NEW ACADEMIA: *An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*

Online ISSN 2347-2073 **Vol. VII, Issue IV, Oct. 2018**

U.G.C. Journal No. 44829

From Crime to Detective Fiction: An Exploration of Victorian Society through the Private Eye

Kanad Giri
M. Phil Scholar
Department of English
West Bengal State University
giri.kanad@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to map the development of Detective fiction in nineteenth century, tracing it back to the Crime narratives that evolved in eighteenth century as both nonfictional and fictional account. The stories of urban underworld fascinated the audience since its inception and Victorian reading public was known for their obsession with murder, violence, mystery and crime. These accounts, as their background, drew heavily upon contemporary society, culture and people. Here, it would be pertinent to analyse the crime and detective fictions to get a reflection of Victorian socio-cultural and moral purview. The paper further explores how the figure of a detective fosters a false sense of security from perceived threats-originated from racial, imperial and cultural anxieties.

Keywords: Crime, Detective fiction, Criminality, Victorian Society.

Crime fiction has often been identified with an uncomfortable dialectic with literature and literary criticism. On the one hand, it is not easy to ignore the popularity and vast readership that crime fiction enjoys. On the other hand, it is equally problematic to aestheticize violence, murder, misdemeanour which frequently threatens social stability, law and order. Crime fiction, in turn, is considered to be a powerful medium to reassert societal values, norms and order. It depicts the horrible, gruesome murders, and thus warns of the dangers of social and moral transgression by describing them in their cruellest form. The genre of crime fiction, in its formative days- has evolved from nonfictional account of criminals, histories of their crime, trial, confessions, and ultimately their spectacular and brutal death. Arguably, the publication of *Newgate Calendars* from 1773 was instrumental to introduce the discourse of crime in day to day parlance. The collection celebrated real-life criminals and they were often presented as being mere victims of an unjust system. It was as if the ordinary people faced organized oppressions from the persons who hold the power.

Nevertheless, the appeal of *Newgate Calendars* for the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century audience resided in spectacular violence and punishment of those who had made attempts of transgression. Andrew Knapp and William Baldwin, two early editors of chronicles of crime offered a cautionary warning- "for we shall find, in the course of these volumes, that crime has always been followed by punishment; and that, in many circumstances, the most awful secrecy could not screen the offenders from detection, nor the utmost ingenuity shield them from the strong arm of impartial justice" (iv).Newgate prison, a prime locus of trial and execution of infamous criminals was exclusively associated with the subgenre of crime fiction, Newgate novels- named after the events described in Newgate Calendar- which includedThomas Gaspey's*Richmond* (1827), Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830) and *Eugene Aram* (1832), and William Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834). Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837) often falls under the category and the genre reaches its culmination with the publication of Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839). Newgate novels are characterized by their male authorship, romanticized and often sympathetic portrayal of criminals and a passive, reluctant, matter-of-fact description of the victims. It is the criminals who take the central stage and acts as a pivot around which the whole plot revolves.

The genre of crime fiction primarily evolved from nonfictional accounts of sensational murder stories which were frequently described as real or experienced through fragmented narratives from other people, newspaper reports etc. Thomas De Quincey's "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts" (1827) is possibly one of the first attempts to see murder as an aesthetic experience, by relating it with the excess of passion and transgression of contemporary Gothic writings. Here the murderer is considered to be an artist; the act of murder is perceived as a delicate work of art and thus, murder and violence come under the domain of 'literary' events by evoking sublime effects- it provokes awe and terror among the readers. Moreover, the depiction of a murderer not thoroughly as a sinful creature or essentially evil often perceives the criminal as a helpless victim of social change and a faulty legal system. William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) is set in a period of social transition- from feudal to early modern society and the plot revolves around the misdemeanour of an aristocratic noble man Falkland who murders a fellow aristocratic person named Tyrell over a negligible verbal skirmish. Caleb starts enquiring the course of events by his own and makes a startling discovery of finding Falkland as the murderer. Godwin devotes a significant portion of the novel by dealing with how Falkland attempts to silence Caleb and he eventually fails. This leads him to fabricate an account by claiming Caleb as the murderer. Philip Shaw, while analysing the painful pleasures of Caleb's discovery who the real murderer is, rightly comments, "Caleb is motivated not out of sympathy for the murder victim but rather out of a fascination with the murderer, the sublime "artist" whose genius is manifested in the execution and concealment of transgression" (366). Through the course of the novel, Godwin is much critical of the corrupt and unjust legal system which lose its

significance day by day. It may act as a point of departure where the trust upon administrative legal system gradually lessens and it prepares an ideological and cultural background for the coming of a detective.

