From "The Formula of the Classical Detective Story" by John G. Cawelti

The changing cultural mythology of crime has given rise to many different popular formulas. Some of these have been essentially adventure stories or melodramas, but one of the most striking embodies the cultural mythology of detectives, criminals, police, and suspects in an archetypal form that is almost pure mystery. The classical or ratiocinative detective story was first clearly articulated by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s, but it did not become a widely popular genre until the end of the nineteenth century. Its period of greatest popularity was initiated by the enormous success of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, and it flourished in the first four decades of the twentieth century. . . . It seems clear that the classical formula is related to a distinctive historical period and reflects attitudes and interests that are no longer as widespread as they were.

Patterns of the Formula

The formula of the classical detective story can be described as a conventional way of defining and developing a particular kind of situation or situations, a pattern of action or development of this situation, a certain group of characters and the relations between them, and a setting or type of setting appropriate to the characters and action. . . .

1. Situation. The classical detective story begins with an unsolved crime and moves toward the elucidation of its mystery. As Poe, discovered in his two stories, the mystery may center upon the identity and motive of the criminal, as in the case of "Rue Morgue," or, with the criminal and his purposes known, the problem may be to determine the means or to establish clear evidence of the criminal's deed, as in the case of "The Purloined Letter" where the detective must determine where the Minister D. has concealed the letter. Poe also defined two major types of crime on which much detective literature bases itself: murder, frequently with sexual or grotesque overtones, and crimes associated with political intrigue. From a formal point of view it is not difficult to see why these should be the favorite crimes of detective story writers. First of all, the significance of these crimes is proportionate to the elaborate parade of mystification and inquiry that the detective story must generate. Though Poe begins with crimes that are self-evidently important, he does not really make the significance of the crimes a major part of his story. We find out very little about the specific political issues and consequences that cluster around the theft of the queen's letter. Nor are we invited to reflect at any length upon the complex human tragedy of the sudden and horrible death of Mme L'Espanaye and her daughter. Instead, in "Rue Morgue," Poe carefully selects as his victims a rather obscure and colorless pair of people in order to keep our minds away from the human implications of their death. This seems to be an important general rule of the detective story situation. The crime must be a major one with the potential for complex ramifications, but the victim cannot really be mourned or the possible complexities of the situation allowed to draw our attention away from the detective and his investigation. A similar rule governs the detective's position in the situation. Poe tells us that Dupin has a personal reason for his involvement in the investigation. In "Rue Morgue" Poe obscurely hints at some prior friendship between Dupin and the prime suspect, Adolph Le Bon, while in "The Purloined Letter" we are offhandedly informed that Dupin is a partisan of the queen. Neither of these motives amounts to anything in comparison to what continually stands out as Dupin's major interest: delight in the game of analysis and deduction. The classical detective usually has little real personal interest in the crime he is investigating. Instead, he is a detached, gentlemanly amateur. . . .

2. Pattern of action. As Poe defined it, the detective story formula centers upon the detective's investigation and solution of the crime. Both "Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" exemplify the six main phases of this pattern: (a) introduction of the detective; (b) crime and clues; (c) investigation; (d) announcement of the solution; (e) explanation of the solution; (f) denouement. These parts do not always appear in sequence and are sometimes collapsed into each other, but it is difficult to conceive of a classical story without them. Sometimes, the story begins with the introduction of the detective through a minor episode that demonstrates his skill at deduction. This is the case in "Rue Morgue," where after a brief characterization of the detective and the narrator we see Dupin "reading" his narrator friend's mind. Then Dupin explains that he has followed the narrator's train of thought by deducing it from his expressions and gestures. Doyle later developed this initial proof of the detective's skill to a standard convention of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Not only did Doyle try to improve on Dupin's mind-reading trick in Holmes's adventure of "The Resident Patient," but he devised a great variety of such opening proofs of Holmes's miraculous powers: Holmes tells where Watson has been by examining the color of the mud on his trousers; he deduces a complete biography of Watson's unfortunate brother from a watch; he reveals men's occupations by observing the calluses on their thumbs or the characteristic wrinkles in their clothes. . . . These episodes establish the

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hero's special competence and give the reader confidence that, however great the obstacles and dangers, the hero will be capable of overcoming them.

