

Davide Del Bello ENG II -- Detective Fiction: Synopsis

Feature	The Moonstone (1868)	The Hound of the Baskervilles (1902)	And Then There Were None (1939)	Golden Age of Detective Fiction (1920s-1930s)
Mystery	Theft of a valuable diamond	Supposed curse of the Baskerville family	Series of murders on an isolated island	Complex puzzles and clever criminals
Detective Figure(s)	Sergeant Cuff and Franklin Blake	Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson	No single detective; characters must solve the mystery together	Amateur sleuths and eccentric detectives
Narrative Structure	Multiple narrators, non-linear timeline	Traditional linear structure	Unique structure with characters systematically eliminated	Often complex plots with surprising twists
Type of Mystery	Theft mystery	Supernatural elements blended with detective genre	Murder mystery, "locked room" subgenre	Diverse subgenres, including locked room mysteries and country house murders
Setting	Victorian England, themes of colonialism	Gothic moors of Devonshire	Isolated island off the coast of Devon in the 1930s	Often set in upper-class British society
Detective's Role	Central to the investigation and resolution	Central to the investigation and resolution	No single detective figure; characters must work together and against each other	Detectives as the main focus, often outsmarting the police
Relationship to Golden Age	Precursor to the Golden Age, establishing key elements of the genre	Influenced the Golden Age with its iconic detective figure and atmospheric setting	Epitomizes the Golden Age with its complex puzzle, isolated setting, and clever resolution	N/A

Feature	Strong Poison (1930)	And Then There Were None (1939)
Detective Figure	Lord Peter Wimsey, aristocratic amateur detective	No central detective figure
Romantic Subplot	Significant, with Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane	Not prominent
Narrative Focus	Split between mystery and character development	Primarily focused on mystery and psychological tension
Setting	London, courtroom, and various locations	Isolated island off the coast of Devon
Thematic Emphasis	Love, justice, and the role of women in society	Guilt, retribution, and the human capacity for evil
Plotting	Intricate, with clever twists	Complex, with a unique structure and systematic elimination of characters
Golden Age Characteristics	Complex puzzle, amateur detective, romantic subplot	Intricate plotting, isolated setting, psychological tension

DOROTHY SAYERS and AGATHA CHRISTIE: Two queens of The Golden Age of Detective Fiction

Dorothy Sayers' "Strong Poison" (1930) and Agatha Christie's "And Then There Were None" (1939) are both classic examples of **Golden Age detective fiction**, but they differ in their approach to the genre and their central focus.

1. Both novels were written during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction and feature complex puzzles and clever plot twists.
2. Both authors are known for their intricate plotting and their ability to keep readers guessing until the final revelation.

Differences:

1. **Detective figure:** "Strong Poison" features Lord Peter Wimsey, an aristocratic amateur detective who recurs in many of Sayers' novels. "And Then There Were None" does not have a central detective figure, with the characters themselves attempting to solve the mystery.
2. **Romantic subplot:** "Strong Poison" includes a significant romantic subplot, with Lord Peter Wimsey falling in love with the accused murderess, Harriet Vane. "And Then There Were None" does not feature a prominent romantic subplot.
3. **Narrative focus:** "Strong Poison" splits its focus between the mystery plot and the character development of Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane. "And Then There Were None" is more singularly focused on the mystery and the psychological tension between the characters.
4. **Setting:** "Strong Poison" is set primarily in London and features scenes in the courtroom and various other locations. "And Then There Were None" is set almost entirely on an isolated island, creating a claustrophobic and tense atmosphere.
5. **Thematic emphasis:** "Strong Poison" explores themes of love, justice, and the role of women in society, in addition to the central mystery. "And Then There Were None" is more focused on themes of guilt, retribution, and the human capacity for evil.

The Golden Age of Detective fiction, written mostly between the two World Wars (1920s and 1930s).

Characteristics

- **The Puzzle:** Emphasized intellectual challenges with intricate plots, complex clues, red herrings, and surprise twists.
- **Fair Play:** Authors adhered to rules, providing all necessary information for readers to solve mysteries alongside detectives.
- **The Eccentric Detective:** Featured unique detectives like Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and Lord Peter Wimsey, known for their distinct quirks and brilliant deductive skills.
- **Closed Setting:** Used settings like country houses, isolated trains, and villages to keep the character cast limited and make every suspect integral.

