

Detective fiction: an  
almost realistic  
fantasy in "the blue  
carbuncle"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

As detective fiction became more popular, people began speculating what the role of the detective was. In one perspective, many believed that the detective served as an explanation for the chaotic, modern world. The detective also gave society a simple way to approach situations using reason and logic. However, many argued that the detective represented an unrealistic character, and a fantasy solely for society's entertainment. Some even argue that it could distract readers from real problems by simplifying the unique situations the characters face. This idea is often explored using stories from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle. One of the stories, "The Blue Carbuncle," follows Holmes and his partner Watson as they figure out who stole a valuable diamond found in a goose's throat by first figuring out who the goose belonged to. Holmes' only clues were the name Henry Baker, and the hat that he left in the street with his goose. However, Holmes is able to theorize who this man might be and lure him to his apartment. Although it turns out he is not involved in the crime, Watson and Holmes use Baker to trace the diamond thief. While Holmes' method is the ideal way to approach problems, and it is clear how Holmes came to this conclusion, it required an unrealistic amount of knowledge. Despite his claim that everyone has the ability to reason the way he does, it is clear that it is a unique talent. This idea is prevalent throughout many pieces of detective fiction, and it supports the claim that detective fiction offers a fantasy, and Holmes' methods fail to address real problems.

After Holmes explains his process to Watson, his process seems simple enough. However, his conclusion requires a unique knowledge of insignificant facts that the general public would not know. Holmes creates an

extremely detailed hypothesis about Henry Baker's life based on a few characteristics on his hat. When Watson asks him to explain how he deduced a complex theory with little evidence, Holmes begins by explaining that “this hat is three years old. These flat brims curled at the edge came in then. It is a hat of the very best quality” (Doyle, 153). Holmes was able to figure this out by simply looking at the style of the hat while others would have had to do extensive research in order to come to that conclusion. Holmes was able to reach this conclusion without research and technology, which reveals a distinct knowledge of fashion that Watson did not have. Although his approach was simple, it required detailed knowledge of fashion patterns. The idea that Holmes' method is effective but unrealistic is portrayed in his analysis of the dust on Baker's hat. He suggested that Henry Baker spends most of his time indoors because “the dust... is not the gritty, grey dust of the street, but the fluffy brown dust of the house” (Doyle, 153). This adds to the idea that Holmes' method is unrealistic. While some of his conclusions were simple to understand, such as wax stains suggesting one uses candles rather than gas, it would be extremely unlikely that one would be able to easily tell the difference between indoor and outdoor dust. This revelation would require experiments and great amounts of research and information that was often not readily available to the general public, and yet Holmes was able to deduce this with one look.

Holmes' companion, Dr. Watson, serves as a representation of the general public and emphasizes that, while his method works and his talents are desirable, reason and logic are not the only factors that are involved in problem solving. Holmes believes that anyone could infer what he did

through reason and logic. Holmes explains that ““ you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see’” (Doyle, 152). He clarifies that he does not have any abilities that Watson does not, and therefore Watson can make the same connections that he has. Contrary to his beliefs, his talent takes a unique amount of knowledge and intelligence. Although it is possible to make some of the inferences that Holmes makes, others take skills that the public cannot access as easily as Holmes. Watson explains this idea to Holmes by articulating “ I have no doubt that I am very stupid; but I must confess that I am unable to follow you’” (Doyle, 152). Although Holmes’ discovery seems simple enough that an average person could have suggested what he did through his method, Watson, an intelligent army doctor, is unable to use reason and logic to his advantage despite his best efforts. Watson shows Holmes that it is unrealistic to expect an average person to connect clues as quickly and the way that Holmes does.

The claim that the detective is a mere representation of the desirable way to solve problems is further supported in Edgar Allan Poe’s “ The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” The detective, Dupin, wants to solve the murders of two women when the police fail to figure it out. The police cannot figure out how they were murdered because it seemed impossible for anyone to enter the room. Dupin is able to hypothesize that the criminal was not a human based on its ability to climb into the room, a hair sample, the nail that broke away from the window and the indescribable voice witnesses reported. This led him in the right direction, and knowing what to look for, he was able to track down the type of exotic animal and the possible owner. When Dupin explains this process to his companion, the colleague explains that although he tried

to understand Dupin, he only “seemed to be upon the verge of comprehension, without the power to comprehend” (Poe, 25). Much like Dr. Watson, the narrator serves as a representation of the average person, which emphasizes the detective’s talent. Dupin blames that police’s shortcomings on a lack of methods and reason. However, even his colleague describes his inability to understand the process despite Dupin explaining it. This moment exposes the unfortunate truth of detective fiction: the methods suggested by the brilliant detectives in so many novels is only an idealistic approach to solving problems. The talents that these detectives possess out of reach of the general public. While it is easy to believe how they came to their conclusions, people would not be able to draw these conclusions as effortlessly as the detectives. These methods would only be closely reproduced in real-life, but it would require a greater amount of effort, technology, research and knowledge. However, it provides society with a great source of entertainment and a momentary distraction from the inability to solve trivial, real-life problems.

Holmes exhibits the ideal way to problem-solve that was unavailable to the public during modernization. However, both “The Blue Carbuncle” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” portray an overly simplified way to solve problems. In order to solve problems as quickly and effectively as those represented in detective fiction, they would have needed the technology we have today. The closest method to the problem-solving reflected in detective fiction is by gaining instant access to detailed information through the power of technology and internet. Now, people have access to the amount of knowledge that the detectives’ method requires right under their fingertips.

While during its time, these novels presented an unrealistic but ideal way to view the chaotic world, now the average person has the ability to mimic their methods with the use of technology. Unlike those during modernization, the detectives had readily available access to information that not everybody has, therefore creating an escape from an unpredictable and unexplainable world.