

The Commercial Success of Detective Literature

Anca Rodica Tivadar
MA Student, University of Oradea

Abstract

Detective literature is a genre prevailing from the 19th century to the present time and beloved by readers around the globe. It is a genuinely impressive achievement, surviving an ever-changing market and keeping up with the changes in culture. The detective mystery genre has a rich and fascinating history, which is an exciting analysis topic when paired with an analysis of its faithful audience. This research paper aims to examine the rise to popularity of detective fiction, its history, evolution, and core elements, and why exactly it is appreciated by readers, taking an in-depth study of famous titles.

Keywords: *detective fiction, publishing, psychology, writers, readers*

In order to understand the rise to fame of the detective genre, its origins must first be understood, and to understand the origins, an in-depth look must be taken at the time in which they made their debut, as well as at its audience.

It is safe to say that the 19th century was the century of the novel, and Victorian England did not make an exception from literary movements. With the advancement in technology and commerce, as well as education reforms, reading books became more and more accessible to the general public. To put it in the simplest terms: more readers demanded more reading material. From this point of view, the prevailing popularity of the novel, a long-form written work, is unsurprising. How this popularisation took place has several key components.

The evolution of the novel can be linked to the evolution of society as a whole. It used to be considered an inferior form of literature, lesser than poetry and theatre, associated with frivolous and even immoral people, such tags being attributed to both readers and writers. (Heitmann 12) Novels were an amusement for non-intellectual people who did not wish to think too hard about what they were consuming. This hierarchy of literature existed for most of the 18th century and part of the 19th century as well, which were dominated by classicism and then romanticism.

Along with being the century of the novel, the 19th century also saw the rise in popularity of realism. Where classicism focused on codes of honour and knightly morals enacted by venerable heroes on the theatre stage, and romanticism revolted by bringing forth the emotional turmoil of daydreaming poets unhappy with the world unfit for their intellect, realism was a much more grounded genre. In the same way that romanticism revolted against the sterile classicism by being unabashedly whimsical, realism may be said to be a revolt against romanticism. While very different, classicism and romanticism both presented highly idealised depictions of the world and of the human experience, portraying characters and events that, while beautiful, are rare to happen.

The Industrial Revolution, beginning in the 18th century and picking up astonishing speed in the 19th century, changed the lives of English people, particularly those of rural communities. The appearance of more and more factories that replaced the need for their manual labour forced people to leave their homes and move into cities, such as London, in order to find new work

and to survive (Engels 1-4). At first with no proper regulations, London soon became overpopulated, without enough resources for everyone, with rampant disease, poverty and crime. Life was far from ideal to the average person, who was breaking their back in a factory and was being treated like the replaceable cogs of a machine (Engels 1844: 276). It was a bleak time to be alive even for the upper classes, overcome with the obsessive need to gain more money and power, now easier than ever, at the expense of humanity and personal feelings:

I have never seen a class so deeply demoralised, so incurably debased by selfishness, so corroded within, so incapable of progress, as the English bourgeoisie [...] For it nothing exists in this world, except for the sake of money, itself not excluded. (Engels 277)

With so much unpleasantness, the unrealistic nature of romanticism must have felt annoying and naive, just how romantics found classicism suffocating and exaggerated. And what is so wrong with the frivolous things? When a worker returned home after hours at an assembly line or a sewing machine, they rightfully wanted to spend their free time in leisure.

While classicism and romanticism sought to depict the world in its most appealing moments and aspects, the goal of realism was to depict it as true to reality as possible, including the ugly parts, the parts that were not considered noble enough to be the subject of a work of literature, even the taboo parts that were considered shameful to openly talk about. Realist authors did not wish to idealise and sugar-coat life anymore. In the effort to depict life as authentically as possible, realist authors became genuine anthropologists and sociologists, exploring how a socio-economical situation would influence somebody's mindset and decisions, the environment of the story becoming as important as the characters living in it (Heitmann 8).

