

Detective Fiction in Victorian England

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Abstract: This paper explores the origins and evolution of detective fiction, debunking the myth surrounding Sherlock Holmes' famous quote and highlighting his enduring popularity. It traces the genre's inception back to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841 and underscores the societal and political changes in 18th and 19th century England that paved the way for its rise. With the growth of the middle class and the demand for accessible entertainment, periodicals emerged as a key medium for short stories, with detective fiction becoming a prominent genre. This paper also emphasizes how Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories achieved commercial success and influenced a generation of writers, while the public's passionate response to his character's temporary demise underscores the genre's profound impact on readers and its enduring popularity.

Keywords: Detective fiction; Sherlock Holmes; Edgar Allan Poe; Middle class; Periodicals

Online publication: January 20, 2024

1. Introduction

Despite popular belief, Sherlock Holmes never said the famous phrase "Elementary, my dear Watson!" in any of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's original writings. The actual quote is simpler: "'Elementary,' said he," in 1893's *The Crooked Man*. However, his fans do not seem too disappointed that what is perhaps Sherlock's most famous quote cannot actually be attributed to him. According to the Guinness World Records, the fan-favorite fictional sleuth was the most portrayed literary character in the history of television. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's success in the detective fiction genre was not an isolated event; this previously unpopular genre received a huge boost in popularity in Victorian England^[1]. Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and later Arthur Morrison and Agatha Christie all wrote within the span of about a century, prior to which detective fiction was a literary no-man's land that no author successfully penetrated. A popular belief is that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle "invented" this genre of literature and was its main proponent. However, this is simply not true – Doyle himself described detective fiction as "a lower stratum of literary achievement," and when he created Holmes, he had only "meant to make some money for his real art." While it is undeniable that the popularity of his character did much to propel detective fiction to a new height, prolonging its popularity all the way into the 21st century, it is quite a disservice to Doyle's predecessors to claim that he was the "cause." There was no "inventor" of this genre; its

modern-day form, however, can be attributed not to any of the British authors that the genre is so well-known for, but the American Sir Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote and published *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841. The rise of the middle- and lower classes in the late Victorian era coincided with an increase in reported urban crime rates; together, these two factors led to an increase in public interest in law and order, enabling the long-term success of the genre of detective fiction ^[2].

Detective fiction is a genre with little history. While stories about detectives and crimes have existed for a long time, one of the earliest examples being Di Renjie, a legendary Chinese detective who lived in the 7th century, the start of modern detective fiction is often pinpointed as 1841, when Edgar Allan Poe wrote and published *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. This short story, published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1841, set the stage for later, more famous works of detective fiction; for example, the use of a Boswell, a friend or acquaintance of the protagonist who records the adventures of the main character, as the narrator became common in later detective fiction novels. While there have been many attempts to popularize the genre, there were few notable developments in the genre until 1887, when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published his first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*. In fact, there have only been a handful of notable detective fiction writers in the history of the genre, with Sir Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie among them ^[3].

Meanwhile, in 18th and 19th century England, many important political and social changes took place. In the early 1700s, the government was still in the hands of the bureaucracy; during Queen Victoria's rule, however, the parliament passed several voting reforms, most notably in 1867 and 1884, allowing approximately two-thirds of adult men to vote, compared to the previous one-sixth. This increase in political participation brought about a revamp of the criminal justice system; the country established a capital code and a police system, with the former then abolished within the same period ^[4]. This revamp also coincided with an increase in urban crime rates. There are many famous examples of crimes that have become staples of this period, most notably Jack the Ripper, a serial killer who killed five women in Whitechapel in 1888, four of which within the span of a month ^[5]. This sensational story was the first of its kind, and the story of Jack the Ripper became a common subject for historical investigations and inquiries. Thus, when Edgar Allan Poe's works arrived in England, it was under these circumstances that they were able to gain popularity, though initially only among authors.

