




Investigating Genre Extension: Proposing a Juvenile Sleuth in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

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Abstract

'Genre' is a literary type which keeps extending and evolving into something independent and new. The extended work of art paves way for further extension, with innovative disparities. Detective fiction is a fine example for the extension and overlapping of genres as it offers scope for creativity and experimentations. This paper elucidates how this extension of genre happens by following and also differing from the existing conventions. This elasticity of genre is explained through a detailed analysis of Mark Haddon's novel The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, focusing on its narrative aspect.

Keywords: genre extension, detective fiction, overlapping, genre-elasticity

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The term 'pulp literature' came into existence during the First World War. The magazines of the early twentieth century were printed on wood pulp and were called pulp magazines and became extensively popular during the 1920s (Cuddon, 2013). Pulp fiction has been of importance in literary history as it gave birth to American detective fiction. Detective and crime stories are among the most popular genres of present day fiction and accommodate numerous sub-genres. Tzvetan Todorov (1977), a Bulgarian-

French historian and structuralist, in his essay "The Typology of Detective Fiction" opines that the concept of genre sprouted after literature on the whole came into existence, and so it is unjust to label a book good or bad based on it. He claims that every book establishes two genres, one is that which existed before it and the other is that which it creates, by transgressing the previously existing rules. The three prime sub-genres of Detective Fiction are Whodunit, Thriller and



Suspense. The self-explanatory classical form is called Whodunit.

Whodunit, considered a predominant mode of crime writing, is a plot oriented, complex detective story which invites readers to involve in the investigation process. Thriller is a broad genre of literature with several sub-genres. Todorov states that, “. . . the narrative coincides with the action,” and so the detective is not assured to reach alive till the end of the story, unlike Whodunit (Todorov,1977, p. 47). Suspense is a crucial element of the thriller genre as it maintains the interest of the reader by stirring up hope and anxiety. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle (ca. 350 B. C. E./ 1907), in his *Poetics*, argues that suspense is a crucial element in thriller genre. Apparently, Thriller and Suspense share qualities and overlap, and so they cannot be extensively differentiated.

Detective Fiction and *The Curious Incident*

According to P. D. James (2011), detective fiction is differentiated from mainstream literature and crime novels by its highly organised and recognised conventions. The general expectation of a reader is a mysterious crime, a detective, either an amateur or a professional, and towards the end of the book, a convincing solution. This solution must be obtained by apprehending the systemic clues prudently injected in the text. *The Curious Incident* proves that a new genre is evolving in detective fiction. This novel includes the pre-existing qualities of detective genre and also various new perspectives enabling the extension of the genre. This extension widely happens in terms of its narrative technique. The novel is written in the voice of an adolescent who is in the process of writing. He ponders, reflects and also comments on the narrative process, which is typical of a postmodern narrative. Postmodern texts collaborate the conventions and innovations, through the implementation techniques such as intertextuality, short-circuit, metafiction and defamiliarisation. John Scaggs (2005) in *Crime Fiction* opines that crime narratives are self-aware metanarratives which welcome progressive theoretical and critical

approaches, eventually paving way for genre extension.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is an attribute of postmodern novels; the title *The Curious Incident*, is taken from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "Silver Blaze" in which Sherlock Holmes remarks, “. . . the curious incident of the dog in the night-time” (pp. 19 Doyle, 1894). Haddon's novel is about a teenager investigating and narrating the murder of a neighbourhood dog. It is a combination of the disability of the narrator, logics, graphical elements and also the process of detection. The author transports the readers into the world of Christopher Boone – the protagonist with Asperger's syndrome, through the pictographic representations.

Probing into the aspect of detective fiction, the interesting difference is that the victim in *The Curious Incident* is not a human, but a poodle. Moreover, the type of detective found in the narrative is not a professional like Sherlock Holmes, but a teenager who relies on logics and his instincts, elevated by autism spectrum disorder. He is not a refined detective, but mutating into a 'nouveau' detective. The deconstructed victim and an amateur detective are subversions of the conventions of considering only a human as the victim of sufferings and also only an adult as a detective. Detectives are not usually born out of situations, but Christopher becomes a sleuth due to his situation. These kinds of experimentations, in addition to fulfilling the norms of detective fiction, prove that detective fiction is not restricted to a particular domain, but a genre which accommodates new ideas and keeps expanding. The new generation writing gives chance for the birth of the reader, who can ponder, travel along, interpret, imagine and create a new world as a response to the text.

Christopher, as a narrator, uses intertextual elements by alluding to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of Baskervilles*, to explain the process of detection. The mystery in Doyle's rendition lies between the supernatural and the factual. There are similarities and disparities between *The Hound*

of *the Baskervilles* and *The Curious Incident*. Like Doyle's version, there is death, but that of a dog. There is a detective who is unlike Sherlock Holmes, but a juvenile in the autism spectrum with a love for detection. In the denouement part, the detective (Christopher) finds the criminal (his father) who makes a confession of killing the dog; the detective cracks the case, but the criminal is left unpunished, whereas in a traditional detective novel the criminal is punished. This is a characteristic of post-modern fiction where one cannot arrive at a definite solution.

Metafiction

The Curious Incident is about a writer (Christopher) writing a story, hence a 'metafiction', that is, 'story within a story'. Christopher records his adventures and his experiences in: ". . . a murder mystery novel" (5). The text seems to be written by Christopher Boone, rather than the novelist Mark Haddon, as the protagonist constantly reflects on the process and style of writing. This causes a difficulty in differentiating reality and fiction. Patricia Waugh (1984) in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* describes Metafiction as, ". . . a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (p.2). The narrative fuses detective fiction with metafiction and game structure, resulting in the extension of genre. Linda Hutcheon (1996) in *Modes and Forms of Narrative Narcissism: Introduction of a Typology* argues that, "The detective story (the written plot and the plot to kill) is based on the general pattern of the puzzle or the enigma, this literary form is itself a very self-conscious one: in fact, the reader of a murder mystery comes to expect the presence of a detective-story writer within the story itself" (p. 211).

