

2.2.4 Crime fiction



Crime fiction developed as a literary genre in the early 19th century and has since become very popular. The author Edgar Allen Poe is said to be the *father* of crime fiction with his works: *The murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The mystery of Marie Roget* (1842) and *The Purloined Letter* (1844). Its focus is on crimes, their detection*, criminals and their motives. The popularity of crime fiction owes to* the evolution of the print mass media in the United States

and the United Kingdom as many of the first crime fiction stories were published in magazines and thereby the genre gained its popularity. Some of the first Sherlock Holmes stories were published in serial form in the monthly magazine *The Strand*. Crime fiction has a number of subgenres* some of which will be explained in the following sections.

Whodunnit fiction

A crime that is solved by a detective. All clues* are available to the reader through the story and the story is written from the detective's point of view. The stories usually include a mysterious death to be solved and a number of suspects who all have a motive and opportunity to commit the crime. The plot is complex, like a puzzle to be solved both by the detective and the reader. A variation of the *whodunnit* fiction is the inverted* detective story also called *howdunnit*. In this type of detective story, the guilty party and the crime is revealed from the beginning and the story revolves around the detective finding out the truth while the criminal tries to prevent it. The criminal might even be the narrator* – the protagonist* – in this genre of detective story. An example of this could be *The Victim* by P.D. James (where the narrator* is both a killer and a victim).

Examples of whodunnit and howdunnit

- *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) by Agatha Christie (whodunnit fiction)
- The TV series *Colombo* and *Law and Order* (howdunnit fiction)

detection sb. opdagelse • owe to vb. skyldes • subgenre sb. undergenre • clue sb. spor • inverted adj. omvendt • narrator sb. fortæller • protagonist sb. hovedperson

Legal thriller

Often a lawyer confronting his/her enemies both inside and outside the courtroom. Thereby, the protagonist* puts his/her own life at risk. The plot and action of a legal thriller primarily revolves around elements of the law and government. Therefore, a great deal of the action may take place in a courtroom. Focus of the legal thriller is how the case affects the involved characters and their lives.

Examples of legal thrillers

- *A Time to Kill* (1989) by John Grisham
- *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960) by Harper Lee

The cozy mystery

A mystery set in a middle class environment in a small town. The suspects and the victim(s) are therefore familiar with each other. The murder is solved by friendly police, an eccentric detective or the like. There is no graphic description of the details of the murder.

Examples of cozy mystery

- Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* novels*
- TV series such as *Midsomer Murders*

Hard-boiled crime fiction

The hard-boiled detective story started in the United States in 1920s. The genre developed based on the socio-economic circumstances during the interwar years where people felt disillusioned due to The Great Depression, the stock market* crash in 1929 and prohibition* laws with its spin-offs relating to gangsterism and connections between crime, business and politics in the greater American cities. The protagonist*, the hard-boiled detective, is a product of these circumstances. He has a tough, cool facade and doesn't mind taking a beating *like a man*. He is often a private detective and a sort of anti-hero with flaws*. Hard-boiled crime fiction is often told by a first person narrator*. The stories are usually set in realistic, urban surroundings with graphic descriptions of the crimes and of sex and violence. This genre has influenced a large number of writers and directors ever since. The TV series *True Detective* being a notable example.

Examples of hard boiled crime fiction

- *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) (protagonist*: Sam Spade) by Dashiell Hammett
- *The Big Sleep* (1939) (protagonist*: Philip Marlowe) by Raymond Chandler

Psychological suspense

The plot in a psychological suspense novel* is often complicated and appeals to one's intellect. The mystery to be solved is focused on the complexities of the crime and what motivates the person in question to commit the crime. Therefore, the storyline has frequent twists and unresolved endings. There is also a greater focus on the mental state of the characters than on physical action. Characters therefore tend to explore the cunning* and often disordered* psychological motivations of others and also tend to question their own mental state. The tone of the story is often chilling*, ominous* and unsettling*.

Examples of psychological suspense

- *Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne Du Maurier (can also be read as gothic horror fiction)
- *Silence of the Lambs* (1988) by Thomas Harris (can also be read as horror fiction)
- *The Fall* (TV series)

Though each sub-genre has its own characteristics, there are also some basic characteristics shared by almost all crime fiction.

