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## What Makes a Detective: Character in Detective Fiction

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Eastern Kentucky University

What Makes a Detective: Character in Detective Fiction

Honors Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
Requirements of HON 420  
Fall 2019

By  
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## What Makes a Detective: Character in Detective Fiction

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As a subgenre of formula fiction, detective fiction is often not considered serious or legitimate literature. Despite this, detective fiction continues to appear at the top of international bestselling lists. This thesis attempts to answer the question: Why is detective fiction so popular? In order to answer this question, this thesis explores the characteristics of both formula fiction and detective fiction in order to gain a better understanding of the genres, as well as the conclusions of numerous critics regarding what makes a good detective narrative. The ultimate conclusion is that the character of the detective determines whether a detective narrative is both popular and memorable. To prove this, I applied everything I have learned about this genre and character development to writing my own detective story, "A Novel Robbery." In this thesis I analyze numerous passages from my short story in order to explain the techniques I utilized to develop my detective character and establish a connection between her and the reader. Finally, this thesis advocates and provides reasons for the legitimacy of detective fiction as a serious literary genre.

*Keywords:* Thesis, Honors Thesis, Detective Fiction, Formula Fiction, Creative Writing, Character, Literature

## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Acknowledgments.....	4
Thesis.....	5
Works Cited.....	19

## Acknowledgements

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The genre of detective fiction is a longstanding one that has spanned several cultures over just as many decades. Edgar Allan Poe is credited with giving life to the genre as we know it during the mid-nineteenth century with his short story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Since then readers the world over have been fascinated with crimes and the people who solve them. Yet for all of the popularity detective fiction has acquired over the years, just as many academics and critics have produced a myriad of criticisms for this genre in regard to its originality or ability to be considered “serious” literature.

Before further analysis, it is important to define what formula fiction is, as well as detective fiction’s place within this wider categorization. Formula fiction—also commonly referred to as genre fiction—is just that: Fiction that is accompanied by set rules and expectations as to how the narrative is going to play out. Various pieces within the same genre may have similar patterns or tropes from story to story, depending on the nature of the genre itself. Therefore, before reading a piece of genre fiction, one may already have some idea of how the story is going to end. It is because of the commonalities between genre pieces that it is not taken particularly seriously in the literary community. Numerous critics believe that formula fiction—detective fiction included—lacks originality, or that it is essentially the same story being told over and over again with slightly different embellishments in between.

However, there is something to be said for the benefits of writing within formula fiction, as John Cawelti expresses in his critical essay “The Study of Literary Formulas.” Rather than

agonizing over how the narrative should be structured, the author has a formula that he/she can follow that ultimately simplifies the writing process and brings books to anxious readers more efficiently. Cawelti also notes, “We tend to think of genres not simply as generalized descriptions of a number of individual works but as a set of artistic limitations and potentials” (123). Formula fiction should not be viewed as limiting the artistic choices of the author, then, but as a realm of writing rife with potential to turn traditional writing conventions on their heads. There is merit to genre fiction if one takes the time to consider it more closely.

As a subgenre of formula fiction, detective fiction thus comes with its own sets of patterns and tropes. However, throughout my research I found that these characteristics can vary widely depending on the region in which the detective story was written. George Grella sums it up best in his essay “The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel.” Though the essay primarily focuses on American detective fiction, it is through characterizing this subgenre that we are able to gain an understanding for what English detective fiction must be like in turn. According to Grella, “Abandoning the static calm, the intricate puzzle, the ingenious deductions, they [American authors] wrote an entirely different detective story, characterized by rapid action, colloquial language, emotional impact, and the violence that pervades American fiction” (104). Therefore, it can be understood that English detective fiction is characterized by the presence of hierarchy, rationality, and order. In contrast, American detective fiction thrives on a disordered society where the law can be corrupt, and the narrative is meant to deliver an emotional impact. This means that readers from these respective regions will have different expectations going into their reading of either an English or an American detective novel.

Regardless of the detective novel’s defining characteristics or culture of origin, readers continue to come back to this genre time and time again. This observation is what ultimately led

me to the question that guided my research: What is it about detective fiction that makes it so popular? If the works of this genre are merely the same plot arranged in slightly different ways, with the same patterns and tropes, why do readers continue to consume it at the rates they do? As to be expected, there are a number of differing views on this topic.

