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Comparing the Evolution of the Detecting Woman to the Waves of Feminism

Keywords

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Introduction

Crime fiction, despite being categorized mostly as popular fiction, provides ample material for analysis and theories. The novels in the genre provide exciting materials in terms of narratology, looking at the ways of how storytelling works. Todorov sees detective fiction as two stories existing within one: the story of the crime and the story of detection (Todorov 1984, 160). Hühn brings this idea even further when he states that the criminal writes a story, and his aim is to deter the detective from reading it (Hühn 1987, 454). Hutcheon sees detective fiction as a genre that is always already metafictional, where the detective is a surrogate character for the reader (Hutcheon 1980, 31–32). Detective fiction, especially the classical ones (such as Poe's or Doyle's short stories) are also seen as the representation of the hermeneutics of thinking, a celebration of rationality, analytic problem solving (Kovács 1999, 15). Theories about the restoration of order, and its allegoric manifestations – or in some cases, their lack thereof – are also prominent talking points when theorizing the genre (Gregoriou 2007, 160). Although detective and crime fiction are fertile ground for all these theories, it is also a tableau of social issues, and it is heavily influenced by them – even from the beginning of the genre. The evolution of it shows how crime, its prevention, and punishment, developed, how the police formed, which social issues were most prevalent at the time (like the Great Depression's connection to the hard-boiled mode or Christie's pre-war nostalgia), and it continues to do so in its contemporary iterations too.

This can be observed too when it comes to women in crime fiction: both woman writers and female detectives show a parallel to debates about women, more specifically, the feminist movement. "Mystery fiction has become the infrastructure for middle-class social and ideological issues", states Bette Shoenfeld about the so-called feminist detection popular from the 1970s, however this statement is not only true to that specific era of crime narratives (Shoenfeld 2008, 842). Besides solving crimes, women detectives – and in some cases the crimes they investigate – tend to be a reaction to the specific wave¹ of the feminist movement(s) they are written in. Although the history of detective and crime fiction officially starts with the great forefathers like

¹ Using the wave metaphor of feminism is debated in the literature, because as Nicholson points out, it does suggest a unified feminism, which is of course not the case – during the specific waves different branches of feminism were coexisting, starting with the dominating liberal feminism in the first wave, which kept on going through the second one too, where radical and social feminism(s) became also apparent. Moreover, the feminist movement of women of color can also be considered as its own branch, having its own stages throughout history too. However, the different historical periods show similar tendencies that are helpful when it comes to comparing it to the trends in female written detective fiction.

Edgar Allen Poe, who established the genre, and his British counterpart Arthur Conan Doyle, who made it popular, the genre had its woman authors ever since its beginnings. Originating from gothic and sensation novels, female authors – although not canonized as detective fiction, and therefore, less known – were helping to establish and popularize the genre, oftentimes employing female detectives in doing so – both in British and American fiction. The female-written counterparts evolved throughout its course in relation to trends in crime fiction, but also were influenced by and were a reaction to the feminist movement(s).

In this paper I will touch upon the main stages of the history of female-written crime fiction in correlation with how the genre was evolving, to see what contemporary iterations are inspired by, and compare the most typical female-written crime novels to the trends and streams of the feminist movement.

1. Beginnings and the Golden Age

As Lucy Sussex points out, the detecting woman or a female detective is a transgressive, liminal character, who just by existing or working can disturb the social order, and because of that, she embodies the anxieties of the different historical periods' changing gender ideas and roles (Sussex 2010, 4). From Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and the gothic women of crime, through the first wave of feminism working for the women's suffrage (and at the same time female detectives doing what they were not allowed, like joining the police); through the second wave's fight for equality and the reappropriated tough women detectives; and finally, arriving at the contemporary third wave feminism, and the many aspects women detectives challenge and rewrite order and tradition—the female detective does more than solving crimes.

