

The Traditional Plot of Detective Fictions

This is an interactive exercise; the facts here are generated from the broad knowledge of classmembers. The class draws the plot-line of archetypal detective fictions on the board and then fills in the information below.

- initiating anti-social act - not necessarily a murder - takes place. Sometimes we see it or see part of it; sometimes we don't know how the crime was committed until the end of the story.
- dead body or evidence of crime is discovered - often the victim is female.
- detective investigates. Detective is usually male, detached, objective, not a member of the community; often has a sidekick. The Detective is generally not a police officer and could not have committed the crime.
 - detective observes physical evidence, carefully noting the details of the crime scene and its surroundings.
 - detective asks suspects to tell him their stories - what were they doing, how did they feel about the victim, what do they think about others and their motives, etc.
 - detective has to manage bumbling police, who either interfere with the investigation or get things wrong.
 - detective focuses on what doesn't make sense.
- circle of suspects (family, friends, acquaintances) widens to include large number of people - nearly everyone who knew victim or was present.
 - Each suspect is questioned by the Detective about motives and alibis.
 - Each suspect is found to have had some reason to dislike the victim or to have had motive to hurt the victim (money, blackmail, etc.).
 - one suspect seems obviously to have "done it" and is early on often imprisoned or accused - but this person will later be exonerated.
 - suspects may threaten the Detective, tell him to leave, or assault him.

- Detective begins to construct narrative that explains the mystery.
 - Detective pushes suspects to confess what they have done. Often can be very abrupt about this.
 - Detective carefully eliminates the impossible: clues and narratives that don't lead anywhere.
 - Detective gathers suspects together and explains what happened; singles out one person as having committed the crime. This person is then either handed over to the police for punishment or otherwise penalized.