

THE RECOGNITION OF VICTORIAN DETECTIVE FICTION AS AN UPSHOT OF 'VICTORIAN' QUEST FOR SOCIAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ORDER: A CRITICAL STUDY

Stishin K Paul

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Thomas's College (Autonomous), Thrissur, Kerala, India

Received: 06 Jul 2018

Accepted: 09 Jul 2018

Published: 16 Jul 2018

ABSTRACT

Detective fiction as a genre of fiction came into existence during the Victorian age. To grasp the reason for the wide popularity of the detective fiction during the Victorian Age, an understanding of the socio-political and economic scenario of Victorian England is necessary. A reading of the socio-political history of England during Victorian age will shed light on the fact that Victorian age has been marked with tremendous progress in the field of science and technology. This advancement exerted immense change in the socio-cultural circumstances of English people. They began to experience a quest for Socio-epistemological order and this article is an attempt to explore how this quest resulted in the wide acceptance of detective fiction.

KEYWORDS: *Detective Fiction, Victorian Age, Holmes, Realism*

INTRODUCTION

The recent critics who search the reason of the success of Victorian detective fiction attempt to account for the appearance of the literary detective in the nineteenth century relating to a 'Victorian' desire for social and epistemological order. Victorian age roughly marked from 1837 to 1901, a period of the reign of Queen Victoria, can be seen as an age of rapid economic and social changes in England. It was an era of industrial revolution and technical advancement. Though the conversion of Britain through industrial development was a gradual process that goes back to the eighteenth century, it gradually changed the nation through the nineteenth.

The rule of Victoria was marked with free trade. Her Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel stood for the economic development of the nation. According to his perspective, the nation can achieve the economic growth through free trade. To foster the trade he allowed relaxation of taxes for imports and exports. He believed that the low tax will increase the imports and solve the problem of the scarcity of goods; the availability of the necessary things will reduce their market price; and following the model of England other countries also will reduce their taxes which will encourage the exportation. He also took steps to increase the value of British note and wanted the Bank of England to keep gold equal to the value of note which it prints. He viewed a bank-note as a promise to pay. This economic renovations accelerated trade and hence the rate of production. The factories began to produce more goods than the need of the natives. This development promoted England to be the greatest industrial power all over the world. The French war sped up the industrial revolution as there was a high demand for the supply of goods for the war. The places where the factories had been established began to grow as industrial towns. Anthony Toyn in *An English-reader's History of England* explains this development as follows:

“The island was developing into a great industrial out-heap, with everybody busy and the factories producing more goods than the Islanders needed for themselves” (272).

This industrial development had a dark side too. Many new factories were started making the living of the public more difficult. There emerged problems regarding the supply of fresh water and shelter and the disposal of waste. People were overcrowded in industrial towns. Most of them were laborers and the town council failed to provide them houses, supply fresh water and to dispose of the waste. The poor life situation and lack of proper sanitation caused the spreading of epidemics like typhoid, Cholera, tuberculosis, diphtheria and smallpox. The industrialists gave only small wages for the laborers. Moreover, there was the problem of unemployment and poverty. The rich became richer and the poor became the poorer. As a result, the crime increased in the society. The dark sides of the streets were the centers of crime which became a trade or means of life for many. As the crime increased the police forces also developed. The police act of 1828 by Sir Robert Peel resulted in the creation of first municipal constabulary in the world (Scaggs 18). This modern police force made use of the knowledge of science like photography in the investigation of crimes. Toyne writes: “Crime seemed more important now that it had ever been before. There were nearly 40,000 policemen, and a special criminal investigation department (the C.I.D) near the Thames in London at New Scotland Yard. Twenty or thirty people were hanged for murder every year, and wax models of many of them were put on the show at Madame Tussaud’s ‘waxworks museum’ in baker street” (309). All these developments became the matter of the plot of so-called “detective fiction” because the first and foremost characteristic of the Victorian fiction was its inclination to realism.

The Victorian writers tried to portray the society with highly realistic tone. Frye in his essay “Dickens and Comedy of Humors” opines: “In general, the serious Victorian fiction writers are realistic and the less serious ones are romancers (537). This idea of realism forced the detective writers to unfold the dark side of the society. While dealing with the characteristics of late Victorian period, Sanders in *The Short Oxford history of English Literature* assesses: “An obsession with crime, with anarchy, with decadence, with reversion, with the animal, or simply with the paraphernalia of horror can be seen running through the work of many of the key writers of the end of the century, writers as diverse in their styles and interests as Hardy, Wilde, Yeats, Conrad, Wells, and Stevenson” (476). This obsession was paramount in the detective stories to force Ross in his article “Watching the Detective” to define detective story as “a genre which takes as one of its principal task [sic] the representation of the ordinary, everyday entanglement of people with their surroundings” (199). In his “Victorian detective Fiction” Andrew Radford affirms this saying,

The most trenchant expressions of the aesthetic and moral benefits of ‘high’ Victorian realism in the 1860s and 1870s were published in alarmed response to the immense and rapid popularity of sensation and detective fiction. For the watchdogs of established culture, these narratives stimulated an appetite for escapist solace that dissolved any distinction between the light reading habits of a leisured, overwhelmingly middle-class audience on the one hand and the coarse mass entertainment of a newly literate proletariat. (1180)

Another reason for the success of detective fiction was the educational policy of Queen Victoria. She insisted on the primary education of the children. During the period of 1867-73, the liberal government under the leadership of William Edward Gladstone came into rule. This government aimed at the social reform and started a national system of education. In order to fulfill their goal they started schools in industrial towns and in the villages (Toyne 290). The middle-classes opened Sunday-classes which provided the laborers’ children chance to attend the school. The girls were also sent to the schools. As education became wider, the percentage of reading also increased. Myer in his *The Essentials of Literature in English Pre-1914* explains this development as follows: “By the time she [Queen Victoria] died, compulsory education to the age of 10 meant that, theoretically, the whole population would soon be literate.

