

# The Detective Novel: A Mainstream Literary Genre?

**Knut Brynhildsvoll**

Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo

P.O. Box 1166 Blindern, NO-0316 Oslo, Norway

Email: [knut.brynhildsvoll@ibsen.uio.no](mailto:knut.brynhildsvoll@ibsen.uio.no)

**Abstract** It has often been maintained that the detective novel belongs to the category of entertainment narrative and as such has too much in common with trivial literature in order to be considered an equivalent counterpart to the mainstream norms of epic expression. In my article I dispute such assertions and show on the contrary that the modern crime genre has developed new standards of narration, which are comparable to the masterpieces of contemporary novel fiction. Instead of being something of inferior value, the best crime novels have conquered a status of excellence within the broad field of modern narration. I confirm my observations through references to modern Scandinavian crime novels and in so doing I discuss the role of the detective as a modern representative of the spirit of Enlightenment, who intends to elucidate the criminal scenery and bring the perpetrator to justice. Finally, I focus on the occupational understanding of the detective role in modern crime novels, hereby paying attention to questions regarding the ethical understanding of the detective's profession.

**Key words** Crime novel; detective story; symptomatological methods; scientific criminology; delight of anxiety; the ethical detective

**Author** **Knut Brynhildsvoll** is Professor of Nordic literature at the University of Cologne (Köln, Germany), guest Professor at the Universities in Hamburg, Bochum, Marburg, Giessen and Zürich, 2000-2007 director of the Centre of Ibsen Research, University of Oslo. He has published more than 200 articles in national and international research journals on topics from romantic literature to postmodernity including literary theory and comparative literature, and numerous scholarly books in Norwegian and German.

In the theory of crime literature one usually makes a distinction between the crime novel and the detective story. In the crime novels the plot is based on the conflict

between characters, which have a complete different relationship to the principles of law and order. The tension between good and evil is however not only a characteristic of crime narration, it belongs to the structural features of almost all classical novels and theater plays, where it appears as struggle between contradictory mental attitudes in the field of social, economic, erotic and familial norms. In order to produce the thrilling effect it is more or less unavoidable to introduce narrative configurations, which enable the reader to clearly distinguish between protagonists and antagonists.

In the following I don't want to further comment on this general form of generating narrative conflicts. Instead I want to draw the attention to the detective story, in which there is a strict distinction between the lawbreakers and their persecutors. The hero of this kind of novels is the detective, who either on his own or on behalf of the society takes measures to combat criminal activities and bring those committing criminal actions to justice. The designation detective is derived from the Latin verb *detectare*, which means to solve, to clear up. Because the detective is engaged in deciphering criminal acts, he is mostly regarded to be a cooperator in reestablishing the social balance, which through the criminal activities of gangsters has been brought into disorder. Hereby he proceeds to a figure, which on account of his job is regarded to represent ethical values. At first glance it looks like the detective is working for a clean society with a limited threat from criminal outsiders, whose aim is to destabilize the civil society and undermine the respect for the corporal integrity and the property of fellow citizens. In the following I intend to question this idealistic view of the detective and examine to which degree the detective stories reflect the idea of the detective as an ethical hero, whose main ambition is to release the society from the tyranny of criminals, who attack the basic values of a human society

In order to avoid simplifications, I want to stress that the ethical borderlines between the detective and the crime novel often are blurred. And it is important to be aware of the fact that the roles of good and bad in many novels are reversed. In his essay *Der Verbrecher aus verlorener Ehre* Friedrich Schiller, the German classic, explained the reasons for being an honorable lawbreaker and in his short story *Michael Kohlhaas* Heinrich von Kleist described the psychological outline of a man, whose extreme sense of justice makes him guilty and proves the truth of the Latin proverb that *summa jus*, is turning into *summa injuria*. It is of course a special situation when the detection is directed against lawbreakers, whose only guilt consists in their solidarity with those who due to the prevailing social conditions cannot escape poverty. In Norway one of the most famous robbers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was Gjest Baardsen, who, provoked by the class distinctions, started a social redistribution

of goods. In a popular ballade his criminal adventures are subject to great homage: "He stole from the rich and gave to the poor." In the eyes of the authorities he was a gangster, who offended against law and order, but in the eyes of the majority he was a social revolutionary, who through his criminal actions draw attention to a social order, where the robber is the noble man, whereas the authorities are the real robbers.

