



Thirst for Knowledge in Patricia Cornwell's *Postmortem*

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Abstract

“I CAN’T HELP READING!” is the common comment uttered by Detective Fiction readers who lose control over themselves as they begin reading a crime novel. The genre is a crystal clear formulaic structure which abounds with repetition: following a crime, an investigation is initiated by a detective to capture the criminal. Still, its clichéd nature does not lessen the universality of Detective Fiction. How could a story replete with puzzles and vague incidents be enticing? More importantly, why would the reader avoid discarding a book which sketches horrible deeds and inhuman interests of the criminal? What is the powerful element of Detective Fiction which places it among popular literature? This paper intends to answer these crucial questions by focusing on “conjecture,” a term introduced by Umberto Eco as the key feature of Detective Fiction’s appeal. To this end, an article by William F. Brewer and Edward H. Lichtenstein entitled, “Stories Are to Entertain: A Structural-Affect Theory of Stories” (1982) is targeted to shed light on the claim of conjecture as a way to knowledge by elaborating on three analytical components—surprise, suspense, and curiosity—of a story which make it strikingly attractive.

Keywords: detective fiction, knowledge, suspense, surprise, curiosity

ARTICLE INFO

Research Article

Received: Thursday, February, 3, 2022

Accepted: Friday April 15, 2022

Published: Sunday, May 1, 2022

Available Online: Friday, April 15, 2022

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2022.27649.1393>

Online ISSN: 2821-0204; Print ISSN: 2820-8986



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Introduction

The introduction to this Article includes two parts as follows:

Patricia Cornwell and the Tradition of Detective Fiction

Bergman (2009) in “Crime Fiction as a Popular Science” acknowledges the “declining interest in science education” (p. 193) in the last decade; therefore, academic institutions have managed to solve the issue by presenting science in popular fiction, particularly crime fiction in order to raise the public interest in the field of science. People appreciate science not in scientific books but in fiction and mass media. While they do not select crime fiction with the primary goal of majoring in science, they are “interested in what is going on in the world around them, and science is part of the world” (p. 204). As a result, crime fiction might be a valuable choice in favor of popularizing science among people.

Detective Fiction, a popular subgenre of crime fiction which appeals to almost everyone from a vivacious teenager to a quiescent aged person, is prone to numerous criticisms from various perspectives. Edgar Allan Poe’s three praiseworthy works “The Murder in the Rue Morgue,” “The Purloined Letter,” and “The Mystery of Marie Roget” won him the title of the father of detective story. The genre achieved its peak in the time of interwar, the Golden Age, by the stories of talented authors particularly, Agatha Christie who created a permanently living detective character, Monsieur Poirot. The genre’s popularity has not diminished since its emergence. Indeed, the latter part of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have augmented its charm by the immeasurable advancement of technology.

Patricia Cornwell, the well-known author of Scarpetta series, had the opportunity to work at the Virginia medical examiner’s office for six years. “Many of her experiences weren’t pleasant. But she was a superb observer of life” (Feole & Lasseter, 2005, pp. 3-4); six years of hard work in such a critical place added to her knowledge in this field (p. 4). In 1990 she succeeded with her best-selling novel, *Postmortem*, which won her a large number of awards (p. 6). In this novel, she created a protagonist, Kay Scarpetta, whom readers appreciate for her high intelligence and sympathetic heart. In *Postmortem*, Cornwell pictures the crime scene in detail, which mirrors the inhuman act of the killer that might recur in disparate parts of the story. Although these gruesome images – as well as ghastly depictions of autopsy – chill the reader, readers still take immense pleasure in pursuing the story. Readers accompany the detective throughout the novel because as human beings, they are eternally in search of truth. Since the creation of man is the biggest unresolved question, they are obsessed with truth, thus any endeavor to reveal truth is enjoyable for them. Findings of the detective adds to their “knowledge” and uncovers facts which pleases the reader to comply with the story. Achieving success through her well-liked character, Kay Scarpetta tempted Cornwell to make a series of the so-called detective’s investigations: *Body of Evidence* (1991), *All That Remains* (1992), *Cause of Death* (1996), *Black Notice* (1999), *Blow Fly* (2003), *Book of the Dead* (2007), *Scarpetta* (2008), *The Scarpetta*

Factor (2009), *Port Mortuary* (2010), *Red Mist* (2011), *The Bone Bed* (2012), *Dust* (2013), *Chaos* (2016), and *Autopsy* (2021).

