

Importance of Place and Concept of crime in Detective Fiction

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Abstract

Detective fiction has been quite prominent in the field of literature. Many writers have been indulged in writing detective stories because of the popularity it holds in its hands. The official arrival of detective fiction has been started by Edgar Allan Poe when he published his story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841 which is considered as an ideal model of detective fiction. The portrayal of place in detective stories plays a vital role as the concept of crime also depends on the place. The selection of place depends on the preference of the writer which would also suit the characters and events of the story. While choosing the place they also consider a place which would increase the charm of the detective as most of the things would be projected by the detective only. Since the detective solves the case, they must know the place in order to understand nature and reason of the crime. Knowing the place also helps them to move ahead in the investigation in a proper manner.

Keywords: Detective fiction, place, crime, Edgar Allan Poe, Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Introduction

Place holds the power to make a story interesting or boring for the readers. Reading is considered as a therapy to heal people who are going through some emotional breakdown. The use and description of place can either heal the people or it can increase the intensity of their emotional trauma. At a time of emotional breakdown, people look for something that can divert their minds from the things that bother them. A good description of place can enlighten people with abundant of knowledge of a particular place that they can use in the future. If the writer wins to transport the mind of the readers, readers scramble up all freshened up with the energy which could be the first step towards healing.

There is correlation between people and place. People acquire certain emotions and feelings towards places. The feelings and emotions that we have for others is similar to the feelings we have with places as well. It's just places don't talk back to us. Our mind gets affected by the design and content of the place we live in. In fact it shapes our mind too. The success of a story is also dependent on its setting. The art of choosing a befitting place to represent the theme of a story tells a lot about a writer's skill. There is a strong relation between place and theme of a

story too. A pure comedy cannot be revolved around a haunted mansion and a horror story cannot be effective in a park during day time. When Anton Chekhov wrote *The Proposal*, he wanted to attack the rich people of Russian society of the nineteenth-century; specially how they considered marriage as a way to expand their business and property. To present this theme, he couldn't choose other society because that would have not matched the theme he wanted to convey to the readers.

Thus, the place in a story should be relevant to the genre as well as the theme. The place may become a light for the readers to initiate their own investigation in the story. They may participate well in the search of the murderer and reason behind it. It's true that sometimes writers and readers both ignore the importance of place since they are more focused on the action. Sometimes writers give more importance to the crime and other actions that they forget to give the broader elaboration of the place- readers also get hasty to read about the main mystery which mostly revolves around the murder. Portrayal of crime, personality of the detective, and the heroic techniques of the detective used to solve the mystery conceals the importance of the place. In fact the characters of the story also reflect the characteristics of the place.

Detective fiction reached the field of literature quite late. Though detective and detection are always there in literature but the scientific model of detective fiction lacked in the stories that came before Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). This story presented a detective characters who solved the case with his skill that is equivalent to the calibre of a professional detective. Poe used Paris as the background of his story which plays an important role in the story as during that time Paris was quite sensational in terms of the portrayal of crimes.

The narration of the setting that a writer chooses for their story is as important as the characters and plot. Setting is a huge deal in detective literature as the affect of crime depends on it. In fact, mostly it is the first thing in the beginning the writer gives description about. It helps the readers to form the picture of the place for the better understanding of the story. While reading any crime story, the first thing that readers look forward to is the crime. But plot and characters should be connected to the setting in order to make the story more original. That's why it's important to talk about the setting to make the story more authentic for the readers. The vital role of the place is important as it is the place that's been disturbed because of the crime. It must be restored to make the balance. Writers give this task of the reformation of the society to their heroes who can be a professional detective, an amateur detective, a police man or any ordinary person. Everything associated with the place also contribute in the development of the story.

One of the most important elements about detective literature is crime but where it has been committed is also quite important. Both these things are interlinked. Different writers have chosen different places for portraying the crimes in their stories. As for example, Poe chose Paris, and Sherlock Holmes chose London and some countryside areas. Agatha Christie showed a lot of variation in her detective stories. As the wife of an archaeologist, she visited a lot of places and used her first hand experience to write her stories. From sky to sea, from crowded

place to an island, and from urban places to rural ones, Christie has portrayed murders everywhere:

He went over in his mind all that had appeared in the papers about Indian Island. There had been its original purchase by an American millionaire who Was Crazy about yachting and an account of the luxurious modern house he had built On this little island off the Devon coast. The unfortunate fact that the new third Wife of the American millionaire was a bad sailor had led to the subsequent Putting up of the house and island for sale.¹

Murder is the common crime in detective fiction but it seems different in different stories mainly because of the place it's been committed and how it's been committed.

