
The Emergence of French Crime Fiction during the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This article deals with the emergence of crime fiction in the Second French Empire during the reign of Napoleon III. This article focuses on components which have enabled the birth of the genre. The emergence of crime fiction matches with several societal changes, such as a new social fascination for criminal figures relayed by a new cheap press, the evolution of police structures or the emergence of a leisure society. Those changes inspired writers, giving them materials to create of this new literary subgenre. It will also focus on new crime fiction's structures developed by Edgar Allan Poe, then followed and developed by writers from France such as Emile Gaboriau, structures which reverse some usual patterns, allowing crime fiction to become a real independent genre.

Key Words

French literature, Crime fiction, Second Empire, Serial, Newspapers, *feuilleton*, Emile Gaboriau

Introduction

It seems complex to assert who was the father of crime fiction, and even to identify in which country the genre had emerged for the first time. However we know that the earliest record of crime fiction was situated in China around the year 700, with the adventures and investigation of the Judge Dee, a magistrate and statesman of the Tang court. But we have to wait until the 19th century to notice the emergence of a new genre with proper rules and structures. A new genre which did not appear from nowhere for it was indeed part of long gestation, and even during the Romantic Movement we already had some traces of crime fiction themes. For example in Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens' novels some themes such as unpunished crime, criminal and avenger figures or miscarriage of justice, presage the new genre. Crime fiction appeared in the middle of the 19th century in three different countries. Edgar Allan Poe was a precursor in the United States around 1840 with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* [1841]. Then Emile Gaboriau was the first in France in the year 1860 to embrace the medium. At the same period in England Wilkie Collins also wrote detective stories and crime fiction. He was followed in the years 1880 by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with *A study in Scarlet*, introducing the famous Sherlock Holmes and his partner in crime, Doctor Watson. There were indubitably two poles, in France and Anglo-Saxons countries, both were in constant evolution and inspired by each other over the years. During the Second Empire in France, emerged a trend for subgenres and diversification in literature, which was aimed for a specific audience: exotic adventures novels for men with Gustave Aimard's novels, children fiction novels with La Comtesse de Ségur and even the emergence of science fiction novels with Jules Verne. It seems that crime fiction occupied an intermediary level between proper literature and popular fiction and therefore the genre was read by a cultivated audience as an entertainment but also by a more popular readership with newspaper's serials. In this essay we will focus on the French pole, by trying to understand different aspects that have enabled crime fiction to emerge in the 19th century.

Crime *feuilleton* in Popular Newspapers

Crime fiction in France emerged under Napoleon III's Second Empire, who was highly criticized at the time. A lot of intellectuals were hostile to Napoleon III's repressive system such as Victor Hugo or Emile Zola. It was a time of repression specifically for the press. Indeed during the Second Empire, authority censored newspapers, especially articles and columns dealing with political issues. To fill this editorial gap, some newspapers such as *Le Petit Journal* began to cover criminal matters. *Le Petit Journal* created in 1863, was one of the first popular daily newspapers with a wide distribution. This popular press also called *canard*¹ was sold at a really cheap price on public roads to attract a popular audience which usually did not read daily press. *Le Petit Journal* was specialized in crime themes which attracted numerous readers fascinated by grim and atrocious anecdotes. In 1869 the Troppmann case is one of the most representative affairs which have been written about extensively in newspapers. Indeed in 1869 eight corpses have been found mutilated in Paris [Porte de Pantin]; newspaper headlines were extremely evocative and provocative as this headline from *Le Petit Journal*:

Un crime épouvantable!!! Un homme de 60 ans coupé en morceaux. Bouilli dans une marmite et jeté en pâture au porc. Détails horribles!!!

A dreadful crime!!! A 60 year old man has been cut up into pieces. Boiled in a cooking pot and thrown to pigs. Horrible details!!!).

Moise Millaud *Le Petit Journal's* owner and editorial director understood quickly that this new fascination for crime was a windfall for his newspaper. Crime and judicial novels, tribunal *chroniques* and anecdotes were at the heart of *Le Petit Journal*. To reinforce this editorial policy and increase his readership, Moise Millaud hired Emile Gaboriau to write criminal serial fiction each day, following tradition of the *feuilleton*. Therefore Emile Gaboriau is considered to be the first French crime fiction novelist, notably with his *Monsieur Lecoq* serial novel which dramatized police investigation. Gaboriau became the newspaper's head author and represented a new category of journalist; he was both

¹ Newspapers specialized in anecdotes accompanied by illustration. It was dedicated to a popular audience.

novelist and reporter. He also considered that with his crime serial and especially with detective *Monsieur Lecoq's* investigation he brought at least 60,000 new readers over the 300,000 copies distributed at the time. Moise Millaud confirmed in a letter to Gaboriau with a touch of cynicism the importance of the novelist [de Lavergne, Elsa. 2009. "La naissance du roman policier français: du Second Empire à la Première Guerre mondiale"]:

Mon cher Emile, continuez. Votre système s'adapte à merveille aux exigences de la bêtise humaine. Il y a en France 500 000 lecteurs qui vous gobent tous les jours.