The rapid expansion of cities and the increase in political citizens also gave birth to an expanding middle class, which consisted of city-dwelling skilled workers who, unlike the working class, did not have to rely on manual labor. This group of citizens were the people who enabled the genre of detective fiction to survive the rough literary world. "They were the ones priced out of concerts, the ones who had to wait for the cheaper versions of popular novels", said Jennifer Keishin Armstrong about the middle class of the Victorian era. Indeed, the Victorian middle class was stuck in their own sort of "limbo": they were rich enough to afford and want commodities and entertainment, but too poor to enjoy the preexisting entertainment at the time, the type of entertainment designed for and could only be afforded by the upper class. This called for new forms of entertainment to be created for this emerging class of citizens. Football, for example, was one product of the demands of the time. However, with football matches few and far in between, with ticket prices that ironically priced out many of the citizens of the social class they were targeted at, an even cheaper and more accessible form of entertainment was still needed ^[6].

This new business opportunity did not go to waste. Magazines and newspapers, known collectively as "periodicals," a form of literature that itself saw a huge rise in popularity in the 19th century, took it upon themselves to provide new forms of entertainment to the middle class. These publications realized short stories

were the preferred format: they were short and intriguing, and a popular character could create prolonged interest that would keep the newspaper's revenue up by demanding regular subscriptions from its readers. More and more magazines and newspapers started publishing short stories within their pages, with the rising genre of detective fiction being the most common. Sherlock Holmes was the prime example of such columns, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story collection, published in the *Strand* magazine, was the cash cow of the newspaper; when Doyle killed off his popular character in *His Last Bow*, more than 20,000 subscribers canceled their subscriptions; readers held literal protests over this decision, and the *Strand* magazine and Doyle were forced by public pressure to bring him back. "A vast treasure trove of detective stories was published in periodicals between 1893 and 1900," said Clare Clarke, an assistant professor of 19th-century literature at Trinity College Dublin, about this literary phenomenon. Thus, detective fiction found its perfect medium, and an entire generation of writers, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself, turned to the genre, though initially only for its monetary benefits.

While the eventual and prolonged success of detective fiction came from the rapid increase in the amount of urban, middle-class readers, the initial sparks of inspiration came from the dramatic increase in urban crime rates in 19th-century England ^[7]. The increase, in fact, was massive: there were 5,000 recorded crimes in Britain in the year 1800; that number increased to 20,000 in the year 1820. The public, obviously, demanded a reform of the justice system; police forces were first established in London in 1829, and other cities soon followed suit. However, many have pointed out that this increase was not due to an increase in crime rate, but rather an increase in the rate at which crimes were reported by newspapers. Later analysis of Victorian crime rates and reports revealed that this was indeed the case: frequency analysis of Victorian periodicals showed that newspapers and magazines of the time period tended to over-report on crime. Of course, this is not without good reason: the sprawling urban landscape of London, which contained a million people at the start of the 19th century, had expanded exponentially to 6.7 million souls just 100 years later ^[6]. Late-19th-century London was a fertile breeding ground for sensational crime. Notorious serial killers, including Jack the Ripper, terrorized the streets of London, their gruesome crimes also provided intriguing material for the reporters of England. While these sensational, unsolved crimes were what caught the public's attention, the pure commonality of crimes during the Victorian era was what inspired detective fiction writers and even made their stories relatable. Consider, for example, Mary Ann Cotton, one of England's most prolific female serial killers, who killed at least 14 people in her lifetime. Her weapon of choice was arsenic, a poison that is very frequently used in detective fiction. It was the crimes committed by innocuous everyday folks using non-sensational methods that inspired detective fiction writers of the late 19th century; more importantly, they were what kept the public interested in these stories.