For some readers of detective fiction, a strict view of what makes a good detective story is adopted. This is the case of English poet W.H. Auden, who wrote an essay on detective fiction entitled “The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, By an Addict.” Auden was a reader who knew what he wanted. He had a precise image of where the setting should be, what the characters must be like, what must characterize the crime, and more. For example, regarding character, Auden believed “since the murderer...is the aesthetically defiant individual, his opponent, the detective, must be either the official representative of the ethical or the exceptional individual who is himself in a state of grace” (Auden 3). Much can be learned about Auden’s opinions on detective fiction in this statement. First, he believed that the crime in a detective story *must* be a murder, as is noted when he refers to the criminal as a “murderer.” The second is that the detective *must* fall into one of two narrow categories: either he *must* represent morality, or he *must* be the epitome of morality himself. I must note that I disagree with Auden’s narrow-minded view of detective fiction. It offers no room for experimentation or divergence within the genre. The setting does not have to be set in the English countryside (as all of American detective fiction has proven), nor must the crime necessarily be a murder. Nevertheless, this is Auden’s opinion of what it means to write a good detective story, and there are several others who likely share his sentiments.

Others feel differently about what it is that makes a detective story “good” or “popular.” In her essay “A Taste for Murder: The Curious Case of Crime Fiction,” Rachel Franks does



much to disprove Auden's limiting view of detective fiction and instead present her own insight on what makes this genre popular. Franks believes that readers continue to return to detective fiction because it often provides a satisfactory ending. She also argues that this is just one factor that sets detective fiction apart from works of literary canon. Everything is wrapped up tidily at the end of a detective novel; the wrongdoer is caught, and justice is dealt. Franks observes, "The subject matter of crime fiction does not easily facilitate fairy-tale finishes, yet, people continue to read the genre because, generally, the concluding chapter will show that justice, of some form, will be done" (2). In this case, detective fiction is reaffirming the reader's preestablished notions of morality and what it means to be ethical, thus giving the reader a sense of security while reading.

Despite the opinions presented by these two respected critics—as well as those by numerous other academics—there is one important feature of detective fiction I came across far more than any other. In fact, I found this feature to be my own personal draw to detective fiction as well. This feature is the character of the detective. Strong characters are necessary to any good piece of literature, regardless of genre, but it holds especially true for detective fiction. For example, John Cawelti observes, "Unless we are able to relate our feelings and experiences to those of the characters in fiction, much of the emotional effect will be lost" (127-8). A connection between reader and character is essential for the story to be able to make some kind of emotional impact. Likewise, Rachel Franks states, "If a character is too difficult to embrace—if I find that I cannot make an emotional connection, if I find myself ambivalent about their fate—then a book is discarded as not being to my taste" (3). The author must make the reader care about what happens to the characters for the story to be successful. It is apparent from both of these quotes that the character of the detective—as well as his/her ability to establish a strong

connection with the reader—is the driving force behind what makes a detective story great, and thus, what makes it popular.

This observation is logical when one considers some of the greatest and most-known works of detective fiction: the Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the Philip Marlowe stories by Raymond Chandler, and the Hercule Poirot stories by Agatha Christie, just to name a few. What all of these stories have in common is that they illicit an image of the primary detective character before any consideration of crime or plot. This is because all of these detectives have a number of eccentricities that make them memorable. These are the types of characters that will stick with the reader long after they have returned the novel to the shelf. Robert A. Rushing makes an interesting connection between the characteristics of the detectives in these stories and the genre as a whole in his book *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture*. Rushing states:

It is remarkable how often classic detective fiction presents us with this “pathological” detective, given over to a whole series of manias, phobias, addictions... One can’t help but notice that the compulsive quality that I’ve been outlining characterizes the entire genre, with its endlessly repeated formalist tics. (145-150)

The formulaic quality of detective fiction, Rushing argues, is present in the titular characters of these stories as well. It is as though authors of this genre have unanimously decided that compulsivity is a necessary trait in detectives. In this case, genre and character influence one another.