Key characteristics of crime fiction

- The crime is what drives the story and the characters (therefore, the crime has to be worthy of a story such as kidnapping or murder).
- The protagonist* is the hero of the crime story, usually the detective trying to solve the crime.
- The protagonist* can be both likeable (cosy mystery) or some sort of anti-hero (hard-boiled crime fiction).
- There are usually a number of suspects and misleading cues to keep the suspense at a high and involve the reader.
- The criminal is an important character in crime fiction and has to be a worthy adversary* to the protagonist*.
- The storyline has to be realistic and believable.

novel sb. roman • cunning adj. snedig • disordered adj. uorganisert • chilling adj. isnende • ominous adj. ildevarslende • unsettling adj. foruroligende • protagonist sb. hovedperson • adversary sb. modstander, fjende



Exercise: Crime fiction

1. Read the excerpt from Sherlock Holmes: *A Scandal in Bohemia*.
2. In pairs:
 - Which type of crime fiction does the excerpt resemble*?
 - Where do you find some of the key characteristics of crime fiction in the text?
 - Rewrite the text into either a hard-boiled crime or a legal thriller.
 - Discuss what happens to the text and characters when you change the genre.

A Scandal in Bohemia (excerpt)

- 1 ...He threw over a sheet of thick, pink-tinted note-paper which had been lying open upon the table. "It came by the last post," said he. "Read it aloud.
- 2 The note was undated, and without either signature or address.
- 3 "There will call upon you to-night, at a quarter to eight o'clock," it said, "a gentleman who desires to consult you upon a matter of the very deepest moment. Your recent services to one of the royal houses of Europe have shown that you are one who may safely be trusted with matters which are of an importance which can hardly be exaggerated. This account of you we have from all quarters received. Be in your chamber then at that hour, and do not take it amiss if your visitor wear a mask."
- 4 "This is indeed a mystery," I remarked. "What do you imagine that it means?"
- 5 "I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly* one begins to twist facts to suit* theories, instead of theories to suit* facts. But the note itself. What do you deduce* from it?"
- 6 I carefully examined the writing, and the paper upon which it was written.
- 7 "The man who wrote it was presumably* well to do," I remarked, endeavoring to imitate my companion's processes. "Such paper could not be bought under half a crown a packet. It is peculiarly strong and stiff."
- 8 "Peculiar—that is the very word," said Holmes. "It is not an English paper at all. Hold it up to the light."
- 9 I did so, and saw a large E with a small g, a P, and a large G with a small t woven into the texture of the paper.
- 10 "What do you make of that?" asked Holmes.
- 11 "The name of the maker, no doubt; or his monogram, rather."
- 12 "Not at all. The G with the small t stands for 'Gesellschaft,' which is the German for 'Company.' It is a customary contraction like our 'Co.' P, of course, stands for 'Papier.' Now for the Eg. Let us glance at our Continental Gazetteer." He took down a heavy brown volume from his shelves. "Eglow, Eglonitz—here we are, Egria. It is in a German-speaking country—in Bohemia, not far from Carlsbad. 'Remarkable as being the scene

resemble vb. ligne • insensibly adv. uanfægtet • to suit vb. passe til • deduce vb. udlede • presumably adv. formentlig

of the death of Wallenstein, and for its numerous glass-factories and paper-mills.' Ha, ha, my boy, what do you make of that?" His eyes sparkled, and he sent up a great blue triumphant cloud from his cigarette.

13 "The paper was made in Bohemia," I said.

14 "Precisely. And the man who wrote the note is a German. Do you note the peculiar construction of the sentence—'This account of you we have from all quarters received.' A Frenchman or Russian could not have written that. It is the German who is so uncourteous* to his verbs. It only remains, therefore, to discover what is wanted by this German who writes upon Bohemian paper, and prefers wearing a mask to showing his face. And here he comes, if I am not mistaken, to resolve all our doubts."

15 As he spoke there was the sharp sound of horses' hoofs and grating* wheels against the curb, followed by a sharp pull at the bell. Holmes whistled.....

16The facts are briefly these: Some five years ago, during a lengthy visit to Warsaw, I made the acquaintance of the well-known adventuress, Irene Adler. The name is no doubt familiar to you.....

17"Let me see!" said Holmes. "Hum! Born in New Jersey in the year 1858. Contralto—hum! La Scala, hum! Prima donna Imperial Opera of Warsaw—Yes! Retired from operatic stage—ha! Living in London—quite so! Your Majesty, as I understand, became entangled* with this young person, wrote her some compromising letters, and is now desirous of getting those letters back."

18 "Precisely so. But how—"

19 "Was there a secret marriage?"

