

# When a crime does not frighten — the case of a detective story

Magdalena Kowalska

The present essay will be telling about the experience of a reader associating with a literary work, specifically with a common novel and, among it, with a classic detective story. In this text I'm going to narrow both of mentioned concepts — the reader's experience as well as a detective novel. In relation to the second one i will evoke only one author. With regard to an experience, i understand it widely, mostly as: firstly, a process of reading and establishing the contact with a reader; secondly, a relation between a work and its reader and thirdly, also as a pleasure caused by the contact with crime literature. Summing up, the goal of my short study is to describe how a detective novel experiences (or, at least, could experience) its reader and what consequences of that experience (and experiencing) are. In my interest there will be especially: at first, a novel construction and the convention, at second, the readers' reception. There are going to be two vital categories useful in my description: a pleasure caused by the contact with literature<sup>1</sup> (mentioned before) and the category of the game.

Nevertheless, before we would come into the clue of the text (which is a detailed description of narrative strategies in classic detective novels based on examples from works about Sherlock Holmes by sir Arthur Conan Doyle and, later, a descriptions of a reader's experience caused by the contact with crime literature) there is a necessity to specify what would we recognize by the concept of a classic detective novel.

There are many elaborations in which we can find some information about that genre. *Słownik literatury popularnej* (*The Dictionary of Common Literature*) edited by Tadeusz Źabski seems to be the most universal and comprehensive source of knowledge of a classic detective novel. The article from the dictionary called 'a crime novel' contains a description of four presently

1 Here i am understanding the category of a pleasure and its role in the process of reading according to its meaning suggested by Umberto Eco who wrote: 'każdy tekst chce dostarczać przyjemności poprzez uprawnione odczytanie. Narrator powieści w odcinkach pragnie czytelnika, który umie wdychać i ronić lzy, Robbe-Grillet [...] pragnie czytelnika zdolnego docenić powieść przyszłości, obaj natomiast życzą sobie kogoś, kto odczuwa przyjemność podczas czytania [...]'. (Eco U., *Tekst, przyjemność, konsumpcja*, [in:] idem, *Po drugiej stronie lustra i inne eseje. Znak, reprezentacja, iluzja, obraz*, transl. Wąjs J., Warsaw 2012, pp. 141–142).

existing types of that genre<sup>2</sup>. One of them is precisely a classic detective novel. It is very strict when it comes to its structural specification. Works classified as detective novels are strongly schematic and conventionalised and, then, also recurrent in further representations of its genre. The protagonist of detective novels is, obviously (and, well, *nomen omen*), a detective. His or her role (and the method of functioning at the same time) in the fictional universe is an investigation. What distinguishes a classic detective novel from another types of crime literature is the specific structure of narration called linear–recurrent narration which is carried on non–linear (not in the chronological order of the plot) but in the order of discovering things, incidents and their circumstances by the detective. What is more, classic detective novels usually become a kind of intellectual game with a reader. The task for the reader is to identify with a protagonist (detective) and, simultaneously with him or her, try to deduce about what happens and also about the crime and its culprit<sup>3</sup>. According to the definition from *The Dictionary of Common Literature* edited by T. Żabski the principle of a classic detective novel composition is a verisimilitude — a fictional universe is presented with a preservation and care of realism and details, including historically justified techniques of running the investigation. Up to the binding convention of the classic detective novel a person who has committed a crime (the most often crime is a murder) needs to be caught and punished, rarely, in particular situations (for example when a crime was committed because of an altruistic reason) a murderer can commit suicide<sup>4</sup>.

According to Roger Caillois, the French sociologist, philosopher, literary critic, and (what the most vital is) the author of the rules of the category of the game<sup>5</sup> (a game in an anthropologic meaning), a detective novel is a literary work which:

[...] z życia bierze tylko ramy, w psychologii widzi metodę śledztwa albo punkt oparcia dla dociekania, namiętnościami i wzruszeniami zajmuje się

2 To be precise in determining a genology of a classic detective novel (what means to take into account standards used in the Polish genology), it should be noted that: a) a crime novel itself is a genre (it is one of the genres of epics) and b) a classic detective novel is one of the types of that genre (so formally it is a sub-genre). However, due to the facts that a classic detective novel is strongly conventionalised, it has a relative autonomy among its genre and it has a structure which can be read as a kind of a scheme and which is simple to decode, it seems that a classic detective novel can be qualified as the genre of the popular literature. Such solution is also supported by the cause of, let's say, the editorial nature: in the Anglo-Saxon literature a classic detective novel is often described as a genre (rarely as a sub-genre).