Clearly the character of the detective brings readers back to this literary genre time and time again. The detectives mentioned above are unique, memorable, and are able to capture the reader’s interest and empathy. Therefore, when it came time to craft my own detective story, I

paid extra time and effort to developing the detective above any other aspect of the worldbuilding process. Yet besides crafting the character of the detective him/herself (background, appearance, personality, etc.), I found there are numerous other ways to develop character and build the relationship between detective and reader.

One of the primary ways to create proximity between character and reader is through first person point of view. In “Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction,” Carl Malmgren observes, “First-person narration necessarily entails a degree of identification between reader and protagonist” (126). Through first person narration, the reader is placed in the detective’s mind, where he/she will reside for the entirety of the story. In fiction, there is no greater closeness than this. Furthermore, first person narration “also serves to secure and reinforce the Selfhood of the detective, whose enunciation bears his distinctive signature” (Malmgren 126). Because the story is being told from the detective’s perspective, the narrative is colored by the detective’s unique voice. The reader will learn more about the detective’s personality through the way he/she tells the story.

Tense was another important consideration to make, and I ultimately decided on present tense. By having the narrative transpire in the present, the events seem more immediate. The reader experiences everything in “real time” with the detective, allowing him/her to feel as though they are at the detective’s side, helping this character solve the crime. Malmgren remarks on the necessity for the narrative to coincide with the action (126) in a detective story. Present tense enables for this to take place, as the narrative can only be furthered through the action of the investigation, which the reader experiences real time.

It is also important to establish the detective’s interiority throughout the narrative. By interiority, I refer to what the detective character is thinking or feeling at any given point in the

story. What does he/she think about the events unfolding in the world around him/her? How do these events make him/her feel? Interiority is where the reader will see the detective for his/her most authentic self. Therefore, not only will the reader learn more about the detective as a person, but a bond of trust will be developed as well.

Just as important as interiority is dialogue—in other words, how the detective communicates with other characters in his/her world. How individuals speak can say a lot about their personalities. Do they speak with an accent or some kind of dialect? What is their tone of voice? What information do they choose to include/omit in their dialogue? All of these factors aid in developing the detective's character. However, how other characters communicate with the detective can also reveal a great deal about the latter's character as well. Who loves or hates the detective, and why might that be? Is the hate justified or unfounded? What might the detective have done or said to earn these sorts of reactions? These questions are critical and prove that much more goes into characters' dialogue than simply what they need to say to advance the plot.

Finally, there is action. The adage “actions speak louder than words” is especially applicable to fiction. As important as dialogue is, it is what the detective *does* in the face of problems or challenges that reveals who he/she truly is. In this case, the detective's personality will determine how he/she reacts to what is going on in his/her world. If actions are out of place or uncharacteristic of the detective, the bond between character and reader may become strained. The reader will become dissatisfied with the narrative if what the detective is *doing* feels unbelievable.

Taking these factors into consideration, I then set to work on creating the detective that would lead my short story “A Novel Robbery”: Harper Frye. To begin, I had to decide what

Harper's occupation was—what does she *do*? In most detective fiction, the detective is either employed with a formal police force or still works officially as a private investigator. However, there are also “amateur” detectives, usually individuals with a great deal of time and wealth on their hands and nothing better to spend either on than the pursuit of solving crimes. Other times there is the character who is simply brilliant, such as Sherlock Holmes, and thus enjoys the thrill of pursuing complex problems. It comes naturally to the character.

For Harper, I wanted her to diverge from the norm of professional detectives. An amateur seemed to me a good choice because it allows for a wider range of diverse backgrounds. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that she should be a college student. This way, though Harper is technically able to enjoy all the legal liberties of adulthood, she is still developing and maturing in several ways as she acquires greater world experience. Furthermore, she is an English major who adores books and reading, especially detective stories. A natural love for detective fiction grants Harper a better understanding of the process that goes into solving a crime. I thought that perhaps an interest in detective fiction would also enhance her critical thinking and observation skills, making her the perfect candidate to solve a mystery. She just needs a chance to put her knowledge into practice.