The Novel, *Postmortem*

Patricia Cornwell's first published novel, *Postmortem*, which has sold more than 100 million copies was "the first novel to ever win the Edgar, Creasey, Anthony, and Macavity awards, as well as the French Prix du Roman d'Aventure, all in a single year. The book remains the only American crime novel to have ever won the coveted British Gold Dagger award" (Feole & Lasseter, 2005, p. 4). On the 1st of March, 1996, "six of Patricia Cornwell's books were included on the USA Today list of the twenty-five bestselling crime novels to date, including *The Body Farm*, *From Potter's Field*, *Postmortem*, *Cruel and Unusual*, *Body of Evidence*, and *All That Remains*" (p. 5).

Postmortem reveals the story of some horrible crimes committed in Richmond, Virginia. The first character introduced is Scarpetta, the sleuth detective, whose career covers a large portion of her life. She is a divorcee who runs a romantic relationship with the commonwealth's attorney, Bill Boltz. The other important man in her life is detective-sergeant Marino who stubbornly follows the cases in order to help solve the crime. Another significant person in her life is Lucy, her ten-year-old niece who is visiting her.

The story begins with a phone call from Marino who gives Scarpetta the address of a crime scene. It has been almost two months since the first murder happened and this one is the fourth. The victim is a young woman found dead by her husband in her bedroom. She has been raped and strangled in a fashion identical to the three previous cases. The only clue is a kind of substance found on the dead bodies. Matters exacerbate as the fifth crime happens to the sister of Scarpetta's acquaintance. Frustration prevails as detectives cannot find any meaningful connections between the five cases. Finally, however, they succeed in discovering a lead; all five victims had dialed 911 at a point in their lives for individual causes. Based on the newly found evidence, they infer that the killer must be a 911 dispatcher that was seduced by voices on the phone to chase and trap his baits. At the night of this discovery, the murderer breaks into Scarpetta's house while she is sleeping. He tries to do the same to her as he did to his other five victims, but Marino heroically appears in the room and shoots the killer dead.

Theoretical Background

Since its naissance, the popularity of crime stories has been the subject of scrutiny to the extent that numerous explanations have attempted to justify its fame. By emphasizing Umberto Eco's claim on "conjecture" expressed in *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, published in 1983, we intend to foreground one of the exemplary characteristics of Detective Fiction which qualifies it as "popular literature." Eco, the Italian philosopher and novelist, believes that people enjoy crime novels "not because there are corpses or because there is a final celebratory triumph of order (intellectual, social, legal, and moral) over the disorder of evil." On the contrary, the preliminary pleasure is obtained from the fact that "crime novel

represents a kind of conjecture, pure and simple” (1983, p. 54). For Eco, there is a strong bond between philosophy and Detective Fiction. In this regard, he avers that:

After all, the fundamental question of philosophy (like that of psychoanalysis) is the same as the question of the detective novel: who is guilty? To know this (to think you know this), you have to conjecture that all the events have a logic, a logic that the guilty party has imposed on them. Every story of investigation and of conjecture tells us something that we have been close to knowing. (Eco, 1983, p. 54)

Following Eco's lead, we try to shed light on one of the key factors behind Detective Fiction's global popularity. In order to achieve this goal, we make use of the term “knowledge” coined by Umberto Eco to justify the pleasure gained through reading detective stories and to conclude that superficial formulaic structure of these stories in fact delve into extremely complicated areas behind the scene. To further clarify our approach – and to make the fans of the genre conscious about their zeal for it – we draw on the two plots which comprise Detective Fiction: the first is the crime and the second which orbits around the detective and occupies most part of the text is investigation. The detective strives to close the case through interrogation, forensic means, and inference. Crime fiction readers accompany this detective in chasing the clues and observations to reach the conclusion. From the beginning of the novel to the end their thirst for knowledge is quenched and stimulated again, a kind of pleasure which persuades them to keep reading.

Literature Review

Patricia Cornwell's success in writing tangible stories with violent crimes has drawn the attention of critics to examine her novels from manifold approaches. She is a prolific American author whose works have received numerous prizes. While mentioning all the researches done previously is worthy of consideration, the academic requirement to fit it into a certain scale would allow fewer criticisms to cite:

Sayers (1936) in “Aristotle on Detective Fiction” acclaims Aristotle's *Poetics* as a fundamental resource for criticizing works of literature, in addition to announcing Aristotle as the chief advocate of Detective Fiction. She believes that Aristotle criticized the Greek Theater for the reason that it was the only available piece of literature, and indeed “what, in his heart of hearts, he desired was a Good Detective Story” (p. 24). Later, she underlines all the essential components of tragedy to employ them on Detective Fiction together with convincing explanations to intensify its significance as good literature. By quoting Aristotle from *Poetics* to prove her claim, she avers that “he had a stout appetite for gruesome” (p. 24), which is the essence of the crime. She maintains that Aristotle in spite of inappropriate mysterious stories, shortcomings of detective heroes who compromised of unsympathetic Gods, and no trace of forensic science to assist unravelling the truth still brings about significant components of Detective Fiction.