While realism obviously focuses on reality, it still contains timeless archetypes, characters and situations that have repeated themselves in every era of history. Society is in a constant state of evolution and change, but there shall always be naïve young people, disillusionment, political turmoil, the chase for riches and the fear of ruination. As such, realist novels become a reflection through literature of the era of the world they were written in. (Heitmann 10) Through these timeless archetypes and familiar scenes, readers may be able to enjoy a novel written centuries before they were born, relate to the hero's struggles or find themselves in similar dilemmas, because for all the change that happens in the world, people will not change too much.

The success of novels and how much people loved them is undeniable, regardless of the individual reasons why people may read them. Many genres that are popular to this day have been born out of the demand for books on various subject matters, such as romance, adventure, horror, and the detective genre is no exception.

The first modern detective novel is believed to be Edgar Allen Poe's "*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*", published in 1841 (David 172). It was followed by "*The Mystery of Marie Roget*", 1842, and "*The Purloined Letter*", 1844, where Poe's gentleman detective, C. Auguste Dupin, would solve baffling crimes with his great intelligence and power of observation. Dupin's keen eye and ability for deduction would be the blueprint to many other famous fictional detectives, including Sherlock Holmes.

The first British detective novel is believed to be Charles Dickens' "*Bleak House*", from 1853 (David 172). It deals with the investigation for a

legal case incited by a number of conflicting testaments regarding the true inheritors of a fortune. The novel is stunningly complex, with many subplots and characters, but at the centre of it all is the mystery and the solving of it.

In the opinion of T. S. Eliot, the true inventor of the detective fiction genre as we know it today was Wilkie Collins (David 179). Collins was a very skilled writer, with a great ability to create sensational stories:

an illegitimate son passes himself off as a baronet and imprisons the true heir to his fortune in an asylum; a working-class woman murders her husband and changes her name to marry a gentleman; a servant woman and her barren mistress exchange identities to provide the master with a child he wrongly believes to be his own (David 179-180).

His most well-known novels, “*The Woman in White*” (1859) and “*The Moonstone*” (1868), contain numerous elements that became staples of the detective genre: the genius investigator, the local policeman who becomes their sidekick, red herrings, false suspects, the unlikely suspect, the reconstruction of a crime scene and the final twist.

Like his predecessors, Collins was a readers' favourite, but critics of the time would leave scathing reviews of his work. The detective genre still struggled to escape the tag of cheap literature. Beloved by common readers, but dismissed by critics, it was admittedly oversaturated with cheap thrills and ultimately mediocre content, many of them written just for the sake of quick money.

Between 1886 and 1927, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would dominate the world of detective literature with his short stories and even more so with his character, Sherlock Holmes, stealing the spotlight from every author and detective before him. If Wilkie Collins is credited with refining the detective genre and the detective novel format, Doyle is believed to be the one who perfected it:

[...] he created a form for the detective story which remained enormously popular until World War II and which remained the supreme example of crime fiction throughout the twentieth century. [...] a mythic game of crime; the criminal act becomes a manifestation of potential chaos in the self and society, but the detective asserts reason's power over this element, reassuring the reader of control over the self and safety within the social order. (Kelleghan 207)

While other authors have faded into obscurity, and Poe's detective novels are often overshadowed by his other works, Doyle's stories are still popular all the way in the 21st century, Sherlock Holmes being synonymous with the word “detective” and being one of the universally-known fictional characters in the world.

The general public can not get enough of detective books and shows, explaining the wide range of media available and frequently coming out up to the present day. The versatility of the genre and the familiarity of famous archetypes, as well as the accessibility of the detective genre to both readers and authors, are all factors in its prevailing popularity.

A key element in the rise and popularity of detective literature, if not the most important element, is the audience which made it popular. Detective fiction may be considered one of the literary genres that will never go out of fashion, like romance and fantasy. Since its emergency it has maintained a spot of honour in the hearts of many readers, be it dedicated fans or people who only seldom pick up a mystery story.

