

The Mystery Novel: An Old Tradition Made New

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Abstract

The mystery novel is often thought of as a “modern” literary form. It is, in fact, just the current manifestation of an ancient form, that of the storytelling myth of the quest. All of the elements of quest are present, they are just displaced into a new setting.

The Mystery Novel as a Popular Literary Form

The mystery novel is the world’s most popular literary form. Mystery novels are the most popular or nearly the most popular genre in nearly every country of the world. They are among the most international of books: frequently translated and successfully marketed in many foreign markets and appearing in a dazzling variety of settings.

What is the reason why this genre is popular in so many different cultures? It is because it is a type of story that speaks to everyone. It does so because we intuitively understand it as an archetypal pattern: mystery novels are contemporary manifestations of mythological quest stories found in all cultures.

Mystery Novels as Displaced Romantic Quests

In his landmark 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell originally articulated the idea of the “monomyth,” that is, the observation that the myths of all cultures share enough similarities that they are, in fact, all the same quest story retold in different ways. This idea has been further

expanded by literary critics such as Richard Hughes and Foulke and Smith. Different variations of the quest have been identified, as have reoccurring patterns of stages of the quest and reoccurring character types.

The most elemental type of quest literature is the Narrative Romance. "The romance narrative most often dominates the earliest period in the literary history of a culture" (Foulke and Smith 46). The pattern of the action in this is familiar to all:

1. There is a "call," some kind of problem that presents a compelling need for the hero to undertake a journey in search of something that will fix the problem.
2. The journey is not easy. All heroes undergo trials "designed to see to it that the intending hero should really be a hero. Is he really a match for this task? Can he overcome the dangers? Does he have the courage, the knowledge, the capacity to enable him to serve?" (Campbell 126). This usually involves his descent into a threatening place, a "dark underworld."
3. The hero must confront his dark "other," that is, a villainous being who is nonetheless a reflection of him.
4. Along the way he will encounter "helpers and guides." These can take the form of "wise elders."
5. He will also encounter "sirens," dangerous female characters who try and seduce him off the path.
6. The object of the quest is some kind of "treasure" that once brought back will benefit society.
7. The quest will "transform" the hero in such a way that he is a better person.

All of the elements of a romantic quest are present to some extent in detective and mystery fiction. In all murder mystery novels, the protagonist starts in a realm that has been or will be disturbed by an unsettling change, namely a murder. Not only is this a crime that affects the victim, the

event has upset the natural order or balance of society: if individuals were permitted to kill one and other, society could not continue to function. Society has been put out of balance by this catastrophe.

In order to restore the natural order, the killer must be found and brought to justice. The truth of what happened must be revealed. The detective gets “a call,” to go on a quest in search of this truth. He must undertake a perilous journey in his quest and must enter a “dark underworld,” wherein nothing is what it seems to be. Along the way he will encounter wise counselors, sirens, temptations — and confront his own dark “other,” who is, in fact, the killer. In order to find the murderer, the detective must re-create the crime by projecting the killer’s mind into his own. He must also face the awareness that finding the truth may not bring him any kind of reward, but rather it may actually harm him. He “undergoes a trial” to see if he is worthy. He persists and in the process is changed. He gains new self-awareness and grows as a person. This “boon” he brings back to society also serves to change some of those around him and they also grow into greater awareness.

Thus, mystery and detective fiction re-creates displaced versions of all of the characters and elements of the quest.

In detective novels as in fairy tales and dreams, the same characters and props constantly appear in new combinations: the Watson figure, the locked room puzzle, the least likely suspect, the damsel in distress who turns out to be a femme fatale (Lehman 24).

Though Gertrude Stein pronounced the detective novel to be “the only really modern novel form,” she was quite off the mark (Lehman 23). Detective novels are popular precisely because they are not “modern.” They do not suffer from the self-conscious quality of trying to be “experimental,” or march to the beat of the latest politically-correct academic trend, instead:

Crime novelists depend heavily on tight plot constructions, surprise and suspense, reversals and recognitions. The narrative line proceeds in gradual stages from mystification to revelation, a teleological progression towards the truth. The good survive and prosper. The evil are isolated and carted off. We are promised a happy ending, or something that resembles one. In these and other ways, the genre would seem to conform to the most ancient storytelling traditions (Lehman 23).

