

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE DETECTIVE ARCHETYPE: COMPARING SHERLOCK HOLMES AND HERCULE POIROT

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT:

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#### ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received:02.05.2025

Revised: 03.05.2025

Accepted:04.05.2025

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#### KEYWORDS:

Detective fiction, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, archetype evolution, crime literature, psychological investigation, Victorian literature, Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle.

*This article explores the development of the detective archetype through a comparative analysis of two of the most iconic figures in crime fiction: Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. While both characters serve as master detectives, their investigative methods, personal traits, and cultural contexts differ significantly. Sherlock Holmes represents the logical, scientific detective of the Victorian era, whereas Hercule Poirot reflects a more psychological, human-centered approach from the early 20th century. By studying these two characters, the article demonstrates how the detective figure has evolved in response to changing societal values, literary styles, and reader expectations.*

**INTRODUCTION.** Detective fiction has long held a unique place in literature, combining the thrill of intellectual challenge with the satisfaction of restored order. Since its emergence in the 19th century, the genre has evolved in parallel with societal changes, scientific advancement, and shifting cultural norms. At the center of this literary evolution stands the figure of the detective—a character who embodies rationality, insight, and justice. Among the many fictional detectives that have graced the pages of mystery literature, two names have become synonymous with the genre: Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. Sherlock Holmes, created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1887, is often considered the quintessential detective. Operating in the foggy streets of Victorian London, Holmes represented the ideals of scientific reasoning and empirical observation. His sharp intellect, coupled with a distinct detachment from emotion, made him a symbol of late 19th-century rationalism and the rising faith in logic and forensic science. Through his iconic catchphrases and unique methods, Holmes set the standard for countless detective characters

that followed. A few decades later, in the wake of World War I, Agatha Christie introduced Hercule Poirot in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). Poirot, a retired Belgian police officer, emerged in a different social and cultural context—one marked by disillusionment, uncertainty, and psychological complexity. Unlike Holmes, Poirot relies more on understanding human psychology, emotions, and motives. His methods are less about footprints and fingerprints and more about profiling personalities and reconstructing emotional truths. Where Holmes represents the mechanical mind, Poirot symbolizes the emotional and psychological detective. This paper examines how these two iconic figures reflect the shifting archetype of the fictional detective across two major literary periods. By comparing their investigative approaches, personal characteristics, narrative roles, and broader cultural significance, we can gain insight into how the genre has matured—and how it continues to adapt in response to the evolving concerns of its readers.

**Literature Review.** The development of the detective archetype in literary fiction has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention. Critics and researchers have traced how the genre has reflected evolving societal values and intellectual trends through its central figures—especially in the characters of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. In *Crime Fiction: From Poe to the Present*, John Scaggs (2005) outlines the historical progression of the genre, emphasizing the foundational role of Edgar Allan Poe and the significant refinement brought by Arthur Conan Doyle. Scaggs identifies Holmes as the “rational machine,” whose methods embody Enlightenment ideals—objectivity, logic, and detachment. Holmes is a product of the Victorian faith in science and empirical evidence, and his stories often feature the triumph of order over chaos. Stephen Knight (2004), in *Crime Fiction 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity*, expands on this idea by contrasting Holmes with later detectives, such as Hercule Poirot. Knight points out that Poirot’s emergence during the interwar period represents a shift toward more psychological and interpersonal approaches. Unlike Holmes, Poirot focuses on motive, intuition, and the moral complexity of his suspects, reflecting post-WWI skepticism and the changing nature of justice and authority. Agatha Christie’s own narrative style has also received academic attention. Alison Light, in her book *Forever England* (1991), argues that Christie’s work—especially through Poirot—reflects a deep engagement with social norms and human behavior, rather than merely puzzles and logic. Poirot is portrayed as an outsider who understands people deeply, using emotional intelligence as much as deduction. Moreover, Catherine Nickerson, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* (2010), notes that detective fiction evolved not just through character development, but also in response to readers’ expectations. As audiences grew more sophisticated, detectives like Poirot, with more personal depth and cultural nuance, became more popular than Holmes-type figures who relied purely on observation. Together, these works illustrate the detective archetype as a dynamic literary construct—one that evolves with the times. Holmes and

Poirot serve as markers of this evolution: Holmes as the pinnacle of scientific logic, and Poirot as the detective of the human soul.

