



## WHEN ANTI-HERO BECOMES A HERO: A CASE STUDY OF POPULAR DETECTIVE NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT

The current paper postulates the various traits of a protagonist who often being an anti-hero becomes the key or central narrative in this genre of popular literature. However, before going into the core of the subject, it would be rational to excerpt some light on the characteristics of the detective novel.

**KEYWORDS:** central narrative , urban environment , crime, motive.

### INTRODUCTION

Thus, the detective novel, is a literary genre, whose plot is constituted by the elucidation of a crime in an urban environment (in general). Most often it is a police investigation or a private detective investigation. Here, it is worth mentioning that the police genre takes help from normally six ingredients in order to make a narrative, namely: crime, motive, the culprit, the victim, the mode of operation and the investigation. With the help of these entities, a popular author builds the plot of the novel. In this context, it would be pertinent to mention George Sadoul:

“The crime novel is the rational narrative of an investigation into a problem whose main source is a crime<sup>1</sup>”

This popular genre is often referred as “The black novel” and draws inspiration from the American Thriller novel of the 30s. However, there have been some conflicting opinions from different scholars on this issue, hence, in the words of J. P. Manchette:

“I decree that the thriller does not mean police novel. On the contrary, the Police novel means violent black romance. While the rogue detective novel of the English school sees evil in human nature, the police novels see evil in transitional social organization. The thriller is the literature of the crisis<sup>2</sup>”.

A deep insight on the root of this popular genre “police or detective novels” also generally called as “Thrillers” finds its epistemology from the verb to thrill, which depicts the state of sensation of the readers. In other words, this creation of the feeling of thrill among the readers has baptised this popular genre which has engrossed a large section of readers of different genres. With the passage of time, this genre has enlarged its scope and reach. In fact, this is usually the story of a hunt, a mousetrap, a moral torture, or a fatal narrative; however, the thriller is not necessarily police novel. It can encompass different narratives such as erotic thriller, spying, horror, legal, psychological, political, science fiction, and fantasy among others. When it comes to the classification of the popular Police novels or Thrillers, one can broadly classify them into: a) British style: Agatha Christie, b) American style: Ellery Queen, c) French style: Simenon and d) The black novel. Here, it would be worthwhile to point out that all four portrays the same type of narrative, albeit through different approaches. As far as black novel is concerned, it finds its roots in the United States.

<sup>1</sup> SADOUL Georges, Anthology of Police Literature,

<sup>2</sup> J. P. Manchette, interview in "Monthly Charlie No. 126 of July 1979.

The black novel develops especially after the war. It depicts the malaise of a society confronted with crime, violence and marginality, whose main protagonist/ hero is rather an antihero.

While writing this paper, a question often comes to mind "why the popular fiction or in other words, the thrillers are so popular among the masses?" The answer to this question may perhaps find its existence on the notion of human psychology, when the reader, while going through the novel, gets associated himself or herself psychologically with the character of detective in the novel in order to find the solution or to solve the riddle or to solve a mystery. This simple psychological phenomenon lays the foundation of the success of this genre among the large section of the society. In some way, he/ she also challenges the institutions of the authority by solving the problem, hence symbolically mocking the authorities "when a simple person like me can do, why can't you?"

For the past few years (around ten years), we have witnessed a new phenomenon. For the first time, it is no longer literature that influences the audiovisual and cinema but the opposite. The television series with a strong emphasis on characters inspire a generation of writers at present. Today, the heroes of crime novels or thrillers, for example, are no longer all white or black, but between light gray and dark gray. Throwing light on their shadows - and moving from the hero to the anti-hero - makes them more human, more "identifiers" and ultimately more endearing. Recurrence is a great asset for a writer. It allows to work on the hero in depth, to see him evolving, to make him so true that the reader ends up having the impression of touching him with the fingertips. Throughout the works in which he appears, an emotional bond is created, stronger and stronger, which leads the reader to be really afraid for him, to fear for his life when he is in danger. Perfect illustration of this attachment: the decision of George Martin to "kill" some emblematic characters of the "Game of Throne", his saga of fantasy, caused an uproar among the readers.

