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# UNIT 1 SUSPENSE AND ATMOSPHERE

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## 1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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**Although** we love mysteries, we want them solved. Detective stories are popular, because they not only create mysteries but also solve them. This Unit tells you how. After reading it you will learn that:

- the centre of interest in a detective story is not the sensational crime, **but** the logical reasoning that goes into its solution;
- the detectives of the past used to be gentlemen-amateurs, but now they are **seasoned** professionals, physically and mentally tough;
- the early detectives were brilliant reasoners, but those who followed possessed various other qualities;
- the detective's companion, unintelligent, nevertheless serves a useful **purpose**;
- suspense, which lies at the core of a detective story, is a chain, to be built up link by link;
- it has to be created and maintained. This is done through
- atmosphere and action.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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We all love mysteries. A mystery is made up of what is unfamiliar to our **experience** and what stirs our imagination. It may even satisfy our escapist **urge**. A mystery is what you find in a detective story, usually built on a **murder** or a crime. Its insistence on finding an explanation for the puzzling or **the** mysterious, including death, is reassuring in that it seems to make **some** meaning of the situation in the story, which intrigues us all. We like mysteries to **be** solved, uncertainties removed. We can then live in our world with a sense of confidence. A detective story hides from us what has actually happened and we are drawn into making the exciting effort of reconstructing it through detail. It involves a **crime** which seems to have been expertly executed, leaving behind no trace of the criminal. That is why a detective story is often **called** a 'Whodunit'

A detective story is based on reasoning and deals with individuals like ourselves. Detective fiction is sensational only in so far as its action is concerned but not in other respects, since it is based on reasoning. Indeed, the 'true' detective story centres not on a sequence of sensational incidents or thrills but on an 'organic mystery', the last three chapters of which 'explain its first three', with great logic and precision. It may be regarded as 'moral fiction', as it shows what and 'where' we are, as individuals', and that it is the ordinary human being who often commits a crime, although he may have motives which we shall never have.

## 1.2 THE GENESIS OF THE DETECTIVE STORY

There are many number of detectives thrown up by the ever-growing number of detective stories which have come to be written in recent times. But you will find only some among them who are worth paying attention to. As literary characters you may trace them to a tradition established by the American, Edgar Allan Poe and the Englishman, Arthur Conan Doyle, who have pioneered this kind of writing. C. Auguste Dupin in Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', and Sherlock Holmes in Conan Doyle's 'The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes', have established a tradition which has been dominant up to our times. Dupin is intellectually brilliant and eccentric and Holmes is 'a romantic personality possessed by scientific spirit'. Both are gifted with the extraordinary powers of deduction needed for solving a mystery.

### 1.2.1 The successors

There are other well-known detectives who can be broadly categorised. For instance, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown are funny and impractical characters, whereas Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe and John Dickson Carr's Dr. Gideon Fell are like magicians. Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe are physically tough (they can take any amount of punishment!), and represent the American hard-boiled school of detective fiction, - apart from these, you have Dorothy Sayers' aristocratic Lord Peter Wimsey and Georges Simenon's ingenious Maigret, not to speak of Ellery Queen.

### 1.2.2 W.H. Auden's choice - Sherlock Holmes, Inspector French, and Father Brown

Of all the detectives, W.H. Auden finds only three who are 'completely satisfactory detectives': Sherlock Holmes (a scientist), Inspector French (a policeman) and Father Brown (a priest) created by Arthur Conan Doyle, Freeman Wills Crofts and G.K. Chesterton respectively, Holmes is a lover of 'neutral truth' (i.e., unconcerned with the feelings of the innocent or the guilty); Inspector French is exceptional only in his exceptional love of duty which makes him take 'exceptional pains' to track down the criminal; Father Brown as a priest is primarily concerned with 'the saving of souls' and only, incidentally, with detective work. You may choose others but you have got to consider them as objectively as Auden has done.

#### Activity 1

- Why are detective stories popular? (50 words)
- Distinguish between the detectives of the past from those of the present and account for the difference. (50 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

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## 1.3 THE DETECTIVE

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The mystery is investigated by a character who, as the story unfolds itself, becomes **recognisable** as a detective. The detective in the 'old' detective fiction is not a professional, but an amateur, who sets out to investigate the **crime**, because the victim or his friends have asked for his help, or for public welfare.

But in modern detective fiction, he is a hard-boiled professional, a 'private eye', who can be hired for a fee and who is trained in the use of complex **technical** equipment.

He can no longer rely on or 'make do **with** a magnifying glass and a keen mind', like Sherlock Holmes, the father of fictional detectives, since crime **detection** has nowadays become highly complex with the emergence of new crimes like industrial espionage in Europe and elsewhere. The detective, in fact, may even be required to be acquainted with 'international financial laws, criminal codes and customs regulations'. Indeed, he considers himself a businessman, (as Jean-Jacques **Parenti** of a Paris investigation agency has said) who is hired to solve difficulties-which others have failed to solve.