3 Martuszevska A., *Powieść kryminalna*, [in:] *Słownik literatury popularnej*, ed. Żabski T., Wrocław 2006, p. 465.

4 Ibidem, p. 465–466.

5 See: Caillois R., *Ludzie i gry*, Warsaw 1997.

o tyle, o ile potrzebuje siły, która by wprawiała w ruch mechanizm, jaki zbudowała. Nie pragnie wzruszać, wstrząsać, zachwycać czy pochlebiać duszy, obrazując jej niepokoje, cierpienia i ambicje. Jest jądowa i zimna, doskonałe mózgowia. (...) Stara się tylko niczego nie zostawić w zawieszaniu i niejasności<sup>6</sup>.

Caillois, quoted above, sees an analogy to the game in the model of detective novels and in the mode of their reception<sup>7</sup>. What is the base of such analogy? In the opinion of the quoted scholar a detective novel exists and works on the basis similar to the functioning of the game, especially an intellectual one:

[...] intelektualne przeznaczenie powieści kryminalnej można [...] łatwo i wszędzie odczytać. Zwiastują je liczne znaki: w magazynach tygodniowych, między kratkami krzyżówek i innymi grami, gdzie główną rolę pełni **przyjemność** pokonywania trudności, cykle obrazków z podpisami proponują czytelnikowi kryminalne zagadki [...]. Przeciwnie zaś, tomy niejednej serii *detective novels* zaopatrzone zostają w dodatki z zadaniami szachowymi albo nawet czysto matematycznymi. Ci sami więc amatorzy znajdują **przyjemność** w dokonywaniu obliczeń, obojętne, czy chodzi o mijające się pociągi [...], figury poruszające się na szachownicy albo jakiegokolwiek ćwiczenia, gdzie **umysł cieszy się, dochodząc do określonego wyniku wedle określonych reguł** (bold — M.K.)<sup>8</sup>.

In such meaning a crime novel is 'not a novel but a game, not a story but a task'<sup>9</sup> and its conventional and schematic character and uniformity<sup>10</sup> are not disadvantages but they contrary became an advantage — being a kind of literary technique and an invitation for a reader to take place in the game. If a reader is about to take place in that game, he or she has to (get to) know the rules — then, if a writer follows those rules, he or she invites readers to a common game.

Targeting on a reader, thinking about a reader and constructing a novel which would be attractive and/or useful for a reader — those are characteristics not only of the detective story but a common novel in general:

6 Caillois R., *Powieść kryminalna, czyli jak intelekt opuszcza świat, aby oddać się li tylko grze, i jak społeczeństwo wprowadza z powrotem swe problemy w igraszki umysłu*, transl. Błoński J., [in:] Caillois R., *Odpowiedzialność i styl. Eseje*, Warsaw 1967, pp.191–192.

7 French *le jeu* means both: a game and a play (fun) — in the text i am going to use those two words alternatively.

8 Caillois R., *Powieść kryminalna...*, op. cit., p. 191.

9 Ibidem.

10 By uniformity i mean constructing detective novel basing on some codified rules (e.g. *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* by S.S. Van Dine). Those rules were established to guarantee relative (relative because, obviously, the rules were broken) constancy of the convention and, what is vital, they gave readers a chance for solving a crime simultaneously with a novel's detective.

Autor utworu popularnego nastawiony jest na realizację nie własnej ekspresji twórczej, ale potrzeb osobowościowych czytelnika. Jak wynika z wielu biografii (Doyle'a, Leblanca), autorzy dokonują wielu prób, by trafić na taki temat i wyraz artystyczny, który uzyska aprobatę czytelników<sup>11</sup>.