"The Purloined Letter" deployed a second way of introducing the detective hero that Doyle also made an important part of the Holmes stories. The narrator is "enjoying the twofold luxury of meditation and a meerschaum in company with my friend C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library, or book-closet, au troisieme, No. 33, Rue Dunet, Faubourg St. Germain," when the placid calm is suddenly broken by the entry of the Prefect G. from the "gusty evening" outside. This intrusion of the outside world on the serene and reflective calm of the detective's bachelor establishment was elaborated by Conan Doyle into the memorable opening scenes at 221B Baker Street. As he did with many of Poe's inventions, Doyle transformed Dupin's back library into a complex and highly developed scene whose eccentric inventory-tobacco in a Persian slipper, bullet holes in the wall spelling V.R., hypodermic syringe in its neat morocco case-forms an important part of the Holmesian ambience. This same device, though not universal, became one of the standard opening gambits of the classical detective story. One thinks immediately of Dr. Thorndyke's secluded laboratory, Dr. Fell's study, and the house of Nero Wolfe. . . . Two considerations probably account for the effectiveness of this kind of introduction to the detective story. First, the sudden disruption of the quiet and secluded retreat is an effective emotional rhythm. The peaceful beginning in the detective's retreat establishes a point of departure and return for the story. The crime symbolizes not only an infraction of the law but a disruption of the normal order of society. It is something extraordinary that must be solved in order to restore the harmonious mood of that charming scene by the blazing fireplace. This manner of introduction also emphasizes the detachment of the detective, his lack of moral or personal involvement in the crime he is called on to investigate. The crime represents a disorder outside the confines of his personal existence, which thrusts itself upon him for resolution. Nero Wolfe goes so far as to refuse to leave his retreat at all, solving the crimes from reports brought to him by his assistant.

Another aspect of the classical detective's detachment appears in Poe's two stories. Dupin stands apart from us and the workings of his mind remain an essential mystery because the story is told from another point of view, that of his devoted but far less brilliant friend. Following Doyle's development of Poe's anonymous narrator into the unforgetable Dr. Watson, this device became a standard feature of the classical detective story. Though sometimes told by an objective narrator who sees partly into the detective's mind, the narrator is often a Watson-figure or a character involved in the story who has an excuse for being close to the detective but cannot follow or understand his line of investigation. There are a number of structural reasons for this practice. First, by narrating the story from a point of view that sees the detective's actions but does not participate in his perceptions or process of reasoning, the writer can more easily misdirect the reader's attention and thereby keep him from prematurely solving the crime. If he uses the detective's point of view, the writer has trouble keeping the mystery a secret without creating unnatural and arbitrary limits on what is shown to us of the detective's reasoning processes. . . . In the classical story . . . it seems to be important that the detective solve the crime or at least get on the right track from the beginning. In story after story, when the solution is finally revealed to us, we find that the detective immediately established the right line of investigation by making a correct inference from the conflicting and confusing testimony that had baffled everybody else. Of course, if this convention is to be maintained, the writer simply cannot afford to give us any direct insight into the detective's mind. If he decides to drop the device of the Watsonian narrator, the writer must either use a detached and anonymous narrator who sees the detective's actions but does not have any knowledge of his mental processes, or he must make the crime one that cannot be solved by the normal assumptions and methods of the detective.

There are other reasons for the particular narrative pattern of the detective story: by keeping us away from the detective's point of view, the writer can make the moment of solution an extremely dramatic and surprising climax since we have no clear indication when it will arrive. In addition, the Watsonian narrator provides us with an admiring perspective and commentary on the detective's activity. By using a narrator other than the detective, the writer can manipulate our sympathies and antipathies for the various suspects without forcing a revealing commitment on the detective himself. Moreover, the classical story's narrative method does not encourage an identification between the reader and the detective because the latter's feelings and perceptions remain largely hidden. Instead, the reader is encouraged to relate himself to the Watson figure and to the various suspects. . . .