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## 1.4 THE DETECTIVE'S COMPANION

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The detectives go about their business alone, but some of them have companions. Interestingly, the 'detective's friend' is often cast in the mould of **Holme's** companion, Dr. Watson, 'the wholly unintelligent recipient of **half**-confidences, the minimum thermometer of the reader's intelligence'. He serve; as a sounding-board rather **than** as an active helper.

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## 1.5 ALL DETECTIVES TEND TO DEVELOP INTO TYPES

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Although the detective has been represented as a woman, a priest, a policeman or even as a robot (as Asimov has done in science fiction), he invariably tends to develop into a type. This is, perhaps, to be expected. After all, even the detective story is formulaic. The reason is that it has come to represent 'a complex of conventions' which the writer tries to fulfil so as to match the expectations of his readers.

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## 1.6 THE ESSENCE OF DETECTIVE STORIES IS SUSPENSE

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Suspense is what makes you read a book to the end. In fact, the detective story **owes** its great popularity to it. It has not invented any narrative **devices**

of its own but relies on the standard ones to create suspense. To be successful the writer should gauge the effect of suspense on the reader as they lead him to an unexpected revelation of truth. This means that they should correspond to 'the step-by-step process of rational inquiry'.

### 1.6.1 How suspense is created

Let us consider **what suspense** is and how it is created. Suspense is a kind of uncertainty (usually tense) which you experience when there is a break in the logic of events or time, and you do not know what is going to happen next. It continues as long as the mystery surrounding it remains unsolved. You are curious or even **anxious** to know how it is going to end. This is what makes you read on till what has been mystifying ceases to be so. But suspense need not necessarily arise from fear of impending disaster or from what is puzzling—like an unanswered question.

### 1.6.2 How suspense is sustained

The writer is **able** to maintain the suspense to the end of **his story** by delaying the solution of the **mystery** or the unmasking of the real criminal. He is able to do it with the **help** of several devices.

He may introduce parallel intrigues including rival **investigations** or **love-motifs** or episodes which interrupt the process of investigation. **He** may have confused witnesses who have to be shown to be innocent before the real criminal is identified. Sometimes he creates a highly reserved detective, who keeps his thoughts to himself. You just cannot read his thoughts, with the result that **you are** kept guessing till he himself chooses to **reveal** them.

### 1.6.3 Suspense is really the construction of a logical chain

You may thus **see** that suspense implies a chain, the links of which **have to** be made out. It means that the way the crime has come to be committed is to be **reconstructed** step-by-step, logically and chronologically. In doing so you would experience the thrills of suspense. Consider the following passage from Chandler's 'The Big Sleep':

There was a tarnished and well-missed spittoon and a gnawed rubber mat. **A** case of **false** teeth **hung** on the mustard-colored wall like a fuse box in a screen porch... The fire stairs hadn't been swept in a month. Bums had slept on them, left crusts and fragments of greasy newspaper, matches, a gutted imitation-leather pocketbook. In a shadowy angle against the scribbled wall a pouched ring of pale rubber had fallen and had not been disturbed. A very nice building.

The detective **Marlowe** arrives at an office located in 'a run-down commercial building' described above. **He** overhears Harry Jones's voice

I froze, The other voice spoke. It had a heavy purr, like a small dynamo behind a brick **wall**. It said: '**I** thought you **would**'. There was a vaguely sinister note in that voice.

A chair scraped on linoleum steps sounded, the transom above me squeaked shut. A shadow melted behind the pebbled glass.

### 1.6.4 Suspense through atmosphere

Look at the **passage** carefully. You would notice first a description of the place which creates the necessary 'atmosphere' for what is to follow. What follows **produces** the effect of suspense. Suspense, indeed, is related to atmosphere, **which** intensifies it by suggesting a vague, even indescribable, threat or fear or something that is arresting, forbidding or uncanny **around** a place or 'a happening'.

### 1.6.5 Suspense through action

Now let us **look** at the second quotation. It illustrates the use of a variety of narrative devices to promote suspense. It opens **with** a two-word sentence indicating **the** initial response of **Marlowe** ('I froze'). You can **visualize** the

scene: Marlowe is moving towards the door of the office and suddenly stops on hearing Jones's voice which has the effect of transfixing him and ending his movement. This interruption is what makes you experience a tension, for you do not know what is going to happen—anything might. Then follows a simile, describing the voice ('like a small dynamo behind a brick wall'). The narrator (not Marlowe) intervenes with his comment ('There was a vaguely sinister note in that voice'). The two concluding sentences describe what Marlowe must have heard and seen. Thus this passage is able to (at the same time) suggest what is to take place and to delay the resolution of the mystery expected by the reader, who is stunned by the outcome of it. By alternating the spoken word with apt description and the narrator's comments Chandler is able to generate suspense.

