

ORIENTALIST DEPICTIONS IN ENGLISH DETECTIVE AND CRIME
FICTION OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: *This thesis explores the use of Orientalist depictions in early 20th-century English detective and crime fiction, focusing on prominent works by authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Sax Rohmer. The genre's fascination with the "exotic East" often reflected colonial anxieties and racial stereotypes. Through analysis of key texts, this article illustrates how Orientalist themes were utilized to create villains, exotic settings, and mysterious crimes, reinforcing Western notions of superiority over Eastern cultures. Despite being presented as mere narrative devices, these representations played a significant role in shaping Western perceptions of the East during the colonial era.*

Keywords: *Orientalism, detective fiction, crime fiction, Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Sax Rohmer, early 20th century, colonialism, English literature.*

INTRODUCTION

The early 20th century marked the height of British detective and crime fiction, with iconic detectives like Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot captivating readers across the world. However, beneath the surface of these suspenseful tales, many works reflected and reinforced the era's colonial attitudes, particularly through the use of Orientalist depictions. Orientalism, as theorized by Edward Said, involves the Western construction of the East as mysterious, exotic, and inferior, often used to justify colonial dominance. In detective fiction, Orientalism manifested through the portrayal of Eastern characters as dangerous, cunning, or criminal, while the East itself was depicted as a place of intrigue, danger, and moral ambiguity.

This thesis examines the Orientalist themes found in early 20th-century detective and crime fiction, focusing on key works by Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Sax Rohmer. It explores how these authors utilized Orientalist tropes to enhance their narratives, while also perpetuating racialized and colonial stereotypes of the East.

Orientalist Themes in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Stories

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are among the most famous works of detective fiction, and several of them incorporate Orientalist themes. In *The Sign of the Four* (1890), the plot revolves around the theft of a valuable Indian treasure, and the narrative portrays characters from the East as either exotic or threatening. The most prominent example is the character of Tonga, depicted as a savage, almost subhuman figure from the Andaman Islands, reinforcing colonial ideas of the East as a place of danger and primitive violence.

Holmes, embodying rational Western logic, is positioned as the agent who can decode the mysterious and chaotic world represented by the East. This contrast between the rationality of the West and the perceived irrationality of the East serves as a recurring theme in Doyle's work, reinforcing the superiority of Western thought over the mystical and inscrutable nature of Eastern cultures.

Doyle's use of Orientalist tropes is particularly evident in the characterization of Tonga, a racialized figure who represents the "Other" in colonial imagination. The depiction of Eastern artifacts as dangerous or cursed also feeds into the idea of the East as a place of supernatural threat.

Agatha Christie and the Mystique of the East

Agatha Christie's works, particularly those set in the Middle East, offer a more subtle but still significant engagement with Orientalism. In *Death on the Nile* (1937), Christie sets her murder mystery against the backdrop of Egypt, capitalizing on the Western fascination with the country's ancient history and archaeological wonders. The Egyptian setting serves as an exotic and romantic locale, adding to the allure of the plot. However, the narrative occasionally veers into stereotypical depictions, with the East presented as a place of danger and unpredictability.

Similarly, in *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), Christie's portrayal of Iraq evokes the image of the Orient as a land steeped in ancient mysteries and hidden threats. While Christie's depictions are less overtly villainous than Doyle's, they still reflect Western assumptions about the East as fundamentally different, mysterious, and potentially dangerous.

Christie's engagement with Orientalism is more atmospheric, using the East as an exotic backdrop rather than directly villainizing Eastern characters. Nonetheless, her works reflect the broader trend of using Orientalist imagery to create suspense and intrigue, feeding into Western fantasies about the East.

Sax Rohmer and the "Yellow Peril"

One of the most explicit examples of Orientalism in early 20th-century crime fiction comes from Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* series, which debuted with *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913). The character of Dr. Fu Manchu, a Chinese criminal mastermind, embodies the "Yellow Peril" stereotype—a Western fear of the growing influence and perceived threat posed by East Asia.

Fu Manchu is portrayed as the ultimate Oriental villain, using his knowledge of Eastern poisons, arcane sciences, and secret societies to challenge Western power. The character represents not only a racialized Other but also a geopolitical threat, reflecting Western anxieties about the decline of imperial dominance in the face of rising Eastern powers like China and Japan.

Rohmer's work is perhaps the most blatant example of Orientalism in detective fiction, playing into racialized fears and reinforcing the notion of the East as a site of danger and moral corruption. The Fu Manchu character became a cultural icon of Orientalist villainy, influencing popular media and Western perceptions of East Asia for decades.

Orientalist Criminality: The East as a Source of Danger

In detective and crime fiction, the East is often depicted as a source of criminality and danger. Eastern characters are frequently portrayed as masterminds of complex criminal plots, operating through secret societies or wielding knowledge of dark, mystical practices unknown to the West. This portrayal feeds into the colonial narrative that Western civilization must maintain control over the East to prevent chaos and disorder.

The use of Orientalist tropes in early detective fiction also reinforced racialized stereotypes about Eastern peoples as inherently duplicitous, untrustworthy, and morally ambiguous. These depictions, while often sensationalized for the purposes of fiction, had real-world implications in shaping Western attitudes toward Eastern cultures and peoples during the colonial period.

The association of the East with criminality in early detective fiction mirrored broader colonial concerns about maintaining control over foreign territories and the perceived threats posed by non-Western cultures. These fictional portrayals helped solidify Western superiority by contrasting rational, law-abiding Western detectives with chaotic and dangerous Eastern criminals.

Conclusion

Orientalism played a significant role in shaping early 20th-century English detective and crime fiction. Authors like Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Sax Rohmer drew upon colonial stereotypes of the East to create exotic settings and villainous characters, reinforcing Western notions of superiority. These depictions, while often serving the narrative needs of suspense and intrigue, also contributed to the perpetuation of harmful racial and cultural stereotypes.

The legacy of Orientalist depictions in detective fiction continues to influence popular media and Western perceptions of the East. As contemporary readers and scholars revisit these works, it is essential to recognize and critically engage with the colonial attitudes they reflect, while also acknowledging the ways in which modern literature and media are moving toward more nuanced and respectful representations of Eastern cultures.

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