The second major element in the classical detective story's pattern of action is the crime. In Poe's stories, and usually in Doyle's as well, the description of the crime immediately follows the introduction of the detective. Later writers, observing that this exact sequence was not necessary, found that in some instances it was desirable to present the crime first and then introduce the detective. This practice particularly relates to the use of one of the suspects' point of view as an alternative to the Watsonian narrator. In stories using this device the narrator's involvement with the
crime leads to his encounter with the detective. This change in the sequence of the pattern also tends to place greater emphasis on the puzzle of the crime and less on the character of the detective than in the Poe-Doyle treatment of the introductory sequence. In general the classical detective story evolves in this direction, giving increasing importance to the intricacy of the puzzle surrounding the crime and less prominence to the detective's initiative in the investigation.

The effectiveness of the crime itself depends upon two main characteristics with a paradoxical relationship to each other. First, the crime must be surrounded by a number of tangible clues that make it absolutely clear that some agency is responsible for it, and, second, it must appear to be insoluble. With his lucidity and sense of structure Poe created this paradoxical combination with dazzling simplicity in "The Purloined Letter." We have the most tangible physical evidence that Minister D. stole the letter, for the person from whom he stole it saw him. We also know, by equally tangible evidence, that the minister still has the letter, for the catastrophic political consequences certain to follow from its leaving his possession have not appeared. Yet at the same time we have equally certain clues that the letter is not in his possession. The minister's person has been searched several times. His house has been ransacked with microscopes and long, thin needles by the Parisian police. It is certain that the letter is not concealed anywhere. A crime has evidently taken place, and yet it appears to be absolutely insoluble. This is the ideal paradigm of the detective story crime, for it poses a problem really worthy of the detective. Unfortunately, strokes as brilliantly economical as this are rare. The treatment of the crime in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is more typical of detective story literature. Here we find a large number of tangible clues that are confusing and obscure but do not reach the ultimate paradox of "The Purloined Letter." The "Rue Morgue" clues, like those of so many other detective stories, combine evidence that some agency has performed the deed with seeming indications that it cannot have been any person we can imagine being involved. The mutilated condition of the bodies, the way things in the room have been scattered about, the evidence of the voices heard by witnesses, make it clear that some person or persons have been involved in the murder, but other clues--the locked window, the apparently superhuman force involved in the murder, the confusion about the language spoken by the second voice--make it impossible to see how any known agent could have been involved. Thus, in the initial formulation of the problem, it is certain that a crime has taken place, but the identity of the criminal remains in doubt. The mystery is not as paradoxical as in the case of "The Purloined Letter" and the solution, when Poe drags in an orangoutan to account for the confusion of clues, is correspondingly less satisfying because it seems a way of solving the impasse by introducing a new element into the story. Later writers have generally tried to avoid this necessity by discovering ways to make the paradox of clues eventually point back to one of the initial characters.

The "crime and clues" section of Poe's stories is followed by the parade of witnesses, suspects, and false solutions, which constitutes the investigation as it is presented to the reader. In "Rue Morgue" this section is brief, a sign that Poe had not quite fully articulated the classical detective form as he would in "The Purloined Letter." Nevertheless, Poe did invent two central conventions of this section: the parade of witnesses presented in quasi-documentary fashion and the "red herring" that in "Rue Morgue" takes the form of the obscure clerk Adolphe Le Bon. Remarkably, Poe even seems to have had an inkling of the desirability of having the finger of suspicion point at a character with whom the reader can identify or sympathize. . . . we are told that Dupin feels an obligation to Le Bon who "once rendered me a service for which I am not ungrateful." . . .