This meant that novels were able to appeal to an even wider constituency than they had previously” (111).

The high demand for reading increased the number of the printing press. The revolution in printing press lowered the price of the books. The booksellers found the market for publication more profitable. There were sixpenny novels available in the market and people read it. Toyne accounts for this tendency: “The number of lending libraries increased. Booksellers enjoyed a growing trade. Popular novelists, several of them women, wrote for a mass market. Some of them wrote ‘romances’ about knights in shining armour, ruined castles, wicked barons, terror, darkness and death. These tales were illustrated boldly in black and white” (242). Their characters were complex, had their roots in a specific social context with which they interact and undergo the experiences of everyday life. The master novelists of this mode of realistic novels were Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, William Dean Howells and Henry James in England (Abrams 197). The detective writers who used the scientific experiments to unfold the truth in their novels found their writing more appealing to the audience who were influenced by Darwin and scientific inventions. It prompted them to write more on such topics.

The newspapers and magazines also helped in the establishment of the genre of detective fiction. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” was written for Graham’s Magazine in 1841 (Panek 7). Doyle’s first book *A Study in Scarlet* was first published in *Beeton’s Christmas Annual* (Tiwari 33). Leroy Lad Panek in *Before Sherlock Holmes: How Magazines and Newspapers Invented the Detective Story* unfolds this fact:

During the nineteenth-century detective stories began to appear, grew, and then prospered in a variety of mediums—periodicals aimed at various kinds and classes of readers as well as in anthologies of short stories and then in novels. But, from the beginning, detective stories also appeared in daily and weekly newspapers—indeed as the century progressed, newspapers helped to establish the genre and can claim a significant amount of credit for creating the modern detective story and making it popular. (170)

At the end of the nineteenth century, detective fiction began to be accepted as a genre in its own right and had a great number of readers. This acceptance was due to the influence of two major writers, Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker. The essay “The Victorian Age: 1837-1901” in *English and Western Literature* asserts this saying, “Towards the end of the era, two of the best-known characters in literature came into being when Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) created his master detective, Sherlock Holmes, and Bram Stoker (1847-1912) created Count Dracula” (407). Victorian detective fiction liable much to the character Sherlock Holmes, a fictitious sleuth created by Arthur Conan Doyle. His Sherlock Holmes who was an embodiment of superhuman intelligence, and Watson, the auxiliary to Holmes received world-wide acceptance. *The Encyclopedia of British Writers: 19th century* observes: “Sherlock Holmes’s ‘continued popularity with all levels of readers’ the critic Christopher Clausen has noted, ‘is all the more striking when one reflects that he is probably the most cerebral protagonist of any importance in English fiction’” (114). Another outstanding example of detective story of this period was G.K. Chesterton’s ‘Father Brown’ stories.

To encapsulate, the detective fiction which is one among the most popular genres in the fiction writings, can be seen as the natural outcome of the quest for the social and epistemological order of nineteenth-century England. The greatest thrust of such stories was to safeguard law and order. To serve this purpose those stories emphasized that even the most secreted crime can be unfolded and the criminal will be punished. Commenting on Denis Porter’s observation that crime fiction ‘is a genre committed to an act of recovery, moving forward to move back’ Scaggs states: “Porter’s

observation, however, can also be applied to the ideological motivation to recover, or return to, a previous period characterized by stability and order” (47).

REFERENCES

1. “Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan (1859-1930): Novelist, Short Story Writer.” *The Encyclopedia of British Writers: 19th Century*. 2005 ed. Print.
2. “The Victorian Age: 1837-1901.” *England and Western Literature*. California: Glenco Publishing Company, 1984. 403-449. Print. *Macmillan Literature Series*.
3. Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2009. Print.
4. Frye, Northrop. “Dickens and Comedy of Humours.” *Literary Criticism Idea and Act: The English Institute, 1939-1972 Selected Essays*. Ed. and Introd. W.K. Wimsatt. Berkeley: U of California P, 1974. 537-59. Print.
5. Myer, Tony. *The Essentials of Literature in English Pre-1914*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2005. Print.
6. Panek, Leroy Lad. *Before Sherlock Holmes: How Magazines and Newspapers Invented the Detective Story*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. ebrary.com. Web. 20 Sep. 2014.
7. Radford, Andrew. “Victorian Detective Fiction.” *Literature Compass* 5.6 (2008): 1179-96. JSTOR. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
8. Ross, Kristin. “Watching the Detectives.” *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Nail Lucy. UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000. 197-217. Print.
9. Kadavakollu Tejaswani, *American Detective Fiction: A Study of James Ellroy’s My Dark Places: An L. A. Crime Memoir*, *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)*, Volume 3, Issue 1, March-April 2013, pp. 7-12
10. Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. 3rd ed. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
11. Scaggs, John. *Crime Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
12. Tiwari, Rajiv. *World Famous Poets and Writers; A Brief Life sketch of Poets and Writers of India and Abroad*. Delhi: Manoj Publications, 2007. Print.
13. Toyne, Anthony. *An English-Reader’s History of England*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1971. Print.