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## THE EMERGENCE OF DETECTIVE FICTION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Abstract:** *The article is devoted to the argument that draws upon many aspects of critical frameworks such as the regulatory and disciplinary functions of detective fiction as well as the connection between detection and storytelling. However, my analysis focuses primarily on the figure of the detective rather than criminals or the law courts. Specifically, it argues that the detective novels that begin to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century and develop over the course of the nineteenth century link detection and authorship. Late eighteenth-century, proto-detective novels such as Caleb Williams, suggest that successful detection is contingent upon the detective's ability to cultivate the trust and admiration of their audience as well as craft a compelling, believable, and socially accepted narrative of the crimes they investigate. The repetitive nature of criminal activity in these novels represents a larger genre shift that deemphasizes the importance of the crimes themselves in favor of a detailed examination of the psyche and investigative method of the detective.*

**Key words:** *detective genre, novels, discipline of detective genre.*

**Language:** *English*

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### Introduction

Scholarly interest in crime and detective fiction is a relatively new development in the field of literary studies. In introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Martin Priestman notes that, prior the 1960s, “*Crime fiction was certainly written about, but on the assumption that readers and authors were already dedicated fans...Where the authors claimed some academic credentials, their love for the genre was owned up to as a guilty pleasure*” [8]. Priestman goes on to attribute the growing amount of critical attention detective fiction has garnered in recent years to the increasingly blurred lines between “‘*high*’ and ‘*low*’ literature” [8]. He argues that this shift helped to transform detective fiction from a genre largely relegated to the status of popular literature to one worthy of serious critical analysis.

### Results and discussion

The discussion surrounding detective fiction is diverse in nature. However, a dominant topic that emerges within this scholarship is the connection between detection and storytelling. Critics such as D.A. Miller, Howard S. Babb, and Jerrold E. Hogle convince that the link between detection and narrative is central to the genre's function as a means of social and political regulation. Others scholars, including Jan- Marissa Schramm and Jonathan H. Grossman, discuss the complex relationship between detection and criminality to emphasize the extent to which both detectives and criminals rely upon narrative manipulation and effective storytelling [9]. Peter Thoms describes detection as an act of narrative control that detectives engage in to divert attention from and atone for their own real or imagined “*crimes*.” Emily R. Anderson argues that the ease with which both criminals and detectives manipulate narrative destabilizes the concept of objective truth [1].

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D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* argues that the portrayal of the police in nineteenth-century novels establishes and enforces a set of social norms and boundaries [6]. The police often appear to operate on the periphery of these novels, a position that lends police officials an air of ambiguity and cultivates a degree of skepticism toward their abilities. However, according to Miller, the ambiguous and marginalized position of the police in novels contributes to their power. Appearing marginalized and ineffective enables police officers to investigate with a greater degree of freedom by making their maneuvers seem trivial and unworthy of notice. In addition, he characterizes the police as agents and masks of a far larger system of discipline and power.

Miller further asserts that there is “a radical entanglement between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police” [7]. He suggests that, while many critics characterize the novel as a transgressive and revolutionary form, it perpetuates a set of normative values and behaviors that integrate even the most potentially disruptive and scandalous acts into ‘a systematic function of its own self-maintenance’ [7]. Miller claims that the image of the novel as radically transgressive is, in fact, a central component of its power as a regulatory tool. Referencing Foucault’s theory, Miller argues that the most effective systems of discipline are those that engage in constant observation while keeping their own machinations abstract and unseen.

In their article, “The Texture of Self in Godwin’s Things as They Are,” Howard S. Babb and Jerrold E. Hogle argue that narrative plays a central role in constructing identity and regulating behavior. They assert that, in Caleb Williams, Caleb is entrapped and defined by the narratives of which he is a part. While Caleb attempts to become the author of his own narrative and thereby escape the damaging stories others construct about him, his efforts only serve to entangle him further in a corrupt social and moral system. Babb and Hogle state that “the self...is a mere object of desire projected by the schemes of previous writing. Thus, Caleb tries to create a self...by making himself an ‘I’ wrapped in textual chains that are different from him and different from their own referents” [2, 262]. They suggest that Caleb’s efforts to construct an autonomous identity by telling his own story merely reinforce the power of, and his position within, a preexisting narrative framework. In “Vicarious Villainy and the Burden of Narrative Guilt,” Jan-Melissa Schramm details the ways in which eighteenth and nineteenth-century detective novels draw upon and manipulate the stylistic conventions of legal trails and newspaper articles to develop their fictional narratives of crime and detection. In addition, Schramm asserts that the narrative surrounding criminality, particularly the characterizations of detectives and criminals, reflects the agendas and biases of those in power. She applies

her argument about the constructed nature of identity to the authors of detective novels, who have complete control over creating the criminals and detective figures in their texts, as well as to the characters within these novels who seek to craft a vision of criminality and detection that most benefits them.