Poe's stories at least partially developed the two major characteristics of the investigation section. Just as the crime and clues must pose a paradox, the parade of witnesses, suspects, and possible solutions, while seemingly moving toward the clarification of the mystery, must really further obfuscate it so that we finally arrive at a total impasse where the reader feels lost in a murky and impenetrable bog of evidence and counterevidence; when this point is reached, the detective is ready to step in. By means of his transcendent intuition, he has been working clearly and rationally toward a solution while the reader sinks into confusion. Second, the investigation usually threatens to uncover or expose the guilt of a character or characters with whom the reader has been encouraged to sympathize or identify, so that the detective's final solution is not only a clarification of the mystery but a rescue of characters we wish to see free from suspicion and danger. The elaboration and expansion of this section of the pattern of action was a major trend in the development of the classical detective story after Poe.

In Poe's stories, the dark confusion and uncertainty reached after the examination of clues and witnesses is suddenly and dramatically superseded by Dupin's announcement that he has solved the crime. . . . In "Rue Morgue," Dupin's sudden revelation that "the facility with which I shall arrive, or have arrived, at the solution of this mystery, is in the direct ratio to its apparent insolubility in the eyes of the police" does not lead immediately to the production of the criminal but to the immortal announcement, "I am now awaiting a person who, although perhaps not the perpetrator of these butcheries, must have been in some measure implicated in their perpetration." Then, only after Dupin's
The announcement of the solution is as important as, perhaps in some instances more important than, the actual apprehension and punishment of the criminal. Like Poe, most classical writers make a strikingly dramatic moment out of the detective's revelation that he has solved the mystery. To give just one example, think of ... *The Hound of the Baskervilles* where Watson, at the zenith of his confusion, enters the mysterious prehistoric dwelling on the moor to await in darkness the return of the mysterious figure he believes to be the criminal. While he sits there clutching his revolver, he hears footsteps approaching. A shadow falls across the opening of the hut and then: "'It is a lovely evening, my dear Watson,' said a well-known voice. 'I really think that you will be more comfortable outside than in.'", In the ensuing conversation Holmes calmly reveals that he has worked out the whole thing. This is a paradigm of such scenes: the frantic narrator who is hopelessly lost in the maze of clues and testimony and the supremely calm detective who now takes the action into his hands. ... Naturally, since the action of the classical story focuses on the investigation of a mystery, the detective's calm announcement that he has arrived at the solution is a climactic moment. This is also the turning point of the story in another way. As indicated earlier, the reader has been forced to follow the action from the confused and limited point of view of the narrator. From this point of view investigation leads only to obfuscation. But when the solution is announced, though technically the point of view does not change, in actuality we now see the action from the detective's perspective. As he explains the situation, what had seemed chaotic and confused is revealed as clear and logical. In addition, this is the point at which the detective usually assumes the initiative against the criminal. Throughout the main part of the story the narrator appears to be surrounded by the plots of a mysterious criminal. After the announcement of the solution, the reader joins the detective in his superior position, assuming the role of spider to the criminal fly. Finally, the special importance of the moment of solution presents the classical writer with the opportunity of having two major climaxes or peaks of tension, the moment of solution and the eventual denouement when the criminal is actually captured.