It is not as if the passion to indulge in a crime fiction is relatively new, starting with the publication of *Newgate Calendars*. This is a phenomena existing before that; and here we find an interesting paradigm that coincided with the rise of the novel. The genre of novel provides ample space to accommodate fragmented, dispersing account into a narrative whole and it has started as early as 1722 with the publication of Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. It delves deep into a criminal world from its very outset as the eponymous protagonist is described to have born in Newgate prison. She later returns to the same prison as a convicted criminal after spending a life, full of adventures, misdeeds that threatens contemporary moral fabric. Defoe's treatment of Moll as a criminal is quite ambiguous, he does not perceive her protagonist solely as a criminal. It becomes evident when coming back from America after a kind of exile, Moll has been allowed to live a respectable life whereas Defoe reminds the reader that it is a reward for being repentant and shameful for her past life. In a manner similar to *Moll Flanders*, following a murder, the eponymous heroine of the novel *Roxana* (1724) fears her own guilt consciousness more than any punishment, given by contemporary authority. Defoe's *The True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathan Wild* (1725) features an equally notorious criminal account as its basic source. Heather Worthington puts emphasis on the character of "thief - taker General,"Jonathan Wild- because of the fluidity of narrative roles, it assumes- "…the novelistic style and structure and the careful selection of the more entertaining aspects of Wild's dual career as simultaneously thief and quasi-detective locate the text more as prototype than as full-fledged crime fiction" (16).

Edward Bulwer- Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830) is considered to be one of the defining books of the genre of Newgate novels and it tells the story of Paul Clifford who leads the life of an adventurous highwayman and later is convicted of being a thief. Though at the end of the story he succeeds to flee to America, despite being condemned to death, the novel questions what crime actually is and thereby, shows how a reformation is necessary to improve both social condition and legal system.

> Men embody their worst prejudices, their most evil passions, in a heterogeneous and contradictory code; and whatever breaks this code they term a crime. When they make no distinction in the penalty- that is to say, in the estimation- awarded both to murder and to a petty theft imposed on the weak will by famine, we ask nothing else to convince us that they are ignorant of the very nature of guilt….(qtd. in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* 23)

As a victim of an unjust social system, Paul easily perceives inherent fissures of it; he is equally critical of the legal system- "Your laws are but of two classes; the one makes

criminals, the other punishes them. I have suffered by the one- I am about to perish by the other…." (23)

Dickens as a novelist seemed to be quite fond of the dark underbelly of London and its suburbs and he catered the Victorian obsession for crime, criminals, punishment and moreover with social and individual morality. It was partly inspired by Dickens's own problematic upbringing and he wrote what he had seen by himself. *Oliver Twist*, serialised from 1837 to 1839, is his first attempt to depict a criminal persona through the characterization of Fagin, whereas Dickens's focus lies on utter poverty and helpless conditions of the children who are forced to choose the paths of evil. Like Godwin and Bulwer- Lytton, Dickens questions the deplorable London cityscape and his portrayal of criminals in his fictions and non-fictions often imbibes a sympathetic touch – he tends to see them at least as a human being. Dickens later in his *Great Expectations* (1861) closely evaluates the social and penal systems of England and the condition of its prisons. He voices forth his dissatisfaction regarding how the criminals are kept in deplorable condition. Though he never gains popularity as a crime fiction writer, his works broadly examines the social paradigm of crime and punishment, also the condition which brings forth the tendency to transgress societal norms and values.