The idea that the state through its institutions is the real guilty one in criminal affairs is still a widely held opinion. In the detective stories of the Swedish authors Sjöwall/Wahlöö inspector Beck exposes a lot of crimes, where the swindlers are single criminals, but where the Swedish state is the real guilty one because it has failed to create a social security, in which the roots of crime has been eliminated. The psychosocial decline of the perpetrator is the result of his socialization. That means the culprit's psychogram is at the same time the sociogram of the society. This is a very one-sided explanation of the reasons for criminality. As Fritz Lang has shown in his famous film *X* there are x factors responsible for a criminal career, and in this multiplicity of causes the detective story has an inextinguishable supply of materials for new narrations.

The idea of a non-violent society remains however an unattainable ideal. In Western societies the police is the only institution, which has the license to use violence. The role of the detective is far more controversial. He is a partner in solving criminal cases, but he is usually working independently and on his own account. In the history of detective narration one finds a wide specter of characters, which look upon their activities in a total different way. It is worthwhile to be conscious of the etymological relation between detection and enlightenment. Both have their semantic roots in the Latin verb *detegere*, which means illuminate, uncover. According to his role understanding the modern detective works on behalf of a customer in order to solve a criminal affair. As far as this activity challenges his sense of justice and mobilizes his resistance against the evil it is reasonable to ask if he looks upon himself as a sort of ethical detective, who aims at cleaning the society and restoring what the criminal mind has destroyed. So far this description is correct, the detection has a certain similarity with Henrik Ibsen's conception of dramatic writing. It has been asserted that Henrik Ibsen in his plays entered into the dirt in order to clean it, whereas Emil Zola entered into it in order to take a bath.

Criminal plots are integral parts of novels and dramas ever since the genres were launched in ancient times. Accordingly, one traces the roots of criminal literature back to Sophocles and asserts that one finds features of criminal tension in classical novels and dramas from Shakespeare to Dostojewski. In his book *Dødens*

*fortellere* (*The Narrators of Death*) Willy Dahl, the senior expert on criminal novels in Scandinavia, underlines that “there is no definite distinction between criminal narration and other forms of fictional writing” (102). Ibsen research has shown that Ibsen received creative impulses from Sophocle’s *Ödipus Rex* and that he developed his retrospective technique as a modern form of detective discourse. Through his reversal of dramatic expression Ibsen paved the way for a reversal of the relation between author and reader. The reader and the theater spectator become partner in the detection of past events. This role adoption is the result of a change of perspective, due to which the dramatic actions are not depicted in the moment they are taking place, but reflected from the scope of a later time, the implication of which is that the pure train of events are tuned down, while reflections and analyses are upgraded. The result of this is that Ibsen’s plays are impoverished in terms of external action. Ibsen in his contemporary plays has improved this dramatic method in a way that caused early critics to blame him for choosing undramatic topics, more suitable for novels than for theater plays. Some of the early criticism of his plays was that they were undramatic, that they dealt with material and motifs that were actually unsuited to dramatic treatment. Georg Lukas and Raymond Williams saw *Hedda Gabler* as a novel and Peter Szondi claimed in his study *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (*Theory of modern Drama*) that the Ibsen drama is based on undramatic “material for a novel.” But in contrast to the advocates of the Aristotelian views of drama, Szondi sees nothing negative and reprehensible in this approach to the novel. Quite in reverse. He points out that the drama is not an eternal and immutable genre, an a priori anthropological entity, but a historical category that is subject to changing views of times and fashions., and he emphasizes that the development away from “the dramatic drama” to “the epic drama” is hastened through the growth of historical experiences that do not simply fit just like that into a traditionally handed down system of forms and norms.

In more recent Ibsen research, it has been pointed out that Ibsen’s analytical drama with its retrospective perspectivisation is closely related to literary genres and scientific methods that were introduced and developed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, first and foremost with the detective novel and psychoanalysis, but also with the science of art, criminology and even edition philology. According to the semiotician Thomas A. Sebeok all these sign systems have their origin in medical symptomatology, which is a method of diagnosing disorders on the basis of seemingly insignificant signs and clues.

In this connection it is interesting to note that three of the most important representatives of the symptomatological disciplines were themselves doctors: Sig-

mund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, Giovanni Morelli, the representative of a comparative science of art, who in his studies ascribes to graphological or grammatological details the very greatest weight as clues to the style of an epoch or an individual, and Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the modern detective story and the character of Sherlock Holmes, who explains his method with the words: “You know my method Watson. It is founded upon the observation of trifles.”