Once I established the basis of Harper's character, I turned my attention to developing the crime she would attempt to solve throughout the story. In actuality, the crime I composed—the robbery of a rare book from the university's archives, where Harper's aunt works—was largely influenced by Harper's character. In his essay “The Determination of Incident or What is Character?”, Michael Cunningham claims, “The story has essentially created itself, out of the wishes and needs, the very natures, of its characters” (753). If a character is developed and well-rounded, the writer will be aware of that character's deepest fears and desires. Acting (or

sometimes refusing to act) on these fears and desires is how plots are created. To compose a crime for Harper to solve, I first had to consider what kind of crime she would care about and get personally invested in. Otherwise, she would have no real reason to intervene.

In the crime I composed, a rare book brought over to the United States by a Jewish refugee during WWII goes missing from the university's archives. It just so happens that Harper's aunt, Natalie Frye, is a librarian in those archives and was there the night of the robbery. During the heist she was rendered unconscious and suffered a concussion as a result. Now there are two reasons for Harper to get involved in this crime: Her aunt, who she is extremely close to, has been injured; and she is outraged over the robbery of a book that she greatly respects. Naturally, Harper will want to find the people responsible for this crime as soon as possible.

To demonstrate how I applied the techniques previously discussed to developing Harper Frye in my own writing, I have included a few excerpts from "A Novel Robbery" for further analysis.

Once Harper learns about the crime, she attempts to converse with the police to learn what information they may have about the case so far. In the scene that follows, Harper interacts with the lead officer on the case, Neil Irvine, and becomes increasingly angered by his nonchalance regarding the case. This is conveyed in the following interaction:

"The matter of the book is complicated—" [Irvine]

"Really? A book was stolen, and I'm asking if you can get it back. I think it's pretty simple." [Harper]

Under any other circumstances I couldn't imagine talking to a police officer in such a way, but the flower of anger that's bloomed in my chest makes me reckless. We

stare at each other for what can't be more than a few seconds but feels like years.

(Connelly 8)

Harper's frustration is conveyed primarily through her quick retort to Irvine's evasive answer. She does not allow him to finish his sentence because she believes it will just be another excuse meant to cover up his lack of interest in the crime. Furthermore, through Harper's interiority, the reader learns that under normal circumstances Harper would be much more respectful and level-headed toward a police officer. However, the extraordinary circumstances have pushed her to her limits. Someone Harper loves has been injured, a priceless piece of literature has been stolen, and the police do not consider the case to be of high priority. This scene establishes her motive for getting involved in the case. Harper decides that if no one else will step up to see the job through, so to speak, then she will.

Shortly after, as Harper attempts to search the crime scene for overlooked clues, the reader is provided a glimpse of her naivete:

To my disappointment, as I continue to examine the surrounding area, I can't find any clear clues to indicate who committed the crime, nothing the police may have overlooked. As embarrassing as it sounds, I'd begun to conjure up a little fantasy in my head in which I found the sole clue no one else had considered and cracked the case wide open—just like the private detectives from my favorite books growing up. (Connelly 10)

Although Harper is an adult, she is not quite so grown that she is no longer prone to these imaginative scenarios. Her interiority in this scene reveals these sentiments. There is still a part of her that wants to be the hero of the story, like the detectives she read about when she was younger. Harper's connection to detective stories is further established throughout the story as

she asks herself what her favorite detective, Philip Marlowe, would do in situations where she feels stumped. This eventually shifts at the end of the story, when she finally feels confident enough in her own judgment to make decisions on her own.

Later in the narrative, Harper decides to consult her aunt about the few clues she has managed to uncover. Feeling as though she has made a breakthrough, Harper wants to rush after the suspect, but Natalie is not so sure. She believes they should call the police and let them further the investigation, to which Harper reacts:

I turn away from Aunt Nat as I zip my parka and grab my bookbag. “No, you’re right, I know. Why don’t you let me call them [the police]? I’ve already bothered you enough.”

Aunt Nat follows me to the door. The skin at her neck is bright red where she’s been worrying at it. “It’s okay, really. I can do it myself.”

“Aunt Nat, you’ve been through so much today already. It’s the least I can do.”

(Connelly 17)

As seen in the previous interaction between Harper and Irvine, dialogue plays a crucial role in establishing the relationship between Harper and Natalie. Harper is primarily worried about putting her aunt through further stress; all of her dialogue in this scene indicates that she would rather carry the burdens of this case herself than have Natalie shoulder them. Likewise, Natalie does not want Harper to feel as though she has to be so involved in this case, as indicated by her insistence that she can handle things on her own. Therefore, the reader witnesses just how close Harper and Natalie are, as well as the depths of their care for one another.