Jonathan H. Grossman’s *The Art of Alibi: The English Law Courts and the Novel* argues that detective fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries borrows heavily from the narrative style and structure of the law courts. Grossman suggests that the extent to which detective fiction employs the conventions of a legal trial reflects a larger shift from an emphasis on physically punishing criminals to recognition of the importance of storytelling in relation to crime. He states that detective fiction “defined itself against and through the cultural and material presence of the law court- a symbolic and real place where stories are reconstructed” [5]. Thus, Grossman blurs the lines between fictional and nonfictional accounts of detection by asserting that they are fundamentally narrative acts that consist of similar stylistic and structural elements. In “*The Narrow Track of Blood*: Detection and Storytelling in *Bleak House*,” Peter Thoms argues that detection is primarily an act of narrative control. Specifically, he asserts that detection gives those who engage in it a tremendous degree of power over the live and narratives of others and describes how characters in *Bleak House* “are hounded even to death” [10, 148] by the novel’s various detectives.

According to Thoms, the primary motivation of the detectives in *Bleak House* is a “desire for the narrative and thus for the private identity of another” [10, 149]. He further asserts that the reason detectives are so eager to gain control over the narratives of others is that it draws attention away from their own guilt and fear of self-exposure. Thoms states that “Dickens’s characters fear self-exposure-and their own guilt- and turn instead to probing the inner lives of others...Lacking (and dreading) a defining sense of themselves, these detectives compensate by attempting to read and write the objects of their detection” [10, 149-150]. He suggests that the characters in *Bleak House* have a deep fear of surveillance. They dread the thought of someone discovering their secrets and exposing them to public scrutiny. Playing detective alleviates these characters’ fears by allowing them to become the observer rather the observed. Detectives expose the secrets of others in order to protect their own. Thoms further argues that many characters in *Bleak House* internalize the process of detection. He states “One could say that the guilty, such as Esther, internalize detection. Adhering to a doctrine of self-denial, they rigorously police themselves, and through such scrutiny they keep the flawed self- the criminal- in check” [10, 153]. He asserts that detection involves not just the close observation of others, but careful

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regulation of one's own behavior. While Esther is one of the novel's central detective figures, she also feels an enormous amount of shame over the fact that she is the product of her mother's illicit affair. Thoms asserts that, for Esther, playing detective is an attempt to alleviate her own guilt and move beyond her role as a physical representation of her mother's transgressions.

Emily R. Anderson's "*I Will Unfold A Tale—!': Narrative, Epistemology, and Caleb Williams*," argues that the extent to which criminals and detectives manipulate narrative for their own benefit in Caleb Williams destabilizes the concept of objective truth. She asserts that "*From beginning to end, Caleb Williams interrogates the construction of narrative, thereby raising a central problem of empiricism: are the stories we tell about the world true*" [1, 99]. According to Anderson, Godwin suggests that many of these stories are not only factually inaccurate, but have the potential to be highly damaging and dangerous. She ultimately claims that the novel questions a central tenant of Enlightenment thought: that reason and observation can form a complete and accurate picture of the world.

## Conclusion

During the late eighteenth century, proto-detective novels such as Caleb Williams [3], suggest that successful detection is contingent upon the detective's ability to cultivate the trust and admiration of their audience as well as craft a compelling, believable, and socially accepted narrative of the crimes they investigate. While mid-Victorian detective novels like Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* and Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* still maintain the importance of the detective's reputation and image, their primary focus is illustrating the impossibility of constructing a fully unified and complete account of crimes. Fin de siècle detective novels such as Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* assert that there is a cyclical pattern to narratives of crime. The repetitive nature of criminal activity in these novels represents a larger genre shift that deemphasizes the importance of the crimes themselves in favor of a detailed examination of the psyche and investigative method of the detective.

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