There are a number of reasons why people may enjoy detective stories. One of the ones mentioned earlier was the morbid curiosity the average person has regarding such topics. Common people wanted to know more about this secret, taboo world of criminals and felonies, that everyone was aware it existed and, if fortunate, would not have direct experience with. Reading about crime put a barrier of safety between the reader and the events, allowing them to know what happens without being in danger. It is the same logic as that behind the popularity of sensational newspapers.

The main type of crime investigated in a majority of detective novels is homicide. The act of ending the life of another person is one of the most taboo actions a person can commit. Other crimes, such as theft or kidnapping or fraud, all revolve around the common theme of knowingly and willingly causing harm to a fellow human. Often times it is a close relation - a friend, a family member, a spouse or a child. In many ways, detective novels depict the darkest aspects of humanity: killing for financial gain or revenge, the worst outcomes of feuds and a general breaking of people's trust and faith in others. Anybody in real life could fall victim to such a tragedy and many have fallen - many stories take inspiration from real events. It is a very pessimistic form of realism, that contrast with other forms of literature, which, as mentioned earlier with classicism and romanticism, depict life in whimsical, idealised ways. You are more likely to be robbed by your employers than to go on a grand adventure across the land. You may not have a torrid romance with a handsome stranger from another country, but your husband may plan to take out an insurance in your name and then kill you.

The Victorian era is notorious for being a very conservative and puritan time in human history. While in certain aspects it was true, it is to be pointed out that the main objective of Victorian people, especially of the upper classes, was to appear their most socially presentable self at all times. While in private, Victorians enjoyed plenty of taboo and unsavoury things, including literature. Early police memoirs and detective novels were extremely successful despite their allegedly bad quality and were therefore read by many people. They were, and still are, a guilty pleasure for many people, despite their arguably quite dark subject matters.

Some people are simply more drawn to dark and morbid subjects than others, taking an interest in topics such as murder, be it real or fictional. This fascination may come from a dissatisfaction with day to day life - a sort of boredom with peace. Reasonable people will not go out of their way to witness illegal acts to cure themselves of boredom, so reading a book about it will give them the dose of adrenaline and wonder the mind is seeking. As previously mentioned, a large portion of novel-readers were women. The Victorian era was a highly oppressive and judgemental one for the female gender, living under constant scrutiny from others, where their value as a person could be questioned based on their smallest mistakes. Books and sensational literature were a safe method of self-expression and relief of frustration. Upper class women trying to live up to unachievable standards, cooped up in their rooms, and working women stuck at home, looking all day after their family, could take their minds off their problems and frustrations through this "cheap detective literature".

It may also be interpreted as a form of rebellion, of reading subjects inappropriate for women, or freely enjoying frivolous fiction that they would be made fun of for in public. Women lived very sheltered lives, Victorian mentality claiming they were too feeble-minded for serious and dark topics - the sight of blood would surely make them faint. In an extensive manner

book from 1873, titled "*The Ladies' Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness, A Complete Handbook for the Use of the Lady in Polite Society*", can be found the following piece of advice:

Avoid, at all times, mentioning subjects or incidents that can in any way disgust your hearers. Many persons will enter into the details of sicknesses which should be mentioned only when absolutely necessary, or describe the most revolting scenes before a room full of people, or even at table. Others speak of vermin, noxious plants, or instances of uncleanness. All such conversation or allusion is excessively ill-bred. It is not only annoying, but absolutely sickening to some, and a truly lady-like person will avoid all such topics. (Hartley 17)

As such, I find it credible that women would enjoy all sorts of indecent topics they have been deprived from, in private. The moment something is made forbidden, the more people will want to see it. Books allow people to have experiences they may never have in person and for Victorian women that must have been the best part.

For others, it may be an potentially peculiar way of soothing themselves. As the book "*Murder must appetize*" opens: "Is there anything, when life gets a little much, as comforting as a detective story?" (Keating 7). If a person has experienced a trauma, or is generally living a very stressful life, they are used to their mind running at very high speeds. Times of leisure and relaxation do not feel like leisure and relaxation. As paradoxical as it may sound, they need a certain amount of stress and discomfort in order to feel peaceful. Reading or listening to morbid stories, such as the investigation of a crime, provides a safe and controlled dose of excitement, without actually having to go through pain or stress.

