

Canonizing Detective Fiction

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Walking into a modern bookstore, the reader today is often confronted with several choices- books arranged under various categories on different shelves, ranging from Cook-books to volumes on Nuclear Physics - all shelved separately. Hunting for fiction in the designated shelves one is likely to notice another kind of demarcation- not all books of fiction are shelved together, and there are separate shelves for "Mysteries", "Thrillers" and the like. Hardly do we find a copy of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* stacked with a regular crime and mystery paperback. Though in some stores we might find a "Complete Sherlock Holmes" resting back to back with other volumes of 'literary fiction', but that is an exception. In the figure of Holmes, Doyle has created the most famous and archetypal scientific detective of all times and has attained a place in the literary canon. But in most cases Mysteries, Thrillers, Westerns, Adventures, and even Romances are likely to be stacked together. This kind of segregation, no doubt, is made by the bookstores for the readers' and their own advantage, but it also has other implications. It is evident, not only booksellers, but the greater literary world acknowledges the need for such demarcation between what we consider "literary fiction" and "genre fiction". It implies that genre fiction is not fit to be ranked with literary fiction because it is poorly written, inferior in quality and aesthetics. Such segregation is proof enough that despite the efforts of a section of the academia, since the last two or three decades, for the canonization of crime and detective fiction, the degrading tag of "sub-literature" could not be detached from the genre.

However, on the question of aesthetic quality, one is confused reading authors like Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald who in spite of being genre writers are highly artistic. Again, writers like Graham Green and Joyce Carol Oates have simultaneously produced literary and genre fiction; and Umberto Eco's fascinating historical crime-mystery, *The Name of the Rose* (1983) is remarkable in its richness and complexity of the framed narrative. Regardless of these facts, we summarily tend to reject detective fiction's claims to "artistic" status. This paper attempts to defend the canonization of detective fiction, particularly the classical cozies. Today, though the larger genre of detective fiction includes varieties like feminist detective fiction, black detective fiction, and post-modern detective fiction; the appeal of the classical cozy enclosing a puzzle is undeniable to most of us. Thanks to Doyle and his series of Sherlock Holmes stories, for which this particular formula has spread beyond the boundaries of Western cultures.

Talking about popularity, one must distinguish between an individual work and the popularity of a formula. The success of an individual work like the Sherlock Holmes series is difficult to explain. The public might respond to the presence of certain elements, or their particular combination in case of a particular story, and yet the same things might fail in another. But when a certain combination of elements and a particular kind of treatment becomes recurrently successful with the public, we attempt to derive a pattern that is working behind these best-sellers. A formula is one such pattern. When a formula becomes widely successful and remains so for a stretch of time, as it has been with the detective story, we may infer that the particular story pattern has some special significance and appeal to many people in that culture. Then, with John G. Cawelti we might agree that the particular formula becomes "a matter of cultural behavior that calls for explanation along with other cultural patterns" (Cawelti 21). Initiated by Doyle, the formula of the classical detective story gradually got established by its successful application in other series like *Father Brown*, *Hercule Poirot*, and *Lord Peter Wimsey*.

Investigating the rise and popularity of the classical detective formula between the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Cawelti offers a hypothesis of the cultural pattern that is projected by the form. The classic detective fiction emerged in the late nineteenth century, at a time and when the earlier social order was giving way to a new one. The authority of the nobility and the church had been weakened by political and economic changes and had no longer the "unquestioned

sway over the mind" (Cawelti 101). The traditional centres of authority were being replaced by new centres like: "the ethos of individualism, the ideal of the Christian family circle, and scientific rationalism". The rising middle class reacted to this change in a dual manner: on one hand they revolted against the lingering potency of these long established institutions, and on the other they were attracted by their traditional ascendancy. As the nineteenth century progressed the social and political dominance of the middle class became unquestioned and the earlier centres of authority could no longer be restored. This led to two threats in the middle class mind: "the political emergence of the lower classes, and a new concern with psychological urges toward aggression that were in sharp contrast with the ideal of the family circle", ultimately leading to a sense of guilt. Readers "shared a need for a temporary release from doubt and guilt generated at least in part by the decline of traditional moral and spiritual authorities, and the rise of new social and intellectual movements" (Cawelti 105). Cawelti derives that the formula of the classic detective fiction offers a release from middle-class guilt over repressed sexuality and aggression, and overexploitation of the lower classes. The detective rescues ordinary characters from irrational fear and superstition and discovers that one person, a criminal or outsider, is the real enemy. This pattern of removing generalized guilt and pinning it on a particular criminal is recurrent in classic stories of detection. (Cawelti 98-105)

Various currents and cross currents in the literary as well as the socio-political and cultural world worked behind the idea of the crime story with the detective at the centre. The essential difference between a story of crime with the criminal as the protagonist, and a detective story must be recognized. The latter form inverts the narrative of the former by transferring the readers' sympathies from the pursued to the pursuer. While eighteenth and nineteenth century writings were replete with crime, the detective fiction proper only started with Poe's creation of the "ratiocinative" detective Auguste Dupin. Before the establishment of an effective modern policing, the very idea of the detective was implausible. And with Dorothy Sayers we might agree that the form of detective fiction could not develop until and unless there was a general change in the public notions regarding law, and there were real life detectives around us.