The rapid urban expansion in Victorian England had another consequence. Before the Industrial Revolution, England was a rural country, and its citizens tended to prefer living in small villages; however, when the Industrial Revolution began and factories were built, mass emigration began. Workers flocked to the large cities in search of work, initiating the process of urban transition. The change from knowing all of one's neighbors personally to living in a sprawling urban landscape where one rarely met one's neighbors was drastic. In a small town or village, it was difficult to imagine any of one's amicable, upright neighbors as murderers. But in the urban hellscape of post-Industrial Revolution London and other cities, where one could not hope to know more than just a tiny fraction of one's neighbors, these assumptions seemed less of a stretch. In other words, the large populations created unfamiliarity between neighbors and suspicion in the hearts of the people; in response, many early detective fiction novels featured large, urban settings to be relatable, as suspicion in one's neighbors was not an unfamiliar idea at the time. Though detective fiction into the 20th century turned

to a heavier focus on rural settings, especially the much-abused “murder-in-a-country-house” trope, this was actually yet another result of the Industrial Revolution—it became much easier to travel to and from the city as a result of new forms of transportation, such as steam-powered trains and motor vehicles, and people were able to spend much more time away from their homes^[8]. In other words, the Industrial Revolution created a messier, more mobile society, erasing the sense of trust between acquaintances that had been so central to relationships in pre-Industrial Revolution England. Thus, detective fiction, a genre that provides a thrill through the feeling of mistrust, gained relevance^[9].

Of course, the massive success of detective fiction involved quite a bit of luck. That luck came in the form of the emergence of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his character, Sherlock Holmes, as the vanguard of the genre. While Doyle himself was clearly influenced by the aforementioned factors, the genre of detective fiction would not have enjoyed this degree of long-term success had it not been for Doyle and his beloved character, Sherlock Holmes. Doyle’s stories were not only stories; they were a cultural phenomenon. When the character was killed off, readers were not ready to face this reality and sought to influence Doyle to convince him to bring back the beloved character. “‘You brute!’ one letter addressed to Conan Doyle began,” says Jennifer Keishin Armstrong. The protests were international—“Americans started ‘Let’s keep Holmes Alive’ clubs,” she continued, talking about the public reaction to the death of Sherlock Holmes. While these reactions over a fictional death seem extreme, some have described even crazier responses: “Workers sported black armbands or wore black mourning crêpes...” said Russell Miller, one of the many biographers of Doyle, in his book *The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle* in reference to the death of Sherlock Holmes. This level of popularity was unparalleled in the world of literature and remains so today^[10].

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s popularity can be observed even today. Many tropes of detective fiction, such as the villains involving themselves in a case or the use of a Boswell, were invented or popularized by Doyle. Many authors and readers of detective fiction refer to the detective as the “Sherlock” of the story; the word “Sherlock,” in fact, is no longer only a name; dictionaries now include it as a noun synonymous with “detective.” Sherlock Holmes himself is often name-dropped by other authors in later works; Agatha Christie, for example, mentions Sherlock Holmes in *The Clocks* and calls Doyle’s works “brilliant”. It is thus clearly seen how important of an influence Doyle was on the genre of detective fiction and generations of detective fiction authors to come^[11]. While Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* was a product of the many factors that led to the birth of detective fiction, it was simultaneously the perfect catalyst that propelled the genre to new heights.

In many aspects, the success of detective fiction is an early example of the rise of other genres and art forms post-Industrial Revolution and into the 19th and 20th centuries. Science fiction, for example, was made popular as a result of technological and social developments in the mid-20th century, both of which worked together to increase the public’s knowledge of and interest in the genre. This pattern of a genre rising in popularity due to an increase in interest and knowledge in the subject can also be applied to horror films, historical fiction, and even rock music^[12].

As with many other genres, the birth and success of detective fiction was a combination of favorable societal circumstances, an abundance of interested readers, and a bit of luck in the form of a hugely successful and influential author and pioneer of the genre^[13]. The Industrial Revolution turned society upside down in Victorian England; this not only changed the political and social order in England but also caused the rapid urban expansion that ultimately both led to an abundance of crime and enabled the emergence of modern middle-class citizens. The former stimulated the creation of the genre of detective fiction, and the latter enabled its success^[14]. It was under these conditions that detective fiction flourished, with Agatha Christie, who inherited the throne of detective fiction from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, becoming the best-selling author of all

time. This historical rise of the detective fiction genre will be forever cemented in history^[15].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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