Just as the form of novel transformed nonfictional memoirs of criminal narratives into fictional counterpart, the emergence of short story as a distinct narrative form was instrumental in developing the detective fiction to its fullest extent. It was further enhanced by the circulation of magazines where stories had published in subsequent serialization. Both of these initiated a rapid change in reading public by bringing detective fiction into domestic parlance. The earliest example of its kind occurred as early as 1850 with "Charles Dickens's 'Three "Detective" anecdotes', one of a series of articles reporting the activities of real London detectives as observed by the journalist himself for *Household Words*" (Kayman 42).The magazine culture was also closely associated with the development of railroad and telegraph which made communication between the countryside and city quite easier. At the same time, oriental fantasy stories and intermingling of people from different British colonies aggravated a deep sense of insecurity and anxiety as the places outside Great Britain were often perceived as dark and uncivilized where people became vulnerable to monstrosity and evil. However, detective stories were mostly complete and contained within a particular issue of a magazine and it stood oppose to serialized novel which was continued for a number of issues, frequently covering the span of a year or two. On the other hand, the reader eagerly waited for another story in the next issue and it boasted the sell and circulation. Thereby it ensured commercial success for both the magazine and the writer.

The transition from crime to detective fiction gains visibility in the writings of Poe and in his characterization of Dupin as a problem solving genius. Detective fiction, simply put, features a larger-than-life investigator who can solve murder, mystery or any crime and the investigator unravels publicly who the criminal is and brings him often under legal

punishment. It follows the structural pattern widely known as "whodunit" – it primarily situates the audience and the detective alike in a in a baffling situation just after the crime and following the paths of investigation, it closes after discovering who the real criminal is. Rarely, we find a structural reversal of "whodunit", for example, in much later, Satyajit Ray's movie adaptation of his own novel *Sonar Kella*where the audience knows from the very beginning who the real criminal is and the movie investigates the course of events for the detective. At the end, *Feluda*, the detective, untangles the pattern of crime for the audience. Detective fiction depicts contemporary socio-cultural and political conflicts and attempts to show how social order, morality and law interact with each other. Crime fictions, in its early days of development, seem to engage the audience with discomforting, dark world of the criminals by showing vulnerability of human being in lawless, chaotic world. But in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there is a marked change with the rise of detective fiction where the newly emerged figure of a heroic detective extends a sense of security and brings law and order amidst utter disorder. What is important to note here is that they often work outside the official administration and thus, introduce the criminals into a more social and public place. It may lead to a comfortable ambience where the common people through the pursuit of a detective, constructs a sense of security around themselves and that too without any help from contemporaneous authority. Stephen Knight, while discussing about the cultural significance of Holmes in Victoria England asserts - "The captivated readers had faith in modern systems of scientific and rational enquiry to order an uncertain and troubling world, but feeling they lacked these powers themselves they, like many audiences before them, needed a suitably equipped hero to mediate psychic protection." (67)

The emergence of detective fiction was not limited only in Britain, it was developed both in Europe and in America. Edgar Allan Poe is often considered to be the inventor of modern detective fiction whose protagonist, C. AugusteDupin is influential to formulate a new discourse of Dupin methodology or Dupin-inspired fictions. Dupin appears mainly in three stories- "The Murder in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Ragot" (1842-43), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844). Dupin stories has announced a new beginning of detective writings by exploring issues of "anxiety over race and sexuality, concerns about ethics and social control, commentaries (and meta-commentaries) on the reading of signs, the status of language, and the psychology of conspiracy and fear" (Lee 370). Dupin solves the mysteries by focusing not only on the events, but also apprehending what lies beyond ordinary understanding. "The Murder in the Rue Morgue" demands an extraordinary imaginative power to understand the murder, committed not by any human being but by a human-like animal- orangutan. After the failure of the police department, Dupin guides the audience through the complex web of incidents and reaches the conclusion. He seems to read one's thought-process and much like Holmes, it is his key to success. Dupin's method of investigation sets up a yardstick of empirical reasoning for the detectives who will come; he is described to examine the murder scene with "a minuteness of attention" and "scrutinize