While mystery novels are not “modern” in that they do not seek to consciously challenge notions of form, style, or character, they are contemporary in that the manifestations of the traditional elements of the genre take on new outward shapes depending on the times in which were written. This is particularly true in the case of successful mystery novels: In literary terms, the mystery-as-quest is “displaced” according to what its contemporary readers will most relate to. The more the displacement reflects their tastes and values, the more popular it will be—so long as it retains the basic elements of the quest.

Chronology of Mystery Novel Trends: A Mirror of Society

Mystery novels are displaced romantic quests whose displacement reflects the reading public in the society in which they are written. Edgar Allan Poe is often considered to be the inventor of the detective novel with his trio of tales of “ratiocination” featuring the French detective Dupin. The series started in April of 1841 with “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and continued with “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” and “The Purloined Letter.” Though these may have been the first detective stories in the Western world, the form is actually much older. “Crime literature and the investigator who searches for the perpetrator is as old as time” (Browne 6). For example, in 1949, a Dutch diplomat named Robert van Gulik translated some ancient Chinese writing into the book The Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee. These

feature a Chinese magistrate and jurist of the era of the Tang Dynasty (618–906) who solves otherwise baffling mysteries. There may be other instances of detective or mystery fiction that pre-date Poe, but in the interest of brevity, this chronology will start with Poe's Dupin and his English cousin who appeared a few decades later, Sherlock Holmes.

Both detectives are heroes in the romantic mode in which "The hero's powers, once learned, are nearly limitless" (Foulke and Smith 47). But their powers are strictly cerebral, not physical. Both are men of extraordinary intellect. Dupin confronts his other, the criminal, not by challenging him in combat, but by consciously trying to think like him in order to understand his method and motivation.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective, Sherlock Holmes, is undoubtedly the most famous detective in the world. Doyle's first Holmes' story, "A Study in Scarlet" appeared in 1887. He uses a narrative technique wherein Holmes' companion, Dr. Watson, chronicles the story. Like Dupin, Holmes is an eccentric. He enjoys drugs, solitude, the violin, and deep study. Both men don't need to work to survive: Dupin has an inheritance that allows him to pursue his lifestyle and Holmes is apparently well-off financially and moves in upper-class circles. The Holmes' books and stories do not criticize Victorian English society: Holmes' London is not a menacing city. Holmes may be eccentric, but he is also an elegant, upper-class English gentleman.

By contrast, the "hardboiled" or "tough guy" American novels and stories of the Depression 30's feature detective heroes who are at the lower end of the stratum of society. The world had changed.

The elegant, deductive sleuth, the calm, calculating sifter of clues, gave way to a new breed — the wary, wisecracking knight of the 45, an often violent, always unpredictable urban vigilante fashioned in the rugged frontier tradition of the western gunfighter (Nolan 13).

They appealed to the general sentiment that the rich and institutions of

society in general, such as the police, were not to be trusted. In these works, the rich were generally decadent and the police were usually “on the take” from them. There was little difference between them and the high class criminals they associated with. The detective/hero was a lone man with his own strict morality. This meant that he was usually at odds with society and not financially successful. In many ways, these hardboiled novels and stories follow the pattern of the romantic quest the most closely of all mystery fiction.

The hardboiled detective faces almost continuous trials. Like a knight, the hardboiled detective must journey to a literal “underworld” in his quest for the truth. What keeps him going is his integrity, his desire to know and reveal the truth in spite of the fact that he may not gain any personal benefit — or even be destroyed. The detective has “a code that must be adhered to no matter what the cost or consequences” (Connelly 61).

The hardboiled school of detective fiction germinated in a magazine called Black Mask that was published between April of 1920 and July of 1951. In contrast to the genteel London that gave birth to Sherlock Holmes, Black Mask came from a harsher world. Its writers “captured the cynicism, bitterness, disillusionment and anger of a country fighting to survive the evils of Prohibition and the economic hardships of the Depression” (Nolan 13).

Two writers who published short stories in the 1920’s and 30’s in Black Mask would become the two seminal American hardboiled detective writers, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Their books are the best known of all American detective novels. Additionally, both writers’ works have been made into movies. In the case of Hammett, the movie versions of his novels are probably better known than the novels from whence they were derived.

