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The Ideological Machinery: A Marxist Critique of Detective Fiction through *The Hound of the Baskervilles*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to examine detective fiction from a Marxist perspective, examining how the genre both uncovers and negotiates the ideological frameworks and class relationships of capitalist society. While highlighting narratives in classic and contemporary detective fiction, the study scrutinises how crime, investigation, and social order are intrinsically connected to issues of power, alienation, and justice.

The paper also contends that detective fictions such as Sherlock Holmes not only reflect the fears and contradictions of its socio-economic conditions, and it also is a location for the unveiling of the inequalities and repressed conflicts built into the very texture of ordinary life.

Following such theorists as Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson, the analysis illustrates how the detective becomes a social mediator of contradictions, illuminating the complicity between state, capital, and law. The genre's dependence on closure and truth is critiqued as a kind of ideological containment, even as its stories tend to gesture towards greater social disturbance.

Finally, this Marxist analysis illustrates how detective fiction can reproduce and challenge dominant ideologies at the same time, providing a critical space for both uncovering and imagining alternatives to the existing order.

Keywords: detective fiction, Marxism, ideology, class, social order.

Introduction

Detective fiction, through its emphasis on crime, investigation, and solution, engages readers through convoluted plots and layered characters. Below its surface, however, the genre is an ideological apparatus, a reflection of its epoch's socioeconomic forms and concerns. A Marxist critique provides a lens to show that detective fiction does more than reflect social contradictions: it actively negotiates and obscures the persistence of class relations and power structures. This essay treats detective fiction as a cultural artifact embedded in capitalist conditions, examining its formal conventions, character types, and social functions through Marxist theory. By tracing examples from classic to contemporary works, it reveals how the genre both critiques and normalizes the power dynamics that structure society.

Early detective fiction appears in the metropolises where industrial capitalism, wage labour, and emerging consumer culture produce new kinds of social discomposure. The detective figure tends to work within a system which rewards efficiency, rationalization, and mastery over uncertainty values which resonate perfectly with capitalist ideology.

Detective fiction is manufactured, marketed, and received in a commodity economy. Serial publication, franchise characters, and mass-market formats turn crime fiction into a reproducible commodity whose value is inextricably linked to audience demand, market trends, and branding and not at all to artistic innovation. The staging of the crime, the inquiry, and the final revelation unfolds as a carefully managed spectacle. It offers a critique of how surveillance, policing, and social discipline that rooted in capitalist societies, are deployed to orchestrate threat, deviance, and class tension. The detective embodies rationality, method, and calculable procedure, standing in for a larger order of control. This framing naturalizes the notion that social problem-solving is possible through technique, while concealing the structural causes of crime, economic deprivation, exploitation, and marginalization.

Ironically, closed-circle plots assure readers that crime can be explained through logical deduction within a closed social world. The containment of mystery within a readable framework mirrors the containment of social unrest within legal and institutional systems. The significance of clues often depends on specialized, insider knowledge, the legal jargon, forensic techniques, or contextual cues rooted in aristocratic or bourgeois realms. This can reproduce a credentialed gatekeeping of knowledge and reinforce an epistemic hierarchy aligned with class power.

The resolution typically reaffirms social norms and property relations. Wealth, lineage, and reputation are vindicated, while the marginalized figure of the criminal is re-integrated or expelled from the social field, depending on the text's ideological stance. Metropolitan settings concentrate economic disparities, municipal corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. The urban detective story often maps the social geography of capitalism—finance districts, factories, tenements, and salubrious drawing rooms, revealing how different spaces encode power. The periods of economic downturn intensify themes of desperation, survival, and precarity. Characters may be driven to crime by economic necessity, foregrounding the structural rather than individual causes of wrongdoing. Contemporary detective fiction frequently revisits issues of cultural capital, taste, and prestige. The detective's connoisseurship of clues and cultural fluency can signal a classed competence that maintains social hierarchies.

The investigator mediates between the base (economic conditions) and the legal-ideological apparatus. Their methods are sanctioned by institutions that reflect and reinforce capitalist rationality. The perpetrator often embodies social pressures such as poverty, alienation, exploitation that arise from capitalist organization. Criminal trajectories may critique inequality even as the text ultimately sanitizes or resolves them.

Police, private investigators, and legal professionals can serve either as reformist agents who stabilize the system or as corrupt actors who reveal its fragility. Outsiders (labour organizers, marginalized communities) may appear as threats to order, highlighting the fragility of the social contract.