In her essay entitled “Bodies of Knowledge Pleasure and Anxiety in the Detective Fiction of Patricia Cornwell,” Sue Turnbull elaborates on four conspicuous appealing aspects of Scarpetta novels. Firstly, she discusses “a

pleasurable frisson of carefully structured anxiety with the promise of an ultimate resolution” (Turnbull, 1993, p. 3). The formulaic structure of detective stories may be the key factor of Cornwell’s books’ popularity. Secondly, pleasure is “derived from the scientific knowledge” (p. 5). Clues and traces found by the detective in crime scene, in addition to the autopsy done on the victim which clarify answers for questions such as the motif of the criminal, time of murder, and means of killing, all attribute to solve the riddle that readers are confronted. Thirdly, she mentions “the ambiguous pleasure of looking at what we most fear, that is death” (p. 16). Readers experience contradictory feelings of threat and security by death. And finally Scarpetta as a female detective dealing with cases of female victims feels a sense of threat that “produces suspense which renders these books compelling reading” (p. 27). Scarpetta sympathizes with the women victims and treats them in the autopsy in a very delicate and passionate way in which she seems to be talking to their dead bodies.

In a short essay entitled “A Pedagogical Approach to Detective Fiction,” Augustine Reyes-Torres claims to exploit the popularity of Detective Fiction as a tool to attract foreign language students to read and engross in literature. He announces “the mystery, the action, and the suspense in the story” (Reyes-Torres, 2011, p. 33) to be the substantial appealing components of the genre. According to him, through reading these stories three educational goals are achieved: progress of an individual mind, acquaintance with other cultures, and development of language skills (pp. 33-34). He proposes Detective Fiction to raise the students’ attention since it “is one of the most globalized, most popular, and best selling of commercial literary genres” (p. 33). Quite interestingly, all Detective Fictions include the same formula; a murder happens, the detective begins his research to assemble clues in order to solve the crime, and bring the criminal to justice; yet, each story expresses a totally different context with disparate plots, because “Every author in every country is distinguishable from another due to the local aspects that differentiate his or her work” (p. 35).

Bill Phillips in “Crime Fiction: A Global Phenomenon” presents an example story from the “Book of Daniel, chapter thirteen” (Phillips, 2016, p. 6) to argue that Detective Fiction goes back to the ancient time. The story reveals life of a virtuous young woman whom two elder judges are to seduce to have a relationship with. Shamelessly these two elders accuse the woman of having a relationship with a young man. In the court, people believe elders of high reputation, so the woman is condemned to death. God sends Daniel to defend her by cross examining the elders. Their lies are divulged and the young woman regains her honor. Phillips endeavors to convince people of crime’s existence from long ago when Daniel acted the detective. Phillips considers crime fiction as a source of truth in which the real events of each epoch may be deeply studied, that is, it “enables us to share emotions and comprehend the psychological consequences of events in a way that impersonal historiography does not” (p. 12). He delivers several instances from various countries to prove that the genre is a worldwide phenomenon. Furthermore, supposing its plurality and variety, “one of the things these texts reveal is a common global desire for justice to be done, and to be seen to be done” (p. 5). According to

him, Detective stories might pursue disparate themes such as politics, identity, or neocolonialism. Depending on the region and the common issues of that location, types of crime differ; however, the main concern is for “social justice and the betterment of our world” (p. 13).

Discussion

There is a virtually active sense of curiosity in human’s inner self. By instinct, we crave to acquire what is going on around us. Some people attempt to weaken this desire in order not to be troublesome as quidnunc, whereas others develop this wish by feeding it more and more. Although the first group may seem favorable, the second group might turn out to be more productive if the desire is directed on the right path. In fact, it is an insatiable appetite for knowledge implanted in human being which exhorts us to know more. Absorbing the required knowledge implies satisfaction in the beginning; yet, in time, this transient pleasure subsides and the thirst for more arises. The one who prefers Detective Fiction intensifies this desire for two overt reasons; first, the obvious job of a detective – to follow the clues and glean information – assists the reader to accompany the detective throughout the story and increase his findings along the way; second, the methodology that the modern detectives apply to solve the crime by utilizing high-tech facilities also augments one’s scientific knowledge.

Additional information is added to the earlier knowledge. Sometimes we are in need of urgent knowledge and willingly or reluctantly attempt to gain it. However, infovore system boosts our desire to learn things which we are not in need of, though “the knowledge obtained may have some practical value in the future” (Biederman & Vessel, 2006, p. 247). Therefore, it is of no significance that we require knowledge in order to use it; still “there is, in evolutionary terms, adaptive value to its acquisition” (p. 247). Acquired knowledge fills us with such a pleasure that unconsciously we get drawn towards anything or anyone that is potentially able to convey information to us. That is why we are generally attracted to intelligent people since they act as a source of knowledge to us, “a trait that is strongly correlated with mate selection in every human culture that’s been studied” (p. 247).