The birth of detective fiction as a genre is associated with Edgar Allen Poe's short stories and his detective character, August Dupin. Crime fiction, however, did not start with Poe: it has a longer history and tradition. Crime and punishment are topics that have been of interest for writers since the beginning of recorded literature; however, the early stories were concentrating on the content and not on the now-indispensable process of detection. *Oedipus* has many elements of the detective fiction genre that contemporary readers expect: a crime, a dead body, a culprit, detection, and punishment. Sussex argues that the element of mystery only became a part of crime fiction from the Gothic; Religious texts often deal with stories about crime as a cautionary tale. Apart from the "conny catcher" pamphlets of the Elizabethan court, which are considered forerunners of crime fiction, the evolution of the genre has religious connections too: the 18th century Newgate Calendar was published by the chaplain of the Newgate prison. The calendar consisted of cautionary tales, where the detective is not needed yet, as God always punishes the criminal – even if sometimes the punishment required human intervention. The emphasis was on the punishment, as a "moral warning" for the readers. The calendar tales are related to the contemporary "true crime" narratives, rather than detective or crime fiction, because they are more biographical, and they lack the murder – detection – motive triad that are necessary elements of the genre.

But before the evolving crime fiction genre could give space to the detective fiction, organized police and the figure of the detective needed to be born. With the Enlightenment, the importance of the church turned towards secularity, and with that came rationality. Instead of leaving the investigation to the church and the punishment to God, detecting crime became the responsibility of the public, of community detection: people started observing each other from Christian conscience. At the same time, at the turn of the 18th century, with the emergence of the public law and forensic sciences, the concept of organized police was about to born. The birth of the police is an important step in detective fiction, because we can pinpoint that mo-

ment also as the birth of the detective, and thus can discuss the detective as a construct from that point on (Sussex 2010, 6–12; Knight 2004, 3–10).

The Gothic novel was also a fertile ground to crime fiction. Many writers, among them prominent women, wrote novels that can be considered as predecessors of detective fiction. It is no wonder the predecessors of the female detective can be found in the Gothic novels, since great thinkers, like Mary Wollstonecraft, begin the work that later became the feminist movement of that time. Her famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, first published in 1792, argued for equal education for girls and boys, but also rejected the idea of sexual dimorphism, the idea that associates men with reason and women with emotion. The book puts the emphasis on rationality for women as opposed to sentimentality, which is an important step toward a detecting woman (Tong and Botts 2018, 18–20).

The first wave of feminism was following on the path of Wollstonecraft, arguing for rationality and reason when it comes to women. Although in the United States it was tied to the abolitionist movement, generally speaking the first wave of feminism was blind to the issues of race and class, making it a white liberal feminist movement, and its most famous and most successful achievement was the suffrage for women. The first wave brought the questions of law reforms in the forefront, namely about marriage, divorce, property and child custody. It also challenged the presumption that women instinctually chose marriage and motherhood over a career or an occupation and suggested that for the liberation of women they need to become partners in a marriage, and that can only achieve by having an income on their own (Tong and Botts 2018, 20–24). No wonder that the first female detectives thematize the idea of choosing detection instead of marriage and a family.

The first dedicated female detectives were written by male authors, like Mrs. Paschal by W. S. Hayward, and Mrs. Gladden by Andrew Forrester, and were more like honorary men, according to Joan Warthling Roberts. They were submissive characters who did not disturb the status quo, or the social order, by their detection, and when their job ended, they returned to their domestic roles. Their detective roles were only made possible as being men's proxy, for example, being an assistant. The first woman who is considered to be breaking this trope is Catherine Louisa Pirkins' character Loveday Brooke. The English author published her stories in serialized format, and as novels such as *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* (1894), and her character, although a detective on her own rights, suffered the consequences of her action: she became considered a lower-class person than she already was, and her rebellious act pushed her to the margins of society (Roberts 1995, 4–6).

The American author Anna Katharine Green's Amelia Butterworth was the character who finally broke the tradition of her predecessors and who also became the prototype of the spinster sleuth. Published in 1897, *That Affair Next Door* depicts the woman detective as coming from a good financial background, which granted Butterworth the freedom of doing what she wanted – detecting. However, her abilities were only recognized after male colleagues praised her, making her still dependent on men (Roberts 1995, 6–8).

