
UNIT 2 CHOOSING CHARACTERS

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2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Characters form one of the most **important** constituents of a detective story. **This Unit identifies** the **four main types** of characters thus: the victim, the criminal; the detective-and the detective's companion. Then there are the **others** who may act as red herrings but set the story in reality. Often, the events in a story are **set** into motion because of the **characters**. At the end of the Unit you will **understand** that

- there isn't **much** room to develop characters in a detective story; the form **has too** tight a **compass**
- characters should **not be** just type characters, good or evil
- the **characters'** motivation must be clearly established; they cannot be **automatons**
- ~~there must~~ be a **victim**, usually murdered; the criminal; the detective; and other **characters**
 - the criminal's motive must be established
 - **the detective must** be intelligent and cool; able to deduce from **observation**, and act **skilfully**
 - the **detective's companion**, if present, is **often** dim-witted (to set off the **brilliance** of the detective) and, finally,
 - **the other characters** are also quite **important**: they set the story in reality.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Most of us would **have** enjoyed reading detective stories, and some of us might **have become** addicted to this kind of fiction. Because it is popular, we need not assume that it is necessarily mediocre. In fact, some of the finest minds of **creative** fiction, beginning with Edgar **Allan** Poe, have done their best **work** in this kind of fiction. Also, the enjoyment of detective stories is not **necessarily confined** to inferior intellects: in fact, they can offer pleasure and **relaxation even** to the highly **educated**.

In the first Unit, we have discussed two of the important ingredients of **detective fiction**; **suspense and atmosphere**. We shall now discuss **another**, namely, **characters**.

2.2 CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN DETECTIVE STORIES

The **portrayal** of **characters** in **short stories** is different from that in the **novel**; **this** is also true of **characters** in detective stories. There is hardly any room in a story of **three** to four **thousand** words for the **full** **portrayal** of a

character, tracing its **growth**, analysing it and letting it develop. A few skilful touches, and the character of the short story comes alive. Dialogue and action then give it fullness. This is true, to a greater degree, of the detective story, where action and plot are of the highest interest, and character is only of incidental interest. The tightness of the form leaves little room for many characters, and hardly any scope for their sustained development. A detective story usually begins close to the end, **i.e.**, when a crime has been or is about to be committed and **then** it moves so fast, that the end comes before the author can possibly **introduce** complexities of character.

2.2.1 The characters should not become mere types

But while it is **true** that in the detective story character is of **subsidiary** interest, it is not **insignificant**. In fact, character may often hold the key to the solution of **the mystery**. The modern detective story has been compared, with some justice, **to those** medieval tales where good characters fighting with bad characters prevailed over them, thereby suggesting that virtue always triumphs over vice. This comparison appears all the more appropriate when you realise that characters in detective stories tend to become types of good or evil rather **than** distinct individuals. Beware of **this** danger when you begin to write.

One of the main **objections** against detective stories is that most of them seem to be monotonously similar. 'Read **one**, and you have read them all'. **Since** detective stories deal with crimes like murder, theft, blackmail and impersonation, they **have** a tendency to become repetitive in respect of plot and action. This is **even** more true of characters in detective fiction. The criminal is a **murderer**, thief, cheat or sex-maniac and he tends to behave like any other criminal of his type. If you read a number of detective stories, you will begin to feel that the plots and characters somehow seem familiar, though the **stories** have been written by different authors.

2.2.2 The detective story writer must establish motivation

You, as a writer of (detective) stories, will be faced with the problem of establishing motivation credibly and succinctly. This however, creates a special **problem**. **Despite** the comparative unimportance of character in detective fiction, you will have to develop a special skill in the portrayal of character, the ability to create real persons, without allowing them to become merely types. The **characters** of the detective story, like its plot, should not require us to believe the unbelievable. In a sense, therefore, characterisation in the detective story is even more difficult than in other types of fiction, Although **not portrayed** in the full, the **characters** should never be 'wretched automatons'. The detective story being a tight kind of writing, a writer has to avoid the lifelike looseness of the novel, and must create an illusion of reality without appearing to be contriving it too obviously. He has to balance character and action in such a way that one should not be made prominent at the expense of **the** other. Credible characters have their own 'place' in a **detective** story although it is primarily the plot that interests us. Characters must move and talk in accordance with their roles in the story because the special quality of a detective story has to be achieved through them. The detective story must enable **the reader** to see enough of the character to recognize his type **and** to understand his motives.

2.3 FOUR MAIN CHARACTER TYPES : THE VICTIM, THE CRIMINAL, THE DETECTIVE, AND THE DETECTIVE'S COMPANION

The characters in **detective** fiction are of four main **types**.