Metafiction generally makes readers conscious of reading a fiction. Christopher notes, ". . . I am writing a murder mystery novel" (5). The narrator reflects on what he has been writing and explains too much at certain places. One such instance is where he

apologises for diverging from the topic of discussion, "But this is what is called a digression, now I am going to go back to the fact that it was a Good Day" (33). As an unreliable postmodern narrator, Christopher corrects, "And I realise I told a lie in Chapter 13 because I said, 'I cannot tell jokes', because I do know 3 jokes that I can tell . . . Siobhan said I didn't have to go back and change what I wrote in Chapter 13 . . ." (176). This proves that the narrator is self-conscious of what he is writing and also makes the reader aware of reading fiction. When the narrator shockingly intrudes, it forces the readers out of the novel. The narrator brings in 'story within a story' which is another widely used technique in metafiction. He comes up with the case of the Cottingley fairies. In reality, the reader is exposed to the story of Christopher who manipulates the position of a narrator and tells the story of the death of a dog and also refers to other stories within the framework of the main story.

Defamiliarisation

Another feature of metafiction is the technique of defamiliarisation where something already known to the readers is told in an unfamiliar way, to make the well-known appear strange. One such instance is when Christopher describes the constellation 'Orion'. He creates the suspicion of Orion not being the image of a hunter and suggests the same positioning of the stars to be randomly connected to draw a dinosaur or any other shape out of it. Detective fiction, thus, is reader-oriented and hence a form of metafiction. It could be re-termed as meta-detective fiction resulting in the extension of the genre of detective fiction.

Linda Hutcheon, concerned about structural conventions classifies metafiction as overt and covert – diegetic and linguistic four part system. According to this classification, detective story comes under covert diegetic form where the reader is not directly addressed, but the text acts as a narrative and imagines a fictive universe. Employing game structure is vitally a postmodern inclusion where every object is given a comic perspective. In this novel, the narrator toys with language and imbibes

linguistic mode with covert diegetic mode. It is the mode which employs language to bring out pun, riddle or joke. All of these qualities are present in this novel. For instance, the narrator mentions one of the jokes told by his father, which he supposedly does not understand – “His face was drawn but the curtains were real” (10). He uses puzzles as an effective means to connect to the readers. The Monty Hall Problem is one such example of a puzzle where he supports the columnist Marilyn vos Savant.

Game Structure

As mentioned above, the game structure in a fiction which teaches the codes and norms of a game through the narrative falls under this category. The detective process is considered as a game by Christopher’s father who reprimands him to “. . . stop this ridiculous bloody detective game right now” (64). Christopher formulates certain codes to call a day good or bad based on the coloured car series. According to Christopher, “4 red cars in a row made it a **Good Day**, and 3 red cars in a row made it a **Quite Good Day**, and 5 red cars in a row made it a **Super Good Day**, and... 4 yellow cars in a row made it a **Black Day . . .**” (31).

Christopher’s playfulness is evident from the very beginning of the book. The chapter numbers are not in the serial order as it ought to be; instead the chapter numbers carry prime numbers from 2 to 233. When Christopher gets annoyed, he comforts himself by squaring or cubing numbers and this highlights the mathematical genius of Christopher.

The narrator tests the readers’ patience by being extraneous on complicated and trivial issues as well. The covert diegetic form of game structure is tangled with that of the metafiction and detective story. This makes the novel unclassifiable and thus cannot be fixed into a particular genre. Each of these sub-genres is relative and overlaps one another as it cannot exist independently, in this novel. The form of the novel is intertwined, making it challenging to classify.

Detective fiction, an earlier sub-genre, has evolved as a separate genre, and in it can be found whodunit or thriller as sub-genres.

Even these sub-genres have emerged as independent genres in recent times and this best proves the unending extension of genre. Novels, with its extensive description, helped in the production of movies. For instance, *The Curious Incident* extended to the theatre form where Christopher’s complex world was replicated from the text. In addition to being the recipient of different awards as a novel, it also achieved great fame by receiving seven Olivier Awards and five Tony Awards for ‘Best New Play’. The evolved genre challenges the existing conventions and introduces a new set of rules by subverting the preceding work. In his work *Crime Fiction*, Scaggs (2005) observes that postmodern detective fiction brings about a correlation between reading, detection, and interpretation, and investigate vital responses to them.

This paper mediates an understanding of genre and its evolution. It explains how genre keeps extending and also points out the difficulty in classifying the new work into an already existing genre. Genre studies, has a significant role to play in this postmodern Age where there is no restriction to creativity. There is no compulsion to fix a novel or any work of art in a particular mould. The novel *The Shock of the Fall* by Nathan Filer has won the Costa Book of the Year Award in 2013. It is a mystery with a schizophrenic narrator and incorporates creativity and commendable innovations. The book was remarked by Daily Mail as, “. . . following in the footsteps of Mark Haddon’s genre-setting *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.” This proves the birth of a new genre, which follows a tradition and also falls apart from it. Further scope of this study is to conduct genre studies in any other genre like science fiction or romance or spy novels. Genre extension, thus, becomes plausible because of the liberty to experiment in writing style and eventually produce novel works of art.

End Notes

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