Knowledge is an essential achievement in Detective fiction. The detective occupies most part of the story in order to unfold the truth which was either scattered or covert. In *Philosophies of Crime Fiction*, Joseph Hoffmann identifies a detective as a philosopher who follows the traces to get to the knowledge. He defines a philosopher as “not someone who loves wisdom, but rather someone who appreciates knowledge, who actively pursues it” (Hoffman, 2013, p. 13). A philosopher is the permanent follower of knowledge. World is a big enigma to him and doing the puzzle to unravel the truth prioritizes his life. Variable reasons breed crime. Sometimes the reason and sometimes the perpetrator of the crime signify the detective’s predisposition to gather the clues to foreground the truth. Hoffmann believes that the reader paves the same path that the detective does. In order to obtain the proportionate knowledge, the detective must be intellectually adroit to make a distinction between essential and vacuous traces as Hoffmann reminds us

that “rationality, or reason is also an important tool in a detective’s work, though by no means the only one” (p. 13).

One of the ancient dominant philosophers who remains as an unprecedented paradigm of wisdom is Aristotle. Although he elaborated on tragedy profoundly, Hoffmann states that “he appreciates a myth (fable) in which the sequence of single episodes is probable and necessary and which contains the essential component of recognition, in other words a transformation from ignorance to knowledge” (p. 14). Suspense was a substantial component of the story for Aristotle. Moreover, discovering the truth to end the suspense was the ultimate goal of his writings. Hoffmann brings forth the popular Italian philosopher, Umberto Eco’s statement into attention to affirm his view on Aristotle. He asserts that “to Eco, the detective novel is Aristotle’s poetics reduced to its most essential elements because the novel contains a series of events (pragmata), the threads of which are tangled or have been lost. The plot (mythos) depicts how the detective finds these threads and connects them again” (p. 17).

The individual who pursues philosophy possesses a head replete with various questions on human’s origination. A philosopher is a never retiring learner for whom solving each riddle opens up new doors of mystery. Similar to Philosophy, there might be no definite explanation for many incidents in Detective Fiction; yet, the detective interminably attempts to get out of darkness created by the vicious character whose act is probably beyond comprehension. Deleuze (1994), the eminent French philosopher who is popular for his metaphysical ideas, was interested in Detective fiction as he declares:

A book of philosophy should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction. By detective novel we mean that concepts, with their zones of presence, should intervene to resolve local situations. They themselves change along with the problems. They have spheres of influence where, as we shall see, they operate in relation to “dramas” and by means of a certain “cruelty.” (p. xx)

The detective finds himself in the crime scene where a crime has already been perpetrated. The murderer has concealed all the traces in order not to get captured. The detective begins her job by disclosing the concealed truth to reach an understanding of the incident. On the other hand, psychoanalysis is a field in which a patient approaches the psychoanalyst with no more than a blurry dream. The patient is incapable of interpreting what his perplexing and vague dream conveys. As a result, the psychoanalyst is a refuge for the dreamer to bring what is left in darkness into light. The popular Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst, Slavoj Žižek, makes a “similarity between the procedure of the analyst and that of the detective” (Žižek, 1991, p. 53). Indeed, both hunt for hidden knowledge. In the former ambiguity of the fact is due to one’s specifically intellectual function of the mind, whereas, in the latter, disguise of the truth is on purpose. Žižek believes that there are multiple sources which rectify the psychoanalytic underlying fundamentals of Detective Fiction as “the primordial crime to be explained is parricide, the prototype of the detective is Oedipus, striving to attain the terrifying truth about

himself” (p. 50). Psychoanalysis attempts to clarify the obscure nature of dreams which are unfathomable for an ordinary person. Zizek (1991) avers that this procedure occurs in Detective Fiction as well:

The scene of the crime with which the detective is confronted is as a rule, a false image put together by the murderer in order to efface the traces of his act. The scene's organic, natural quality is a lure, and the detective's task is to denature it by first discovering the inconspicuous details that stick out, that do not fit into the frame of the surface image. (p. 53)

Hoffmann in the analysis of a philosophical novel, *Zadig*, by the French philosopher, Voltaire, adds more to the covert similarities between Detective Fiction and Philosophy. He states that Voltaire observes the world “as a place of crime and catastrophe, a place in which murder, greed and ideological conflicts are the driving forces” (Hoffmann, 2013, p. 36). In fact, human being is the omniscient witness of the incessant crime committed in the society. Here and there one observes or more frequently hears of the crime with various plots. People all are of criminal desires. Some might transmute this desire into reality while others struggle to confide it in themselves and look innocent. There is no guarantee for anyone's absolute discretion. An event or a pernicious habit might turn everything upside down since “all that seems steady and unshakeable today can come to an end tomorrow” (p. 36).