every thing" (qtd. in 373). Then, he moves on to follow his own intuition; at this point, he makes a methodological departure from the more systematic process of police- investigation. Poe's firm faith on Dupin as a detective leads him to employ an actual murder of Mary Rogers in 1841 as Dupin's second adventure. Poe moves the setting to Paris as an attempt to make it thinly fictional. Poe, in three parts of the story, deals with several possibilities behind the murder, but at the end, most of them turns out to be wrong as it is widely reported that the death may be resulted from a failed abortion. Poe returns to a completely fictional event for describing Dupin's third attempt of solving a murder mystery. Here, he again seems to be critical of detailed investigation and "empirical scrutiny" (377), employed by the police department. Detective stories as we have seen both in Poe and in Holmes, embodies in their ambit an essentially modern and urban agent of state surveillance- that is the newly-established police force. Martin A. Kayman, along with many notable critics, perceives it as a "literary reflection of, if not propaganda for, a new form of social administration and control based on state surveillance" (44). Dupin in contrast to the Police, relies much on creating a fine balance of acute observation, chance-encounter and intuition. Dupin, in "The Purloined Letter" identifies Minister D, depending on his intuition to think like Minister D and apprehending D's moves from the very beginning. Much like Holmes and Professor Moriarty, there are startling similarities between Dupin and Minister D- both are genius in their world, they share the same initial letter of their name and their motifs and actions largely remain outside ordinary comprehension.

T.S. Eliot once credited Wilkie Collins of writing the first full-fledged detective novel in Britain (Mangham 381). It was never an exaggeration as Collins showed his mastery over Sensational novel; *The Woman in White* (1860) satisfied Victorian audience's insatiable desire for violence, murder and blood. The author himself frequently faces harsh criticism "for a perceived morbid obsession with crime" (382). *The Moonstone*, serialized in *All the Year Round* from January to August 1868, accommodated a series of testimonies regarding a murder mystery in an upper class family. Much like *The Moonstone*, *The Law and the Lady* employedcertain situations which characterize detective fiction for the era to come. In Collins's writing, suspicion gets shifted from one person to another before reaching the actual criminal; everyone is under scrutiny at the very beginning of the novel. It, therefore, involves a series of negations before arriving at a decisive conclusion. Victorian society's taste for crime stories is often perceived as a means to assume an ideologically superior position than those criminals who are hailed from a lower class background- " In reading about such rogues, we [they] may rest assured that we[they] are simply better than they [criminals] are" (382). But Collins soon shatters the false notion of social and moral superiority by situating his all major criminals in middle and upper class society.

Arthur Conan Doyle's phenomenal success as the creator of Sherlock Holmes possibly surpasses each and every fictional detectives ever created. Here it would be pertinent to analyse the reasons behind it and how Doyle situates Holmes in the larger tradition of

detective writing. In the very beginning of Holmes's career as a London-based detective in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887)Doyle makes a clear reference to Dupin and Monsieur Lecoq; he situates Holmes as their descendant. Though the basic pattern of solving mystery remains almost the same in Holmes stories, Stephen Knight has commended Doyle of inventing various methods to keep the demand of his writing intact. Doyle achieves a rare balance between engaging his readers in an intellectual endeavour as well as catering to the moral and cultural anxieties of Victorian period. Holmes puts forward the exercise of reason, observation and science and shows how it possesses the capability to "organize the material of existence meaningfully, and the power of the rational individual to protect us from semiotic and moral chaos" (Kayman 48).If we put Holmes's method of investigation under magnifying glass, we will observe much to our own surprise that he is described by Watson as a living dictionary of crime- he systemically recalls the events one after another, just as a humanoid form of *Newgate Calendar* or any other nonfictional criminal accounts. Holmes asserts – "I am able to guide myself by the thousands of other similar cases which occur to my memory" (176). Holmes's formulation of a detective constitutes as its base a vast knowledge system- an ever-expanding field of expertise with which Holmes continues to surprise his audience. While for an ordinary reader, Holmes's minute observations and sudden discoveries often appear too hard to digest instantly, Watson is there to manifest logical steps behind it and makes Holmes credible to the common people. It further initiates a reader to have trust on Holmes's instinct and intelligence. Doyle's stories have often been criticized for employing pseudo-scientific procedure to reach at a desired conclusion; Michael Shepherd, denounces Holmes's method as being "counterfeit, a simulacrum of the real thing" (20). Holmes's procedure, as critics have argued, does not possess any scientific authenticity or logical accuracy- he often surmises widely popular race and class stereotypes as being rationally or scientifically verified and therefore, accurate. What is important to note here is that the Victorian reading public were elated to be a part of contemporaneous scientific achievements- they remained happy within "an aura of science" (Knight 79), without being much concerned with its accuracy and authenticity.