The most famous spinster detective to date is Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, who is arguably the most famous female detective to this day, created during the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction. Most of Christie's novels were written in an interwar and 'interwave' period: starting in 1930, Christie published about the spinster sleuth till the writer's death. The character, seemingly a stereotypical old lady, was able to use other people's impression on her to her own advantage and were able to expose crimes because of her unassuming nature, all the while revealing social concerns and comments on women's issues. The other notable female detective of the Golden Age was Harriet Vane, who appeared in four Dorothy Sayers novels, of which the most famous is *Gaudy Night* (1935). Harriet was written as a young and independent woman,

a writer of detective fiction, who struggled to balance her private and professional life – a fact which got thematized in the novels which made her an important predecessor of the feminist detective. Sayers also avoided the use of “female intuition” in her novels and making Vane rely on logic and deduction. This also comes from the subgenre most associated with the Golden Age: the clue-puzzle type of detective fiction provides the reader with the same pieces of information as the detective, so the reader can solve the case while reading the novel (Gavin 2010, 263; Reddy 2003, 193).

2. The Feminist Detective and Hard-Boiled Women

The 1960s were an important decade both in the feminist movement and in crime fiction history. Reddy argues that Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1964) and the publication of the first Carolyn Gold Heilburn novel, written under the pen name Amanda Cross (*In the Last Analysis*, 1964) started a new era in both: in Kate Fansler’s character we can recognize the first real feminist detective, and Friedan’s book is a commonly considered starting point in the second wave of the feminist movement.

The second wave, starting in the 1960s and ending around the 1990s, as replaced by the third wave, was the era of the women’s liberation movement, and focused on identity politics, but was still predominantly liberal and white and middle class – although the Civil Rights Movement helped other social groups coming forward, too. Between the first and the second wave there is a 40-year period, counting from the 19th Amendment in the United States of America, which provided the suffrage of women; however, this division is misleading. It suggests that there was no active feminism between the two; however, this is far from the truth. In fact, one of the most influential feminist philosophical texts, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), was published in this intermediate period. The second wave – although it was not as homogeneous as the naming would suggest – sought out what was already stated in the first wave: that women need economic and sexual freedom, as well as civil rights, to be on equal ground with men (Tong and Botts 2018, 25–27). In this period many different women’s rights groups were working alongside each other, and with the help of the Civil Rights Movement women of color also gained a bigger platform, forming their own groups, which in their philosophical-theoretical work became the forerunner of intersectionalism that will be the central idea of the third wave (Tong and Botts 2018, 85).

Amanda Cross’ novels represent the start of a new era of the female detective. Carolyn Gold Heilburn was an academic herself who theorized detective fiction and wrote about feminist criticism. It is no wonder that her character, an English professor who solves crimes, reforms the genre and the concept of the female detective too. In Heilburn’s novels, the crimes do not just exist in a vacuum; they also suggest something about society too. As Reddy states, the novels “move away from the traditional mystery’s progression from disorder to order and instead incorporate challenges to the very idea of social order in her plots, demonstrating some of the ways in which the status quo depends on women’s continuing oppression” (Reddy 2003, 195). However, Knight does not agree with Reddy on this: he argues that although Cross provides “discursive space” in crime fiction for feminism, her character, Fansler, is just as much an honorary man as the early female detectives, since she is always helped by her male lovers, and is never an independent detective. Moreover, the cases undervalue sexism and being a victim of oppression (Knight 2004, 165–166).

Another famous example of this era is the British author P. D. James, whose *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1977) indicates in its title already that it questions and challenges the idea of the man-ruled world of detective fiction. Cordelia Grey, James’ detecting woman, is not a formulaic

character like her predecessors, and – which foreshadows the character-central contemporary crime fiction novels – her character is just as important as the plot of the novel. The novel thematizes the roles of women, love, male-female relationships, the destructive possibility of love, and, most importantly, female independence. Sue Ellen Campbell argues that Grey avoids romance, because she fears losing her independence and her detective skills (Campbell 1995, 14)². Both Cross and James can be considered the forerunners of the phenomenon that now we are calling feminist detection.

“Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” says Adrienne Rich in her essay, and her statement defines the most striking phenomenon that evolved parallel to the second wave of the feminist movements: the appropriation and rewriting of the hard-boiled private eye character and its genre by (feminist) woman writers (Rich, 1972, 18). However, to be able to compare the feminist revision, I would like to summarize the main characteristics of the hard-boiled detective fiction first. The genre was a predominantly American answer to the so-called Golden Age, which provided the subgenre whodunit and/or the clue-puzzle, which is popular to this day. Taking place in the time period between the two world wars, the hard-boiled detective fiction adapted the western cowboy stories to an urban setting. Contrary to the cerebral predecessors solving crimes from an armchair, the hard-boiled detective inserts himself into the action of fighting against petty crimes, bootlegging, and gambling. He is a lone figure who isolates himself, “a loner, an alienated individual who exists outside or beyond the socio-economic order of family, friends, work, and home”, a heavy drinker and smoker, very private and secretive (Scaggs 2005, 59–60). As the genre’s most prominent authors Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler’s novels demonstrate, opposed to the nostalgia-evoking whodunits, hard-boiled detective fiction breaks away from clear-cut categories of morality, highlights the corruption of the police, and shows a disillusionment in social values (Knight 2004, 112–3).

Hard-boiled detective fiction treats female characters – like the femme fatale – often in a rather misogynistic manner; moreover, as Knight explains it, detective fiction as a genre is inherently masculine:

The violence of language and action of the private eyes, the insistent individualism they share with the clue-puzzle detectives, the extensive male chauvinist traditions of description, attitude and behaviour, as well as the complacent acceptance of a patriarchal social order, all seem contrary to the tenets of late twentieth-century feminism (Knight 2004, 163).

This is the reason why it is exciting that in the ‘70s and ‘80s a generation of American female authors appropriated the genre, and created feminist hard-boiled, private eye, or police detective women. These stories, like the aforementioned male counterpart of the genre, do not focus on individual crimes in itself, but they instead highlight the systematic nature of it. They can only achieve small victories; the usual “making order from chaos” narrative structure of detective fiction is disregarded. This is because crimes are not random; they are part of a bigger system of oppression – often the consequence of patriarchy.

² Interestingly, James’ next Grey-novel, *The Skull Beneath the Skin* – demonstrating how much crime fiction is a tableau of cultural and political change – is almost in opposition with the first novel, showcasing a Thatcherian propaganda of returning to the Victorian ideals of womanhood (Nixon 1995, 41).

Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone were the main characters of the author's series of novels, respectively, however the serialized nature of the narrative is not the only thing that makes them similar. Reddy argues, that similarly to the original hard-boiled detective, these women were solitary characters too, being professional detectives, but the twist that these female writers brought to the character is the solid connections of friendships, a network of connections instead of having a family on their own – as it is often expected of women. Moreover, these women find that relationships with men have the possibility to disrupt their “hard-won autonomy and independence”. Their investigations, let it be about murder, corruption or other cases, often led to the realization that crime can be the result of systematic oppression. Violence, either corporeal or on the level of language use is a key point in the hard-boiled mode. The feminist revision does not shy away from it, however it does in a critical way. These female characters find violence as something they are not fond of, but they use it when the situation calls for it, and they do not hesitate to fight back, both literally, against perpetrators, and metaphorically, against patriarchal control (Reddy 2003 197–9).

3. Chick and Domestic Noir – a Reaction to Postfeminism

After 2010 a new trend seemed to be crystallizing among the female-written crime fiction novels. Although its nomenclature is still not fixed, changing from chick noir to domestic noir, critics seem to agree on its major characteristics. Based on crime thrillers³, these novels are centered on a young urban woman protagonist with a job either in publishing or in arts, exploring anxieties connected to the cultural scripts of being a woman. The genre seeks answers to questions on the anxieties of femininity, marriage, domesticity, violence, trauma, and how contemporary (female) crime writers deal with these questions in literature and consequently in filmic adaptations.

Domestic noir seems to be an updated version of the “chick noir” that was the leading domination of the phenomenon in the past. Similarly to chick lit, themes like body image, careers, sex life, mother-daughter and romantic relationships (especially marriage), and motherhood are depicted, analyzed and questioned in these novels in relation with the “loss of female agency, power and autonomy” (Kennedy 2007, 26). Marriages are often depicted as traps, (gilded) cages with disturbing things beneath the surface. Julia Crouch, who named the genre, explains it as the following:

Domestic noir puts the female experience at the centre. The main themes are family, motherhood, children, marriage, love, sex and betrayal. Setting is important: the home a character inhabits, and the way they inhabit it, can tell us as much about them as what they say or do. At the centre of these stories is a subversion of the idea of home as sanctuary. Home can also be a cage, a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence. (Crouch in Joyce and Sutton, 2018, vii)