The Austrian literary researcher Hans H. Hiebel regards Henrik Ibsen’s analytical dramatic technique as a significant part of this symptomatological discourse and emphasises that his contemporary dramas form a clear parallel to the psychoanalytical detection of past events. The kinship between the psychoanalyst and the literary detective rests on the fact that they both endeavor by means of clues to understand events in the past and that in their efforts they seek to reconstruct “the primary scene” that constitutes the basis for contemporary conflicts. Psychoanalysis and detective stories have in common the fact that they work on securing, interpreting and linking clues. Both the analyst and the detective have — to put it linguistically — to do with significant elements that are unreadable because they lack a context that make them comprehensible, and their task consists in recreating the lost connection by reading together the fragmented signs in such a way that they provide plausible solutions to the mysterious cryptograms that are presented.

Much of the topicality in Ibsen’s plays has its basis in the fact that they are on the one hand subtly structured throughout while on the other hand they are full of ambiguities and display numerous polysemous passages that appeal to the reader’s or audience’s reconstructive powers of detection. The key to the understanding of Ibsen’s plays are the numerous hidden symptoms, clues and signs, which form inner mental engrams or purely material traces of the kind that are investigated in criminal cases. Hans Gross, the founder of scientific criminology, demands in his handbook from 1893 that the investigator shall record all possible clues — from faeces, traces of hair, stains on clothing, footprints and fingerprints etc. and with an unprejudiced eye conduct the investigation in all directions at once. These methodological approaches may in many ways serve as a model for the hermeneutic treatment of the Ibsen drama, which basically operates with isolated signs and fragmented connections that are only made rationally available in the course of the process of analysis and confirm Søren Kierkegaard’s sober statement that life is lived forwards, but is understood backwards. The reason why edition philology has been brought in as an example of detective discourses is connected with the fact that this discipline is concerned with reconstructing the original text in order hereby to get onto the track of the inspired textual movement. Indeed, there is a great difference between recreating

an authentic text and bringing forth as many authentic readings as possible. There is however one central difference between the literary and the criminal detection. The literary detection provides never a final solution while the criminal detection aims at solving criminal cases.

Obviously the crime novel belongs to the symptomatological disciplines which challenge the analytical intelligence of the detective. The more complex a detective novel is, the more opportunities the detective has to shine and show his superiority, whereas the police inspector and less talented investigators are following false tracks and fall victims to what in the language of criminal jargon is called “red herrings,” an expression for lack of sensitivity to read criminal traces, quite in sharp contrast with super star detectives like Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, who never are led astray through hasty conclusions. In order to demonstrate the superiority of the modern detective the author has to create a highly complex and enigmatic plot, which only the analytical detective with his spiritual gifts is able to see through and disclose.

Compared to the early detective novels, in which action was the dominating element, the new detective novel is characterized through its constructed and mysterious plot, which emphasizes the puzzle character of the narrative course. The only successful way to catch the perpetrator is to crack the criminal code through reconstructing the operative strategy of the criminal mind. Thus the criminal detective has a lot in common with all those, who protect the main principles of the civil society and use their intellectual capacity in the service of law and order. In the narrative tradition of crime detection, the detective seldom questions his social solidarity and his own role as supporter of the established order. Of course, the fictional detectives are provided with different job attitudes and mental approaches to their work, but they seldom doubt their own position as advocates of an obliging social justice. And here we have touched a crucial point, then in the criminal genre one generally miss representations of the ethical detective, who is working on eliminating the evil and reestablishing a society where the rules of an ideal community are prevailing. In Peter Nusser’s study *Der Kriminalroman (The Crime Novel)* one finds a statement, due to which the detective and his reader share a common moral obligation toward a social system, which both of them don’t query (42). In the manuals to criminal narration one seeks mostly in vain after statements about the detective’s occupational understanding. The main emphasis is attributed to the detective’s working method. The authors of criminal detection devote themselves to methods from the psychological and natural sciences, according to which “the micrological look” (Ernst Bloch) promises to solve the criminal mysteries in analogy to the logic of the exact

natural sciences.

Compared to the early production of criminal B-narration, whose plots, style and mode of expression were quite simple and adapted to the preferences of the lower classes' standard of education, the modern detective story with its complex structure and entangled texture appeals to readers with higher education, who compete on equal terms with the detective in clearing up the complicated cases. The brain appeal of the modern A-detective stories constitutes their stimulating receptive effect. Thus the popularity of modern detective stories depends on the intellectual challenges they deliver and the excitement they supply the reader with, who suffers from the lack of dramatic tension in his own life. From the point of view of ethical literary criticism, it is noteworthy to observe that the civilized human being in his peaceful and pleasant home still has a need for cruel and bad imaginations. What Nie Zhenzao calls the Sphinx factor is in the life of cultivated people still active, but in the controlled form of literary consumption.