Dutta-Flanders (2017) in her popular book, *The Language of Suspense in Crime Fiction*, states that “suspense is more about unfolding the offender traits in a storyworld backgrounded in the dominant narrative, and is essentially an emotional process” (p. 2). Human beings have strong desires to get to what is kept from them. As the story proceeds, enigmatic questions will gradually be answered which not only do satisfy the reader by settling the curiosity but also widen their view of the world. Indeed, suspense does magic to mind since as it “emerges in the unfolding of the criminality, it has the ability to provoke an intellectual as well as an affective response, shaping our overall outlook of the crime” (p. 2).

In their popular article, “Stories Are to Entertain: A Structural-Affect Theory of Stories,” Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982) elaborate on three significant components of a story, namely surprise, suspense, and curiosity, which “account for the enjoyment of a large proportion of stories” (p. 13). Each one is intended to be explored largely on its own term and be applied on the selected novel of Patricia Cornwell, *Postmortem*.

According to *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, “surprise” is the feeling caused by something unexpected or unusual. Detective stories generally begin with a surprise which is the initiating element of their success to attract the readers. Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982) declare:

In a surprise discourse organization, the critical information from the beginning of the event structure is omitted from the discourse, without letting the reader know that it has been omitted, and then is inserted later in the discourse. We assume that the reader will be surprised when the reader reaches the point where the omitted information is revealed, and that the surprise is

resolved when the reader reinterprets the underlying event sequence in light of this new information. (pp. 13-14)

Following the plot of the story, readers construct their own imagination which leads to a singular interpretation and a sort of expectation for the final result. However, a twist of the outcome surprises the reader greatly, which intensifies the pleasure they were finding along the way. As Brewer and Lichtenstein state, “the basic discourse force of stories is assumed to be the entertain force” (p. 12).

Postmortem begins with a call to the medical examiner, Doctor Scarpetta, to report a crime. Neither the reader nor the characters have any initial information about the crime. The victim’s name is “Lori Petersen, a white female, thirty years old. Her husband had found her body about half an hour earlier” (Cornwell, 1990, p. 2). It is the author’s strong skill that “withholds the critical information at the beginning of the story, information that is necessary for a correct interpretation of the story” (Graesser & Klettke, 2001, p. 57).

The novel consists of several minor and major surprises. Arriving at the scene of the crime, Doctor Scarpetta, the chief examiner, finds medical equipment in the house. She supposes they might belong to the husband; but, to her dismay, they are for the victim. On the exact night of the murder, while the house is fenced as crime scene and the police are doing investigations, Marino, Scarpetta’s colleague, realizes that the killer has used the only unlocked window in the bathroom to enter the house. He is surprised by the husband’s explanation that he was “replacing the screen last weekend ... [and] it’s possible he forgot to relock the window when he finished” (p. 13) There are a few windows in the house which are all locked and neither has been touched in an attempt to break into the house. It seems the murderer already knew well which way to try. The husband is a literature student getting his Ph.D. in another city, Charlottesville. He stays the whole week there and only visits his home and wife on the weekends, “then goes back to Charlottesville on Sunday night” (Cornwell, 1990, p. 14). To their great surprise the crime has been committed on the night he returns home.

To arouse the feeling of surprise, the author does not follow a chronological order of events. This disorderly revelation of the events originates a sort of anxiety in the reader who is determined to get the whole account of the story. As Sternberg in “Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity” asserts, “among narrative effects, surprise evidently lies on tension, because a sequence communicating the events in their proper occurrence would reveal all and so leave nothing unexpected” (1992, p. 519). Readers do not receive the primary event in the beginning and follow a kind of chaotic sequence of events which increase their bewilderment; yet, to make a clarification in their mind they need to reach the concluding chapters of the story which shall disclose what was kept from them. This is where “the surprise will occur when the reader reaches the moment where the missing information is revealed” (Albuquerque et al., 2011, p. 8). Indeed, the authors skillfully position the reader in a particular path where everything seems to be moving as it should be, whereas the final revealing section faces the unexpected and the surprise.

The biggest surprise comes with a residue found on the scenes of the crime on various parts of the victims' bodies. The detective will not solve the crime unless she discovers the nature of the strange substance since "the information omitted for surprise must allegedly be 'critical'" (Sternberg, 2003, p. 623). It becomes even odder as they recognize the growing amount of the residue following the crimes. The fourth victim seems to be entirely covered with it. Not only does the obscurity of the substance perplex them, but they are also worried about the possibility of another impending crime. Sternberg (2003) declares that "with a permanent gap, the discontinuity forced open remains unfilled, or too variously, improbably, unreliably filled: the questions unanswered, the possibilities unambiguated, the hypotheses multiple, however incompatibly" (p. 522).

