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Literature Review: The Formulaic Genre

A professor in McDaniel College, Leroy Lad Panek, wrote, “Doyle wrote of a new world” (76). What did Doyle do to make the detective genre so popular? The detective genre, undeniably, gained its popularity through Conan Doyle’s series of Sherlock Holmes stories. Even though Doyle was not the author who created the detective genre, but he was definitely one of the authors who influenced the genre in a great extent. The organized structure and consistency in Doyle’s stories are one of the factors that bring the detective genre to its peak popularity at late Victorian era. The novel *The Sign of Four,* the short stories “The Red-Headed League”, “Silver Blaze”, and “A scandal in Bohemia” by Conan Doyle are detailed examples of a formulaic plot. Literary scholars who focus on the structure of Doyle’s stories are often able to conclude with a formula of a successful detective story, which includes the ‘magic trick’ during the process of investigation and the Watsonian narrative tone.

Literary scholars George Dove and T.J. Binyon agree that one of the conventions of the detective story’s structure is that during the process of investigation, Holmes will perform a ‘magic trick’ (Dove 3). This process of investigation is analyzed by George Dove in his book-length study *The Reader and the Detective Story.* Dove identifies four qualities of the detective genre. One of the elements is that the process of investigation goes on during the main plot of the story, even though there can be other themes involved. (10). In the novel *The Sign of Four,* SherlockHolmes investigates the mysterious deaths of Major Morstan and Bartholomew Sholto. As part of their investigation, Holmes and Watson examine footprints in the locked room and the handwriting of a letter from Major Sholto’s heirs to Miss Mary Morstan. As a result of the investigation, Holmes magically deduces the identities of the murderers. In regards to the ‘magic trick’, he writes, “that the pleasure a reader gets from the detective novel is not that of listening to a story but of watching a magic trick, which the magician immediately explains” (3). The magic tricks that detectives perform in each story contributed to the popularity of the detective genre in the late Victorian era. The literary scholar and crime writer T. J. Binyon agrees with Dove’s claim of ‘magic trick’ with a different terminology. In the book *Murder Will Out: The Detective in Fiction,* instead of the term ‘magic trick’, Binyon uses the phrase “an adequate amount of Sherlockholmitos” (12). By “Sherlockholmitos,” as Binyon describes it, is the magic trick of deduction that Holmes can perform. (12). Deductions are magic tricks because the detective is able to reveal to the audience the truth after several close investigations. As exemplified in the beginning of *The Sign of Four*, Sherlock deduces that Watson’s watch belongs to his brother by closely examining the watch. Sherlock’s observation skills and knowledge guide his deduction. The process of investigation and the ‘magic trick’ of deduction are illustrated throughout Conan Doyle’s stories. Binyon does not only agree with Dove’s formula, his formula concurs with another scholar Panek’s formula.

Another part of the formula of a detective genre includes the Watsonian narrative tone. Binyon uses the term Watsonian narrative tone. Professor Leroy Lad Panek examines the development of detective story in the historical perspective in the book *An introduction to the Detective Story.* Similarly, Panek believes that a successful detective genre contains a manipulation of narrative elements. (10) There is a reason why Holmes is not the narrator. The readers are able to understand the solution through Holmes’ explanation to Watson. If Holmes is the narrator, there is less excitement in solving the case because Holmes is depicted as a hero-like figure. As proved by Binyon, the three stories without Watson as a narrator are considered the weakest because it is not as exciting. (10). So, instead of telling the story from the powerful character, Doyle employs the technique to manipulate narrative, and even readers, to mislead them into a wrong directions with apparent solutions. In the short story “The Red-Headed League”, Holmes and Watson solve the mystery of the disappearance of a store and prevent a robbery from happening. Watson’s narration in the short story explains why Doyle chooses Watson as the narrator. After the process of investigation with Holmes, Watson states, “I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbors, but I was always oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes. Here I had heard what he had heard, I had seen what he had seen, and yet from his words it was evident that he saw clearly not only what had happened but what was about to happen, while to me the whole business was still confused and grotesque”(Doyle). Watson realizes his differences with Holmes which makes the plot more exciting because readers can only understand the plot from Watson’s point of view. Binyon’s and Panek’s depiction of a narrative tone illustrates another scholar’s perspective of the detective genre. A Russian-American writer and journalist Maria Konnikova describes the “Watson system” in the book *Mastermind*. The “Watson system” is “reflexive, automatic, intuitive, reactionary, quick to judge” (18). Readers of the detective genre are mostly under the “Watson system”; with Watson as the narrator, readers can easily relate and be engaged in the novel. So, the manipulation of narrative, as part of the formula, can help to shape detective genre into a more exciting piece of literature.