Joel Black in his essay "Crime Fiction and the Literary Canon" observes that in detective fiction the story often seems a pretext for the artful display of the detective's analytical ability and the author's logical ingenuity' (Rzepka and Horseley 81). In this

context we are reminded of Tzvetan Todorov's interesting essay "The Typology of Detective Fiction" (1966). Todorov posits that at the core of a typical whodunit there is a "duality" since the work contains not one but two stories: the first of crime, and the second of investigation. He further problematizes the duality by comparing the two stories of a detective narrative with the Russian Formalists's concepts of the *fabula* and the *sjuzet* in a narrative. While the *fabula* is "what has happened in life", the *sjuzet* is "the way the author presents it to us". This makes detective fiction a narrative of narratives, its classical structure being the laying bare of the structure of another narrative. The story of detection begins after the story of crime is already over; but through the story of detection the story of crime is reconstructed. The artistry of the narrative lies in the process of reconstruction, and such complex narrative structure no doubt demands some critical attention.

A defendant of the genre, R. Austin Freeman, in his 1924 essay "The Art of the Detective Story", argues in favour of the detective story as a literary genre. In order to ascribe a superior literary status to detective fiction he distinguishes it from a "mere crime story" where "tragic, horrible, even repulsive" incidents are the thematic concerns and the aim is "horror-crude and pungent sensationalism". Freeman insists on the intellectual nature of detective fiction:

The distinctive quality of a detective story, in which it differs from all other types of fiction, is that the satisfaction that it offers to the reader is primarily an intellectual satisfaction. This is not to say that it need be deficient in the other qualities appertaining to good fiction: in grace of diction, in humour, in interesting characterization, in picturesqueness of setting or in emotional presentation. On the contrary, it should possess all these qualities. It should be an interesting story, well and vivaciously told. But whereas in other fiction these are the primary, paramount qualities, in detective fiction they are secondary and subordinate to the intellectual interest, to which they must be, if necessary, sacrificed. (Freeman)

In an attempt to establish detective fiction in the ranks of "high culture", Freeman points out that the connoisseurs of detective fiction belong to the "intellectual class" like "theologians, scholars, lawyers, and to a lesser extent, perhaps doctors, and men of science". However, it is curious that in his celebration of intellect in detective fiction, Freeman not only subordinates, but even denigrates the very aspects that are customarily praised in literary fiction. Freeman argues:

Thus, assuming that good detective fiction must be good fiction in general terms, we may dismiss those qualities which it should possess in common with all other works of imagination and give our attention to those qualities in which it differs from them and which give to it its special character. (Freeman)

Thus, in order to uphold the 'art' of the detective story, he unawares excludes the detective story from the very circle of literary art.

Explaining the appeal of the detective story Howard Haycraft had pointed out to the democratic nature of the genre. This kind of fiction could be "produced on any large scale only in democracies", and "under the bright cloak of entertainment" detective fiction affirms the democratic ideal of the legal process and respect for free citizens' rights and privileges (Haycraft 313). However, G.K. Chesterton's plea for the detective story was made purely on aesthetic grounds. In a passage of poetic beauty Chesterton observes that the detective story, which he considers a "perfectly legitimate form of art", has other significant aesthetic values:

...it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life...Of this realization of a great city itself as something wild and obvious the detective story is certainly the Iliad. No one can have failed to notice that in these stories the hero or the investigator crosses London with something of the loneliness and liberty of a prince in a tale of elfland, that in the course of that incalculable journey the casual omnibus assumes the primal colours of a fairyship. The lights of the city begin to glow like innumerable goblin eyes, since they are the guardians of some secret, however crude, which the writer knows and the reader does not. Every twist of the road is like a finger pointing to it; every fantastic skyline of chimney-pots seems wildly and derisively signaling the meaning of the mystery... A city is, properly speaking, more poetic even than a countryside, for while Nature is a chaos of unconscious forces, a city is a chaos of conscious ones...there is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol - a message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or a post-card. Anything which tends, even under the fantastic form of the minutiae of Sherlock Holmes, to assert this romance of detail in civilization, to assert this unfathomably human character in flint and tiles, is a good thing. (Chesterton)

In the wake of the defenses written in the 1920s and 30s, most of which explained the artistry of the detective, what remained clouded was whether these stories should be considered as literary art.