Hammett had actually worked for the most famous private detective company in the United States, The Pinkerton National Detective Agency,

from 1915 to 1931. He started publishing stories in Black Mask in 1922 and continued until 1930. His most famous title, The Maltese Falcon, featuring detective Sam Spade, was originally published in five installments in the magazine and came out as a finished novel in 1930. It has been made into a motion picture three times, the most noteworthy one in 1941 starring Humphrey Bogart. The movie version of Hammett's other extremely famous novel, The Thin Man, is one of the most important movies of the 1930's.

Chandler's The Big Sleep, published in 1939, was the author's first novel. Its first-person narrative gives the reader the point of view of its strong and cynical private detective protagonist, Philip Marlowe. The first paragraph gives some inkling of the Chandler style, which is blunt, poetic, funny, ironic, and beautiful — all at the same time:

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder blue suit, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars (Chandler).

Chandler based Marlowe on Hammett's Sam Spade, but made him considerably more complex. He would go on to become the iconic figure of classic American detective stories and appear in a total of seven novels and several film adaptations. He would be played by Humphrey Bogart in the 1946 Warner Brothers version of The Big Sleep. Thus Humphrey Bogart has the distinction of playing both of the two most famous hard-boiled detectives.

The author, Ross Macdonald, is sometimes referred to as the third member of the "holy trinity" of hardboiled detective novels that also includes Chandler and Hammett. He played tribute to the latter by naming the detective in his first novel, The Moving Target, after Sam

Spade's murdered partner in Hammett's The Maltese Falcon: Lew Harper. Macdonald's series of fourteen books featuring Harper would span three decades and would change in style somewhat over time. Whereas there is a palpable sense of romanticism that permeates Chandler, Macdonald was accurate when he described his evolving writing style as having gradually siphoned off the aura of romance and made room for a complete social realism. The Moving Target has elements of both. His later novels would be much less Chandler-esque.

The Moving Target was published in 1949, ten years after The Big Sleep. The two novels share some characteristics: both are set in Los Angeles and feature "tough guy" detectives that speak in first-person narratives that sometimes (particularly when the detective is struck on the head) turn into stream-of-consciousness poetic ramblings. Other similarities include incompetent police, decadent rich, and a dark Southern California landscape that extends beyond Los Angeles in long drives in the night to seaside locales with Spanish names. The latter bears some mentioning, because the changes in this landscape that will continue in later years will affect the viability of it as a setting for this kind of mystery. Those changes are foreshadowed in The Moving Target.

The hardboiled novels of the 30's spawned what would become a recognized movie genre of the 40's: Film Noir. Many hard boiled detective novels were made into these "dark films" that reflected the underbelly of unease that surrounded the ebullience that accompanied the end of WW2.

The Cold War produced a gradually-evolving mystery trend. Some 50's writers, such as Mickey Spillane, included atomic bomb fear in their general scenario. There was an undertone of dread and paranoia of the 50's, but a sense of "live for today." The most obvious manifestation of this was the shift in popularity to the spy novel as exemplified by the British writer Ian Fleming's James Bond novels. Starting in 1952 with Casino Royale, Fleming "single-handedly transformed popular detective and spy fiction from the

dark, middle-class heroes of Hammett, Chandler and Sapper, to the elegant world of his own, seen through the eye of James Bond, secret agent 007.” (Cork and Scivalli 6)

Bond was the ideal man of the era of Playboy magazine. He was irresistible to women and skilled in every possible social and physically challenging situation. He always defeated every opponent and won at cards. Beyond this, he also displayed an uncanny awareness of worldly things by their brand names. This blending of a fictional world and the real, commercial one also reflected the increasingly consumer-driven world. Fleming’s novels are now better known for their movie adaptations, which thrived from 1962 to 1967. That these films were popular during this time period, but the hardboiled detective was not says a lot about the popular genre of mystery fiction.

As has been stated, the circumstances, moods, and tastes of the times affect novels, scripts, and films. Comparing the ease with which the James Bond film adaptations fit into the mid 60’s with the awkward fit of the film adaptation of Macdonald’s The Moving Target (Harper) is illustrative because the times when Macdonald’s novel was written and when the film was made were so different.