The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century completely changed the way people, particularly employees, operate and live out their lives. Work conditions for the Victorian working class were gruelling, anywhere from twelve to fourteen hours a day, with no regulations to preserve their health or safety, often working with highly dangerous substances or high risk environments, all for the payment of pennies (Engels 276-277). The average life expectancy was between 30 to 40 years, after a life of back-breaking labour and constant exhaustion, not to mention rampant disease and poor hygiene (Engels 105-110). The "stress" of reading a gripping detective story offered a much needed mental stimulation, while also being familiar enough in nature to satisfy the body accustomed for constant momentum.

Regarding trauma, it is a commonly known fact that the Victorian era did not have good accommodations for those suffering of mental disorders. Psychological ailments such as depression, schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder were severely misunderstood and downright ignored. If a person was not mentally stable due to a traumatic event they have gone through, or if they suffered an intellectual disability, it was considered entirely their fault for not being in control of themselves, for not being proper enough. They were considered a burden their loved ones had to deal with (Shorter 3). Not everyone was treated without any sensibility whatsoever, but beneficial psychological treatment for mental illness was nearly non-existent. Those who suffered from mental illness would either end up in an asylum and be mistreated even more, even have their lives endangered, or live out their lives as outcasts and continue to struggle (Shorter 190).

The way traumatised people without professional help make themselves feel better is through self-soothing methods. This soothing could be achieved through substances like alcohol or drugs which fog the mind too

much to dwell on what is haunting it (Stewart 40); or through other forms of pseudo-addiction: working constantly as to distract the mind, or diving into the escapism of literature: “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop” (Robinson 69). Overworking fit in just right with the industrialized world. As for escapism: when real life is too much to handle, another reality will be preferred.

It cannot, however, be any kind of reality, because, as mentioned above, certain brains need a certain amount of stress in order to de-stress. Many trauma survivors seek what is familiar to them, even if that familiar is dangerous or will cause them harm again, because that is all they know and are thus comfortable with, whether they consciously realise it or not. (Chu 328) Peace does not feel relaxing to someone who went through a traumatic event. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the first readers of detective fiction may have suffered plenty of trauma: beloved family members dying from rampant disease or in work accidents, bad marriages and abusive spouses, crimes in bad neighbourhoods they had no choice but to reside in due to poverty, and the list can go on. Unfortunately, many of these problems prevail to the modern era. Some of the scenes from detective novels – violence, abuse, theft, scheming family members, police officers coming to one’s door – may be familiar to readers.

From this point of view, detective novels were the highest form of realism. It is also an extremely validating form of self-therapy. At the end of every detective story, the criminal is caught by the investigator and justice is served. The victims of the crime, be they dead or still living, are given justice. Even if the readers of these stories did not experience justice themselves and may never do, it is comforting to be told that what happened to them was wrong, it was a crime, and the person who did it deserves to be punished and sent to prison. Even if the readers did not experience a murder within the family or an elaborate mystery that required the services of a detective, they may know what it is like to feel helpless. The concept of an angelic figure of justice like Sherlock Holmes coming to fix impossible problems is pure escapism and wishful thinking.

The human body responds to thoughts as if they are real, such as feeling physical pain in the chest while thinking about something that provokes sadness, whether or not that sad something is actually taking place in the moment. The same principal applies for positive emotions as well, such as blushing and feeling butterflies in your stomach while reading a romance, even if you are not taking active part in it. The subconscious does not differentiate between thought and reality, and prepares the body for the event, even if it never happens or it is fake, just a figment of the imagination or a fictional story being read. (APA 189) Just how reading about a murder investigation raises your tension and your adrenaline, reading a satisfying, happy ending where the wrongdoer gets what they deserve subconsciously soothes a mind in need of that kind of validation.