The case becomes even more dazzling as they conduct a number of examinations to find out that the residue looks like the substance Doctor Scarpetta uses in the autopsy. They become suspicious of each other, which adds to the confusion of the case. Sternberg (2003) strongly suggests that "surprises born of misdirection, along with less drastic yet as pleasurable zigzags in hypothetical reconstruction, are at the heart of the detective story's own teleology of telling in time" (p. 555). Approaching the final parts of the novel, it becomes apparent that the glitter comes from a particular kind of soap to wash the hands. The detective is in absolute wonder at the outcome as she utters that "I desperately wanted to know the origin of the residue we'd been finding on the bodies. But I'd never, not in my wildest fantasies, hoped it would turn out to be something found in every bathroom inside my building" (Cornwell, 1990, p. 194).

Readers might be kept in a condition of puzzlement virtually to the end; yet, the pleasure received from this perplexity and consequently unfolding of the mystery is greater since "readers will enjoy narratives whose discourse organizations succeed in producing surprise and resolution" (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982, p. 15).

Eventually, after a long run, they recognize the murderer is someone working in the radio room, 911, who responds to people's panicked calls. It is the final surprise which reveals the murderer's true character. So, the readers are expected to be surprised when they reach "the point where the limited information is revealed, and that the surprise is resolved when the reader reinterprets the underlying event sequence in light of this new information" (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982, pp. 13-14).

According to the Structural-Affect Theory, suspense is the second significant discourse structure which adds to the pleasure of Detective Fiction. It is a state of uncertainty and anxiety intentionally created by the author to keep the reader in doubt. In this regard, Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982) state:

A suspense discourse organization must contain an initiating event or situation. An initiating event is an event which could lead to significant consequences (either good or bad) for one of the characters in the narrative. The event structure must also contain the outcome of the initiating event. In a suspense discourse organization, the initiating event occurs early in the discourse. The initiating event causes the reader to become concerned about the consequences for the relevant character and this produces suspense. (p. 14)

Readers are obstinate in their search for the truth which is held back from their observation; so, when the suspense appears “in the unfolding of the criminality, it has the ability to provoke an intellectual as well as an affective response, shaping our overall outlook of the crime” (Dutta-Flanders, 2017, p. 2). Suspense awakens intellectual antennas of the human mind to look for the required information. Detective Fiction not only provides the reader with forensic science which augments the reader’s general knowledge, but also paves the way for them to make calculations in the mind and reach a comprehensive understanding.

In his article, “The Paradox of Suspense,” Carroll (1996) defines suspense as “an emotional response to narrative fictions” (p. 151). Doctor Scarpetta, the main character of *Postmortem*, is the principle source of the readers’ attempt to discard suspense. He continues that suspense can “evolve in reaction to whole narratives, or in response to discrete scenes or sequences within a larger narrative whose overall structure may or may not be suspenseful” (p. 151). In fact, *Postmortem* is a fiction in absolute suspense. Not only the reader but also the main characters are in a dilemma to recognize the villain. Based on their own interpretations they construct hypotheses neither of which proves to be true. Doctor Scarpetta is the only one who holds onto extended range of possibilities in solving the crime. Moreover, it involves several minor sections of suspense which appeal to the reader.

Suspicious behavior of the fourth victim’s husband, data leak from Doctor Scarpetta’s office, and unreliability of Doctor Scarpetta’s boyfriend who is also a colleague accumulate suspense. The most exciting and horrifying instance occurs in the final chapter of the novel. Doctor Scarpetta is in her house doing the research when she eventually decides to take a rest. Even her dream adds to the intensity of suspense as she puts it into words:

A bird was circling lazily overhead as I rode in a van with someone I neither knew nor could see. Palm trees flowed by. Long-necked white egrets were sticking up like porcelain periscopes in the Everglades. The white heads turned as we passed. Watching us. Watching me.

Turning over, I tried to get more comfortable by resting on my back.

My father sat up in bed and watched me as I told him about my day at school. His face was ashen. His eyes didn’t blink and I couldn’t hear what I was saying to him. He didn’t respond but continued to stare. Fear was constricting my heart. His white face stared. The empty eyes stared.

He was dead.

