

An Analysis of the Typification of Mystery and Detective Fiction by John G Cawalti and Carl D Malmgren: Another Cul-de-sac in Generic Classifications?

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Abstract

*There have been a number of attempts at forming classifications that could streamline a basic unifying factor among novels placed under the genres of detective and mystery fiction. Among such attempts, the ideas and strategies sustaining present analysis are deliberated with John G Cawalti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976) and Carl D Malmgren's *Anatomy of Murder* (2004) to study and reasonably refute the generic nomenclature for the same and its subtypes as contended by said theorists. Conclusively, Rian Johnson's 2019 film, *Knives Out* has been considered to demonstrate the flaw in such generic classifications, as there is always room for overlap and intersection among various genres in terms of themes, narrative, form, etc. However, an alternative and ameliorated order for classification has been deliberated in this paper.*

Keywords: *genre; mystery fiction; detective fiction; hard-boiled; formula fiction; knives out (2019)*

To persist in paying attention to genres may seem to be a vain if not anachronistic pastime today. (Tzvetan Todorov, "Modern Genre Theory")

John G. Cawalti accounts a comprehensive analysis of literary formulas as exercised in popular fiction in his *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976) which has been significantly recognized and is an essential tool in the study of mystery fiction and other of the categories similar to it. He addresses a number of measures, trends and contraptions operating within the popular forms of literature. In particular, his theory on the relationship between the concepts of "mimetic" and "formulaic" orders in literary work or genre and in a way, fictionality and realism in context of the factor of escapism as associated with reading fiction will be taken into consideration in view of the current discussion. Further, certain theoretical models as proposed by Carl D. Malmgren in his *Anatomy of Murder* (2004) are employed to examine the classification of mystery and other forms of fiction similar to it in terms of plot, structure, type of protagonist, tone, narrative, theme etc.

The paradox of Generic Classifications

Cawalti explains that mimetic literature depicts in its virtual apparatus a world derived from reality in its harsh, orderless and often unjust and unforgiving state which also, involves creating characters within it that are with many layers and grey areas. Thus, oftentimes the lines between right and wrong are blurred, with which occurs the possibility of a reader being able to identify or understand the perspective of the villains, or perhaps, even identify with certain of their ideologies and traits. On the other hand, formulaic literature employs certain noticeable and preconceived patterns of order, stability and justice that readers know, do not always subsist in the real world. It adheres to certain levels of structure, logic and a sense of simplicity and meagre to no complexity in its characterization and theme. Cawalti further draws upon its tendency to cater and adhere to formulas offering recreational delights and escapism of the kind that provides instant gratification, emphasising more on the plot and focussing less upon instilling layers and depth

into the characters. Thus, the formulaic constituent of literature provides an escape from reality as opposed to the mimetic, which confronts one with it – “the mimetic and the formulaic represent two poles that most literary works lie somewhere between. Few novels, however dedicated to the representation of reality, do not have some element of the ideal. And most formulaic works have at least the surface texture of the real world” (Cawalti, 13) Thus, a literary work regardless of its formal establishment and perceived genre, is capable of having both the “mimetic” and “formulaic” elements, structure, narrative and characterization.

Furthermore, derived from all this is the indication that classic mystery stories lean greatly on the formulaic devices which perhaps lead to its present segregation from serious literature and academic recognition. Of mystery-detective fiction that mimics reality and particularly its “hard-boiled” variety leans more towards the spectrum of the mimetic. During the 1920s, a new trend or “formula” branched from the genre of mystery and detective fiction which is often termed as the “hard-boiled”. The term is used to denote mystery fiction willing to capture a realistic and visually gritty nature of the criminal world. Stories like these initially emerged in pulp magazines particularly, in the 1930s. Although, the form emerged in the 1920s in the works of Carroll John Daly, it found true popularity through Dashiell Hammett and particular finesse and galvanic flavour with James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler. Thus, considering the tonal, thematic and visual nature of the hardboiled, it has a particular proclivity for mimetic representation yet, all the while retaining certain formulaic elements of its own. One may consider, Raymond Chandler’s criticism on mystery fiction of the 1920’s as opposed to the hardboiled fictions of the 1930s-40s in “The Simple Art of Murder: An Essay” (*The Simple Art of Murder*).

In his “Anatomy of Murder” (2004), Carl D. Malmgren distinguishes between mystery, detective, and crime fiction which he has framed under the wider genre term of ‘murder fiction’. His overall take on classifying genre is based on the differences and similarities of its “novelistic signs” underlying the “Self” and the “World” i.e., its narrative’s virtual locus being either personal, external or

both. He also argues that the elements categorized by Cawalti as being formulaic are in fact, “conventional”, as the worlds of both types are subject to preconceived predicates that their types purport. (118)

