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## Crime Fiction: An Introduction

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to attempt an introduction to Crime fiction, starting from the Vedic era to the golden age of crime fiction. It is evident that crime has always been there. But the idea of a formal detective came later. Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin is the first detective in English literature. Although the word detective was not in existence at that time.

**Keywords:** Crime, fiction, detective, golden age, literature

“For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol. The symptoms of this are: Firstly, the intensity of the craving - if I have any work to do, I must be careful not to get hold of a detective story for, once I begin one, I cannot work or sleep till I have finished it. Secondly, its specificity - the story must conform to certain formulas (I find it very difficult, for example, to read one that is not set in rural England). And, thirdly, its immediacy. I forget the story as soon as I have finished it, and have no wish to read it again. If, as sometimes happens, I start reading one and find after a few pages that I have read it before, I cannot go on.” (Auden, 1)

Popular literature has been decanonized and considered unfit for serious academic study for a long period of time. Detective fiction was no exception. Despite its immense popularity, Detective fiction was ignored from literary canon. However, since 1960s the barriers between “high” and “low” literature have been obliterated and this genre has been seen worthy of close analysis. The main focus on the study of this genre was on “detective” till 1980s. The question that Sukumar Sen has raised in his book *Crime Stories' Chronology* is whether a detective is always necessary in detective fiction. He has given an example where not a human being, but Destiny (Doibo) or Time has played the role of a detective. According to Sukumar Sen, the main thing about a detective fiction is the manifestation of intelligence and to win the game of intelligence. (Translation mine, Sen, 12).

In Vedic literature, there are traces of crime both in the form of prose and poetry. There are such terms like “Tayu” (Thief), “Kitab” (Gambler) and also terms like “Sposh” which means detective, investigator or spy. If we look back at our ancient Indian literature - *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Mricchakatikam* and Elizabethan and Jacobean English literature - *Kyd's Spanish Tragedy*, *Websters's Duchess of Malfi* and a number of plays by Shakespeare, we find that crime has always been a key factor in building up the plot and unfolding it. Mystery has always been there and interesting strategies have been taken in solving them, just like the “play within the play” in *Hamlet*. The story remains the same for a great bulk of 18th century literature also. Crime and mystery have played major role in literature, but “the idea of a ‘detective’ did not find any textual space”. (Priestman, 9). This is mainly because of the penal realities of the time; the absence of a reliable system of investigation or the detection of crime in a systematic way.

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* is considered as the first detective novel in English and English literature gets its first remarkably unique detective- C. Auguste Dupin, although the word “detective” did not even exist then. The anonymous narrator comments: “Sometimes he seemed to be not one, but two people – one who coldly put things together, and another who just as closely took them apart.” (Poe, 42).

The golden age of crime fiction has been attributed to the period between the world wars, when we find the two all-time great fictional detectives Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot.

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Sherlock Holmes, the unanimously great detective, who first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet* is described by Agatha Christie as “the one and only” (Christie, vii). According to the biography of Conan Doyle by Sherlock Holmes Society of London, Doyle based Holmes on Joseph Bell, a surgeon and teacher he had studied with while attending Edinburgh University. As far as Holmes' name, his last name may have been based on American jurist and fellow doctor Oliver Wendell Holmes and his first name may have come from Alfred Sherlock, a prominent violinist of his time. Dr. John Watson, a fellow Southsea doctor and Portsmouth Literary and Scientific Society member who served time in Manchuria, received the honour of having Holmes' partner named for him. The White detective has inevitably been a man of empire and invoked a thousand questions regarding Doyle's imperialistic design on racial and gender issues.

As for the introduction of Hercule Poirot, I would like to quote the author: “I settled on a Belgian detective. I allowed him slowly to grow into his part. He should have been an inspector, so that he would have a certain knowledge of crime. He would be meticulous, very tidy...I could see him as a tidy little man, always arranging things, liking thing in pairs, liking things square instead of round. And he should be very brainy...he would have little grey cells. He would have rather a grand name – one of those names that Sherlock Holmes and his family had. Who was it his brother had been? Mycroft Holmes...How about calling my little man Hercules?. His last name was more difficult. I don't know why I settled on the name Poirot, whether it just came into my head or whether I saw it in some newspaper or written on something. It went well not with Hercules but Hercule – Hercule Poirot. That was all right – settled, thank goodness.” (Christie, vii-viii). The Belgian French detective has often challenged the binaries of ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’, ‘criminal’ and ‘victim’ in the texts like *Murder on the Orient Express*, “*The Chocolate Box*” etc.

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