The analysis of the protagonists/ Hero of the Thrillers often directs us to the notion that the hero of crime novels has nothing to do with that of the adventure novels, nothing flamboyant about them. Originally, Sherlock Holmes and protagonists like him are intellectuals who solve puzzles. Unlike the hero of the adventure novel, who is never an intellectual but someone who risks his life on the ground, who acts more than he thinks. Later, the hero of the American crime novel are, of course, also be a man of action, ready to punch, but by no means a triumphant young man. He is beaten, or kidnapped, he is left for dead. He is rather mature, returned from everything and drinks more often.

In short, the "hero" in the thrillers is an anti-hero, although it doesn't diminish his charm. On the contrary, his success is growing. This genre of literature is invading bookstores, movies, television series among others. This is the phenomenon of the moment which points out the changes in our society from triumphant positivism to contemporary relativism. Social realism thus enters the detective story to no longer escape. In France, an emblematic character, Jules Maigret, often tells the story, in another way, of a country that evolves. Most of his adventures take place after the Second World War, he belongs to a Europe that is rising, modernizing and trusting the future.

We also find this pattern in the American Ed McBain and his series called 87th District, a district of Isola, an imaginary city that looks like New York. The police in the 87th district are fighting against all kinds of offenders, twenty-four hours a day. Famous all over the world, McBain is the father of the big television crime series. Over the years, the reader is witnessing a chronicle of urban American life and changing customs: drugs, prostitution, racism etc.

According to Erik Neveu, we live in a world so chaotic, so unfair, amid this chaos; a thriller connects the readers to their surroundings through a crime story. This is the reason possibly why monsters, serial killers and psychopaths flourish in the imagination of contemporary authors. In fact, the structure of the detective story is as constructed as that of fairy tales. All stories of police enigma have the same narrative flow. At the beginning, we have the presentation of the place, characters. Then comes the disruptive element that breaks the first order and sets off the detective's investigation. The mystery intervenes brutally and it is up to the detective to solve it. His quest against evil can begin now. He must now restore the order.

It is to be noted that in the popular novels, the character is very important. It is through him that the readers get to story. We can divide the characters broadly into two categories: those affected by the events and those who are agents of the events. If there is a crime, there is a criminal, a victim and an investigator. Thus, the four protagonists are the victim and the murderer, the detective and the suspect. The detective is most often depicted as a private investigator, sometimes even a child or an old lady (Miss Marple). The detective is a loner and a marginal who opposes the murderer. In order to write a crime novel, it is first necessary that there be a specific person in charge of conducting an investigation, it is he who has for mission to solve the mystery and the secret.

Likewise, all crime novels are based on an enigma. "The crime novel is the rational narrative of an investigation into a problem whose main dramatic is a crime," says George Sadoul. The story of an investigation is an attempt to bring the disorder back to order. The text should answer the questions: Who? When? Why? The majority of police texts are organized around the elucidation of a crime surrounded by mystery. The detective leaves the victim and goes back to the murderer and thus solves the enigma. The investigators start from the facts and develop a theory which is supposed to solve the riddle. The explanation given, the criminal is unmasked and the investigation is closed. In order to solve the puzzle, the detective follows a marked trail through clues; he draws conclusions and elucidates the mystery. The investigator must accumulate evidence that will point the culprit.

Lastly, analysing in detail, we find that these novels often depicts the common problems faced in the contemporary society through a protagonist who investigate, solve the riddle, confront the system and at the end solve the problem. This contributes to one of the reasons why this genre is so popular among the common masses. While reading the story, the readers not only get connected with the protagonist but at the same time, they see protagonist solving the same problems what they are actually facing in their real life. This gives them hope about the future.

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