These reflections help to account for the special interest of the next section in the classical pattern: the explanation. Here the detective discourses at length on the reasoning that led him to the solution and reveals just how and why the crime was carried out. To a superficial view it might seem that the explanation section risks being drearily anti-climactic, but I think that most detective story readers will testify that while they are frequently bored by an unimaginative or too detailed handling of the parade of clues, testimony, and suspects, the explanation, despite its involved and intricate reasoning, is usually a high point of interest. Indeed, many stories that get almost intolerably bogged down during the investigation become suddenly fraught with tension and excitement when the detective begins his explanation. Obviously, the explanation is important because in completing the investigation it represents the goal toward which the story has been moving. It also reflects the pleasure we feel when we are told the solution of a puzzle or a riddle. This is a combination of several factors. We are interested because we ourselves have been involved in the explanation and interpretation of the clues presented in the course of the investigation. Therefore a certain fascination hovers about the detective's explanation as we measure our own perception and interpretation of the chain of events against his. How far were we able to go along the road in the right direction? Where did we get off the track? The most exciting and successful detective stories seem to me neither those where the reader solves the crime before the detective announces his solution nor those where he is totally surprised and bamboozled by the solution that the detective arrives at. When the reader feels confident that he understands the mystery before the detective, the story loses interest. Since many stories are fairly easy to solve, I suspect that most confirmed readers develop an ability to put a premature solution out of their minds so that the story is not spoiled for them. On the other hand, if the detective's solution is a total surprise, that too seems less than satisfactory and the reader feels cheated, because it appears that his earlier participation in the story has been completely irrelevant. When Dupin reveals that the murderer in "Rue Morgue" has been an animal and that he has withheld one essential clue, a tuft of hair from the orangoutan, the explanation is far less effective than the brilliant and thoroughly satisfying account of Dupin's recovery of the purloined letter. In that story, the explanation as in the case of all good riddles requires not so much working one's way through a mass of evidence as being able to see the problem from a different angle. Once the new angle or perspective has been grasped, the solution is simple and obvious. When Dupin intuitionally recognizes that Minister D. conceived the problem of concealment of the letter not as hiding it in or behind something but as making it too obvious to be seen, his act was like the change of perspective required to solve the old riddle "What's black and white and red [read] all over," where the solution is impossible as long as the guesser interprets the sound "red" as a color. ... When the detective supplies the alternative perspective, the reader's feeling, as in the case of a good riddle, is not one of having been cheated and tricked but one of surprise and admiration at the wit of the detective and pleasure and delight at being confronted with a new way of seeing things. Finally, the puzzle or riddle aspect of the detective story depends less upon the reader's own ability to solve the mystery than on...
giving him enough participation in it to enable him better to appreciate the wit of the detective and to understand the new perspective on which the explanation depends.

Beyond its riddling dimension, the explanation has other sources of interest. One of its special pleasures comes from the satisfaction of seeing a sequence of events not only shaped from a different perspective, but given a different kind of order. . . . Clues are initially presented in the wrong order. They are wrenched out of their proper context in space and their place in a chronological sequence. The explanations section sets these events back into their logical position in a sequence of action. It provides the pleasure of seeing a clear and meaningful order emerge out of what seemed to be random and chaotic events. . . .

This brings us to the final source of pleasure in the detective's explanation, the sense of relief that accompanies the detective's precise definition and externalization of guilt. It is here that we participate in the culmination of what Northrop Frye calls "a ritual drama in which a wavering finger of social condemnation passes over a group of 'suspects' and finally settles on one." The parade of false suspects and solutions brings under initial suspicion characters with whom the reader is encouraged to sympathize or identify, thereby exciting a fear that one of them will be shown to be guilty. The reader, in other words, is metaphorically threatened with exposure and shame. Then the detective proves that the sympathetic characters cannot be guilty, or if they are, he establishes by careful explanation that their crime was justified and that they are not guilty in a moral sense. The most popular convention is to externalize and objectively guilt onto the "least-likely person" who is "proved" to be the guilty one. In part, the development of the "least likely person" as the favorite criminal in the classical detective story was a result of the necessity of displacing the reader's attention during the investigation and thereby keeping him from recognizing the solution. . . . For this character is the one who has been kept in the shadow throughout the story, the one to whom relatively little thought has been given. No bonds have been built between him and the reader, and consequently he can serve his role as the personification of guilt without involving the reader's feelings. The relief that accompanies the explanation reflects the reader's pleasure at seeing his favorites and projections clearly and finally exonerated and the guilt thrust beyond question onto a person who has remained largely outside his sphere of interest.

Usually the final section in the pattern of the classical detective story involves the actual apprehension and confession of the criminal. The denouement bears a close relationship to the other climactic moment in the pattern, the announcement that the detective has reached the solution. Sometimes denouement and solution are combined. In many of the Nero Wolfe stories, for example, the solution is announced by means of a trap that both reveals the criminal and apprehends him at the same moment. An alternative treatment of the problem is found in "Rue Morgue" where solution and denouement are distinctly separated. Dupin announces that he has solved the crime and explains it to his dazzled friend before the sailor appears in response to his advertisement. In such cases the denouement serves more as corroboration of the detective's solution and explanation than as a focus of interest and suspense in its own right. . . . The tendency to make the denouement simply bear out the detective's solution rather than give the reader a more complex interest in the criminal's predicament points to an observation we have already made: the classical story is more concerned with the isolation and specification of guilt than with the punishment of the criminal. . . .