What is vital and what is also highlighted in a quote above the aspect of reception is particularly important for a crime novel and, among it, especially in a detective story. Why? We can find the answer for that question in e.g. Mariusz Kraska's work who wrote in the first chapter of his book *Prosta sztuka zabijania. Figury czytania kryminału* (*The Simple Art of Murder. Figures of reading a crime novel*):

Powieści kryminalne, tak jak inne utwory literatury popularnej, czyta się przede wszystkim dla przyjemności i intuicyjnie zajęcie to zwykle łączy się z rozrywką. [...] Nieco przewrotnie można przypuszczać, że to przyszłe przeznaczenie kryminału zdawał się zapowiadać już Edgar Allan Poe, nakazując swojemu detektywowi w *Zabójstwie przy Rue Morgue*, utworze przez większość badaczy uważanym za pierwsze opowiadanie detektywistyczne, twierdzić, że „śledztwo będzie dla nas przyjemnością”. Co prawda, August C. Dupin, wypowiadając te słowa, myślał raczej o przyjemności własnej i narratora, świadka jego dochodzenia, [...] ale komentarz ten idealnie pasuje zarówno do przeszłej, jak i dzisiejszej sytuacji czytelników sięgających po kolejne kryminalne pozycje<sup>12</sup>.

Shortly speaking — providing a pleasure of reading to a recipient, experiencing a reader with a positive impulse is the vital and most essential element of a detective novel. This observations does not require any addition at present. But undoubtedly it does require some exemplification which could help to understand and to prove the thesis. The series of Sherlock Holmes by sir Arthur Conan Doyle (and especially the first book of the series about the brilliant detective: *Studium w szkarłacie*<sup>13</sup> (*A Study in Scarlet*) will provide us the evidence for the previous thesis about a detective novel itself and about an experience of its readers. So... As it was mentioned before while a contact with a common novel and a crime novel among it (and among a crime novel with its sub-genre: a detective story) a reader expects to experience some kind of a pleasure. Therefore let's look into a novel by

11 Martuszevska A., *Powieść popularna*, [in:] *Słownik literatury popularnej*, op. cit., p. 313.

12 Kraska M., *Prosta sztuka zabijania. Figury czytania kryminału*, Gdansk 2013, p. 53.

13 The series of Sherlock Holmes is in many academic works believed to be a turning point in which a detective story has achieved its solid form with a detective as the main character, a deduction as a primary method of an investigation and the specific structure of narration called linear-recurrent narration which is carried on non-linear (not in the chronological order of the plot) but in the order of discovering things, incidents and their circumstances by the detective (see e.g. *Słownik literatury popularnej*, op. cit., p. 464).

Conan Doyle and find those elements of it which determinate that we as readers allow ourselves to get involved into a game. A game which stake is our pleasure.

In a detective novel the most essential question (asked by a narrator, a main character — a detective and a reader) is: who done it, who killed? a mystery needs to be elucidate, all doubts have to be resolved. Obviously at the end of a book we will get to know who the murderer is but before it happens a detective story offers us the first pleasure which José Carlos Somoza called as ‘the pleasure of expectation’<sup>14</sup>. How does it look like in practice? In *a Study in Scarlet* Sherlock Holmes after the short visit at the crime scene (what is obvious there are the only the victim of the crime and some hints which are abstruse to the police — there are no suspicions about the potential perpetrator) says:

— Zdradzę wam, panowie, jedną rzecz, która może wam dopomóc w tej sprawie. Popelniono morderstwo. Sprawcą był wysoki, mierzący ponad sześć stóp mężczyzna w kwiecie wieku. Miał dość małe stopy jak na swój wzrost. [...] Palil cygaro marki „Trichinopoly”. [...] Morderca najprawdopodobniej miał rumianą twarz i wyjątkowo długie paznokcie u palców prawej ręki. [...] — Jeszcze jedno, Lestrade — dodał, odwracając się w drzwiach. — „Rache” oznacza po niemiecku „zemsta”, więc niech pan nie traci czasu, szukając panny Rachel.

Rzuciwszy tę uwagę na odchodnym, wyszedł, pozostawiając dwóch rywali patrzących za nim oglupiałym wzrokiem<sup>15</sup>.

From that moment in the book the pleasure of expectation begins. Here begins a hope that we, as readers, will know the story development and the progress of an investigation. In the next chapters we will receive another hints, we will also get to know the history of a murderer and his victims (yes, in *a Study in Scarlet* there will be more victims) and finally we will find out how the detective will find the killer and who this last one is. We can be certain that the main character will track a murderer to the end — this is what the convention demands and this is also the reason of our expectation — we wait for the case to be solved because we know that we have something big to wait for. At the same time we try to solve the murder

14 ‘Podobnie jak w przypadku pierwszej nocy miłosnej, rozwiązanie zagadki wymaga także rozkoszy oczekiwania’ (Somoza J.C., *Szczęgół. Trzy krótkie powieści*, transl. Topczewska A., Warsaw 2006, p. 81).