Key Authors

- **Agatha Christie:** Known as the "Queen of Crime," with classics like *Murder on the Orient Express* and *And Then There Were None*.
- **Dorothy L. Sayers:** Introduced Lord Peter Wimsey, noted for his wit and intellect.
- **Margery Allingham:** Creator of gentleman detective Albert Campion.
- **Ngaio Marsh:** Known for the theatrical, artistic detective Roderick Alleyn.
- **G.K. Chesterton:** Famous for his Father Brown mysteries, which blend crime with theological reflections.

Why It Endures

- **Nostalgic Escapism:** The settings and social norms provide a comforting distance from the modern world.
- **Intellectual Satisfaction:** The novels are cleverly constructed puzzles that engage readers in unraveling them.
- **Comforting Formula:** Despite the surprises, the novels often feature an underlying structure and typically end with the restoration of order, providing reassurance to the reader.

SAYERS, KNOX and VAN DINE on DETECTIVE FICTION

Dorothy Sayers, Ronald Knox, and S.S. Van Dine were all influential figures in the development of detective fiction during the Golden Age, and each contributed their own views and prescriptions for the genre.

Dorothy Sayers' "Introduction to the Omnibus of Crime" (1928):

- Sayers emphasizes the importance of fair play in detective fiction, arguing that the reader should have access to the same clues as the detective.
- She distinguishes between the "whodunit" and the "thriller," noting that the former focuses on the intellectual puzzle, while the latter emphasizes action and suspense.
- Sayers stresses the importance of character development and the creation of a believable setting, in addition to the construction of a complex plot.

S.S. Van Dine's "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" (1928):

- Van Dine, like Knox, provides a set of guidelines for the writing of detective fiction, focusing on the creation of a logical and intellectually satisfying puzzle.
- He stresses the importance of the detective's role as a scientific investigator and the need for the culprit to be determined through logical deduction, not chance or coincidence.
- Van Dine argues against the use of romantic subplots, suggesting that they detract from the central mystery, and emphasizes the importance of avoiding clichéd solutions or characters.

Ronald Knox's "Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction" (1929):

- Knox provides a set of rules for the writing of detective fiction, which he argues should be followed to ensure fair play and a satisfying puzzle for the reader.
- Some of his key rules include the prohibition of supernatural elements, the necessity of a single culprit, and the avoidance of secret passages and twins.
- Knox emphasizes the importance of logical deduction and the avoidance of coincidence or unwarranted intuition in the solving of the mystery.

While Sayers, Knox, and Van Dine all contributed significantly to the development of detective fiction during the Golden Age, their views and prescriptions differed in their focus and specificity. Sayers emphasized the importance of character, setting, and plot, while Knox and Van Dine provided more explicit rules and guidelines for the construction of a fair and logically satisfying puzzle. All three, however, shared a commitment to the creation of intellectually engaging and well-crafted mystery narratives.

Dorothy Sayers

Fair Play

Emphasizes the importance of giving the reader access to the same clues as the detective

Focus

Distinguishes between the intellectual puzzle of the "whodunit" and the suspense of the "thriller"

Character and Setting

Stresses the importance of character development and the creation of a believable setting

Rules and Guidelines

Does not provide explicit rules but offers general principles for the genre

Unique Elements

Emphasizes the importance of a well-constructed plot in addition to the puzzle

Ronald Knox

Provides rules to ensure fair play, such as prohibiting supernatural elements and secret passages

Focuses on the creation of a logical and intellectually satisfying puzzle

Does not explicitly address character or setting

Provides the "Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction" as a set of rules for writers to follow

Prohibits the use of twins and secret passages as unfair to the reader

S.S. Van Dine

Stresses the importance of logical deduction and the avoidance of coincidence

Emphasizes the detective's role as a scientific investigator and the need for a logical solution

Argues against the use of romantic subplots, suggesting they detract from the central mystery

Offers the "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" as guidelines for creating a satisfying puzzle

Stresses the need to avoid clichéd solutions and characters in the mystery

Hard-boiled fiction, primarily emerged in the 1920s in the United States (peak during the 1930s and 1940s).