3. Characters and relationships. As Poe defined it, the classical detective story required four main roles: (a) the victim; (b) the criminal; (c) the detective; and (d) those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it. Later writers have elaborated on these roles and in some cases have mixed them up, but on the whole it seems safe to say that without the relations implicit in these roles it is not possible to create a detective story.

Doing the victim right is a delicate problem for the creator of classical detective tales. If the reader is given too much information about the victim or if he seems a character of great importance, the story's focus around the process of investigation will be blurred. Moreover, its emotional effect will move toward tragedy or pathos, disrupting the relative serenity and detachment of the classical detective formula. On the other hand, if the victim seems insignificant and the reader has no information about him, interest in the inquiry and suspense about its outcome will be minimal. . . . It is another of the paradoxes of the detective story formula that the victim, who is supposedly responsible for all the activity, is usually the character of least interest.

The criminal also poses a problem of structural focus for, if the writer becomes too interested in his motives and character, he risks the emergence of an emotional and thematic complexity that could break up the formula. The goal of the detective story is a clear and certain establishment of guilt for a specific crime. If we become too concerned with the motives of the criminal, his guilt is likely to seem increasingly ambiguous and difficult to define. It is possible for a detective story writer to create a complex and interesting criminal . . . , but there must never be any

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serious question about either the specific guilt or the evil motives of these characters. In short, their motives may be complex and their actions interesting, but they must always be definable as bad. . . .

[Another] solution to the treatment of the criminal established the convention of the least-likely person, . . . the principle of the unanticipated agent into the person who is present throughout the story, but in a very marginal way. As we have seen, this convention has a double structural advantage: it keeps the reader from identifying the criminal before the detective produces the solution and by keeping the person who is to become the embodiment of guilt on the sidelines it prevents the reader from developing much sympathy for him.

Treating victim and criminal as figures without much emotional interest or complexity places the detective story's primary emphasis on those characters who are investigating the crime, the most important of which is the detective. Of all Poe's contributions to the formula of the classical detective story, his invention of the character of Dupin--with his aristocratic detachment, his brilliance and eccentricity, his synthesis of the poet's intuitive insight with the scientist's power of inductive reasoning, and his capacity for psychological analysis--was certainly the most crucial. This was essentially the same combination of qualities that Doyle built into Sherlock Holmes. With minor differences of emphasis, they have remained the distinguishing characteristics of twentieth-century classical detectives like Hercule Poirot, Dr. Gideon Fell, Mr. Campion, Lord Peter Wimsey, Nero Wolfe, and many others. . . .

The detective's terrifying ability to expose hidden secrets also relates to the convention of aristocratic and eccentric detachment from the ordinary concerns of human life. Because his skill threatens to uncover some secret guilt on the part of a character with whom the reader identifies, it is reassuring that, despite this terrifying superiority, the detective is a detached eccentric with no worldly stake in the outcome of the action. Ultimately he uses his powers not to threaten but to uphold the reader's self-esteem by proving the guilt of a specific individual rather than exposing some general guilt in which the reader might be implicated. . . .