My dear Emile, please carry on. Your novel's system is wonderfully adapted to the human stupidity exigency. There are in France more than 500,000 readers who swallow your story every day.

A fascination for "Super-Criminals"

Therefore newspapers were in France the medium in which crime fiction had made its first entry. This emergence also coincided with a society which became more and more fascinated by what we can call the "super-criminals". Toward a repressive state, people and especially the working class began to be fascinated by villains' misdemeanours, such as Vidocq's adventures. Eugène François Vidocq was a brigand, he was in jail several times and each time he managed to escape, thanks to his capacity to dress up². Later he knew an extraordinary conversion in becoming one of the first investigators in the *Surêté* new police force. He also wrote his memoirs dealing with his criminal days and his lurid adventures. These memoirs quickly became a best-seller in France, capturing the contemporary imagination, and reinforcing the status of heroic outlaw, which was an index of popular discontent with the regime. Such characters as Vidocq or Anthelme Collet, (another famous thief famously known to be able to change his identity and to dress up to commit a crime) were almost legends in the country. Therefore a lot of writers use those popular characters and their stories as material for crime fiction. For example Henry Cauvain's *Maximilien Heller* novel was highly inspired from Vidocq's life, notably in the capacity of the main character to change his appearance in order to foil criminals. There was, in nineteenth

² He escaped from Brest's penitentiary dressed up as a sailor in 1798

century France, a real fascination for eminent criminals seen as modern adventurers and respected for their audacity and provocation. Therefore famous criminals entered into the public psyche through newspapers, and crime novelists played on those portraits to enrich their stories and to satisfy their audience.

The Emergence of the Detective Figure

The emergence of crime fiction also corresponded with the birth of a new police force: the *Sûreté*³ which broke away from Emperor's political police force. With a society which became more industrialized and hence more urban, police needed to adapt, especially in big city such as Paris. The *Sûreté* was created to investigate on committed crimes and also in prevention of it. The problem remain that among society, police forces stayed discredited due to the fact that a lot of policemen in service were reformed criminals and convicts. It was not until the middle of the 19th century and the emergence of detective's profession that people began to have a better perception of police work. Once again crime fiction played an important role, for instance crime novelists such as Emile Gaboriau use figures of *Sûreté*'s detectives in their novels. Detectives such as Monsieur Lecoq's character were spotlighted in crime novels becoming main characters, whereas they were only secondary character in novels hitherto. Emile Gaboriau was known to have a great respect to those new field men which had the reputation to practise thankless tasks with a capacity of great observation and thought. His character of detective Lecoq was strongly influenced by those *Sûreté* new detectives. In the Gaboriau's novel detective Lecoq is a young man without financial resources, coming from an aristocratic but ruined family. Just after he had arrived in Paris to study both his parents die letting him without means, and after several unqualified jobs he was recruited by the French *Sûreté* and became a zealous and professional detective. Thanks to Emile Gaboriau crime fiction, readers began to have a better image of policemen, and he contributed to give those detectives a status of hero. Therefore it is interesting to sense that if crime novelists were inspired by transformation within police institution, their novels and serials had also an influence among society

³ French criminal investigation department directed by Vidocq from 1809 to 1827

perception. At the end of the nineteenth century appeared new methods of investigation and terms of “scientific and technic police unit” emerge. For example a morgue was set up in Paris in 1864 to proceed with crime victims’ medical autopsy. This place became a place of curiosity for a lot of Parisians at the time, corpses being displayed on marble slabs for family to identify. Once again crime novel will escort those changes to jibe properly with reality. For example when detectives started to use photo cameras to immortalize a crime scene, some authors such as Eugène Chavette in his novel *Pourquoi?* [...] add an illustration which represents a map of the scene crime.

