

Introduction to Detective and Mystery Fiction: Narrative Structure and Historical Origins

1. What are the traditional narrative elements or "rules" of detective fiction? (Note that these "rules" are often broken by writers.)
 - a. At the beginning of the story, a crime is committed.
 - b. Some of the details of the crime are known.
 - c. Yet the readers nor most of the characters know "who dun it."
 - d. The crime is often a murder, but can be any serious anti-social act - usually a violation of one of the Ten Commandments (lying, cheating, coveting, murdering, etc., or a combination of those).

2. Second, the crime is investigated and evidence is compiled.
 - a. A detective is chosen - usually a loner and someone who lacks ties to the community s/he's investigating.
 - b. The detective uses reason, not intuition, to solve the crime
 - c. Red herrings (false clues) puzzle the detective/reader
 - d. Supernatural elements and the improbable are ruled out as causes.
 - e. Physical evidence and suspects' narratives and alibis are compiled and evaluated by the detective.

3. Third, the crime is resolved.
 - a. The investigation has revealed that nearly everyone in the community had a motive to hurt the victim.
 - b. The least obvious person usually is the perpetrator; in general, the detective cannot also be the perpetrator
 - c. The reader follows the detective around and watches as the solution unfolds.
 - d. The perpetrator is justly punished (nemesis is the Greek term meaning that a punishment that fits the crime

4. What are the origins of modern detective fiction?
 - a. The Bible contains its seeds, and many other stories imitate it, but it basically began to flower around 1850 because of changes in widespread literacy and in attitudes towards crime at that time.
 - b. The Old Testament, which is dominated by a "rules" orientation about crime and by talionic justice ("an eye for an eye"), differs strikingly from the New Testament, where Jesus frequently forgives people for sinning and encourages the disciples to do their own thinking by interpreting his parables, which are indirect lessons rather than commands.
 - c. Later "detective" works, such as Sophocles' play Oedipus the King and Shakespeare's play Hamlet, focus on a family-related crime and its relationship to the hero's identity. However, they lack a detective, and the hero is characteristically unable to transform chaos back into order. (Oedipus, even though he solves the mystery of the Sphinx, isn't able to solve the mystery of his own identity; even though Hamlet knows Claudius has murdered his father, he can't effectively deal with the crime and "take charge.")

5. Modern detective fiction became popular around 1840, when many traditional ways of thinking and living began to change.

- a. From about 1750 onwards, European and new-world countries had begun to question the traditional notions of hierarchy that buttressed monarchies. Governments became more democratic. When hierarchies dissolve, people get nervous!
 - b. This increasing democratization of governments led to challenges of hierarchy - acts considered "chaotic" and in need of resolution (e.g., "putting uppity people back in their place" - a substantial impulse in many detective fictions).
 - c. Imperialism (the colonizing of "inferior" countries) gave rise to the fear of colonials angrily retaliating against the mother society (another upset of hierarchy).
 - d. Civil rights movements (women, racial minorities) created similar anxieties.
 - e. Large numbers of ordinary people became literate and, moving around and, after learning about other options, sought social mobility (disrupting traditional hierarchy that kept poor people "in their place")
 - i. literate people read fiction as a source of ideas as they had long enjoyed plays and reading ballads, broadsides and "penny dreadfuls" like the Newgate Calendar.
6. Throughout the 19th century, traditional belief in religion was called into question by the rise of scientific thought.
- a. Darwin publishes Origin of Species in 1859, detailing his theory of natural selection and calling into question the Creationist view of the universe.
 - b. New "social sciences" like economics (Marx) and psychology (Freud) encouraged people to seek non-religious solutions to social problems.
 - c. The scientific method - relying on deductive reasoning based on physical evidence to solve problems - became a way of seeing the world. Victorians began to see "crime" as a phenomenon that could be explained through the deployment of logical reasoning rather than as an indicator of God's capricious will or as an inevitable and inexplicable problem (like Cain's murder of Abel)
7. Changes in social organization caused a change in crime.
- a. Urbanization (consequent to industrialization) had changed the sizes of communities and had made social connections more fragile. (When neighbors don't know each other, they're more likely to be willing to commit crimes against each other.)
 - b. Industrialization increased this problem; it alienated workers from the products of their labors and turned them into "machines" to produce things for rich people, which gave them less of a sense of investment in their communities (so more likely to commit crimes)
 - c. "Police," "detectives" and the modern "prison" were invented.
 - i. Prior to the 19th century, there were no official police forces or detectives; towns hired watchmen, and military and royal forces kept public order.

- ii. As cities became more populous and fewer people lived in their ancestral villages, the nature of crime and punishment changed because the relationship between perpetrator and victim changed.
- iii. Urban anonymity made crimes easier to commit and more difficult to solve; in a village, there are eyes everywhere, while in a city, people can literally "get away with murder" because people don't know each other.