15 Conan Doyle A., *Studium w szkarłacie*, transl. Krochmal A., Kędziński R., [in:] idem, *Księga wszystkich dokonań Sberlocka Holmesa*, Warsaw 2012, p. 29.

ourselves which gives us an another, new kind of a pleasure: the pleasure of an investigation<sup>16</sup>.

Every reader of a novel follows a story development and (if we are not facing an avant-garde or an experimental prose) the development of a plot — this is, in general, a process we called ‘reading’. Yet a contact with a detective story requires from a reader to present an attitude of an engaged witness and spectator who is obligated to trust the narrator and accept his rules of the game<sup>17</sup>. If those conditions are met, the process of reading becomes a process of investigating *stricto sensu* — the narrator becomes our guide in the featured world, he describes this world and he provides us information which are useful if we want to lead an investigation simultaneously with the novel’s detective.

In the works of Conan Doyle we have a facilitated task because we have doctor Watson as our guide-narrator. He performs a function of either a commentator of occurrences (the first-person narrative) or a chronicler whose notes and memories are the source of presented stories. The narration looks like a quasi-feature, a report of a witness and participant of the described events. What is vitally interesting from my point of view doctor Watson does not avoid making metatextual references and comments — at the beginning of the second book from the series about Sherlock Holmes (*Znak Czterech, The Sign of Four*) he mentions:

— Tak, istotnie — potwierdziłem. [...] Opisałem to nawet w niewielkiej publikacji pod dość niecodziennym tytułem Studium w szkarlacie.

— Przeglądałem ją — odparł. — Szczepnie mówiąc, nie mam zamiaru gratulować ci tego dzieła. Wykrywanie przestępstw jest, czy raczej powinno być, nauką ścisłą, i jako takie, należy traktować je w chłodny, pozbawiony emocji sposób. [...]

— Ależ to była romantyczna historia! — zaprotestowałem. — **Nie mogłem przecież przeinaczać faktów** (podkr. — M.K.).

— Niektóre fakty należałoby mniej eksponować, a przynajmniej zachować zdrowe proporcje w sposobie ich przedstawienia. Jedynym zasługującym na uwagę aspektem całej tej sprawy był interesujący proces analitycznego rozumowania, od skutku do przyczyny, dzięki któremu udało mi się ją rozwiązać.

Zirytowała mnie ta krytyka dzieła, które stworzyłem, głównie z myślą o tym, by sprawić Holmesowi przyjemność. Muszę przyznać, że rozdrażniło mnie, z jakim egotyzmem domagał się, by każdy wers mojej książki poświęcony był wyłącznie jego dokonaniom<sup>18</sup>.

16 The term ‘the pleasure of an investigation’ by Mariusz Kraska, see: Kraska M., op. cit., pp. 149–174.

17 Kraska M., op. cit., p. 174.

18 Conan Doyle A., *Znak czterech*, transl. Krochmal A., Kędziński R., [in:] idem, op. cit., p. 89.

Watson — the chronicler, the reporter — is very aware of that what he is describing and why he is doing that. He also knows well who his recipients are. In the construction of the narration it is evident that Watson does not write to himself or only for himself. He sometimes turn to his readers, his relation is full of descriptions and comments which are created with taking recipients into consideration. What is important — when i write about Watson's readers i mean readers which are a part of the featured world but they are external toward the triad Sherlock–Watson–an investigation (so Watson could provide them stories about his detective–friend and his adventures). Joanna Kokot while analysing narrative strategies in novels of Conan Doyle concludes:

Jako narrator Watson nie pozostaje już w cieniu swojego genialnego przyjaciela (wg wielu badaczy jako postać powieściowa jest zbędny, a przynajmniej redundantny — M.K.), co rusz (choć niezbyt agresywnie) ujawnia swoją obecność, jak i świadomość potrzeb i oczekiwań swoich potencjalnych czytelników<sup>19</sup>.