They are the **victim**, the criminal, the detective, and the detective's companion. **Then, there are others** directly or indirectly connected with the **crime** or its **solution**. The **victim**, in any detective story, can never be a significant **character**. If the **victim** is an important or famous person, the reader's

interest is likely to be diverted from the most vital aspect of the Story, namely, the committing of the crime and its detection.

2.3.1 The victim's chief importance

The victim has to be a comparatively insignificant person. In many cases, especially in the case of murder, he is even non-existent, in that he is dead before the story begins! In a delightful film, *The Trouble with Harry*, which is a parody of his own films of suspense and horror, Alfred Hitchcock makes the dead victim the centre of interest, the opening words spoken in the film being, 'The trouble with Harry is that he is dead'.

2.3.2 The criminal's motive

The criminal is probably the most important character in detective fiction. He is usually presented as the most unlikely person to have committed the crime. In many detective stories the criminal is presented as a sympathetic character, and the prime suspect — the red herring — is the opposite. This is done to intensify the element of mystery, but there is always the danger of overdoing this kind of thing. The writer has to use his insight into human psychology to establish a complex motive for the crime.

2.3.3 The detective's qualifications

Many writers, however, **make** the detective the central figure of their stories. 'There was never a true detective story until there was a true detective', This is especially true of those detective stories of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries which followed the example of Edgar Allan Poe. **Poe's** Auguste Dupin became the model for such detectives as Father Brown, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule **Poirot**, and Lord Peter Wimsey, to mention a few.

The detective can be either a professional, or an amateur. He relies almost entirely on cool reasoning, and his powers of deduction, like Hercule **Poirot**, with his pride in his 'little grey **cells**', or he combines brilliant powers of **deduction** with the ability to observe and act, like Sherlock Holmes. The detective presents the 'spectacle of mind at work', shows great 'awareness of physical surroundings', and is an embodiment of 'the romance of reason'.

Many writers of detective fiction have the same detective for all their stories so that he becomes a familiar figure, with all his idiosyncracies, whimsicalities and his uncanny abilities **to** fit together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The best **account** of the detective's qualifications for his work is to be found in the opening pages of Arthur **Conan** Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*.

2.3.4 The detective's companion

A stock character in detective fiction is the detective's companion — loyal but a **little** stupid, with unbounded faith in the detective's ability to solve even the **most** insoluble mystery. He often acts as the narrator of the story. Good **examples** of this character are Dr. Watson in the **Conan** Doyle stories and **Hastings** in the stories of Agatha Christie. The contrast between the brilliance of the detective and the feeble-mindedness of his companion is brought out in the famous remark of Sherlock Holmes to his companion, 'Elementary, my dear Watson'.

Activity 1

- Consider the relative importance of each of the main types of characters in the detective story. (100 words)
- What qualifications should a detective possess? (50 words)

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

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2.4 THE OTHERS, WHO SET THE STORY IN REALITY

A detective story has seldom as few as four characters: the victim, the criminal, the detective, and his companion; a host of other characters move in and out of the story, some even staying throughout. These other characters are there to create a likeness of reality. In actual crimes too, although the first three characters have to be present, a large number of characters, related to them, are also present, bound to them by business, familial, amorous or inimical ties. The victim has lived among them. So do the criminal and the detective. In the understanding of the circumstances that led to the crime as well as the personalities of the victim and the criminal, these other characters are essential. They lend to the detective story fictional broadness, and help us to understand motives, actions and behaviour.

There is another good reason why there should be quite a few other characters in a detective story. In order to create an atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty, suspicion for the crime should fall on several characters, some of whom may look very guilty or act very suspiciously. Some again would appear to be innocent, but may turn out to be involved in the crime. In a famous story by Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the criminal turns out to be the most innocent-looking character in the story; the narrator himself, who is the companion of the detective, Hercule Poirot.

The advantage of having a number of other characters is that the detective, and the reader have to spread their suspicion over a large number of people, examine their past conduct and speech, and keep a close watch on what they are doing and saying (and not doing and saying) when the investigation is being conducted. This complexifies the plot and contributes to its appeal.

In a detective story there will be usually (I say *usually* because in another famous story by Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, the case is quite different) one murderer, who will be identified from among several suspects—the so-called red herrings—who may lead the detective for some time, and the reader throughout, on a wild-goose chase.

2.5 SUMMING UP

The very form of the detective story does not permit the introduction of many characters or the full development of a character. For one thing, the detective story usually begins close to the 'end', i.e., when the crime has been

2.6 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

"Activity 1

Hints

- a) Re-read section 7.3 before formulating your answer.
- b) Cool **reasoning**, **powers** of deduction and the ability to observe and act are some of the **qualifications**.

Activity 2

Hints

If the criminal is **ruthless** enough., this could be a successful **portrayal** of motivation of crime. There is not, however, the urgent, almost desperate, need for **money that usually** sets off small-town boys on the route to crime. What did you feel?