Puzzle is one of the main features of detective literature. Without a case, there wouldn't be any detective to solve it. These puzzles look different on the basis of where they were created i.e., where the crime was committed. Some stories look so dark because they have a background that gives them that particular look. But at the same time there are stories that talk about murders and cold blooded murderers but still they don't look so dark because they don't have any gloomy settings. Mostly writers choose places as their background that they are very much aware of and there could be some other reasons too; Edgar Allan Poe chose Paris not because he lived there but because of sensationalism. Even when Poe got inspiration from a real life murder mystery for his second detective short story, *The Mystery of Marié Rogêt*, he changed the background of it. Rather than using the real place which is New Jersey, he used Paris. For his final story, *The Purloined Letter*, Poe kept the same place. Even his detective character, C. Auguste Dupin, is a Parisian which makes him more compatible as the case solver. Whenever the name of Sherlock Holmes appears, the obvious picture of his stories strike the mind instantly such as London's small passes and fog.

It was a cold morning of the early spring, and we sat after breakfast on either side of a cheery fire in the old room at Baker Street. A thick fog rolled down between the lines of dun-coloured houses, and the opposing windows loomed like dark, shapeless blurs through the heavy yellow wreaths. Our gas was lit and shone on the white cloth and glimmer of china and metal, for the table had not been cleared yet. Sherlock Holmes had been silent all the morning, dipping continuously into the advertisement columns of a succession of papers until at last, having apparently given up his search, he had emerged in no very sweet temper to lecture me upon my literary shortcomings.²

One of the most striking features of detective literature is 'suspense'. Background and settings have the power to make things more suspenseful. They make the entire case even more mysterious. While choosing the place, writers must keep in mind that the description could help the readers to form any theory to catch the criminal. When writers choose real place, it makes easier for the readers to participate in solving the mystery. Detective literature engages the readers; and place can enhance the intensity of their engagement. Readers don't only get connected to the story while reading it, they also participate. For a while, they become detective too and try to crack the case. In the end,

they check whether they succeeded in solving the case or not. Climax makes their heart beat faster. So, if they know the place, they will be able to think more practically and it would give them a real feeling as a detective. What goes on in the place is also very important. Weather, people, jurisdiction, culture, tradition etc. are all crucially important. Place plays a vital role in finding the criminal. In literature, background is not only the source to present the portrayal of crimes. In fact, it has many types and they are complicated too. According to the writer Eudora Welty:

*Place in Fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress. Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place.*³

She knows the importance of place in literature. Her statement tells us about her understanding regarding the prominence of place chosen by the writer for their story.

With the passage of time, a lot of changes took place in the world. One of them is urbanisation which was the result of industrialisation which led people move to towns and cities in the quest of job. Population was also increasing day by day. Both urbanisation and population increased crime rate. The association of crime fiction with city is prominent. In *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, Heather Worthington, argues that about the relevance of crime and city. Though not all crime is associated with city but urbanisation has been associated with crime lately. The concept and portrayal of crime change in cities and rural places. In rural areas, crimes are the by-product of personal reasons. But in city it could be professional. Violence is used on extreme level when it's used in cities. Pastoral crime fiction is considered as peaceful which is quite opposite to the urban crime fiction. The American writers started producing hard-boiled fiction in the first half of the twentieth-century which started the tradition of the portrayal of violence in detective fiction. It was started by Dashiell Hammett which is evident in *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Thin Man*, *Red Harvest* etc.

Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, sometimes, is considered as the first detective novel. There are so many elements that must have given chills to readers of that time since it was quite a new thing for them. Collins delighted his readers with puzzles, a locked room, a compact plot, narrators, well-woven characters that includes Sergeant Cuff, and a chance to solve the mystery—a chance that every reader of detective fiction likes to get. He made his readers active in the reading process. Collins' *The Woman in White* is different from this novel on the basis of setting. In *The Woman in White*, Collins created a gothic setting. Most of the events in the novel take place in a mansion in Yorkshire. This mansion has stairs that produce creaking and creepy sounds. It also has twisting corridors and hidden compartments. The moonlight in the garden makes the scenario beautiful with a touch of horror. The gothic setting in murder mystery confuses people; they start having this doubt whether they should look for a person or a supernatural entity.

Conclusion

Thus, place plays an important role in detective fiction. It is connected to all the elements in a story. A well chosen place can make a story more logical and impressive. The type and portrayal of crime depends on the place. At the same motive is also proportional to the place. The rate of crime in urban areas is greater which results in different motives and portrayal of crime. Mostly the motive behind any murder is personal in rural settings but turned into a professional one in urban areas. Place can change the effect of a crime in readers' mind. At the same time, it creates suspense and thrill in the story too. Sometimes, writers try to puzzle the mind of the readers by creating a gothic setting which turns out to be the writer's technique to create more and more suspense to the story. The writers of hard-boiled fiction are the ones who started portraying violence in the detective fiction which was also the reflection of its contemporary society. With the increase in population and urbanisation, disputes also increased that led them being violent with each other. Hard-boiled fiction became popular amongst the readers because of the reality it contained. Hard-boiled writers presented the concept of crime that was prevalent in the society.

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