Characteristics

- **Tough Protagonists:** Features cynical, tough protagonists who often operate as private detectives or antiheroes.
- **Gritty Realism:** Portrays a realistic, sometimes brutal view of the world, emphasizing violence and complex ethical choices.
- **Urban Settings:** Typically set in cities, highlighting the dark and corrupt side of urban life.
- **Stark, Slangy Dialogue:** Dialogue is often sharp, quick, and uses period slang to convey the raw emotions of characters.
- **Complex Plots:** Involves intricate storylines with a focus on criminal activity, betrayal, and survival.

Key Authors

- **Dashiell Hammett:** Known for *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and creating the character Sam Spade.
- **Raymond Chandler:** Famous for *The Big Sleep* (1939) and his detective character Philip Marlowe, known for his witty, hard-edged dialogue.
- **James M. Cain:** Notable for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), featuring themes of crime and passion.
- **Mickey Spillane:** Known for his Mike Hammer series, particularly *I, the Jury* (1947), which pushed the boundaries of violence and sexuality in the genre.

Why It Endures

- **Cultural Reflection:** Reflects the disillusionment and complexities of society, especially post-World War I America.
- **Psychological Depth:** Offers deep psychological insights into characters, making them complex and relatable.
- **Influence on Media:** Has significantly influenced other media, including film (film noir), television, and contemporary fiction, showcasing its lasting impact on popular culture.

Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World*. London: Continuum, 2009.

Evans suggests that the genre of detective fiction plays a crucial **constructionist role** in how societies perceive and cope with the concept of evil. Here's a more detailed explanation of this idea:

Imagination as a Social Construct

In detective fiction, 'evil' is not merely a backdrop for the narrative but is actively constructed through the storytelling. This implies that what society perceives as evil is not an inherent quality but something imagined or created through cultural, social, and media narratives. Detective fiction, by portraying various forms of criminal behavior and moral dilemmas, contributes significantly to this imaginative process.

Coping with Evil through Fiction

- Exploration of Fear and Morality:** Detective fiction allows readers to explore their deepest fears and moral judgments safely. By presenting 'evil' through the lens of a detective solving a crime, these stories let audiences confront unsettling truths about human nature and societal flaws without direct personal risk. This serves as both entertainment and a cathartic exploration of anxieties about disorder and morality.
- Social Catharsis and Resolution:** In many detective stories, the resolution of the mystery provides a form of catharsis for readers. The process of identifying the perpetrator and restoring order reassures the audience that evil can be managed and contained, even if this is more complicated in real life. This narrative closure helps people cope with the idea that despite the presence of evil, there are mechanisms (like the law and justice systems) that strive to uphold social order.
- Reflecting and Shaping Norms:** Detective fiction not only reflects societal norms but also shapes them. By continually redefining what is considered 'evil' or criminal in its narratives, it influences public perception and understanding of these concepts. For instance, a detective novel might highlight the evil of corporate greed, thereby shaping public discourse on economic ethics and justice.
- Moral Engagement:** The genre often encourages readers to engage with complex ethical questions, pushing them to consider different aspects of morality and justice. This engagement can lead to a more nuanced understanding of good and evil as relative concepts, influenced by social context, rather than absolute truths.

Educational Role

Detective fiction often serves an educational role, informing readers about the complexities of law, crime, and ethics. By delving into the psychological and sociological aspects of crime, these novels provide a deeper understanding of what drives individuals towards actions that are deemed 'evil' by society. This can foster empathy and a better understanding of human behavior, which is crucial for a more tolerant and just society. For Evans, the constructionist role of imagination in detective fiction is vital in how societies define, perceive, and ultimately cope with the concept of evil. This genre not only entertains but also plays a significant role in the ongoing cultural discourse about morality, law, and social order.

Feature	Description
Genre Analysis	Explores detective fiction as a genre that goes beyond mere entertainment to probe deep social, moral, and ethical questions.
Societal Reflection	Illustrates how detective stories reflect and critique societal norms and issues, acting as mirrors to the concerns and moral dilemmas of contemporary society.
Moral Exploration	Discusses how the genre navigates complex moral landscapes, questioning the alignment between legal systems and broader ethical truths, and how this has evolved over time.
Cultural Significance	Argues for the elevation of detective fiction in cultural esteem, proposing that it offers unique insights into human psychology and societal dynamics often overlooked by more mainstream literary forms.
Character Development	Analyzes the transformation of the detective character from a simple law enforcement figure to a complex moral agent who deals with broader societal issues and personal dilemmas.