‘Daddddyyyy!’ (pp. 321-322)

Proceeding with unfolding of the events in the novel, excitement increases since the “emotion of suspense takes as its object the moments leading up to the outcome about which we are uncertain” (Carroll, 1996, p. 152). In the case of Doctor Scarpetta, anxiety is mixed with horror and thrill. These are the concluding sections of the novel; thus, the readers are aware of the significance of the events which are to draw them out of darkness and shed light on the truth. Carroll declares:

Suspense is not a response to the outcome; it pertains to the moments leading up to the outcome, when the outcome is uncertain. Once the outcome is finalized and we are apprised of it, the emotion of suspense gives way to other emotions. Moreover, the emotion we feel in those moments leading up to the outcome is suspense whether the outcome, once known, is the one we favored or not. (p. 153)

The anxiety and suspense reach the climax when it comes to the safety of Doctor Scarpetta since with suspense “the question we are prompted to ask does not have an indefinite number of possible answers, but only two. Will the heroine be sawed in half or not?” (Carroll, 1996, p. 154). The tension is high; yet, “pleasurable flirtation with fear is at the center of the experience of exciting stories” (Mikos, 1996, p. 85). A significant reason for the reader’s involvement in the suspense might be their concern for the characters whom they admire. Brewer (1996) calls this particular feeling “character sympathy.” He believes that when “there is the potential for a significant outcome for a character, the reader must be concerned about the character in order for the reader to feel suspense for the character” (p. 228).

In addition to surprise and suspense, as discussed above, Brewer and Lichtenstein introduce curiosity, another factor in Structural-Affect Theory, which adds to the appeal of crime fiction. Curiosity is defined in dictionaries as a strong desire to know. Its application in the novel is described as:

In a curiosity discourse organization the significant event is omitted from the discourse, but (unlike surprise) the reader is given enough information to know that the event is missing. This discourse organization leads the reader to become curious about the withheld information. The curiosity is resolved by providing enough information in the later parts of the discourse for the reader to reconstruct the omitted significant event. (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982, p. 15)

Detective Fiction includes a riddle in its core. The criminal’s unidentified personality is the major problem which needs thorough examination and questioning to be solved. There can be found nothing emotionally pleasing in this genre; yet, the strangeness of the events and characters intensifies the reader’s interest and curiosity to delve into the text and bring the mystery into light. Edmund Burke believes that “the first and simple emotion which we discover in the human mind, is Curiosity” (Burke, 1823, p. 41).

Curiosity does not allow us to enjoy the composure as “we readers know that we do not know and proceed accordingly, looking back to the past for clues and forward to the future for rounded closure” (Sternberg, 1992, p. 515). Readers are blissfully aware of the missing information. The absence of some knowledge in order to do the puzzle is self-explanatory; hence, the reader is to seek for the necessary parts to have a panoramic view of the incident. Curiosity in the text “requires a discontinuity between the telling and the told” (p. 526). Obviously some events have happened earlier; yet, the story begins from the section that these significant occurrences are left in the earlier.

In the selected novel, *Postmortem*, the police and more importantly the detective are looking for clues which are pretty hard to recognize. In serial killings, there is usually a common feature among the victims that attracts the wicked. However, in this case, there are four murdered women who share no apparent characteristics. They lived in entirely different areas. They did not own similar complexions since three were white and one was black. Each had a different profession. It was even unlikely that “they shopped or dined out or did their banking or anything else in the same places” (Cornwell, 1990, p. 71). So, curiosity is intensified as they remain with no clues to follow. Leaving no trace behind stresses the high intelligence of the villain. Scarpetta believes that these types of people are anomalies:

Genetically, these individuals are fearless; they are people users and supreme manipulators. On the right side, they are terrific spies, war heroes, five-star generals, corporate billionaires and James Bonds. On the wrong side, they are strikingly evil: the Neros, the Hitlers, the Richard Specks, the Ted Bundys, antisocial but clinically sane people who commit atrocities for which they feel no remorse and assume no blame. (p. 78)

The intellect and smartness of the murderer augments the reader’s curiosity to follow the story eagerly. “The hidden discontinuities that arouse one reader’s curiosity—pulling his attention back to the narrative past and altering him to the textual future in the hope of closure—” (Sternberg, 1992, p. 532) succeed in creating pleasure. Although the gap created from the missing information perplexes the reader, it is strongly motivating to keep the reader on the alert for filling the gaps since “curiosity throws the reader forward into the opacity of opaqueness” (Dutta-Flanders, 2017, p. 151).

Curiosity results in appearance of a number of particular features. The first is “realized by retarded exposition” (Tan, 1996, p. 333). The omitted information is not presented immediately for the reader. It takes considerable time to reveal what was held back from the reader. Detective Fiction in which the identity of the criminal is of significant value is unfolded to the reader gradually. Indeed, time helps both the detective and the reader discover the real identity of the murderer. Hidden facts contribute to the bewilderment of the reader since “retardation of setting information also results in a lack of comprehension of motives and major plans, from which the complete plot unit structure is dependent” (Tan, 1996, p. 333). The unidentified substance which plays an important part in the novel impedes reader’s understanding of the events. Proceeding with the story, the examiners recognize the substance as being an “inorganic” stuff. A long-term examination discloses the residue “coming from something granular, a powdery substance of some sort” (Cornwell, 1990, p. 193). Nonetheless, they do not give up on investigation. Along these findings the reader’s curiosity is appeased slightly. Medical examination certifies the substance’s being “a cheap soap powder found in public restrooms all over the city” (p. 206). This finding actually does a great deal to help the police search for the right person by narrowing the scope of the investigation.