Besides the necessity of Watson as a narrator, Binyon and Panek also agree with another convention in the detective genre, which is the convincing plot. Binyon uses the term “convincing plot” (12). Panek further explains and develops the notion of convincing plot in her formula, which partly includes “a surprise ending, and the presentation within the body of the story of all or most of the facts which explain the surprise-or give the illusion of having done so ” (10). In order to have a surprising and convincing plot, the ending should be contrary to readers’ expectation yet logical and reasonable. In order to reason the details of the solution, the ending should explain all hints and details presented or used by the detective. In addition, a detective novelist S.S. Van Dine explains in “Twenty rules for writing detective stories”, published in the *American Magazine*, some rules that most detective stories follow. There are two rules from Van Dine that come into agreement with Binyon’s and Panek’s points of view. The rules state “[t]he culprit must be determined by logical deductions,” and “[t]he truth of the problem must at all times be apparent” (Van Dine). In the short story “Silver Blaze”, Holmes and Watson are investigating the disappearance of a race horse Silver Blaze and the murder of its trainer John Straker. The surprising ending is that Straker is killed by Silver Blaze, in account for self-defense. Readers, and even the characters themselves, believe Simpson is the murderer. However, after the investigation, Holmes fully explains to Watson and the inspector the crime behind the race and how he deduces the solution from the details, for example, Holmes observes “the curious incident of the dog in the night-time” (Doyle), presented. These logical deduction and details should come into terms at the end of a detective fiction. Both Panek and Binyon shape a similar perspective of the formula: A surprise and convincing plot can make the unexpected happens, but it cannot make the unreasonable happens.

Besides the mentioned factors form the formula of a detective genre, some historical factors come into play to shape the detective genre. According to Panek, there are four elements that help detective story to come into popularity. They are the incompetent police force at the Victorian Era, the appreciation of a hero, the need for a pocket- genius, the rising of literacy within the middle class, and the invention of short story. (Panek). These historical factors played a role when Doyle wrote the Sherlock Holmes’ stories. During the late Victorian Era, there was a gap between inefficiency of police and crime, so the idea of a detective started to rise. With the significant improvements of scientific technology, the idea of short story, which middle class could afford, gained popularity as well. More middle class, who are the targeted readers, were literate. They had an appreciation of a hero-like figure, such as Sherlock Holmes. The creation of detective story would fit into these society’s needs, which is responsible for the increasing popularity of the detective genre. These historical factors presented by Panek can produce familiarity within readers. This is part of the formula to engage with readers into reading. Similarly, Dove explains four qualities and features of how a detective genre can engage with readers. The detective genre should be “transitory, fundamentally an intellectual undertaking, recreational, and disciplined” (Dove 2). A detective genre is not trying to teach the readers a moral lesson. The story may contain other themes, but they are not emotional. The detective genre doesn’t command for a serious attitude from readers. The structured plot of a detective genre is part of the reason why readers are so engaged into the story. Readers are involved in the story not in a sense that they need to learn a lesson, but in a way that readers are able to enjoy the plot even though they know what is going to happen. (Dove 2). In Doyle’s series, he was able to include these four features of a detective story. In the short story “The Red-Headed League”, Doyle includes the qualities of a detective story that Dove depicted. This story is transitory, which means Doyle is not purposely teaching readers anything. As a reader, we do not learn how to prevent a robbery, or how to deduce the solution. Also, it is “fundamentally an intellectual undertaking”. Although the plot can be complicated, it is not confusing. It does not engage to feelings as much as a romantic comedy will. In addition, Dove’s idea that detective story is created for recreational purposes. Readers are not meant to solve the case by themselves. The disciplined quality of a detective story tells the readers that the solution will come at the end. The complicated series of observations and deduction will make sense at the end. Panek and Dove present two views of the same formula. Readers are able to engage with the story with the existing historical factors and these qualities of a detective fiction.

Some similar elements of the formula of a detective genre include the process of investigation, the manipulative of narrative, the convincing plot, and the historical backgrounds that lit the popularity of the genre. Even though Doyle has employed ideas from a fusion of other authors and writers, he is successful and sets the foundation of detective genre. He lifts the detective genre from the primitive stage to the classical stage, where the genre gains peak popularity. Scholars who write about the structure of the detective genre agree on the fact that there is a formula, even though it is not the exact same formula, that a detective genre follows, which comes along with the popularity of the genre.

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