Thus it is not surprising that in the Scandinavian countries the production and consummation of detective novels is higher than in comparable European nations. This phenomenon has been subject to scientific considerations, and social research has given a credible answer to the dissemination of all kinds of crime literature. Peter Nusser in his introduction to *The criminal novel* refers to Alexander Mitscherlich and Michael Balint, who have described cultivated people's "delight of anxiety." The prevailing security leads people to enjoy the missing risks of their own lives by reading detective novels, in which the moral task of the detective consists in defeating the fictional attacks on the basic principles of the human way of living together. The frequency of such reading habits indicates that the reader needs a substitute for a boring every-day life. It is however on the other hand a convincing proof of the detective novel's lack of ethical considerations that the detective seldom looks upon himself and his activities from a moral point of view. He is firstly preoccupied with collecting technical proofs of guilt and putting the single traces into a damning chain of evidence. On the other hand, the final results of his occupational efforts lead to a temporary reestablishment of the lost harmony. From this point of view, the detective plays an important role in removing cancer cells from the body of the morbid civil society. Nonetheless the detective is often himself a lonely wolf, a rather shabby figure, divorced or living in instable relations, addicted to drinking, spending much time alone in his office, waiting for new jobs, such as for instance the disillusioned, but acute detective Varg Veum in Gunnar Staalesen's prize awarded detective novels from the city of Bergen. His detective shares a lot of character features with other fictional detectives, who pay no great attention to ethical stan-



dards of behavior although they counteract the demoralized criminal actors and their attacks on the civil society and its moral values.

In order to explain the standard procedure of crime detection I want to recall a scene from August Strindberg's *Et drömspel* (*A Dreamplay*), where the deans of the university faculties are sitting in front of a closed door discussing what may exist behind it. The detective however is smarter. He is looking for a key to open it and turn on the light so that he can start investigating the hidden mysteries behind the closed door. In many detective stories one can notice an inversion of this proceeding like in many final scenes in Agatha Christie or in some of John Dickson Carr's novels, in which all the figures including the murderer are gathered inside a single closed room, where nobody can enter or escape and find the way out until the detective through his analytical production of evidence has figured out the guilty one.

In spite of the detective's attempt to solve criminal cases and fight the evil his ambitions are seldom based on ethical demands. He is good as far as he meets the requirements of the criminal genre and the expectations of entertaining quality, but he is far from being an ethical hero, who gives priority to moral challenges and an ideal occupational practice.

It is a strange fact that the educated reader of criminal stories voluntarily resorts to reading matters that evoke a state of joyful anxiety. This psychological ambiguity may be difficult to understand, even if you look upon it as a sort of pleasure-seeking masochism. In order to grasp this phenomenon with reference to the criminal novel it is advisable to consult German existential philosophy, where it is crucial to make a distinction between two notions which describe different aspects of anxiety. *Angst* is the term for an objectless fear, the fear of having been thrown into a worldly existence, while *Furcht*, the other term, means the fear of something concrete, the fear emerging from wild animals, fire, bankruptcy and of course criminals, who terrify their surroundings and threaten to devalue the prevailing harmony of *The Social Contract*. The bourgeois citizen is consuming fictional horror sitting in his convivial armchair drinking a glass of wine and smoking a cigar. However passive this compensational activity is, it offers the reader an opportunity to identify himself with the detective and his attempts to reduce criminal violence and it strengthens his sense of moral awareness. In so far the reader's response to detective stories may be regarded as a contribution to ethical literary criticism. The opinion has however been subject to deviating standpoints. Nils Norberg, a Norwegian specialist in crime literature maintains that Raymond Chandler transformed "the tough private detective into a romantic ideal and made him a spokesman of right and moral" (29).

Willy Dahl has expressed the view that the fictional detective never was meant



to be a realistic figure, whether as an individual nor a social agent. He is due to Dahl “a mythological character who performs a ritual” (Dahl, *Festskrift til 90-årsdagen* 251). His real function is to “question both the individual and the collective moral” (Dahl, *Festskrift til 90-årsdagen* 253). The more crime literature has improved its literary quality the more it has been accepted as a subgenre of mainstream literature. Literary research in what Jury Tynjanov calls the back-yards of literature has shown that awarded crime authors have a higher and far more developed vocabulary in their books than have authors of average non-crime literature. Among the many outstanding writers of detective stories in Scandinavia to day I want to mention the Norwegian star-author Jo Nesbø, whose crime novels with the master detective Harry Hole have raised the standards of crime novels with regard not only to the criminal plot, but also to the details of occupational knowledge and the rough language of gangsters, such as sociolects, jargon and cryptograms. This new genre mastery has made his crime novels not only to world bestsellers, but has reached a new level of artistic craftsmanship, which proves that the detective novel now has conquered a position among the mainstream expressions of the fine arts.

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