The genre's preoccupation with family life, marriage, motherhood and the home make the female-written detective fiction a reaction to postfeminism, which was a trend in feminism parallel to the third wave. The third wave, starting with the emergence of the voices of women of

³ The crime thriller emerged as a parallel genre to the hard-boiled detective fiction in the 1920s, although its modern version is rooted in the Gothic novels. This genre is considered sensational, it illustrates death and violence vividly, it is often concerned with a “secret or hidden knowledge”, and it is more interested in the crime and its consequences than in the investigation process (Scaggs 2005, 105–106).

color from the 80s and becoming its own distinctive period from the 90s, has intersectionalism as its most important, central tenet, regarding diversity and change as its driving force. Intersectional approaches state that it is not enough to look at someone's gender to understand their position, other factors, such as their race, class, sexuality, age, etc. are just as important, and create a matrix, where their social position can be assessed better (Tong and Botts 2018, 193). This period seen a rise in black and lesbian detectives, not coincidentally. However, parallel to this, another movement can be observed.

Postfeminism however, according to Samantha Lindop, has the basic tenet that there is no more need for feminism as it already accomplished gender equality. The postfeminist movement can be dated to the 1990's, and it is keen to "restabilize gendered power structures" (Lindop 2015, 11). The postfeminist figure, although welcoming everything the feminist movement achieved (career, independence, etc) still finds getting married and having a family as the most important goal in her life. The media representation connected to this idea shown women in high positions in their professional live, successful and beautiful, but still their main narratives centered on them being single, wanting to have a husband and a family. Postfeminism emphasizes the importance of the nuclear family, and under its era more and more women portrayed in films and series retired from the public sphere, from their career, to embrace a purposeful life in a domestic setting (Lindop 2015, 79).

Domestic noir's turn to the family and the home as a possible place for crime challenges these ideas. The genre is a synthesis of the most prominent trends in detective fiction written by women that came before it: it combines the tight, stifling spatiality of the whodunit with the corporeal, tough-women-centered action of the feminist hard-boiled novels. The detection happens in a closed space, either in a small community or a family, similarly to the whodunit, but while there the social setting and the possible criticism coming with it was a tool for the process of detection and for the demonstration of the sleuth's brilliance, with the domestic noir the social criticism becomes the goal, the successful detection process reveals the shortcomings of the community.

Tana French's *Broken Harbour* (2012) uses the 2008 economic crisis as a backdrop and culprit for the crimes within the family depicted, while Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) is set in a small town where the rigid gender roles create a fertile ground for psychological trauma and crime. Women are compelled to investigate, and while they are mostly amateurs, they are more closely connected to the women in the feminist hard-boiled novels as they are often finding themselves in situations where they have to physically fight. They are flawed, and often criminal too, but their relation to the femme fatale is critical, it emphasizes the systemic nature of abuse of oppression that women have to endure or fight against in the novels. The genre thus offers a critique of social values through a sense of isolation, a suffocatingly small social and physical spaces.

4. Conclusion

The paper gave an overview, a simplified genealogy, of crime fiction by female authors and with a female detective by comparing the major directions and waves of the feminist movement to the most prominent literary trends in women's detective fiction. Detective fiction is often seen as an impression of the time period it is written in; the female-written version provides an interesting reaction to the Anglo-American feminist movement through the character of the female detective. Corresponding to the concerns of the early stages of feminism, the first female detectives fought for the right to have a career and to be considered a detective on their own with more or less success. Choosing and occupation, the next step was the spinster detective who arrived at the peak of its popularity between the first and the second wave of feminism.

The second wave and the Civil Rights Movement brought the idea of revision, where the female hard-boiled detectives were born, as a reaction to the rough and tough-talking antiheroes of the hard-boiled genre, to highlight the systematic nature of the struggles of women. The third part of the paper looked at the domestic noir, a contemporary version of the female-written detective fiction, which seems to rely on its predecessors to be in opposition with the postfeminist movement, that emerged parallel to the third wave of feminism. Although this paper only looked at fiction written by white authors, exploring similar ideas through lesbian and black female authors would provide an interesting topic for the future.

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