What is more, the way Watson is constructed (as a character and as a narrator) makes identifying with him easy, to 'go into' the plot. It also simplifies taking an attitude of an engaged witness and spectator. Watson — the narrator is very familiar to the reader — he is interested in detective's activities, he wants to know the solution of the crime but, at the same time, he is not as smart and brilliant as Sherlock is. Therefore when Holmes explains to his friend, Watson, the course of the investigations and deductions, he explains that also to the readers of his adventures (so to the recipients of Watson's memories and stories). This situation causes the next experience of the reader of a detective story (a classic detective novel). As Gilbert Keith Chesterton *claims a reader of a detective novel* 'is always happy, when after reading he or she feels like a fool'<sup>20</sup>. That teasing quote above shows the specious logic of a detective story. Although a reader experiences a pleasure of solving a crime (he or she really wants to know who the killer is), he or she does not have to achieve a goal — the vital thing in not to eventually spy out the murderer before the detective does it — all fun and pleasure is about investigating, deducing and getting intellectually involved.

19 Kokot J., *Kronikarz z Baker Street: strategie narracyjne w utworach Arthura Conan Doyle'a o Sherlocku Holmesie*, Olsztyn 1999, p. 41.

20 Chesterton G.K., *The Ideal Detective Story*, 'Illustrated London News' 25 X 1930, a quote and translation by: Burszta W.J., Czubaj M., *Krwawa setka: 100 najważniejszych powieści kryminalnych*, Warsaw 2007, p. 19.

A potential experience of the reader of a detective story described in the present paper includes only few possible scenarios of reading such kind of literature. It is also substantial to mention that analysing a detective story through the reader's reception is only one of possible ways of interpreting detective novels. Other ways (which are also very usable and which also do not fill up the means of research list) are included in the statement of Mariusz Czubaj, a literary scholar, anthropologist and the author of some crime novels:

Po co czytać kryminaly? Oczywiście, wśród interpretatorów tego gatunku odpowiedzi jest mnóstwo: od psychoanalitycznych (literatura kryminalna jawi się tu jako kompensacja) po kosmologiczne (kryminal krąży wokół opozycji chaosu i porządku). [...] Kryminal jest dla mnie pierwszorzędnym zbiorem praktyk kulturowych, z których utkany jest świat powieściowy, rozciągający się wokół intrygi. [...] Zarazem bliskie jest mi zdanie Pera Wahlöö, klasyka szwedzkiego kryminału z czasów dzieci kwiatów, który mawiał, że kryminal jest skalpelem tnącym problemy społeczne. Kryminal jest dla mnie także formą interwencji kulturowej, jakkolwiek jest zarazem opowieścią. Jak w starym bluesie, gdy gitarzysta gra pierwsze akordy i powiada: *a teraz opowiem ci historię*<sup>21</sup>.

As we can see, there are many possible ways of interpreting a detective story. The present essay, as it was mentioned at the very beginning, concerns only one of the aspects of a crime novel which is a detective story. Works classed as detective novels are in my opinion different from other sub-genres of crime literature. What distinguishes them is exactly the theme of my paper — the experience of a reader.

At the end and to sum up I will let myself to repeat the thesis statement from the title of the present essay: a detective story is a work in which a crime (usually a murder) does not frighten. Even if the recipient of a detective novel experiences suspense, an expectation and excitement, those feelings are not a result of the emotional reaction for a crime but the presence of an intellectual challenge, a mystery, a puzzle. Indeed, reading a detective story is an engaging activity but the balance point is not a murder but the case, a reader is not frightened by the crime, she or he is stimulated because he/she really wants to know who the murderer is and how the crime happened). A detective story is a game — we, as readers, receive some hints, elements of a puzzle so we could solve a mystery simultaneously with a detective. The better plot is constructed (what also means: the better a novel is), the

21 *Kryminal jest jak blues* – wywiad M. Olszewskiego z M. Czubajem, [online], [dostęp: 30.03.2014], <<http://e-splot.pl/?pid=articles&id=898>>.



more likely readers get engaged into it. The pleasure of reading is the result of the pleasure of taking part in a game. That game could have many names and forms. We can call it a puzzle, we can call it a kind of a chess game with an author or a narrator/detective/murderer. Whatever we call it, there is one certainty — the effect of taking part in the game of reading a detective story is the emergence of the experience of a pleasure which accompanies our reading.

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