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## **The evolution of detective novel from Arthur Conan Doyle to Gillian Flynn**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the evolution of the detective novel from the classical tradition established by Arthur Conan Doyle to the contemporary psychological crime narratives of Gillian Flynn. It traces the transformation of the genre across key phases, including the logic-driven investigative model of the nineteenth century, the puzzle-oriented structure of the Golden Age, the gritty realism of hardboiled and noir fiction, and the emergence of postmodern psychological thrillers. The study highlights how early detective fiction emphasized rationality, order, and objective truth, whereas modern narratives increasingly explore subjectivity, unreliable narration, and moral ambiguity. By conducting a comparative analysis of narrative techniques, character construction, and thematic concerns, the paper demonstrates how shifting social, cultural, and intellectual contexts have reshaped the detective figure and the nature of crime fiction. Ultimately, the research argues that contemporary detective novels reflect deeper psychological and societal complexities.

**Keywords:** Detective Fiction, Sherlock Holmes, Psychological Thriller, Narrative Evolution, Crime Literature

### **Introduction**

The evolution of the detective novel from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century reflects profound transformations in literary form, cultural anxieties, and conceptions of crime, truth, and justice. The genre achieved canonical shape with the works of Arthur Conan Doyle, whose creation of Sherlock Holmes established the paradigm of the rational, methodical detective who restores order through logic, observation, and scientific reasoning. Rooted in Victorian faith in progress and empirical knowledge, early detective fiction emphasized clarity, moral resolution, and the triumph of intellect over chaos. As the genre progressed into the early twentieth century, it underwent formal refinement during the Golden Age, characterized by intricate plots, fair-play principles, and an emphasis on intellectual engagement. However, shifting social realities, particularly in the interwar and post-war periods, gave rise to the hardboiled and noir traditions, where the detective figure became more cynical, morally ambiguous, and embedded within corrupt urban environments, reflecting a growing skepticism toward institutions and absolute truth. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, detective fiction expanded further into postmodern and psychological dimensions, challenging conventional narrative structures and destabilizing the notion of objective reality. Contemporary writers such as Gillian Flynn exemplify this transformation through their focus on unreliable narration, psychological manipulation, and the exploration of domestic spaces as sites of crime. Unlike earlier models that centered on solving

external mysteries, modern detective narratives often interrogate internal conflicts, identity, and perception, blurring the boundaries between victim and perpetrator. This study aims to trace the trajectory of the detective novel across these major phases, examining how the genre has evolved from a structured, logic-driven form into a complex, psychologically nuanced narrative mode that reflects changing societal concerns and reader expectations. By analyzing key developments from Doyle's foundational works to Flynn's contemporary reinterpretations, the paper highlights the shifting nature of detection itself—from the uncovering of objective truth to the negotiation of subjective realities.

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it critically examines the transformation of detective fiction from the rational, logic-driven narratives of Arthur Conan Doyle to the psychologically complex and morally ambiguous works of Gillian Flynn, highlighting how the genre reflects evolving social, cultural, and intellectual contexts. By tracing this progression, the research provides insight into how shifting perceptions of crime, justice, and human behavior have influenced narrative structures and character development. It contributes to literary studies by bridging classical and contemporary approaches, demonstrating the movement from objective truth and deductive reasoning to subjectivity, unreliable narration, and internal conflict. Furthermore, the study underscores the genre's adaptability and relevance in addressing modern concerns such as identity, gender dynamics, and psychological trauma. Ultimately, it offers a comprehensive understanding of the detective novel's evolution, making it valuable for scholars, students, and researchers interested in crime literature and its broader cultural implications.

### Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the literary evolution of the detective novel from the late nineteenth century to the contemporary period, beginning with the foundational works of Arthur Conan Doyle and extending to the modern psychological crime narratives of Gillian Flynn. It examines key phases in the genre's development, including the classical era, the Golden Age, the hardboiled and noir tradition, postmodern experimentation, and the rise of psychological thrillers. The analysis is primarily textual and comparative, focusing on narrative structure, characterization, thematic concerns, and the shifting representation of crime and detection. While the study incorporates relevant historical and cultural contexts, it is limited to English-language literature and selected major authors who exemplify significant transitions within the genre. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive survey of all detective fiction but rather a focused exploration of representative works that illustrate the genre's transformation over time.

### The Hardboiled and Noir Tradition

The hardboiled and noir tradition marked a decisive shift in detective fiction during the early to mid-twentieth century, moving away from the structured, puzzle-oriented narratives of the Golden

Age toward a grittier, more realistic portrayal of crime and society. Emerging primarily in the United States, this phase was shaped by writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, who redefined the detective figure as a tough, world-weary investigator navigating corrupt urban environments. Unlike the intellectual and often detached detectives of earlier fiction, hardboiled protagonists were deeply embedded in the social realities of crime, frequently confronting violence, moral ambiguity, and institutional corruption. The narrative style became more direct and colloquial, emphasizing action, dialogue, and atmosphere over intricate puzzle construction. Noir fiction further intensified these elements by introducing a darker, more pessimistic tone, often characterized by fatalism, psychological tension, and the blurring of boundaries between right and wrong. In these narratives, justice was no longer guaranteed, and the resolution of crime did not necessarily restore social order, reflecting broader societal disillusionment during periods such as the Great Depression and post-war era. The detective, rather than being an infallible figure of reason, became an anti-hero shaped by personal flaws and ethical compromise. This transformation expanded the thematic scope of detective fiction, allowing for deeper exploration of power, corruption, and human vulnerability. Consequently, the hardboiled and noir tradition played a crucial role in the evolution of the genre, challenging established conventions and paving the way for more complex and psychologically driven narratives in later periods.

#### Postmodern Developments in Detective Fiction

Postmodern developments in detective fiction represent a significant departure from earlier conventions, characterized by narrative experimentation, fragmentation, and a deep skepticism toward objective truth and stable meaning. Emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century, this phase challenged the traditional structure of detective narratives, which had previously relied on linear progression, logical resolution, and the restoration of order. Influenced by broader postmodern thought, writers began to question the reliability of both the detective and the narrative itself, often presenting ambiguous endings and unresolved mysteries. Authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Paul Auster played a crucial role in redefining the genre by blending detective elements with metafiction, philosophical inquiry, and self-referential techniques. In these works, the act of detection frequently becomes symbolic rather than literal, focusing on the search for identity, meaning, or truth in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. The detective figure is often portrayed as fallible, confused, or even powerless, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward relativism and ambiguity. Additionally, postmodern detective fiction blurs the boundaries between genres, incorporating elements of literary fiction, psychological narrative, and existential themes. This transformation also disrupts reader expectations, as the traditional promise of a clear solution is often replaced by interpretative openness. Consequently, postmodern developments expanded the scope of detective fiction, transforming it from a genre centered on solving crimes into a vehicle for exploring epistemological questions, narrative instability, and the fragmented nature of contemporary experience.

## Rise of Psychological Thrillers

The rise of psychological thrillers in late twentieth and early twenty-first century detective fiction marks a decisive shift from external investigation to the exploration of internal consciousness, perception, and emotional complexity. Unlike traditional detective narratives that focus on solving a crime through logical deduction, psychological thrillers emphasize the instability of truth, often presenting reality as subjective and fragmented. Writers such as Patricia Highsmith and Gillian Flynn have been instrumental in shaping this subgenre, foregrounding unreliable narrators, morally ambiguous characters, and intricate psychological manipulation. In these narratives, the boundaries between victim and perpetrator are frequently blurred, challenging conventional notions of justice and accountability. The domestic sphere, once considered a site of safety, becomes a central setting for tension and violence, reflecting contemporary anxieties about relationships, identity, and power dynamics. Additionally, psychological thrillers often incorporate nonlinear storytelling, shifting perspectives, and hidden motivations, which compel readers to question the authenticity of the narrative itself. This evolution aligns with broader cultural and intellectual developments, including increased interest in psychology, trauma, and the complexities of human behavior. As a result, the detective figure is often diminished or entirely absent, replaced by deeply flawed protagonists whose internal conflicts drive the narrative forward. The genre's emphasis on suspense arises not from uncovering external clues but from unraveling the minds of characters. Thus, the rise of psychological thrillers represents a critical transformation in detective fiction, redefining its core focus from objective resolution to subjective experience and emotional depth.