Illusion of control and consolation: By presenting a solvable puzzle, detective fiction offers readers a comforting belief that social problems can be resolved through method, evidence, and rational inquiry. This emphasis can obscure the deeper, persistent structural causes of crime, Sarcasm and critique embedded in the plot, Many works embed subtle and sometimes explicit critiques of capitalism, portraying surveillance, policing, and the commodification of social life, while still delivering a satisfying resolution. The tension between consolation and critique is a defining feature of the genre. Normalization of property relations: The ending often reinforces social hierarchies and property rights, reaffirming wealth, status, and reputation as legitimate grounds for social order.

A Marxist literary approach posits that literary devices and forms are historically conditioned and ideologically loaded. As Terry Eagleton notes, even the “languages and devices a writer finds to hand are already saturated with certain ideological modes of perception” (Eagleton, 24). Marxist criticism seeks to illuminate the relationship between literary structure and the socioeconomic foundation, examining how texts represent, mirror, or contest the prevailing ideology of their era (Eagleton; Jameson, 36). Thinkers such as Georg Lukács and Fredric Jameson stress that literature is not a neutral mirror but an active participant in the social totality, embedded within a dialectic of autonomy and determination (Jameson, 18). Detective fiction, in particular, embodies these tensions, it ostensibly strives for the restoration of order while simultaneously revealing social ruptures and inequalities.

Detective Fiction: Plot, Ideology, and Social Order

Detective fiction is structured around a central crime, followed by investigation and eventual restoration of order. W. W. Stowe describes its basic narrative formula: “a murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies” (Stowe 104). This formula is not merely narrative scaffolding; it encodes ideological imperatives regarding social stability and justice. The genre’s central concern is the disruption and restoration of the social order, but the nature of this order, and whose interests it serves, demands Marxist scrutiny.

The restoration of order often privileges bourgeois norms, depicting the police and detectives as rational agents upholding a status quo presumed to be just and “natural.” As critics point out, detective fiction’s conventions “articulate and manage social anxieties about crime, disorder, and class conflict by translating them into solvable puzzles” (Stowe 107). This mechanism serves an ideological function: it reassures readers of the legitimacy of existing authority and the possibility of rational justice within a capitalist framework.

The Figure of the Detective: Bourgeois Order and Ideological Mediation

By utilizing the analytical frameworks created by Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes, proponents of Marxist criticism explain that the detective is not just an isolated genius but an emblematic representative whose argumentation and process legitimize bourgeois rationality and values (Chandler 203). Classic detectives such as Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot do not only solve mysteries; they reaffirm the power of (bourgeois) science, logic, and individual mastery over chaos. As Stowe puts it, “the detective as character recapitulates the myth of the self-made man, a model of autonomy, professionalism, and rationality” (Stowe 110). It reflects the fundamental principles of individualism and competitive meritocracy that are essential to

capitalist ideology. Nevertheless, detective fiction concurrently exposes social contradictions. The detective's world is never whole after he restores it.

These works often point towards the inherent systemic dynamics of criminality that lie deeply within poverty, corruption, or class conflict, only to end up looking to fix or offset them by means of re-establishing order. The ideological function of the genre is thus framed by ambivalence; the genre exposes the violence of the social world while simultaneously it tries to sew it back together.

A central concern for Marxist critics is the social meaning of crime and justice in detective fiction. Crime, in this type of genre, is generally individualized and pathologised; poverty, alienation, or exploitation as driving social forces are seldom made central as causes (Glover 223). This crime individualization, as Eagleton observes, performs a crucial ideological purpose-

"By representing crime as the deviance of the few, society can visualize itself as inherently just and harmonious, endangered only by unnormal individuals instead of by its own internal contradictions" (Eagleton 41).

The love of detective fiction for closure and the return to a pre-established order functions not merely as a narrative preference but as an ideological mechanism. By presenting a decisive resolution the crime is identified, culprits punished, social harmony restored the genre offers the reader a comforting illusion: that the law decisively governs, that justice is efficient and fair. This reassurance, however, operates at the level of form as much as content. The apparent efficiency of the state's machinery in fiction conceals the violence, biases, and structural inequities that accrue within actual legal and police institutions. In Jameson's terms, detective fiction dramatizes a resolution that legitimates the state while masking the ongoing violence of policing, surveillance, and exclusion that real-world power enacts. The genre thus performs

containment: it curbs disruptive impulses by offering a neatly solvable puzzle, and in doing so stabilizes readers' belief in a just order, even as it invites critique of how that order is produced.