Some elements of what worked in Chandler’s 30’s and Macdonald’s post-war late 40’s still fit in the mid 60’s. The presence of the movie industry is still there, though the studio system was gone. The idea that “the rich are not like you and I” still resonated, and the fact that the poor, everyman detective has a kind of morality that makes their decadence seem even more decadent still spoke to the audience.

Interestingly enough, however, though the 60’s were more overtly sexual than the 40’s, Macdonald’s prose in the novel is seamier than the dialogue in the film. For example, it is full of references to breasts. Miranda is described thusly: “Her light-brown coat fell open in front, and her small sweated breasts, pointed like weapons, were a half-impatient promise”

(Macdonald 107). Mrs. Sampson is also described in terms of her breasts: “The round dark tips of her breasts stared through the silk pajamas like dull eyes” (Macdonald 238). The movie does not have this sort of referencing. Besides its somewhat more vanilla sexuality, the film’s setting is less threatening and does not surround the protagonist the same way as it does in the novel. How this affects the detective is fundamental: it became more difficult to make him the same character.

In the 30’s and post war 40’s, institutions were mistrusted because they had let everyone down. The rich were decadent while everyone was suffering. The police seemed to be there to protect the rich and pad their own pockets and there didn’t seem to be much difference between business people and criminals. The lone detective was the only trustworthy person in this landscape. By the time of the prosperous mid-60’s, the poor detective’s relentless sense of duty and messed-up personal life seemed less operatic and heroic. Adding Harper’s wife does make him seem more human, but he still is more of a lonely divorced man, somewhat more sad than heroic.

The movie’s ambiguous ending fits with the questioning of established values that would become the hallmark of the late 60’s, but it also negates Harper’s whole existence. He rambles on to Graves about how his work is basically thankless, but there are occasionally moments of validation to his adherence to duty that make it all worthwhile. He insists that he must turn Graves in and even says Graves has to kill him to stop him — then the ambiguous ending happens that seems to suggest he has changed his mind or is at least breaking down in his resolve. If this means he is not going to turn Graves in, what is he left with? It means he lives in poverty and is estranged from his wife and doesn’t even have a rigid code of honor to justify it. Essentially, it appears that, as of the 60’s, the code of “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do” didn’t work so well anymore as character motivation.

Macdonald’s self-described “social realism” is also problematic. Novels

and movies of this sort began to predominate in the 50's, 60's, and 70's. It is a shocking experience for someone who was of movie-going age during the 70's to recall so many "message" films of "social relevance" that have been completely forgotten. Watching some of these films today, they seem to have a "quaint" quality to their seriousness. The problem with social realism is that often issues that seemed so central in one time period can seem dated in a few short years.

The world and the U. S. continued to change and the mystery novel form began to include black and female detectives. African-American writer Chester Himes had started with an autobiographical novel with a theme of racism called If He Hollers Let Him Go in 1945. He wrote four more novels before turning to mysteries in 1957 with A Rage in Harlem in 1957. He was not so well known in the U. S. in the 40's and 50's, but his work was "discovered" in the late 60's and 70's and achieved critical and popular recognition. The Black Power movement brought an awareness of African Americans. Suddenly there was an outpouring of films, books, and television shows about black Americans. The previously virtually unknown achievements of Himes were suddenly thrust into the American public eye.

Himes wrote a detective series from 1957 to 1969 about a pair of black New York City police detectives in Harlem named Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. Those names are a clue to the tone of the books, which is quite "funereal." Funeral homes are often locations for action in the stories and one of the reoccurring characters, H. Exodus Clay, is a funeral director. Probably the two best known of the books are A Rage in Harlem and Cotton Comes to Harlem, both made into films. The time setting for the latter was re-set into 1970, which is the year the film was made.

In 1990, African-American mystery writer Walter Moseley burst on the scene with Devil in a Blue Dress featuring his flawed, but interesting black detective "Easy Rawlins." Moseley got a tremendous boost when President Clinton declared him to be one of his favorite authors. Moseley's books

are superbly written, but they are definitely about the black experience. While this constituted a healthy inclusion, it also marked what would be the gradual, but steady fractionalization of the American mystery novel market into groups.