## Literature Review

The scholarly exploration of detective fiction demonstrates that the genre has evolved in close relation to broader literary traditions, narrative theory, and socio-cultural transformations. Foundational works such as *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* edited by Martin Bould provide a broad theoretical framework for understanding genre fiction as a dynamic and adaptive literary form. Although primarily focused on science fiction, Bould's collection situates crime and detective narratives within a wider speculative and genre-based discourse, emphasizing hybridity and the permeability of genre boundaries. Similarly, Clute and Grant's *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* contributes to this discussion by highlighting how elements of mystery, suspense, and investigation intersect across genres, suggesting that detective fiction cannot be examined in isolation. These works collectively underscore that detective fiction, from its inception, has been shaped by intertextual influences and evolving reader expectations. They also establish the importance of analyzing detective narratives not merely as formulaic constructs but as complex cultural artifacts that respond to shifting intellectual paradigms, including rationalism, modernism, and postmodernism. This broader contextualization is essential for tracing the transition from

classical models associated with Arthur Conan Doyle to contemporary psychological narratives exemplified by Gillian Flynn.

A more focused historical perspective is provided by Michael Evans in *The Rise of the American Detective Story*, which examines the development of detective fiction within the American literary context. Evans highlights how early detective narratives were influenced by urbanization, industrialization, and the emergence of modern policing systems, all of which contributed to a growing public fascination with crime and investigation. His analysis emphasizes the shift from the rational, puzzle-oriented structure of early detective stories to the more realistic and socially grounded narratives of the hardboiled tradition. This transition is further elaborated in Lee Horsley's *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* and *Crime Fiction*, which provide a comprehensive overview of the genre's development across the twentieth century. Horsley identifies key phases in the evolution of detective fiction, including the Golden Age, hardboiled fiction, and postmodern crime narratives, highlighting how each phase reflects distinct cultural and ideological concerns. Her work is particularly significant in its attention to issues of gender, identity, and power, demonstrating how crime fiction increasingly engages with social critique rather than merely presenting intellectual puzzles. Together, these studies establish a chronological framework that traces the transformation of detective fiction from structured, logic-driven narratives to more complex and socially engaged forms.

Stephen Knight's contributions, particularly *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* and *Secrets and Detection in Fiction*, offer a critical and theoretical lens through which to analyze the genre. Knight challenges traditional interpretations of detective fiction as purely formulaic, arguing instead that it is deeply embedded in cultural discourses of power, knowledge, and authority. His concept of “detection” extends beyond the solving of crimes to encompass broader processes of uncovering hidden truths within society. Knight also emphasizes the role of diversity in shaping the genre, noting how different cultural contexts and historical periods produce distinct forms of detective narratives. His later work further explores the thematic significance of secrecy and revelation, suggesting that detective fiction operates as a site of tension between what is known and what is concealed. This perspective is crucial for understanding the shift toward psychological and postmodern crime fiction, where the boundaries between truth and illusion become increasingly blurred. Knight's analysis thus provides a bridge between classical detective fiction and contemporary narratives, highlighting the genre's capacity for reinvention and its responsiveness to changing intellectual climates.