The Economics of Detection: Class and Commodity in Detective Texts

Marxist analysis also demands a reading of the material and economic foundations on which detective fiction is made and sold. The rise and popularity of the genre overlap with advancements in urban capitalism, mass literacy, new leisure economies, and the middle class. As Ernest Mandel and other critics have demonstrated, detective fiction "appears with capitalist modernity and cannot be separated from the fears generated by urbanisation, property, and professional policing" (Mandel 67).

Crime in detective fiction frequently involves property and its protection, jewels that have been stolen, wills that have been forged, money that has been embezzled, and heirs who have been murdered are typical plot centres. The successful re-establishment of relations of property by the detective can be interpreted, from a Marxist point of view, as an allegory to the preservation of capitalist interests "In restoring stolen property or correcting interrupted inheritances, the detective sanctions the inviolability of property and the instituted class order" (Dupeyron-Lafay 100).

In the meantime, the genre itself is transacting within the capitalist literary economy, capitalizing on mystery, suspense, and resolution. As Jameson suggests, even our imagining of justice is filtered through the commodity consumption and logic (Jameson, *Late Capitalism* 72). It participates in shaping readers' sense of justice through market dynamics. By structuring plots around solutions, revelations, and definitive endings, it reinforces a transactional worldview where ethical resolution is inseparable from market satisfaction (desires met, goods acquired, status confirmed).

Sherlock Holmes: The Hound of the Baskervilles

Throughout the Holmes stories, distinct class hierarchies are evident. The protagonists—Holmes and Watson operate within and reinforce upper-middle-class rationality and order, differentiating themselves from the working-class populace of Dartmoor and London. For example, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Watson's commentary reveals class prejudice: "if I have one quality upon earth it is common sense, and nothing will persuade me to believe in [the hound superstition]. To do so would be to descend to the level of these poor peasants" (Doyle 67). Watson positions rationality and intellect as upper-class attributes, while associating superstition and ignorance with the proletariat, aligning with Marx's critique of ideological division in capitalism.

Similarly, Jack Stapleton's remarks about the local population "It is extraordinary how credulous the peasants are about here! Any number of them are ready to swear that they have seen such a creature upon the moor!" (Doyle 50)—degrade the autonomy and individuality of the rural working class while reaffirming the intellectual superiority of the upper strata.

The detective's logic and scientific method serve as ideological tools. Holmes frequently embodies the ideals of the bourgeois professional, using deduction to restore order and reinforce social norms. The series, as noted by Marxist critics, privileges individual reasoning, a foundational value of capitalist meritocracy, depicting Holmes as "the self-made man, a paragon of autonomy, professionalism, and reason" (Stowe 110). The restoration of order is not neutral; it upholds the sanctity of property and class, often aligning justice with the interests of the privileged.

In meantime, The plot of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* foregrounds class antagonism: the hound threatens the aristocratic Baskerville lineage, symbolizing a proletariat revolt against oppressive power. Yet, Doyle's handling of Selden's death, when Selden, a fugitive from the

working class, dies disguised in an aristocrat's clothes, suggests the futility of overturning class structures. The motion of Selden's body, "hunched together as if in the act of throwing a somersault" (Doyle 81), is interpreted by critics as a metaphor for the cyclical, self-defeating struggle of the proletariat to overthrow the aristocracy.

Stapleton's attempt to use superstition to mask his revolutionary ambitions reveals how ideological manipulation maintains social order. Despite intending to disrupt the aristocracy, the cycle of class struggle persists, one stratum simply replaces another. Thus, Doyle's narrative, from a Marxist perspective, exposes the mechanisms by which class divisions perpetuate themselves even in the guise of revolution.

Although Holmes often upholds bourgeois rationality, Doyle complicates simple ideological readings through diversified portrayals of criminality. Not all villains in the series are from the lower classes; upper-class characters like Colonel Moran (*The Adventure of the Empty House*) are implicated in major crimes, undermining the association of crime with poverty and raising questions about corruption across strata.

In short, Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series navigates and sometimes deviates from Victorian socio-economic reality by not attributing criminality to poverty alone, or to outsiders of society. Both the rich and poor are suspected by Holmes, and he stands out in literature for his objectivity a role that made him a popular, multi-dimensional hero.

The Fluctuating Ideology of the Genre: Resistance and Containment

Detective fiction functions bourgeois ideology, the genre is also inherently self-subverting, containing within it the seeds of critique, resistance, and alternative possibility. Certain works, especially those within the noir, hardboiled, or proletarian traditions place systemic corruption, state violence, and social inequality front and center in ways that disrupt the genre's typical ideological closure. Raymond Chandler's hardboiled detectives, for example, are frequently

shown as alienated, distrustful of power, and questioning the justice system itself (Chandler 139). Even as they crack cases, they lay bare the decaying underbelly of capitalist society, characterized by class injustice, exploitation, and existential despair.

