

Why use Detective Fiction in the AP[Ⓟ] Classroom?

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***"The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes."---
Holmes, in "The Hound of Baskervilles" by Arthur Conan Doyle***

***"From a drop of water," said the writer, "a logician could infer the possibility of an
Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a
great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of
it."---Holmes, in "A Study in Scarlet" by Arthur Conan Doyle***

Everyone loves a mystery story, probably for two reasons: The first is that the mystery story is the only literary genre that is written for the reader to follow and match their intellectual acumen with the protagonist. By doing so, the genre invites the reader into its own world as an active participant, not merely an innocent bystander (Pollock, 2003). Secondly, it instills a sense of enjoyment in readers wanting to know "whodunit" and infuses them with the desire to search out and find stories with ever-increasing complexity and excitement. Truly, mystery stories are, as Watson concedes in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Scandal in Bohemia*, "the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen."

Reasons for students:

Conversations are the driving force of the written work, usually between an authority figure such as a detective, or inspector, or consultant to the municipal police force and the suspects. By reading the conversations, students will gain a myriad of perspectives into the way suspects—guilty and not guilty—behave; this leads the students to think about their own actions and what they would say if they had done something wrong or were suspected of doing something wrong (Pollock, 2003).

Very often detective fiction is serialized, prompting students to further seek out writers that they enjoy and characters that they have an affinity for. Even to this day, Sherlock Holmes stories are continually being updated or changed to unusual or exotic locales to give readers a new twist in life.

***"When I hear you give your reasons, the thing always appears to me to be so
ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though at each successive
instance of your reasoning I am baffled until you explain your process. And yet I
believe my eyes are as good as yours."---Watson, after Holmes carefully details how he
picked up all the little clues, at the beginning of Arthur Conan Doyle's first short story, "A***

Scandal in Bohemia."

Like in many other mystery stories by Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holms—apparent in his brilliant intellectual skill—astonishes his partner, Watson, by deducing from small details of Watson's appearance, clothing, and shoes that his friend has been walking in the country, has a careless servant girl, and is back in medical practice. As such, detective fiction exposes students to logic, critical thinking, and reasoning skills; skills that are necessary to do well on an AP exam. By working through mystery stories, students should feel more in command in dealing with the multiple choice section of the AP[®] English tests, where often they are misled by the numerous incorrect yet distracting answer choices. The more mystery stories they read, the better they will be at establishing why an answer is the correct one and why the other choices, while close to being correct, are not.

"Can a husband ever carry about a secret all his life and a woman who loves him have no suspicion of it? I knew it by his refusal to talk about some episodes in his American life. I knew it by certain precautions he took. I knew it by certain words he let fall. I knew it by the way he looked at unexpected strangers."—Holmes, in "The Valley of Fears" by Arthur Conan Doyle

Students will be able to determine whether what people say is truthful after dealing with a multitude of suspects and alibis, and more capable in dealing with difficult situations, thanks to their growing skill in "getting to the bottom of things." Moreover, by matching wits with the arguably greatest detectives of literature, students gain greater self-esteem and are instilled with more confidence.

Reasons for teachers:

Detective fiction has a higher reader participation rate than other genres for obvious reasons. In many novels, it is possible to simply delete the first half of the book and construe what happened (Pollock, 2003). But take out one word or character in the mystery story, and the entire meaning of the story can be lost. One has to pay close attention the whole way.

"I must take the view, your Grace, that when a man embarks upon a crime, he is morally guilty of any other crime which may spring from it."—Holmes, in "The

Adventure of Priory School" by Arthur Conan Doyle

Detective novels also have distinct, unified morals. The good guy usually wins; and, intelligence wins out over strength. These recurrent themes never leave the students' side. Some mystery stories may deal with abstract or philosophical ideas to add depth to the material, and readers may appreciate such discussion in the book, but no matter what students read in the genre, the detective usually catches the bad guy. Intelligence wins out over strength in most of the stories. The impression that students are left with, then, is that the good guy is smarter than the bad guy, that it is better to be smart than strong.

"I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose."—Holmes, in *"A Study in Scarlet"* by Arthur Conan Doyle

"Is it not? Is it not? Breadth of view, my dear Mr. Mac, is one of the essentials of our profession. The interplay of ideas and the oblique uses of knowledge are often of extraordinary interest."—Holmes, in *"The Valley of Fear"* by Arthur Conan Doyle

The genre also exposes students to different cultures, historical settings, and views of society as seen through the eyes of the protagonist or detective. From the first mystery story in Ancient Greek society in *Oedipus Rex* to 19th century Britain and Sherlock Holmes, students gain a vast understanding of various societies and belief systems, and also the values of the peoples in those societies. A famous case in point is 'Why does Sherlock Holmes use drugs? Does that serve a purpose that the author wants to convey?' Another is 'Why is Hercule Poirot such an antifeminist?' In that sense, mystery stories are like icebergs; they offer so much more than meets the eye.

Mystery stories can be found for specific literary demands. Works of literary merit include 'Oedipus Rex' by Sophocles, a Greek classic, and 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' and 'The Purloined Letter' by Poe, and 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. One could also use less meritorious works such as Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett as methods to instill an interest in reading for their own enjoyment

As teachers of literature, sometimes we take reading for granted. We assume that students will read everything we assign and also like the stories we discuss. But that is not always the case.

Students often fail to fully appreciate the quality of the works they read simply because the material is something they have to read, not something that they have chosen to read. By using detective fiction, however, students can have a more enjoyable time in class and can be exposed to a genre that is much more powerful than meets the eye, a genre that can enhance both academic aptitude and self-esteem.

Works Cited

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