Crime Fiction new rules and structures

During a long time crime fiction remained disparate without a proper structure, it was therefore complicated to definite the genre. With its installation among the literary scene, and in particular in newspapers as serial fiction from years 1860 in France, crime fiction began to be understood has a specific genre in literature. In renewing some schemes it also became independent from other literature’s subgenres. In fact crime fiction formed itself in opposition to regular serial fiction and reversed some schemes. Crime fiction’s structure was highly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories such as *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841 then *The Mystery of Marie Roget* in 1842 and *The Purloined Letter* in 1844. He was the first to reverse the plot, with Poe plots started from something known [a crime and clues left behind by criminals] to something unknown [who committed the felony and what is his motive?]. This new structure allowed writers to break up the tale, to gradually give clues, keeping readers in suspense. Lot of French crime novel writers were inspired by Poe’s works, thanks to translation and particularly the one by Charles Baudelaire in 1856. References to the American writer were frequent, for example Jules Lermina’s *Histoire Incroyables*, who was clearly inspired by Poe’s collection of short stories *Extraordinary Stories* in the title but also in the stories’ plot.

A Capacity of Entertainment

What is more is that in its youth history crime fiction was shaped in adequacy to social changes, which had an influence over narrative structure. Indeed the period matched with the emergence of a consumer and leisure society, which concerned in the first place a cultivated *bourgeoisie* which read crime fiction as an entertainment. Crime fiction writers understood that in order to attract an audience, they had to entertain, and this is why the plot had to be without any breaks. Moreover the writers tried to include the reader in the story so that he too can play the detective and participate to the crime resolution; it was a kind of puzzle game playing on the “do it by yourself” aspect. Readers had to be active in their reading, they had to fill holes with the right pieces, in a way readers are detective confidants and they followed clues and detective’s logic. These aspects were emphasized by the fact that most of the time, crime novels were quite short with on average no more than 200 pages. In this way, readers were able to read a story in one evening, or during a train travel. Indeed crime fiction worked perfectly in harmony with this new way of travelling. Like a train, the story had to move forward and fluently while readers were in a kind of cocoon which stimulated their reading. We also find this quick consumption’s facet in newspaper crime *feuilleton*, like we saw with Emile Gaboriau who was pushed by Moise Millaud *Petit Journal*’s director to write an episode of his plot every day to keep readers attention. Therefore writers such as Gaboriau had to conceive their enigma really fast and it appeared to be a lot of pressure as Gaboriau explained in a letter sent to his sister in 1867, in which he complained about “the terrible *feuilleton* domination” and the fact that he had to write at a “frenetic pace” without a “minute for himself”. In a way crime fiction’s structures were built to serve those new frenetic needs of consumption, explaining rules’ repetition which involved a standardization to stimulate a nearly endless production. Crime fiction writers also managed to break up *feuilleton*’s model to surprise and grab the audience, for example with an abrupt beginning. It was usual to deal with a crime scene at the outset without a prologue to introduce characters like classic *feuilleton*’s stories usually did. For example in Fortuné du Boisgobey’s serial called *Décapité* in 1889 [*The Severed Head*], the first scene takes place during a masked ball in which a group of masked

scoundrels let fall a woman's severed head, directly introducing the investigation. What is more is that crime fiction novelists used to play with *feuilleton* fragmentation principle such as TV shows nowadays. This daily cutting in the story was used to emphasize suspense and contain readers' curiosity until the next day, most of the daily episode end on a striking event, a new fundamental clue or a revelation which implies an answer and a follow up.

Conclusion

Since its birth, the essence of crime fiction was situated in its capacity to faithfully adapt to fit social realities and changes. Therefore it is not a coincidence if the emergence of crime fiction took place in a changing world, which became industrialized, more urban and fascinated by morbid anecdotes. If crime fiction knew a success from its birth it was also because it managed to attract several population strata, in playing on the working class' fascination for shady crime and in the same time with an entertaining extent. In modifying the usual novel structure and in turning away from some freezing schemes, crime fiction also managed to supply a breath of fresh air through the literate area. If this article only focuses on the French scene, the same conclusions can be adapted to England and the United States, writers from those countries having close links and influencing one another. Therefore it occurred more or less in those three countries the same social changes. Even afterward in its more contemporary history, crime fiction has demonstrated its capacity to evaluate and to transform itself, which is reflected by the raising of subgenres such as *le roman noir* after the WWI, the American *hard boiled* novels with author like Raymond Chandler, thriller, espionage novel etc. What's more, if today's crime fiction stays a genre which attracts the masses, it keeps this capacity to also tempt a more literary audience.

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