Critical events do not pave a smooth path for readers. For a few pages readers are given the opportunity to follow a particular incident; however, they are stopped somewhere to continue with another event. So, “apart from retarded exposition, interruption of suspense may alter the narrative procedure and promote curiosity” (Tan, 1996, p. 333). Doctor Scarpetta’s worries increase after the fourth victim is identified as a medical examiner like her. In most cases, she ponders on the matters and sometimes succeeds in finding answers in her solitude. The readers understand more about not only medical doctors’ abilities but also the tension of the situation. They are deeply drawn into the plot when, all of a sudden, Scarpetta’s thought is put into silence and the story moves to portray events from a totally different angle.

The advancement of technology has mollified the readers’ curiosity by representing absolute facts. Forensic science is known as “the application of science in the solving of mysteries and crime” (Kaye, 1995, p. 3). The major principle of a crime fiction is to identify the criminal. Therefore, every method which could be of even the slightest aid is greatly welcomed to reveal the truth. In addition to the traces left behind by the wrongdoer and eye witnesses, forensic science, an absolute reliable source, facilitates the detective’s job in acquiring the facts. It is a tool which becomes an appealing feature in crime fiction. What it does in real life to solve the ambiguous crimes is priceless:

Over the last 20 years considerable advancements have been made in forensic science as an investigative and intelligence tool for police officers in criminal cases. These advances have changed the way police services around the world have conducted criminal investigations from murder cases to computer crime. Advancements in the methods of identifying biological material (e.g. DNA profiling) found at crime scenes have, in particular and especially, increased the possibility of linking persons of interest to the scene as well as removing the innocent from ongoing investigation. (Julian et al., 2011, p. 218)

Detectives observe the crime scene meticulously, gather clues, possibly question a few suspects and then, based on their suppositions, determine the guilt of the criminal. The knowledge might appease readers but not on fundamental grounds; because, after all, it is merely the detective’s view that judges one guilty and the other innocent. What if the detective is wrong or the information the police gathered did not come from solid sources? Yet, forensic science is “an integral part of the criminal justice system through the application of science to the available physical evidence in order to reach just outcomes in relation to criminal incidents” (p. 223). Science is famous for its precision and infallibility. Without this tool, there are probabilities of accusing innocent people who have no proofs to adduce and discard the accusation.

Learning science via academic books might be a boring experience to many readers. Detective Fiction is capable of turning this uninteresting topic to a matter of great interest. Patricia Cornwell is exemplary in her application of this influential tool in most of her novels, particularly in *Postmortem*. The novel presents scientific jargon to the readers. It seems as though the fiction does the job of teaching. For instance, through a simple sentence readers learn about science when Doctor

Scarpetta in the middle of her speech mentions that a fingerprint “left on human skin can emit light and may be identified in cases where traditional powder and chemical methods will fail” (Cornwell, 1990, p. 23). A didactic book has almost never been attractive for the readers, whereas, learning through fiction is highly efficacious. Patricia Cornwell puts her years of knowledge studying and working in a medical institution into words in her novels. Readers are entertained and instructed in science.

Conclusion

Human beings’ thirst for information and knowing more is a matter of discussion in this article. To elaborate on the significance of this topic, Structural-Affect Theory by William F. Brewer and Edward H. Lichtenstein is selected to support the above-mentioned hypotheses. According to them, what make Detective Fiction a popular genre are three main feelings—surprise, suspense, and curiosity—aroused by these stories. Surprise foregrounds sections of the novel and brings about information later in the following episodes of the book, information that was purposely omitted from the beginning in order to fill the reader with thrill. To create suspense, the author introduces an initiating event in the earlier sections of the novel which ignites concern in the reader to move forward. Readers interestingly follow the relevant pieces in order to get to the outcome which intends to satisfy their suspense by revealing the truth. Curiosity is a self-explanatory theme which pushes the reader to continue reading to gain the knowledge that is removed from the introductory section of the story. However, unlike surprise that keeps the reader unaware of the omitted information, curiosity makes the reader perk up the ears since the reader is utterly conscious of the missing parts. Following knowledge to get the hold of a definite answer is the principle concern of Detective Fiction. What helps human beings to find answers is worthy of attention. We are born to this world with no certain cause, always wondering on the essence of our creation. Multiple hypotheses are offered on this subject; yet, none has soothed us entirely, which is why we are constantly in need of a definite answer to all questions. The extent to which they please us is limitless.

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