Complementing these theoretical and historical approaches, Peter Messent's *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* offers a collection of critical essays that examine various aspects of the genre, including its formal structures, thematic concerns, and cultural significance. The volume brings together diverse perspectives, addressing topics such as the evolution of detective figures, the role of narrative perspective, and the impact of globalization on crime fiction. Notably, the essays emphasize the increasing prominence of psychological depth and narrative experimentation

in contemporary works, aligning with the rise of psychological thrillers. This shift is also connected to changing representations of gender and identity, as modern crime fiction often foregrounds marginalized voices and challenges traditional power structures. Messent's compilation highlights how contemporary authors, including figures like Gillian Flynn, depart from conventional detective formulas by focusing on unreliable narration, fragmented storytelling, and the complexities of human psychology. Overall, the literature reviewed demonstrates that detective fiction has undergone a continuous process of transformation, evolving from the rational and orderly narratives of the nineteenth century into a multifaceted genre that interrogates social realities, psychological depth, and epistemological uncertainty.

## **Origins of Detective Fiction (19th Century Foundations)**

### **1. Early Influences**

The origins of detective fiction are closely associated with the pioneering works of Edgar Allan Poe, who is widely regarded as the founder of the genre. Through stories such as *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Poe introduced C. Auguste Dupin, a character who embodied the principles of analytical reasoning and intellectual problem-solving. Poe's concept of "ratiocination" established a structured approach to crime-solving based on logic, observation, and inference rather than coincidence or supernatural intervention. This innovation marked a turning point in literary history, as it laid the groundwork for detective fiction as a distinct genre centered on rational inquiry and systematic investigation.

### **2. Emergence of Analytical Detection and Logic-Based Narratives**

Following Poe's foundational work, detective fiction increasingly emphasized analytical detection and logical narrative construction. Stories began to revolve around complex mysteries that required careful examination of clues, fostering active reader participation in solving the crime. The narrative structure became more organized, typically involving a crime, an investigation, and a resolution achieved through deduction. This emphasis on logic reflected Enlightenment ideals and reinforced the belief that human intellect could uncover truth and impose order on chaos, a concept that became central to the genre's identity.

### **3. Development of the Detective Archetype**

During the nineteenth century, the detective archetype evolved into a recognizable literary figure characterized by exceptional intelligence, keen observation, and a degree of eccentricity. This figure was often portrayed as intellectually superior to both the police and other characters, reinforcing the theme of individual brilliance. The inclusion of a companion or narrator, who provided a more ordinary perspective, became a key narrative device, later perfected in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle through Dr. Watson. This dynamic enhanced storytelling by balancing complexity with accessibility.

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#### **4. Social Context: Urbanization and Crime in the 19th Century**

The rise of detective fiction was deeply influenced by the social transformations of the nineteenth century, particularly industrialization and urbanization. Expanding cities led to increased concerns about crime, anonymity, and social disorder, while the development of organized police forces and early forensic practices heightened public interest in criminal investigation. Detective fiction thus emerged as both a reflection of and a response to these societal changes, offering narratives that restored order and rationality in an increasingly complex world.

#### **The Classical Era – Sherlock Holmes and Scientific Detection**

##### **1. Contribution of Arthur Conan Doyle**

The classical phase of detective fiction was decisively shaped by Arthur Conan Doyle, whose creation of Sherlock Holmes established the structural and thematic foundations of the genre. Doyle transformed earlier narrative experiments into a coherent literary form by integrating scientific reasoning, methodical investigation, and engaging storytelling. His works not only popularized detective fiction but also elevated it to a respected literary genre, influencing generations of writers and defining reader expectations regarding crime-solving narratives.

##### **2. Characteristics of Sherlock Holmes Stories**

Sherlock Holmes stories are distinguished by their tightly constructed plots, enigmatic crimes, and emphasis on intellectual engagement. Each narrative typically begins with a perplexing mystery that appears unsolvable, followed by a systematic investigation and a final revelation that restores order. The stories often feature atmospheric settings, red herrings, and carefully placed clues, encouraging readers to participate in the process of deduction. This structure became a model for later detective fiction.

