

HG 8011
Detecting Meaning with Sherlock Holmes

Reading Sherlock Holmes I
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+ Genre & Historical Context

- Genre in literature:

The French term for a type, species, or class of composition. A literary genre is a recognizable and established category of written work employing such common **conventions** as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind.*

- Modern detective fiction as genre:

Biblical stories of crime and punishment

Greek tragedy

Renaissance revenge tragedy (16th-17th century)

Gothic horror stories (early 19th century)

Victorian crime stories (early 19th to late 19th century) (*CF* 7-13)**

*All references to genre from *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (ODLT)*, 3rd Edition, online. (Chris Baldick)

***Crime Fiction (CF)*, by John Scaggs (Routledge).



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- “A story in which the principal action and focus of interest is the investigation of a crime... by a detective figure, either professional or amateur. The centrality of this detective figure distinguishes the detective story proper from some other kinds of crime fiction in which the emphasis lies upon the actions of a crime's perpetrator or victim.”
- “Conventionally, the crime should be an especially baffling case that requires the uncommon ingenuity of the detective to find a solution and identify or pin the blame on the true perpetrator, who commonly has an apparently safe alibi or has left a false trail incriminating others. Various kinds of crime are possible subjects, although murder, and preferably multiple murder involving the elimination of witnesses to the original crime, has been found to be the most appetizing to readers addicted to the genre” (*ODLT*).

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- Early versions of detective stories:

Dorothy Sayers identifies 4 early stories with very early elements of the detective story.

Two from the Old Testament from the Book of Daniel

One from Herodotus

Another from the Hercules myths (classical mythology) (*CF* 8)



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■ According to Sayers, common elements of these early stories include:

- 1) A crime that has been committed
- 2) “Locked-room mystery” involving an apparently impossible crime perpetrated within an enclosed space with ostensibly no exit or entrance (Poe's *Rue Morgue* story being an example). (*ODLT*)
- 3) Tampering of evidence
- 4) False accusations
- 5) Puzzles
- 6) Uncovering truth (*CF* 8)



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- Some critics object to Sayer's categorization of early elements of the detective story.
- Julian Symons argues that while stories from the bible and Herodutus include puzzles, and that even though "puzzles are an essential element of the detective story, they are not detective stories in themselves" (*CF 8*).
- Symons main argument: the puzzles in the stories focus more on punishment than on detection:

"The emphasis on right conduct, reinforced by the harsh punishments meted out in the stories from the Book of Daniel, is characteristic of most narratives of crime up until the mid-nineteenth century, including the stories of Edgar Allan Poe" (*CF 8*).

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- Elizabethan Revenge Tragedies (16th-17th c.):

Preoccupied with the restoration of social order, “as embodied by the act of revenge.”

“The revenge pattern of injury and retribution creates a narrative in which the unity of justice and order prevails.”

It is ironic that revenge narratives are produced when there is a lack of justice.

“The revenger pursues a course of action that is itself unjust, in an attempt to restore the unity and social order that justice promises” but have failed.

Francis Bacon refers to the early developments of the revenge tragedy as “a kind of wild justice” (*CF* 11)



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- According to Gamini Salgado, there is a 5-part structure to Elizabethan revenge tragedies, and they are parallel to early Greek Senecan tragedies:. This structure is also commonly used in modern crime fiction today:
 - 1) Exposition
 - 2) Anticipation
 - 3) Confrontation
 - 4) Partial execution
 - 5) Vengeance (*CF* 11).





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- In the 18th century, the *Newgate Calendar* stories provided the first large collection of cautionary tales; accounts of criminals arrested, tried, and punished captured popular imagination.
- Rise in crime during the Industrial Revolution; large population shift from rural to urban areas; also caused by high unemployment rates. (*CF* 13-14)
- “Thief-takers” as predecessors to; the Metropolitan Police Act in 1828 established a police force. (*CF* 18)
- Invention of photography in 1839; development of forensic sciences (*CF* 18)



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- The Golden Age in Britain

1920, with the Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

Country-house murder synonymous with the whodunnit.

Classic British whodunnit: “character is usually sacrificed in favour of ingenious plotting, as the puzzle element of the challenge to the reader to discover ‘whodunnit’ before the book reveals it, is emphasized.” (CF 26)

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- Hard-boiled detective stories—USA

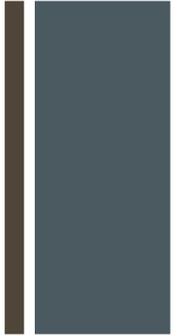
Does not use appeal and reason or logic and focuses on the detective character “normally characterised by violence and betrayal.” By the 1970s [post war generation], the aristocratic elements diminished in British detective stories and they developed more along the lines of hard-boiled American narratives; detectives are associated with professional police enforcement agencies.

“The police procedural... ‘seems to be supplanting the private-eye novel as “realistic” crime fiction’ ”
(*CF* 29)



The Adventure of the Speckled Band (1892)

■ Narrator, Watson.



Three functions of the first person narrator:

- 1) “act[s] as a contrast to the abilities of the detective, emphasising in the detective’s genius a difference in degree, rather than a difference in kind;
- 2) act[s] as recorders, not only of the story, but also the physical data upon which the detective’s analytic ability depends;
- 3) embod[ies] the social and ideological norms of the period

Other factors to consider: planting clues, credibility

+ *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* (1892)

- Representation of social class, culture, and gender.
- Holmes as distinctly English (East India 1757-1858; Crown rule 1858-1947).
- Holmes and Roylott of Stoke Moran (Surrey); English aristocracy as a backdrop here, highlighted by the family's historical past, and how the family's wealth went through different phases.
- Watson's emphasis that Holmes is not interested in money, and Holmes' reassertion to the same: "As to my reward, my profession is its reward."
- Watson's depiction of Holmes.





The Adventure of the Speckled Band (1892)

- “I had no keener pleasure than in following Holmes in his professional investigations, and in admiring the rapid deductions, as swift as *intuitions*, and yet always founded on a *logical basis*, with which he unravelled the problems which were submitted to him.”
- Holmes as the “perfect” English man; British empire.
- Dr. Roylott’s history and his qualities.
- Reading Dr. Roylott alongside the colonial narrative; assumptions of those who spend time in India and are too friendly with the natives.
- Dr. Roylott’s behavior and his temperament.





The Adventure of the Speckled Band (1892)

- If the two male characters (Holmes and Roylott) stand on opposite end of the spectrum then we do we make of the women in the stories?
- Tensions; male and female spaces: “Was it your custom to always lock yourselves in at night?”
- The “locked-door” mystery.
- Helen Stoner approaches Holmes for help; her sister’s death and her appeal to Holmes contributes to the construction of Holmes as a hero figure, and specifically, Holmes’ masculinity as something that overcomes cowardice. (See scene of Roylott’s confrontation of Holmes.)
- Helen’s trust in Holmes and his access of the female space.





The Adventure of the Speckled Band (1892)



- Necessity; Holmes has access to the room and the description of Julia's bed being clamped down to the floor is troubling.
- In solving the puzzle, Holmes in effect restores "order"; the order that has disrupted gender assumptions, civility (in removing the threat of that which is uncontrollable, corrupt, violent, etc.)