20 "None."

21 "No legal papers or certificates?"

22 "None."

23 "Then I fail to follow your Majesty. If this young person should produce her letters for blackmailing or other purposes, how is she to prove their authenticity?"

24 "There is the writing."

25 "Pooh, pooh! Forgery*."

26 "My private note-paper."

27 "Stolen."

28 "My own seal."

29 "Imitated."

30 "My photograph."

31 "Bought."

32 "We were both in the photograph."

33 "Oh dear! That is very bad! Your Majesty has indeed committed an indiscretion."

34 "I was mad—insane."

35 "You have compromised yourself seriously."

36 "I was only Crown Prince then. I was young. I am but thirty now."

uncourteous adj. uhøflig • grating adj. hvinende • entangle vb. vikle ind • forgery sb. forfalskning

- 37 "It must be recovered."
 38 "We have tried and failed."
 39 "Your Majesty must pay. It must be bought."
 40 "She will not sell."
 41 "Stolen, then."
 42 "Five attempts have been made. Twice burglars in my pay ransacked her house. Once we diverted her luggage when she travelled. Twice she has been waylaid*. There has been no result."
 43 "No sign of it?"
 44 "Absolutely none."
 45 Holmes laughed. "It is quite a pretty little problem," said he.
 46 "But a very serious one to me," returned the King, reproachfully.
 47 "Very, indeed. And what does she propose to do with the photograph?"
 48 "To ruin me."
 49 "But how?"
 50 "I am about to be married."
 51 "So I have heard."
 52 "To Clotilde Lothman von Saxe-Meningen, second daughter of the King of Scandinavia. You may know the strict principles of her family. She is herself the very soul of delicacy. A shadow of a doubt as to my conduct would bring the matter to an end."
 53 "And Irene Adler?"
 54 "Threatens to send them the photograph. And she will do it. I know that she will do it. You do not know her, but she has a soul of steel. She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men. Rather than I should marry another woman, there are no lengths to which she would not go—none."
 55 "You are sure that she has not sent it yet?"
 56 "I am sure."
 57 "And why?"
 58 "Because she has said that she would send it on the day when the betrothal* was publicly proclaimed. That will be next Monday."
 59 "Oh, then, we have three days yet," said Holmes, with a yawn. "That is very fortunate, as I have one or two matters of importance to look into just at present. Your Majesty will, of course, stay in London for the present?"
 60 "Certainly. You will find me at the Langham, under the name of the Count Von Kramm."
 61 "Then I shall drop you a line to let you know how we progress."
 62 "Pray do so. I shall be all anxiety."
 63 "Then, as to money?"
 64 "You have carte blanche*."
 65 "Absolutely?"

- 66 "I tell you that I would give one of the provinces of my kingdom to have that photo-
graph."
67 "And for present expenses?"
68 The king took a heavy chamois leather bag from under his cloak and laid it on the table.
69 "There are three hundred pounds in gold and seven hundred in notes," he said.
70 Holmes scribbled a receipt upon a sheet of his note-book and handed it to him.
71 "And mademoiselle's address?" he asked.
72 "Is Briony Lodge, Serpentine Avenue, St. John's Wood...."

Adventures of Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle, The Scandal in Bohemia (excerpt) (1892) Harper & Brothers www.gutenberg.org

2.2.5 Horror fiction



A great number of historians and critics of horror claim that the genre started with *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole from 1764. It is said to be the first gothic horror novel*. The purpose of horror fiction is to frighten and disturb the reader. Horror fiction is primarily defined by its effect on the reader and not by its content. Therefore, horror stories often involve a limited number of characters

and situations. Focus is usually placed on certain elements such as a dark and mysterious setting and malevolent*, dangerous or flawed* characters. Horror fiction always reflects the cultural norms of society and the historical time in which it is written. Otherwise, it would not scare or have an effect on its readers.

Clasen divides horror into two overall subgenres*: Supernatural horror fiction and psychological horror fiction. However, other researchers divide horror into even more subgenres* such as occult horror, erotic horror, rural horror, cosmic horror or apocalyptic horror. Others may prefer to talk about gothic horror which can be read by combining some of the different subgenres* mentioned above for example by reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (psychological horror) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (supernatural horror, erotic horror). Therefore, it is difficult to precisely pinpoint the relevant subgenres* of horror. However, all horror fiction has certain key characteristics.

novel sb. roman • malevolent adj. ondsindet • flawed adj. med fejl • subgenre sb. undergenre