W.H. Auden in his 1948 essay "The Guilty Vicarage" deals with the problematic notion of pleasure and satisfaction that a reader enjoys while reading a detective fiction. He denounces detective stories as being works of art or 'literature'. He perceives the pleasure as a moral satisfaction which a reader finds after bringing law and order into utmost chaos. It happens to be equally applicable to the Victorian audience. In 1860s, there was a visible change in detective fiction, starting with Collins and culminating in Holmes where criminality spread from lower class slum areas to London cityscape. It initiated a movement to look within, to look into one's own house to neutralize any threats. The domestic sphere acted as aninvestigation-ground for police and detectives as for the Victorian society- "The family home was a precious retreat. Conceived as central to the maintenance of Britain's political power, it required protection and maintenance; reasons were needed for sending in

the professionals whose job it was to guard and preserve the sanctity of British households" (Mangham 383). The reason behind the immense popularity of Collins and Doyle lies in the fact that the detectives are used to fortify a sense of security among the audience from the impending threats, originated from racial, imperial and cultural anxieties. Doyle and Collins situated their fictions within a larger cultural framework where we can perceive the fictions as the reflections of Victorian socio-cultural and moral purview.

Works Cited:

The Newgate Calendar; Comprising Interesting Memoirs of the Most Notorious Characters who Have Been Convicted of Outrages on the Laws of England . Ed. Andrew Knapp and William Baldwin. Vol. I. London: J. Robins and Co, 1824-1828. vols. iv. Print.

Auden, W.H. "The Guilty Vicarage." *Harper's Magazine* (1948). Web. 27 August 2018. <https://harpers.org/archive/1948/05/the-guilty-vicarage/>.

Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. London: Penguin, 1722. Print.

—. *Roxana*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1724. Print.

Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. London: Penguin, 1860-61. Print.

—. *Oliver Twist*. London: Penguin, 1837-38. Print.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes*. London: Penguin, 1930. Print.

Godwin, William. *Caleb Williams Or Things As They Are*. Project Gutenberg, 1794. Web. 24 August 2018. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/11323/11323-h/11323-h.htm>.

Kayman, Martin A. "The Short Story from Poe to Chesterton." *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Martin Priestman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 41-58. Print.

Knight, Stephen. *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1980. Print.

Lee, Maurice S. "Edgar Allan Poe (1809- 1849)." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. West Sussex: Wiley- Blackwell, 2010. 369-380. Print.

Mangham, Andrew. "Wilkie Collins (1824- 1889)." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. West Sussex: Wiley- Blackwell, 2010. 381-389. Print.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Penguin, 1938. Print.

Priestman, Martin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.

Quincey, Thomas De. "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts." 1839. *www.wwnorton.com.* Web. 24 August 2018. <https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/noa/pdf/27636_Roma_U13_Quincey.pdf>.

Shaw, Philip. "William Godwin (1756-1836)." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 361-368. Print.

Shepherd, Michael. *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of Dr Freud*. London: Tavistock, 1985. Print.

Sonar Kella. Dir. Satyajit Ray. Prod. Government of West Bengal. 1974. DVD.

Worthington, Heather. "From The Newgate Calendar to Sherlock Holmes." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2010. 13-27. Print.