Furthermore, Malmgren proposes that the stories featuring detectives and built on the mystery-centred-plot-framework labelled, “detective fiction” or the “whodunit” kind (appropriate example for which are the works of Agatha Christie) falling under Cawalti’s formulaic spectrum should be called “mystery fiction”; while the genre of hard-boiled fiction which too are based on the mystery-centred-plot-framework but, incorporated in a mimetic or the “mean streets” setting should be headed under “detective fiction”. The reason for this is two-fold: first, that both types are conventional i.e., they work on a formula suited to their style but, have protagonists who are detectives or investigators or hold similar position in the police force. They have in their stories a common denominator which is a detective and the element of mystery which renders their genre terms nil. The second is that, there lies a difference in their approach to the narrative. In “mystery fiction” the narrative aligns with the plot to focus more on the element of mystery and less on its characters. In “detective fiction”, emphasis falls primarily on the detective and it is from his/her perspective that the story is told whether it be in first-person narrative or second-person narrative. Thus, the terms “mystery fiction” and “detective fiction” reflect the aspect of their narratives that they focus on the most, and denote their “respective narrative dominants”. (Malmgren, 118) George Grella’s “Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel” (1970) for his strategy in characterizing the form of detective novels (“pure puzzle” or “whodunit”) which, he considers as the original version of the thriller, may be taken into consideration for further study.

Malmgren’s methodical contention in redetermining the meanings of mystery fiction and detective fiction on grounds of the dominance of their narrative structure is in many ways accurate. Yet, it does not necessarily indicate other necessary aspects informing its type such as pace, tone, setting, theme, and other literary devices often employed in story-telling. His categorization of detective fiction and mystery fiction rather constricts the field of the

genre which is in fact replicative and representative of a number of other aspects, the chief of which is the element of mystery itself.

The conjecture in this paper is to contain both the hardboiled and detective fiction as separate subgenres under the wider heading of mystery itself. Moreover, reconsidering and refuting the label and description of mystery fiction as posited by Malmgren and Cawalti, one may simply go with the definition and description as contended as follows: mystery fiction is simply a story or narrative in which a conflict is created by means of an unknown force, and discovering said force whether character(s), object(s) or incident(s) is the primary aim.

As defined in the preceding paragraph, the element of mystery, if at all present in a story can be taken to be the unifying factor, the other dominant aspect can be suffixed or prefixed accordingly to form the definitive genre term. Consider for instance the labels *Thriller* and *Suspense*. These labels are often prescribed to novels that essentially have a mystery in their plot-structure. In closer examination, one may realize that the terms thriller and suspense denominate the dominant emotional states in which readers find themselves to be while reading. Thus, in Malmgren's definition of detective fiction there still lies the element of mystery in its plot and is essentially what constitutes a mystery novel. However, if in a story, the perpetrator of the conflict is known to its perceived protagonist and to the readers themselves, much of the focus falls on characters' dynamics with each other and with the conflict itself and its subsequent resolution. Thus, in such a case, where the element of mystery is absent but, there is the presence of a detective and conflict in the form of a crime, the denominative genre may be taken either as detective, crime or hardboiled fiction.

The peculiar case of *Knives Out* (2019)

Despite the various attempts made by a number of theoreticians, there still remain the possibilities of a number of discrepancies and constraints in determining the dominant component of a story. To consider such a case one may take the example of the recent film *Knives Out* (2019), written and directed by Rian Johnson. A majority of elements in the film, much of which are

seemingly symbolism, indicate mystery as its dominant element. Yet, *Knives Out* has a peculiar plot-structure and narrative that defies what Cawalti and Malmgren have deemed "conventional". The plot involves elements of mystery and a detective, thereby convening the heading of mystery/detective film. Yet, considering its framework, it evades the tenets of the mystery-centred-plot-framework.

In the film, Harlem Thrombey, a rich and successful mystery novelist is found dead in his own room with a slit throat. Moreover, the autopsy reports deem his death to be a suicide. During the final interrogations with the family members Benoit Blanc, a renowned detective is let into this unusual case, for, he has been tipped anonymously to investigate any discrepancies, if present. At this point, the cause for mystery is not who killed Thrombey, but rather why he killed himself. Yet, a few minutes into this mystery, the viewers are shown that he kills himself to save his nurse, Marta Cabrera who seemingly overdosed him with his medication. Thus, here, the element of mystery or the classic question of the "whodunit" at its core is resolved few moments into the plot. At this point, the plot takes the form of a thriller where the anticipation lies in whether Marta would be able to escape Benoit Blanc's astute skills and propensity to get to the truth. Moreover, the film delivers a number of shocking blows and vicissitudes to its characters along the way redirecting the story into unexpected directions.

In conclusion, gauging through a seemingly one-dimensional ordinance of the classic mystery story based on the "formulaic" elements, *Knives Out* is able to create depth and an emotional, psychological and other sensory range which raise moral qualms, as the viewers clearly want to see Marta escape from the detective. Moreover, the film also, touches upon the legal, social and financial challenges of the Mexican immigrants residing in American society. It also, subtly lays bare for the audience the self-centred and self-serving outlook and pretentious nature of the remaining members of the Harlem family, which in many ways reflects on certain factions of the group and culture they represent and of universal human follies itself. On the whole, the film transcends the conventions of whichever genre one may possibly ascribe it to.

Conclusion

The inference is that, attempts to classify literature will always be pursued for a number of valid reasons. There are, of course, many other ways to classify mystery and other genres similar to it, some of which have already been accomplished. However, in the contemporary phase a steady shift has been witnessed which renders many attempts at categorisation prone to furcation, if not completely nil. This analysis clearly probes further study in this area and warrants a multidisciplinary and cosmopolitan approach.

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