Action also aids in establishing character and setting the tone of the scene. In the first line, Harper refuses to look Natalie in the eye when she says she will contact the police. Harper is still set on hunting down the suspect herself and has no intention of calling the police, but knows her aunt will object. Nevertheless, she feels guilty about having to lie to her, and so cannot look her in the eye. The red skin at Natalie's neck from picking at it so much is a nervous tic meant to convey her apprehension at Harper's involvement. Both niece and aunt are worried about the other, and this shows through both dialogue and action.

At this point in the narrative, action begins to build—the crime has been established, as well as a motive for the detective to involve herself, and the detective also has a suspect to pursue—but the reader has still been given a clear picture of what kind of person Harper is. She loves her family and is fiercely protective of them. She is intelligent, observant, and enjoys solving puzzles. She is also headstrong and has a quick temper when she witnesses what she believes to be injustice in the world around her. As the author, I have established all of these character traits early in the story simply through her dialogue, interiority, and actions.

Before tackling this challenge, I had never written a detective story. I was always of the impression that it would be a great deal of work, but it was not until attempting to write a detective story of my own that I realized just how much work it is. In her talk, “The Art of the Detective Novel,” well-known detective author P.D. James stated, “It is perhaps the easiest of all books to write badly and the most difficult to write well” (638). I am accustomed to devising characters and developing plots, but in a detective story there are so many minute elements and details involved that many times the process felt overwhelming. Everything has to fit just right to keep the reader enthralled and the conclusion believable.

I emphasize this to directly refute the claims made by several academics and literary critics I introduced at the beginning of this essay, which is this: Detective fiction is not serious literature. It is inherently “lesser” than works of what they consider to be “real” literature, such as those pieces considered part of the literary canon. One of the reasons for this is supplied by Erik Routley, who in his essay “The Case Against the Detective Story” argues, “It [detective fiction] cannot withstand the assaults of ‘respectable’ critics nowadays simply because it does not attempt, in the style of serious novels, to react to life” (177). Routley believes that because the primary function of detective fiction is to provide a form of escapism or relaxation for readers, it cannot say anything meaningful or contemplative about life. This accusation, however, is false. Hard-boiled detective fiction, for instance, offers plenty of critiques regarding the American justice system through the disillusioned narrative of the private eye. I also believe that “A Novel Robbery” explores the lengths which an individual will go to for those they love. “Entertainment” and “meaning” are not mutually exclusive terms; they can coexist within the same novel.

Another reason detective fiction is looked down upon is because it follows particular formulas and patterns. The belief is that works of formula fiction are less inspired than classic works of literature, or less creative. However, those who tote this view do not comprehend the numerous benefits that accompany writing within formula fiction. Rather than being limited by the restrictions a formula implies, P.D. James observes, “What I think is surprising is how varied are the books and the talents which it [formula] accommodates and how many writers have found that these constraints are liberating rather than inhibiting of their creative imagination” (James 638). Therefore, writing an original and inventive piece within the boundaries of formula fiction can provide a unique challenge to an author. It is about trying to turn common perceptions

and tropes on their head, presenting them in a fresh and interesting way. Carl Rollyson also offers an observation from Raymond Chandler in *Critical Survey of Mystery and Detective Fiction*, which goes, “Chandler once remarked that his whole career was ‘based on the idea that the formula does not matter, the thing that counts is what you do with the formula; that is to say, it is a matter of style’” (1915). This reflects the sentiments of P.D. James: a formula is all good and well, but it is what an author does with the formula that decides whether the book will be well-received. The success of a detective story is determined by the author’s *interpretation* of the formula.

There are certainly many elements that go into crafting a great detective story, from determining how to apply one’s own artistic spin to the pre-existing formula of detective fiction to choosing the elements of the narrative. However, the character of the detective is the most crucial factor of any detective story. In order for the story to be truly successful, it must contain a detective that readers can empathize with, a detective whose exploits readers will find themselves invested in. The detective is who readers will spend the entirety of the story with, as well as who they will remember long after the story ends.

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