##### **3. Use of Deduction, Observation, and Forensic Science**

A defining feature of the Holmesian method is the application of deduction, acute observation, and early forensic science. Holmes's ability to infer complex conclusions from minor details exemplifies the power of rational thought. Techniques such as chemical analysis, fingerprinting, and examination of physical evidence reflect contemporary scientific advancements, reinforcing the credibility and appeal of the narratives. This scientific approach distinguished Holmes from earlier fictional detectives.

##### **4. Role of Dr. Watson as Narrator**

Dr. John Watson serves as both narrator and intermediary between Holmes and the reader. His perspective provides clarity and accessibility, allowing complex deductions to be explained in a comprehensible manner. Watson's admiration for Holmes also enhances the latter's intellectual stature, while his relative ordinariness enables readers to identify with him, making the stories more engaging.

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## **5. Establishment of the “Detective Formula”**

Doyle’s works formalized what became known as the “detective formula,” a narrative pattern involving a mysterious crime, a brilliant detective, a sequence of clues, and a logical resolution. This formula emphasized order, rationality, and closure, becoming a defining convention of classical detective fiction and serving as a foundation for subsequent developments in the genre.

### **The Golden Age of Detective Fiction (1920s–1940s)**

#### **1. Rise of the “Whodunit” Tradition**

The Golden Age of detective fiction witnessed the consolidation of the “whodunit” as the dominant narrative form, emphasizing intellectual problem-solving and reader participation. These stories revolved around identifying the perpetrator from a defined set of suspects, transforming crime narratives into structured puzzles. The focus shifted from action or realism to ingenuity, where the central pleasure lay in unraveling the mystery through logical reasoning and careful interpretation of clues.

#### **2. Contributions of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers**

Writers such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers played a pivotal role in shaping the Golden Age. Christie’s intricate plotting and iconic detectives, such as Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, exemplified the elegance and precision of the genre, while Sayers introduced greater psychological depth and social nuance through her character Lord Peter Wimsey. Their works elevated detective fiction into a sophisticated literary form while maintaining its popular appeal.

#### **3. Puzzle-Based Narratives and Fair Play Principle**

A defining feature of this era was the emphasis on puzzle-based narratives governed by the “fair play” principle, which ensured that readers were provided with all necessary clues to solve the mystery. This approach established a contractual relationship between author and reader, promoting active engagement and intellectual challenge. The careful placement of clues, red herrings, and misdirection became essential techniques in constructing compelling and coherent plots.

#### **4. Closed-Circle Mysteries and Plot Complexity**

Golden Age detective fiction frequently employed closed-circle settings, such as isolated country houses, remote islands, or confined social groups, where a limited number of suspects heightened narrative tension. These controlled environments enabled authors to construct highly complex plots with multiple layers of deception, hidden motives, and unexpected revelations. The resulting narratives combined structural precision with imaginative ingenuity, solidifying the Golden Age as a period of both artistic refinement and enduring influence within the genre.

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## **The Hardboiled and Noir Transformation**

### **1. Shift from Intellectual Puzzle to Realism**

The transition from the Golden Age to the hardboiled and noir tradition marked a fundamental shift in detective fiction, moving away from carefully constructed puzzles toward a more realistic and socially grounded portrayal of crime. Instead of focusing on intellectual games and closed-circle mysteries, these narratives emphasized the harsh realities of urban life, where crime was pervasive and often unsolvable within neat moral boundaries. The genre began to reflect a growing disillusionment with idealized notions of justice and rational order.

### **2. Rise of American Hardboiled Fiction**

The hardboiled style emerged prominently in the United States through writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Their works introduced a new kind of detective—tough, pragmatic, and deeply embedded in the criminal underworld. Unlike the refined detectives of earlier fiction, these protagonists operated in morally complex environments, often confronting corruption within both society and law enforcement.