In many ways, detective novels and detective novel readers have been severely misunderstood in the same way mental illness and the attraction to darker topics have been. In a puritan system of beliefs, writing about theft and murder and enjoying reading about them is a sign of a highly immoral person. How can you take pleasure in reading about such awful things? What is wrong with you? A number of authors have approached such concepts and condemned them for their short-mindedness. Writing and reading about crimes should not be considered equivalent to supporting the commitment of crimes. In fact, it is opposite: detective novels are about bringing the

criminals to their rightful punishment. To say a detective novel is bad because it talks about murder would put into question the value of every other work of literature that contains depictions of murder:

The trouble in this matter is that many people do not realize that there is such a thing as a good detective story; it is to them like speaking of a good devil. To write a story about a burglary is, in their eyes, a sort of spiritual manner of committing it. To persons of somewhat weak sensibility this is natural enough; it must be confessed that many detective stories are as full of sensational crime as one of Shakespeare's plays. (Chesterton 118-119)

The sensational aspects of detective literature have been condemned as a cheap tactic to make sells, in the same way that sensational journalism has been. There is also the insidious belief that because something is extremely popular, then it must not be that good from an intellectual point of view. If it is appealing to the masses, if people of low education level and social status enjoy it, then it is a lowly, stupid thing worthy of nothing but criticism. I am not going to claim that this sort of belief is without cause – Russell's inaccurate police memoirs come to mind – but condemning an entire genre for the sins of a few is simply wrong. The reason detective novels were successful is because they were enjoyable, they appealed to a lot of people, regardless of the reasons why people read them. Labelling literature of any genre as cheap due to the subject matter and the reasons why readers read it is, at the end of the day, such a pointlessly spiteful endeavour.

Another reason why detective fiction is popular is, of course, the puzzle-solving aspect of the stories: "Puzzle stories, mystery stories, crime stories, and stories of deduction and analysis have existed since the earliest times – and the detective story is closely related to them all. Yet the detective story itself is purely a development of the modern age" (Haycraft, 4).

The common narrative of detective stories is that of following an investigator along as they uncover clues, question suspects and reach a conclusion. As pointed out by many authors and critics, writing a good and compelling detective story that does not fall into ridiculous is far from easy. As previously mentioned, a degree of knowledge in police procedurals is required, as well as knowledge in various topics: the types of bullets each gun uses, the chemistry behind poison and how to realistically identify it, the maps of cities should a story be set in it, small details like local dialects, historical references, business proceedings, and so on. If an author chooses to disregard these elements, then the detective story resulting from it will be akin to fantasy. One of the joys of reading detective fiction is indirectly learning about how all of these elements work.

The crime and the crime investigation obviously need to be thought out. Clues, as well as red herrings, are scattered throughout the story for the reader to discover together with the detective. I find that the most interesting detective stories are those that, on a second lecture, shock you with how many clues were in plain sight and you did not even realise it. Authors need to be able to keep the readers' attention until the end, to seize their curiosity. The goal is to make the reader want to know what happened, thus read the book from cover to cover.

Writing the unravelling of a mystery needs to be planned out step by step, not too quickly, but not dragged on for too many pages either. The mystery needs to be baffling, but not so convoluted that the reader can not figure it out at all – when such a mystery is explained at the end it feels like the author is pulling information out of thin air. The true criminal can be a known member of the cast from the very beginning, but the final revelation

should not too obvious or too unexpected. The hidden villain of the detective story, who is ultimately the story's target, is an extremely important character that the author must craft and handle with care, just as the detective protagonist, as the end of the story, the resolution of the mystery, is what all the readers want to know and why they stick all the way. The end of a detective story is often what determines if a detective story is good or not:

The chief difficulty is that the detective story is, after all, a drama of masks and not of faces. It depends on men's false characters rather than their real characters. The author cannot tell us until the last chapter any of the most interesting things about the most interesting people. It is a masquerade ball in which everybody is disguised as somebody else, and there is no true interest until the clock strikes twelve (Chesterton 6).