As Fredric Jameson maintains, "the very logic of detection, which seeks to solve social contradictions, is always in tension with the text's exposure of contradictions that cannot, finally, be resolved by individual action" (Jameson 225).

A dramatic counterpoint to bourgeois traditional detection is the figure of the proletarian detective in some periods and cultures. For instance, in Shanghai during the 1920s, characters such as Itō Ken rewrote the detective genre in order to place class struggle at the center and reveal the crimes of capital itself (Michielsen). These novels reverse the genre's typical priorities instead of reintroducing bourgeois order, they condemn capitalist exploitation and call for collective justice.

Such innovations politicize the genre's potential for ideological change. When the detective is on the side of the working class or oppressed, the very rationale of investigation becomes a means of consciousness-raising and revolutionary criticism.

Contemporary Developments: New Directions in Marxist Detective Fiction

Recent decades have witnessed renewed interest in the intersection of crime, politics, and ideology. Postmodern and international detective fiction tends to prioritize issues of neoliberal dispossession, migration, and systemic violence, responding to changing capitalist realities.

Crime dramas and detective fiction, for example, increasingly challenge the dynamics of neoliberal capital, surveillance, and new precarities. Hardboiled and noir protagonists can today be debt-ridden, precarious, or disconnected from classical sources of authority, highlighting the ongoing centrality of class and exploitation (Counterfire.org). Further, more recent literature by minority and postcolonial writers employs the detective genre to challenge

the intersections of class, race, gender, and the vestiges of colonial power. All these points to the incomplete, progressive work of the genre's ideological labour.

Textual Case Studies from Classic to Contemporary: An Overview

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (late 19th–early 20th century):

Holmes operates within a bourgeois-liberal framework where crime is a distortion of rational order. Yet the stories also reveal anxieties about industrial modernity, empire, and social mobility. The forensic method embodies a rational subjectivity that legitimizes bourgeois governance.

Agatha Christie's Christie's Poirot and Miss Marple (mid-20th century):

Christie's narratives often center on social etiquette, class performance, and the domestic sphere. The solutions reveal the moral economy of the drawing room, where class signals and reputational concerns regulate behavior.

Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler (hardboiled tradition):

The hardboiled mode foregrounds systemic corruption, noir fatalism, and the intrusion of capitalism into everyday life. The detective is often morally compromised, and the social world is depicted as inherently rotten, challenging earlier ideals of rational order.

Contemporary writers (e.g., Nordic noir, transnational crime fiction) :

Modern works frequently scrutinize surveillance, state power, economic precarity, and globalized crime networks. They expand the critique to transnational capitalism, immigration, and the erosion of social safety nets.

So in brief, Detective fiction tracks governance shifts for instance , Holmes enforces rational bourgeois order; Poirot and Miss Marple police domestic etiquette and reputations; Hammett/Chandler reveal systemic corruption undermining justice; Nordic noir exposes state

surveillance and global crime networks. Ethical stakes widen from individual order to precarious institutions, threats, and evolving governance in a changing world.

Conclusion

Detective fiction is not just for entertainment; it's a cultural artefact that crystallizes and critiques the material conditions of its era. From a Marxist perspective, the genre exposes how capitalist realities dictate the production, distribution, and reception of tales of crime and resolution. It also demonstrates how the form can engage in the negotiation, legitimisation, or subversion of class relations and power structures. As economies, technologies, and relations of labour develop, detective fiction will continuously track and probe the tensions at the centre of capitalist culture.

To read Sherlock Holmes as a Marxist product is to uncover multiple negotiations of class, ideology, and boundaries of social change. The texts confirm bourgeois order in the logic of detection and restitution, but also underscore the cyclical and returning nature of class conflict. Holmes's objectivity and reason enable Doyle's fiction to speak widely, discussing but not eliminating the inequalities of the Victorian age.

A Marxist reading of detective fiction shows that the genre is more than a simple entertainment, being a rich, contested ideological arena. It justifies both the capitalist social order and is occasionally subject to radical critique, laying bare the contradictions and fears generated by its own conditions of existence. Whether reinforcing or undermining in place hierarchies, detective fiction can only be comprehended as an ideological machinery that is involved in society's perpetual fight to imagine, police, and even alter the terms of its own reproduction.

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