### **3. Themes of Violence, Corruption, and Moral Ambiguity**

Hardboiled and noir fiction is characterized by its exploration of violence, systemic corruption, and ethical ambiguity. Crime is no longer an isolated event but part of a broader social decay, where power, greed, and betrayal dominate. The narratives often lack clear moral resolution, reflecting a world in which justice is uncertain and truth is obscured. This thematic shift introduced a darker, more pessimistic tone to the genre.

### **4. Changing Role of the Detective (From Genius to Anti-Hero)**

In this phase, the detective evolves from an infallible figure of intellect into a flawed and often disillusioned anti-hero. These characters are shaped by personal struggles, moral compromises, and emotional complexity, making them more human and relatable. Their role is not necessarily to restore order but to navigate chaos, exposing the limitations of traditional notions of justice and redefining the detective figure within modern literature.

## **The Psychological Thriller and Feminist Perspective**

### **1. Rise of Psychological Crime Fiction**

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed the rise of psychological crime fiction, marking a shift from external investigation to the exploration of inner consciousness and emotional complexity. Authors such as Gillian Flynn redefined the genre by centering narratives on mental states, interpersonal relationships, and hidden motives rather than solely on solving a crime. This subgenre emphasizes suspense derived from psychological tension rather than physical action or deductive puzzles.

## **2. Exploration of Mind, Memory, and Unreliable Narrators**

A key feature of psychological thrillers is the focus on the instability of perception and memory. Narratives frequently employ unreliable narrators, fragmented timelines, and shifting perspectives, compelling readers to question the authenticity of events and the credibility of characters. This narrative strategy disrupts the traditional expectation of objective truth, replacing it with ambiguity and interpretative complexity, thereby deepening reader engagement.

## **3. Gender Dynamics in Modern Detective Narratives**

The feminist perspective has significantly influenced contemporary detective fiction by challenging traditional gender roles and representations. Female characters are no longer confined to passive roles but emerge as complex protagonists, investigators, and even perpetrators. Writers such as Paula Hawkins contribute to this shift by portraying women with psychological depth and agency, often exposing societal pressures, gendered violence, and power imbalances within domestic and public spaces.

## **4. Crime from the Perspective of Victims and Perpetrators**

Modern detective narratives increasingly present crime from multiple perspectives, including those of victims and perpetrators, rather than focusing solely on the investigator. This approach humanizes characters and complicates moral judgments, blurring the boundaries between innocence and guilt. By foregrounding personal experiences, trauma, and motivation, psychological thrillers offer a more nuanced understanding of crime, transforming the genre into a platform for examining human behavior and social realities.

## **Conclusion**

The evolution of the detective novel from the late nineteenth century to the present demonstrates a profound transformation in narrative form, thematic focus, and the conceptualization of crime and truth. Beginning with the rational and methodical framework established by Arthur Conan Doyle, detective fiction initially emphasized logic, scientific reasoning, and the restoration of social order through clear resolutions. This classical model was further refined during the Golden Age, where intricate plotting and the “whodunit” structure prioritized intellectual engagement and fair play. However, the genre underwent a significant shift with the emergence of hardboiled and noir traditions, which introduced realism, moral ambiguity, and a more cynical portrayal of society, reflecting broader historical and cultural disillusionment. In the postmodern and contemporary periods, detective fiction expanded beyond conventional boundaries, incorporating narrative experimentation, fragmented storytelling, and a questioning of objective truth. The rise of psychological thrillers, exemplified by writers such as Gillian Flynn, further transformed the genre by shifting the focus from external investigation to internal psychological landscapes, unreliable narration, and complex character dynamics. This progression highlights a movement from certainty to ambiguity, from external clues to internal conflicts, and from fixed moral frameworks to nuanced ethical considerations. Ultimately, the detective novel has proven to be a

highly adaptable literary form, continuously evolving to reflect changing societal concerns, intellectual paradigms, and reader expectations. Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to interrogate not only crime but also the human condition, making it a dynamic and insightful genre that bridges tradition and innovation across time.

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