In this perspective the role of the fourth main group of characters in the classical detective story emerges more clearly. This consists of those characters who are involved with the crime but need the detective's aid to solve it. It includes three main types: . . . the friends or assistants of the detective who frequently chronicle his exploits; the bumbling and inefficient members of the official police . . .; and . . . the collection of false suspects, generally sympathetic but weak people who require the detective's intervention to exonerate them. . . . These characters are usually decent, respectable people who suddenly find themselves in a situation where their ordinarily secure status is no protection against the danger of being charged with a crime and where the police are as likely to arrest the innocent as the guilty. This fourth group of characters represents the norm of middleclass society suddenly disrupted by the abnormality of crime. The special drama of crime in the classical detective story lies in the way it threatens the serene domestic circles of bourgeois life with anarchy and chaos. The official guardians of this order, the police, turn out to be inefficient bunglers, and the finger of suspicion points to everybody. The ordered rationality of society momentarily seems a flimsy surface over a seething pit of guilt and disorder. Then the detective intervenes and proves that the general suspicion is false. He proves the social order is not responsible for the crime because it was the act of a particular individual with his own private motives. Through his treatment of the fourth group of characters, the classical detective writer arouses our fears that sympathetic characters are guilty, then releases that fear when the detective proves that the guilt can be attributed to a specific individual. The importance of this aspect of the classical story is probably the main reason why the criminal and the victim are frequently the least developed characters. It is not the confrontation of detective and criminal so much as the detective's rescue of the false suspects and the police that constitutes the dramatic nexus of the classical formula.

4. Setting. In devising the setting for his stories Poe again set the pattern for the classical detective story. Both "Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" take place in two isolated settings clearly marked off from the rest of the world: Dupin's apartment and the room in which the crime takes place. Around these two curiously delimited and fixed spaces swirls the teeming city of Paris. How often this combination of the isolated place and the bustling world outside is repeated in the classical detective story: the locked room in the midst of the city, the isolated country house in the middle of the strange and frightening moors, the walled-in college quadrangle, or the lonely villa in the suburban town. Mystery after mystery takes us back and forth between the detective's apartment or office and the isolated room full of clues. We are always aware of the threatening chaos of the outside world, but it erupts only rarely into the story, usually at the most suspenseful times, the moment of the crime, and then again at the solution and denouement.

This setting performs many functions. First of all, it furnishes a limited and controlled backdrop against which the clues and suspects so central to the story can be silhouetted. It abstracts the story from the complexity and confusion...
of the larger social world and provides a rationale for avoiding the consideration of those more complex problems of social injustice and group conflict that form the basis of much contemporary realistic fiction. The isolated setting also fosters that special kind of suspense that has long been associated with places apart from the busy stream of human affairs. In this respect the classical detective story setting is a direct descendant of the isolated castle or abbey where all those mysterious goings on took place in the gothic novels of Mrs. Radcliffe, "Monk" Lewis, and their followers. But most important, the contrast between the locked room or the lonely country house and the outside world constitutes a symbolic representation of the relation between order and chaos, between surface rationality and hidden depths of guilt. We begin in the serene and rational order of the detective's apartment or in the pleasant warmth and social graces of the country house before the murder. Then we are suddenly transported to the locked room, a mirror image of the detective's apartment disrupted by the chaotic outer world that has penetrated the quiet order and left behind those mysterious clues suggesting the presence of a hidden guilt. By solving the secret of the locked room, the detective brings the threatening external world under control so that he and his assistant can return to the peaceful serenity of his library, or can restore the pleasant social order of the country house.

The isolated setting has remained popular with classical detective story writers for another reason. It establishes a framework for the treatment of manners and local color in a fashion often reminiscent of the great Victorian novelists. Though this tendency is minimal in Poe, it is nonetheless present in his interest in the variety of occupations and responses of the parade of witnesses in "Rue Morgue." Doyle developed this concern into richly atmospheric sketches of Baker Street and its "Irregulars," the London slums, and the English countryside, while in many twentieth-century classical stories local color almost takes over the tale. In Dorothy Sayers's *Nine Tailors* a rural society out of Thomas Hardy by Trollope shares the spotlight with an elaborate discussion of the art of campanology, and Michael Innes enacts an almost Dickensian social panorama in stories like *Appleby's End*. These pageants of local color provide both an air of verisimilitude and an added source of interest to the main theme of investigation. In addition, they symbolize the normally peaceful and serene order of society disrupted by the anomaly of crime and restored when the detective isolates the guilty individual. Many twentieth-century writers of classical detective stories reflect the nineteenth-century novel in their treatment of society in the form of nostalgic fantasies of a more peaceful and harmonious social order associated with the traditional rural society of England.