### Activity 2

a) Read the following passage and show whether or not the writer has succeeded in creating suspense. (70 words)

They sat on the sofa. I sat in the rocking chair again and examined the things she had given me. There were two letters addressed to Sue Hambleton here; her father's telegram welcoming her home; a couple of receipted department store bills; an automobile driver's license, and a savings account pass-book that showed a balance of less than ten dollars . . .

I felt in my pocket, found my copy of the photograph New York had sent us at the beginning of the hunt, and looked from it to her.

'Your mouth could have shrunk, may be', I said, 'but how could your nose have got that much longer? . . .

She glared at the photograph and then at the man. 'What a smart guy you are!', she told him.

He said in a low voice, 'Well?'

I said, 'you're in a hole!'

[This is a passage from Dashiell Hammett's story 'Fly paper'. Peggy Carroll comes to the detective impersonating Sue Hambleton (who is dead), accompanied by an accomplice, Joe Wales.]

b) Read the following passage and answer the question given at the end.

'Mark Wylder is in evil plight', said he.

'Is he?' said Lake with a sly scoff, though he seems to me a good deal scared. 'We hear no complaints, however, and fancy he must be tolerably comfortable notwithstanding'.

'You know where he is', said Uncle Lorne.

'Aye, in Italy; everyone knows that', answered Lake.

'Don't be frightened—but, he's alive; I think they'll make him mad. It is a frightful plight. Two angels buried him alive in Vallombrosa by night; I saw it, standing among the lotus and hemlocks. A negro came to me; a black clergyman with white eyes, and ran beside me; and the clergyman walked with me a long while, to and from upon the earth; telling me the wonders of the abyss.'

'And is it from the abyss, sir, he writes his letter?' enquired the Town Clerk, with a wink at Lake.

[This is a passage from Sheridan Le Fanu's *Wylder's Hand* reporting a dialogue between Uncle Lorne and the criminal Lake in a room. Mark Wylder is murdered and his forged letters are posted by Lake's accomplice from different towns in Italy. The letters, indeed, are despatched from the 'abyss'. How does the scene evoke an atmosphere of horror and suspense? (Length: 100 words).]

(Check your **answers** with the hints given at the end)

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## 1.7 SUMMING UP

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We all love the mysteries which are presented by detective stories. The 'true' detective **story** is based not on a sequence of sensational incidents or thrills but on 'an **organic** mystery' which is explained with logic and **precision**. It deals with **individuals** like ourselves which is the reason why it appeals to us.

- Whereas the **detectives** of the past **were** gentlemen amateurs, those of the present **time are** professionals — physically and **mentally** tough and highly trained in the **use** of **complex technical** equipment needed for the detection of **complex crime** and conversant with international laws, criminal codes and customs **regulations**.
- The tradition **established** by Edgar **Allan** Poe and Arthur **Conan** Doyle has continued up to our time. Their creations — C. Auguste Dupin and Sherlock **Holmes** — have archetypal significance as detectives, although several others, equally popular, have appeared.
- Sherlock **Holmes** (a scientist), **Inspector** French (a policeman) and Father Brown (a **priest**) are **the** only 'completely satisfactory **detectives**'.
- Though **detectives** in general act alone, there are some who have companions **servng** as sounding-boards rather than as active helpers.
- As the detective story is largely formulaic, the detectives tend to develop into **stereotypes**.
- Suspense **being** the essence of the detective story, it is skilfully created, not **necessarily** through the fear of impending disaster.
- **Suspense** is **sustained** to the **end** through strategies such as (a) the delaying of the **solution** of the mystery or the unmasking of the real criminal, and (b) the **employ**ment of such devices as parallel intrigues of **love motifs**, confused with **witnesses** and interpolation of episodes.
- However, suspense depends on the construction of a logical **chain**, the missing links of which have to be made out.
- Suspense may be **created through** 'atmosphere' or 'action' projected through the **use** of the spoken **word**, apt description **and** the **narrator's** comments.

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## 1.8 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

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### Activity 1

- a) Refer to section 1.1.  
The point is that although we are drawn to mysteries we seek reassuring explanations for them. Hence the detective story is based on a logical chain or sequence corresponding to step-by-step reasoning.
- b) While the detectives of the past were gentlemen amateurs those of the present are highly trained professionals. These are needed for the detection of ingeniously committed crimes involving the use of complex technical equipment, and/or specialist knowledge of rules, codes, and procedures concerning national and international organisations.  
'Detection' is no longer a hobby but a professional's job!

### Activity 2

- a) Re-read sections 1.6.1 — 1.6.5.
- b) Refer to section 1.6.4. Fear of the unknown, the indescribable and the uncanny leads to the creation of horror.

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## 1.9 GLOSSARY

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You will find in the glossary a short list of the literary terms used in this Unit

**Atmosphere:** the dominant mood in a creative work of literature as created by setting, description and dialogue.

**Suspense:** a state of mental uncertainty, excitement or indecision. Suspense **sustains** interest and makes the readers ask, 'what happens next?'