to say that fiction including traces of romanticism is of a lower grade than those novels that are founded on rationalism or that they are or should be less popular. In fact, Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*, a horror fantasy romanticized by magical realism, has been translated into thirty-five different languages and was only available in hardback edition for its first ten market years, both strong testaments to its extreme popularity and literary worth.

G. K. Chesterton, an English writer who dabbled in fantasy and crime fiction, evaluates detective fiction as being artistic writing and a form of romanticism in his 1902 essay "A Defence of Detective Stories." He claims that detective fiction is literature in which some sense of the poetry of modern life is expressed. In his opinion, detective fiction treats the city and modernity as natural, beautiful phenomena. He declares,

“[C]ivilization itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions,”<sup>9</sup> and sees social justice as a poetic figure and morality as a dark and daring conspiracy. This view of the mystical evocation of reality as prominent in detective fiction is an idealistic interpretation that would work if an author were capable of keeping it in the distant background and only lightly touching upon it through imagery or other stylistic devices. However, most detective fiction that does incorporate principles of romanticisms treats them as primary themes that clash with any possibility of a true detective recipe. Works such as Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” Schiller’s “The Criminal of Lost Honor,” and Süskind’s *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* are examples of stories that, because of their quixotic focus on imagination, psychology, and individual identity, can at most fall into the very broad genre of crime fiction and never be specified into detective fiction.

Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd” features a perceptive man in a London coffee house who speculates about the lives of passers-by in the nearby street. He identifies “Jew pedlars, with hawk eyes flashing,”<sup>10</sup> “beggars scowling upon mendicants of a better stamp,”<sup>11</sup> “feeble and ghastly invalids,”<sup>12</sup> and many other individuals at a sweeping glance. “The wild effects of the light enchain[ed] [him] to an examination of individual faces”<sup>13</sup> and he is ultimately driven by the illogical and obsessive desire to follow a decrepit old man for days through the avenues. At first glance, this central character may appear to be a sort of detective, but his inferences have absolutely no substantiation other than the highly superficial use of physiognomy. His speculation and his neuroticism deem him an irrational character. The story contains no crime, only the sneaking suspicion of evil, and is therefore a work of personal identity and frenzied psychosis rather than anything dealing with actual detection.

The romanticist idea of assessing a person’s character based on appearance and beauty is a fairytale notion that cannot be taken as serious justification of good or evil. Christian Wolf, Friedrich Schiller’s murderer by negative circumstances in “The Criminal of Lost Honor,” is described as “so unattractive that [his appearance] caused all women to shrink back

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<sup>9</sup> G.K. Chesterton, “A Defence of Detective Stories,” in *The Defendant* (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1902): 118-123, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd,” in *Tales* (London: Wiley and Putnam, 1845): 219-228, 222.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

from him.”<sup>14</sup> And in Süskind’s *Perfume*, Grenouille is a diminutive, pockmarked, little frog of a man. Both of these characters are supposed to immediately be judged by the reader on the simple basis of their appearance, a stark deviation from detective fiction in which an objective perspective is required for judgment.

This use of appearance to provoke emotions about a character is commonly used in literature, including rationalist detective fiction. For example, in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery,” young Miss Turner is described by Watson as “one of the most lovely young women that I have ever seen in my life,”<sup>15</sup> which translates to the immediate assumption of her innocence by readers. The important difference in cases such as this and cases such as Grenouille and Wolf is that Miss Turner is a minor character and no physical evidence ever points to her as a suspect. She can be incorporated into the story as a beautiful, pure character in order to drive the secondary love story of the plot. Grenouille and Wolf are main characters and their atrocious acts are depicted as directly related to their ugliness. They are ugly and are therefore destined to be evil, or they are evil and are therefore destined to be ugly. The question of relation between these two traits transforms both stories into analyses or studies of human nature. Crimes and murders are committed, so both fall into the genre of crime fiction; however, because the psychological aspect of their crimes is of more importance to the authors, both stories cannot follow the classic detective formula. In fact, both deviate from the standard in the same manner. They each assert the fate of both villains within the introduction and treat the narratives as historical accounts meant to teach a moral lesson of some sort: that our virtue relies upon our external situation and that one’s identity and spirit are defined by the presence (or lack of) such virtue.

Furthermore, the story of Grenouille would fit into the genre of fantasy fiction, which contrasts too sharply with detective fiction. According to American fiction author Susann Cokal, *Perfume* should be classified as a horror story as well as a “philosophical meditation on expression and perception.”<sup>16</sup> The novel’s premise is that Grenouille has

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<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Schiller, “The Criminal of Lost Honor: A True Story,” trans. Jeffrey L. High, in *Schiller’s Literary Prose Works: New Translations and Critical Essays*, ed. Jeffrey L. High (Rochester: Camden House, 2008): 39-55, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Boscombe Valley Mystery,” in *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892): 76-103, 89.

<sup>16</sup> Susann Cokal, “‘Hot with Rapture and Cold with Fear’: Grotesque, Sublime, and Postmodern Transformations in Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume*,” in *The Philosophy of Horror*, ed. Thomas Fahy (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010): 179-198, 180.

the most efficient olfactory sense in the world and can concoct a magical perfume that smells so beautiful as to control anyone subjected to it. He can smell across walls and cities, and even has the power to abstract smells of the human body. There is no point of bringing a detective character into the mix because there is no way one would be able to restore order from the disorder created by Grenouille. If Süskind were to incorporate a detective character into the novel, he or she would not be able to follow science or rationality in order to catch Grenouille because it would be illogical to conclude that his motive is the creation of a human based perfume, since it is an impossible feat without the help of magical qualities. The character of Richis exemplifies this in his inability and failure to understand the situation despite developing suspicions.

In other words, a romanticist detective novel would have to persuade its readers into believing the improbable-impossible, an impracticable task. An example at an attempt at this type of intermingling of rationalism and romanticism is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Dupin, the highly intelligent amateur detective of the story, is characterized by his highly deductive analytical capabilities; however, he is also defined by his imagination and ability to speculate. He reasons conclusions from hard data, such as his discovery that the murderer came in through the window because of the broken latch. But he also accepts hypotheses without testing them, such as when he assumes the Frenchman is a sailor, and puts himself in the mindset of other individuals, such as when he goes through the entire thought process of this hypothetical French sailor, something Holmes would never undertake. In addition, the story itself contains a perfect example of an improbable-possible. The fact that an orangutan committed the crime was an impractical structuring on Poe's part. It is a highly unlikely scenario that no reader is able to pick up on or potentially follow the trail of Dupin's conclusions.

The mixture created by Poe limits the extent to which Dupin's rationality can be accepted and takes away from the detective plot, since for all the readers know, Dupin could just be making really good assumptions throughout and because it seems unlikely that he would be able to deduce such an improbable circumstance. Despite its tendency to confuse due to its unrealistic properties, Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" was accepted by the literary community and is now considered the world's first detective story.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 171.

The glimpse of pure rationalism exuded by Dupin must have been the driving force that caused authors throughout the centuries to take Poe's basis and apply it to their own characters and novels, such as Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Father Brown, and many others. This refinement and the ensuing establishment of the genre of detective fiction that would popularly last throughout the centuries could only have been a direct result of the separation of rationalism and romanticism to their appropriate spheres and the subsequent differentiation of detective fiction from fantastical crime fiction.