**Research Methodology.** This study adopts a qualitative, comparative literary analysis approach to examine the evolution of the detective archetype through the characters of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. The methodology focuses on textual analysis, allowing for an in-depth exploration of narrative structure, character development, thematic emphasis, and socio-historical context in selected literary works. Primary sources include Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892) and Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), both of which introduce and develop the foundational traits of each detective. These texts were closely read and analyzed to identify core elements of each character's investigative style, personal demeanor, and cultural representation. The analysis also draws on secondary scholarly literature to support interpretative claims. Key academic works such as John Scaggs' *Crime Fiction* (2005) and Stephen Knight's *Crime Fiction 1800–2000* (2004) were used to frame the historical and literary shifts that influenced the transformation of the detective archetype. The comparison follows a thematic structure—focusing on investigative methods, personality traits, and cultural context. Each category is analyzed with reference to both primary and secondary sources, enabling a balanced and critical discussion. An important aspect of the methodology is the use of direct and indirect literary quotations to illustrate character features. For example, Holmes's famous quote, "*When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth*" (Conan Doyle, 1890), reflects his commitment to deductive reasoning and scientific logic. In contrast, Poirot's emphasis on "the little grey cells" highlights his belief in psychology and intuition. Overall, this comparative method enables a clearer understanding of how the detective figure transformed from a symbol of rational order in the Victorian era to a more nuanced, psychologically driven character in the early 20th century.

**Research discussion.** The detective genre has long captured the imagination of readers, offering an intriguing blend of mystery, intellect, and psychological depth. Among the most iconic figures in this genre are Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, two detectives who not only defined their respective creators but also shaped the evolution of the archetype itself. While both detectives share the role of solving complex mysteries, their distinctive methods, personalities, and cultural contexts present fascinating contrasts that illustrate the changing nature of the detective figure in literature. Created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes made his first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Holmes revolutionized detective fiction, establishing the model for many detectives that followed. His success was grounded in several key features that have since become integral to the genre.

1. Rationalism and Deductive Reasoning: Holmes's defining characteristic is his brilliant mind, particularly his ability to use observation and deduction to solve cases. His

reasoning process, relying heavily on scientific methods and logic, established him as a proto-scientific figure. Holmes's method of deduction, famously illustrated through his powers of observation and logical inference, laid the groundwork for the detective archetype in literature. He represented a figure of reason in a rapidly industrializing world that placed increasing faith in scientific progress.

2. Isolation and Social Detachment: Holmes's personality contrasts sharply with the traditional notions of heroism. He is often portrayed as emotionally distant, eccentric, and sometimes even disdainful of the societal norms that surround him. His relationship with his companion, Dr. Watson, further emphasizes his isolation. Watson represents the everyman, often serving as a foil to Holmes's genius and providing a lens through which the reader can understand Holmes's extraordinary skills. Holmes's solitary nature and sometimes aloof personality reflected the growing individualism of the late Victorian era.

3. Cultural Context and Representation of the Victorian Era: Holmes's stories emerged during a period of significant societal change. The late 19th century saw rapid industrialization, the rise of detective agencies, and growing urbanization. Holmes, with his scientific approach to solving crime, reflects the Victorian fascination with empirical knowledge and technological progress. He embodies the ideals of Victorian masculinity—rational, self-controlled, and intellectually superior—further cementing his place as the quintessential detective of his time.