W.H. Auden, a major poet of the 30's, a producer of so-called "high literature", was also a guilt-ridden avid reader of detective fiction. His 1948 essay titled "The Guilty Vicarage", has overtones of his own guilt as a reader of detective stories. In his essay Auden admits that reading detective stories is chiefly a pursuit of an intellectual mind:

The typical detective story addict is a doctor or clergyman or scientist or artist, i.e., a fairly successful professional man with intellectual interests and well-read in his own field. (Auden)

But, Freeman's stand regarding the superiority of the detective story over the story of crime is completely reversed by Auden. To him "detective stories have nothing to do with works of art" and are distinguished from a story of crime, or a thriller, or a spy story. Auden feels that a work like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, essentially centred on crime and murder, is a work of art because here the reader is compelled into identifying him/herself with the murderer. Opposed to this, a reader of detective fiction is provided with a "magical satisfaction . . . the illusion of being dissociated from the murderer"; the reader distances him/herself with both the victim and the criminal and rather sides with the detective hero who seeks out the guilty party and restores innocence and order which was disrupted by the crime. Thus, Auden brands detective stories as fantastic escape literature as opposed to stories of crime for according to him, "The identification of phantasy is always an attempt to avoid one's own suffering: the identification of art is a compelled sharing in the suffering of another." (Auden)

Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel in their scholarly study, *The Popular Arts* (1964), categorize works of art under three heads. First is high art, which challenges audiences, or readers, breaks new ground, and refuses to rely on convention. The opposite extreme is mass art, which follows formulas and conventions to such an extent that it exists only for simple entertainment and reaffirms the audience's beliefs and viewpoints rather than challenging them. The third category, popular art, is created within the parameters of popular formulas and conventions, as is mass art, yet manages to rise above the form, challenging its audience intellectually, or philosophically, or in other ways (Rollyson 2: 1921). This categorization juxtaposes the innovative nature of "high art" against

conventional formulas followed by "popular" and "mass" arts. Indeed, one of the most regular allegations against detective fiction is its formulaic nature. Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins, the originators of the genre, did not follow any formulaic pattern, but ever since the phenomenal success of Doyle's Holmes series, a definite formula emerged. Later writers of the form like Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, S. S. Van Dine and others worked to further formulize the pattern. New precepts were laid out by the members of the Detection Club --the invincible ratiocinative sleuth, often and amateur, the less intelligent Watsonian friend-narrator, the locked room mystery, many suspects, clues, all giving an impression of a puzzle-game with its own rules and principles. It is this formulaic pattern that tends to become stale with repetition, which critics and scholars object to. Formulaic repetition in fiction interferes with creativity and originality which are often considered as the benchmark for "high" art. Even the American hard-boiled detective fiction that came up as a reaction to the British cozy mysteries soon became formulaic, and hence lost its claims to the literary canon.

This imputation grounded on the formulaic nature of detective fiction could be countered. In fact, popular literatures are inherently formulaic. The subgenres of crime and detective fiction, like the classical detective story, the hard-boiled, the police procedural tale, the spy story, all have though years evolved a definite pattern of their own. Of all these, the most engaging formula is that of the classical mystery, involving the detective, the criminal, the police and the suspects in an archetypal pattern. Commenting on the pattern of the classical detective story, John G. Cawelti writes:

The formula of the classical detective story can be described as a conventional way of defining and developing a particular kind of situation or situations, a pattern of action or development of this situation, a certain group of characters and the relations between them, and a setting or type of setting appropriate to the characters and action.(Cawelti 80)

Cawelti observes that since the days of Poe, four key elements--Situation, Pattern of Action, Characters and relationships, and Setting--were prevalent in the formula of the classical detective story. It is undeniable that in respect of popularity, the detective story formula has been most wide-spread and consistent.

Formula literature is after all a literary art and thus could be evaluated and analyzed like any other kind of literatures that are considered to be "high". There are two

aspects of formulaic structure that are generally condemned by critics: firstly, the standardization which is inherent in formulaic literature; secondly, their relation to escape and entertainment. And if we are to evaluate formula literature like detective fiction, we must explore the aesthetic implications that are there in these two basic aspects. According to some modern aesthetic ideologies, standardization in literature should be condemned; but it is also undeniable that without at least some amount of standardization artistic communication is not possible. In fact, standard conventions give a common plane for the writer and the readers. In formulaic literature, well-established conventional structures are all the more essential in the interest of the writers, readers, as well as the distributors. The readers find some sort of basic emotional security in an accustomed form; the writers working within a paradigm, becomes not only efficient but also prolific in production; the publishers and distributors too are assured of a guaranteed minimum return, if not more for certain popular individual titles.