Writing a detective story is further complicated by "pesky reality" (Saunders 110). Writing a story that is too realistic, too faithful to real life police investigation, loses all its charm. Police investigation in real life is a grim and clinical endeavour, devoid of dramatic flair. Some people condemn detective fiction and television shows for glamorising the investigative process, and it is not untrue. The investigation of a homicide or an assault is far from a pleasant experience, and the satisfaction of catching the criminal – if they are ever caught – can be dwarfed by the struggles along the way:

Murder, which is a frustration of the individual and hence a frustration of the race, may have, and in fact has, a good deal of sociological implication. But it has been going on too long for it to be news. If the mystery novel is at all realistic (which it very seldom is) it is written in a certain spirit of detachment; otherwise nobody but a psychopath would want to write it or read it (Chandler 2).

Detective novels, while based in reality, have to employ a certain amount of fantasy in order to be more digestible for the general public. This comes in the form of genius detectives that always save the day, quirky characters and sensational situations.

Detective fiction plays along this duality and complexity of the human mind: the need for both the real, the logical puzzle solving, and the desire for the fantastic, of extraordinary people and circumstances – "the human paradox that led Poe – the avowed apostle of the morbid and grotesque – to forsake his tortured fantasies, even briefly, for the cool logic of the detective story." (Haycraft 8) Like the novel in the 19th century, the detective stories' versatility and adaptability is what cemented its success in the eyes and hearts of readers.

Detective literature is a can attribute its success and prevailing popularity to its readers. Authors like Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler would have not met been so prosperous had it not been for readers buying their novels and eagerly anticipating the next ones.

Conclusion

A conclusion I have reached while researching for this paper is that a literary genre that had been labelled as "cheap" and "vulgar" has actually provided much more to literature, art and culture than purists would like to admit. Detective literature has provided the world with timeless character archetypes, narrative formulas and an endless well of new interpretations, as well as material for other forms of art other than writing, such as theatre, cinema and television. As I have mentioned before, while original reasons for

which detective literature emerged and continued to be utilised by authors were monetary and there are, admittedly, duds, one would do a great disservice to completely dismiss them all as bad literature.

Detective literature is a representation of the progress of culture, in the same way that the realism genre is as a whole. Detective novels and the characters within represent the worries and concerns of an era, the technologies available, the changing morals and societal opinions regarding marriage, money, authority and many more.

At the same time, I came to find that there absolutely nothing wrong with “cheap literature”. There is this bias, even among detective literature authors mentioned above, that some genres are superior to others and are thus more “worthy” of attention and of being read. Ironically, it is the cheap literatures that find the most success with the public, those same people that condemn cheap literature then complaining that there is no longer high culture and intellectualism. I reiterated that I do not consider there to be anything wrong with cheap literature. The same treatment had been and still is applied to other highly popular commercial genres, such as romance books or, more recently, young adult fiction. If one is caught reading them, some people would be led to say “that’s not real literature”. Many people may be quick to say that because something is very popular, then it must not be very good. An argument may be that if so many people like it, regardless of their social status or level of intellect, then it must not be very good. Truly good literature is to be enjoyed by intellectuals with the proper knowledge and sophistication to do so.

Detective literature is popular because it is enjoyable, and reading a book simply to have fun and enjoy oneself should not be treated with so much ultimately pointless disdain. If something can be enjoyed by a lot of people with ease, whether or not they wish to read it for a deeper meaning, I believe it should be considered a good thing. Literature, detective fiction or not, being easily available to a lot of people is another sign of the progress and evolution of the world around us. Keeping literature gated away from the lay people, only for those intellectual enough to “truly enjoy” it, is an elitist mentality.

Detective literature and its popularity is a testament to the power of the masses, of their ability to enjoy literature and to bring it to great heights. Without dedicated readers, Sherlock Holmes would have not become the template for countless other characters, books, movies and shows for people to relish for decades. Detective literature was no just an outlet for common people to enjoy literature in the 19th century, but an outlet for creativity, for pushing the boundaries of fictional investigation. So many stories emerged by so many authors that I have not even mentioned. It is a highly versatile and malleable genre, allowing writers and readers great freedom and amusement. The commercialisation of detective literature led to wonderful achievements in the art of written word, that will continue to evolve as new books continue to come out.

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