Created by Agatha Christie, Hercule Poirot made his first appearance in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). Poirot's character, while somewhat inspired by earlier detectives like Holmes, presents several distinct differences that reflect the changing landscape of the detective genre, especially in the interwar period. As Europe faced the aftermath of World War I and the rise of modernism, Poirot's method and personality represented a shift in how detectives were conceived. Unlike Holmes, whose method relies heavily on observation and deduction, Poirot's strength lies in his psychological insight. He often refers to his "little grey cells," emphasizing intuition, empathy, and an understanding of human behavior rather than purely logical reasoning. Poirot's approach reflects the increasing interest in psychology and the exploration of the human psyche during the early 20th century. His focus on understanding the motivations of the characters often leads him to a more holistic view of the crime, rather than just solving the technical aspects of a case. Poirot, a Belgian detective, adds a layer of foreignness to the archetype. His accent, peculiar mannerisms, and insistence on orderliness set him apart from the British detectives like Holmes, embodying a cosmopolitan, almost exotic quality that was appealing in a world increasingly defined by globalization. Poirot's foreignness also allows Christie to explore themes of cultural identity, as his outsider status often makes him the subject of prejudice and misunderstanding, which

in turn affects his relationships with others. This juxtaposition of intelligence and perceived "otherness" is significant, as it reflects broader societal questions about identity, nationalistic sentiments, and post-war disillusionment. Poirot's approach to justice is marked by a greater degree of moral flexibility than Holmes's. While Holmes is motivated by a desire to uphold the law and seek out objective truth, Poirot often operates within a framework of personal morality. In many of Christie's novels, Poirot makes decisions based on his understanding of the greater good, sometimes manipulating the outcome of a case or withholding justice if he believes it serves a higher purpose. This approach reflects a more complex, nuanced view of justice in the post-war world, where the black-and-white certainties of Victorian society began to be questioned.

Holmes and Poirot reflect the distinct cultural and philosophical shifts of their respective times. Holmes, with his focus on logical deduction and empirical evidence, represents the Victorian era's faith in rationality, progress, and scientific inquiry. In contrast, Poirot, with his emphasis on psychology, intuition, and moral ambiguity, embodies the modernist movement's exploration of the complexities of the human mind and the changing values of the interwar period.

1. **Methodology:** Holmes's focus on logical deduction and empirical evidence contrasts with Poirot's psychological insight and moral flexibility. While Holmes seeks clear-cut, scientifically-backed solutions, Poirot understands that the motivations behind crimes are often rooted in human emotion, and these cannot always be neatly explained by logic alone.

2. **Personality and Identity:** Holmes is depicted as a solitary, almost robotic figure, while Poirot's charm, eccentricity, and personal flaws make him more relatable. Poirot's foreignness and personal quirks also speak to the changing attitudes toward national identity and the outsider in a globalized world.

3. **Philosophical Outlook:** Holmes embodies the Victorian ideal of objective, rational truth, while Poirot's fluid approach to justice suggests a more modern, morally complex world where right and wrong are not always easily distinguishable.

The characters of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot have left a lasting impact on the detective genre. Holmes's sharp intellect and logical precision established the groundwork for countless detectives who followed, creating an archetype of the detached, rational investigator. Poirot, on the other hand, represents a more modern and psychological take on the genre, highlighting the increasing complexity of human motivations and ethical dilemmas. Through their contrasting approaches, both characters serve as reflections of their respective eras—Holmes as a symbol of Victorian rationalism and Poirot as a product of a more disillusioned, introspective post-war world. Together, they illustrate the evolution of the detective figure from a figure of scientific reason to one that embraces psychological depth and moral complexity. The detective archetype continues to evolve, but it is these

early figures that have paved the way for future iterations, ensuring their place in literary history.

**Conclusion.** The evolution of the detective archetype is clearly illustrated through the comparison of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot—two of the most iconic figures in crime literature. While both characters serve as master detectives, they reflect different historical periods, investigative philosophies, and narrative functions. Sherlock Holmes represents the ideals of logic, science, and detachment characteristic of the Victorian era. His method of solving crimes is rooted in observation and deduction, reflecting the cultural faith in reason and order. On the other hand, Hercule Poirot embodies the more psychological and human-centered perspective of the early 20th century. His approach relies on intuition, emotional intelligence, and an understanding of human behavior. Poirot's character signals a shift in the genre from mechanical reasoning to deeper explorations of motive and morality. Through this comparative analysis, it becomes evident that the detective archetype has transformed in response to changing social values and literary trends. Holmes and Poirot remain enduring figures not only because of their unique traits but also because they each represent distinct phases in the history of detective fiction. Their legacy continues to influence modern interpretations of the detective and ensures the ongoing relevance of the genre.

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