Cawelti points to six elements that have become conventionally established, though in varying order, in the plot of the classical detective formula: introduction of the detective, description of the crime, the investigation, the solution, the explanation of the solution, and the denouement (Cawelti 81-82). Poe, Doyle, Chesterton, Christie, Sayers and others who have developed this formula, invites the reader into this well-known order of events. We take up these works with a fore knowledge of what we are to encounter. Defenders of the established "literary canon" may condemn the repetitiveness of the formulaic structures, but it is a paradox that in formula literature, the well known conventions become points of attraction. The art of formulaic literature depends on the deft handling of the formula so that in spite of the 'repetition factor' a work does not appear tedious. There might be, inventions, attesting to the originality of individual authors, but nothing might be excessively strained to the point of breaking the very formulaic structure. Such a thing happened with Christie's controversial *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), where the narrator, whom the readers implicitly trust, turns out to be the murderer. Here Christie, though commended for innovation, went against the established paradigm by using her favourite ploy of "the least likely suspect" to create a surprise-ending.

The other ground on which formulaic structures are denounced is their connection with entertainment and escape. Western culture has through the years constructed a series of pejorative oppositions that set sub-literature against high literature, entertainment

against instruction, popular art against fine art. And since mysteries and adventures provide a temporary escape from the frustrations of real life, they are simply labeled as inferior, and even pervert forms of something better and artistic. What one fails to see is that the "escapism" of detective fiction might be evaluated as an artistic aspect with its own justification. Though a totally escapist approach is not desirable, a temporary retreat to an imaginary alternative world is perhaps an intrinsic human aspect. But formulaic works particularly excels in the artistry of escape, an artistry which recognizes two different psychological needs: excitement and relaxation. On one hand, from formula literature we seek excitement and stimulus to get away from the boredom and ennui of our relatively secure, organized modern lives; on the other we also seek escape from the larger insecurities of life like death, failure in love, or in life. We all are subject to these two very conflicting impulses. We seek order and security and the result is boredom, and when we seek excitement and novelty the result is danger and uncertainty. But this paradox is very much embedded in our modern culture. A formulaic structure like detective fiction addresses to this conflicting need of the modern reader. They provide gratification through intense excitement and suspense by providing a world of crime where conventional and social order is disrupted. Again, through the presence of a detective figure, they reassure us in such a way that our security is intensified more than it was disrupted. While suspense builds round the act of crime, our confidence in the detective's ability grows, thus creating a fine dialectic of tension and relaxation.

Having defended detective fiction's claims to literary art, we must not forget that as in any literary genre, here too, there are good works and bad works. Those belonging to the former category stand the test of time and challenge the reader even remaining within the formulaic constraints. And the rest are only drab repetitions of skeletal formulas. Since, a formulaic structure like the classical cozy tends to be prolific in output, there is always a chance of a huge number of bad productions. Judging on the basis of these lesser works we should not banish the entire genre from the literary canon. Amidst the formulaic constraints works like Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*, Sayers's *The Nine Tailors*, Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and *Peril at End House* have left indelible mark on the popular imagination. Clive James in an essay "Blood on the Borders" has adequately given the equation of good detective fiction as a balance between "the art thrill" and "the thriller thrill" (James). True, it is difficult to achieve the balance, but time and again we have come across many such examples where

conventionality meets innovation; where besides the elements of excitement and suspense, there are good characterization and excellent depiction of the social milieu providing a deeper insight into human experience.

¹The London Metropolitan Police was established in 1829, and before that there were a great lack in law enforcement, in London. Earlier to it there were The Bow Street Runners, established by Henry Fielding in 1749.

²Sayer's Introduction to *The Omnibus of Crime* for one the earliest commentaries on detective fiction.

³It is a curious coincidence that the very establishment of the 'Detective Department' of the Metropolitan Police in London in 1842, almost coincides with the publication of Poe's first story of ratiocination.

⁴Freeman is also one of the most significant inventors of the inverted detective story, in which the reader observes the crime being committed from the criminal's point of view and then shifts to that of the detective and his investigation and subsequent solution of the puzzle. This shifts the reader's interest from who done it to the process of detection.

⁵The Detection Club was a London based organization founded by mystery writer Anthony Berkley with some twenty six members in 1928. The members included intellectuals and writers of cozy mysteries like Ronald Knox, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, G.K. Chesterton amidst others.

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