Doing a search on the Barnes and Noble website under “Multicultural Mysteries” will bring up a column of hyperlinks to “Africana Mystery & Crime,” “Christian Mystery,” “Gay & Lesbian Mystery and Crime,” “Irish American Mystery & Adventure,” “Latin American Mysteries & Detective Fiction,” and “Native American Mystery & Detective Fiction.” There are others as well, of course. With mystery book buyers looking for detective protagonists from within their own ethnic, religious, or sexual-orientation group, creating a “mainstream” detective has become as elusive as the perpetrator in a whodunit.

However, though many group-member readers have been siphoned off from the general mystery market by the appearance of books by and about members of their group, the appearance of another type of mystery novel may have signaled a change in the general mystery market altogether.

Sue Grafton’s A Is for Alibi appeared in 1982. The first paragraph introduces her detective:

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I’m a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I’m thirty-two years old, twice divorced, no kids. The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind. I’m a nice person and I have a lot of friends. My apartment is small, but I like living in a small space. I’ve lived in trailers most of my life, but lately they’ve been getting too elaborate for my taste, so now I live in one room, a “bachelorette” (Grafton 1).

Compare this to Chandler’s first paragraph of his first novel quoted previously, the similarity to the hard-boiled terseness of Chandler is unmistakable. If anything, A Is For Alibi is more “hard-boiled” than Chandler. At the book’s end, when the killer is attempting to sweet talk

Millhone as he approaches, her final words are simply, “I blew him away” —and she does (Grafton 214). What is missing is Chandler’s humor and poetry, but virtually everything else resonates with his influence. Millhone and Marlowe are about the same age and have similar issues with the opposite sex. The book would become extremely successful and spawn a series, with each successive book having a title that begins with the next letter of the alphabet: “B” is for Burglar, “C” is for Corpse, up to the latest “S” is for Silence.

Grafton was certainly not the first female mystery writer and Kinsey Millhone was certainly not the first female mystery detective, but where Moseley and the multi-cultural mystery writers would carve out niches in the mystery novel market that occasionally crossed over into the mainstream, Grafton and the female writers would become the mainstream.

The Contemporary (2008) American Reading Market: The Female Reader

The current form of the popular mystery novel reflects the fact that there are only 8,000,000 regular fiction readers in the United States and 80% of them are women. Thus, a majority of mystery novels that are successful feature women protagonists or strong female characters working equally with the male protagonist. The male protagonist (if there is one) must be appealing to women. This has spelled the end of any narrative where a Lew Archer-type hard-boiled detective is talking or thinking about “pointy breasts.”

Even Robert B. Parker, best known for his durable (34 titles!) Spencer series and the man approved by the Chandler estate to finish the last Philip Marlowe book, Poodle Springs, now has a female detective series. Launched in 2000 with Family Honor, the protagonist is Sunny Randall, a pretty 35-year-old ex-cop who works as a private investigator in Boston. She is a

single, divorced woman who lives with her little bull terrier Rosie and paints as a hobby/secondary career.

Though the contemporary female detective started with Kinsey Millhone, her ancestors were considerably less “hard boiled.” English mystery writer Agatha Christy had started with an eccentric male detective, Hercule Poirot in The Mysterious Affair at Styles in 1920. He would continue for an extraordinary fifty-four short stories and thirty-four novels ending in 1975 with Curtain. He would be joined by Miss. Marple in 1930. She would appear in a respectable twelve novels and twenty short stories. Miss. Marple is the prototype non-threatening, “old maid” detective. Miss Marple would never calmly shoot someone and say “I blew him away.”

The female detective as personified by Kinsey Millhone had her roots in the feminist movement and the idea that a woman did not have to be “feminine.” Thus she is a kind of female version of a male detective. This evolved to where more recently-conceived female detectives are not so “macho.” They can be quite capable and don’t need to turn to a man to rescue them, but have a female’s tastes, interests, and sensitivity. The contemporary, post-Kinsey Millhone female detective also is more likely to find herself in a romantic involvement. This has led to a blurring of boundaries between the mystery fiction genre and another genre traditionally associated with women readers, the romance novel.

Conclusion

Mystery novels will continue to be a popular genre of fiction, but they will also continue to evolve with changes in the book market.

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