

## 1 Introduction

This term paper aims to explore to what an extent the novel *Oil on Water*<sup>1</sup> can be said to use elements of the traditional detective story. It is not within the scope of this paper to aspire to anything near an exhaustive comparative analysis nor to cover all aspects of the genre comprehensively, although many points of comparison between the novel mentioned above and the rules of detective stories could be drawn. Rather, this paper will more closely analyse how an understanding of the setting of detectives stories and how an understanding of the character of the great detective contribute to a reading of *Oil on Water*.

To this purpose, a short history of the genre of detective stories in the first part of this paper will show how familiar the reading public in general is with recurrent aspects of such tales. A more detailed exposition of typical character traits of great fictional detectives and a demonstration of commonly used settings will establish the foundation of the comparative analysis, which is the aim of this paper. In the second part of the paper, a short plot summary of the novel *Oil on Water* allows those readers who are not overly familiar with that novel the better to understand the parallels and differences that will be pointed out in the third section. The final conclusion will evaluate if reading *Oil on Water* with an eye to the traditions of detective stories offers novel insights to readers or not.

## 2 Elements of Stories of Detection

As a genre, detective stories go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and tales of mystery as for instance *The Murder in the Rue Morgue*<sup>2</sup>, popularized by the American writer Edgar Allen Poe<sup>3</sup>. Their appeal greatly increased through diverse popular detectives such as Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Agatha

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<sup>1</sup> Halon Habila, *Oil on Water*, London 2011;

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Murder in the Rue Morgue*, first published 1841, now in: G.R. Thompson, ed., *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York 2004, pp. 87-96;

<sup>3</sup> cf.: Margaret Drabble, "Detective Fiction", in: Margaret Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford University Press, London 1998, s.v.

Christie's Miss Marple, Dorothy L. Sayer's Lord Peter Wimsey or Colin Dexter's Inspector Moore, many of which became further popularized through mass media such as television or the cinema. Typically, the great detective solves seemingly insoluble crimes committed by a great criminal. He thereby reestablishes order in society, which makes the detective story conservative in nature. In such whodunits, the author challenges the reader to solve the mystery himself. The narrator hides the true clues amidst red herrings, which send both the reader and the detective's less able foil on fools' errands. Typically, all is revealed in the grand finale when the detective proves his superior powers of deduction by laying open his train of ratiocination that led him and could have led the reader to the identity of the criminal. Central to any such story are the character of the great detective and the world that he preserves through his work. Both of these aspects will be more closely presented below.

## 2.1 The Character of the Detective

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Unmistakably, in the Golden Age thriller of the 1920s and 1930s, elements of a much older literary form, the pastoral, can be retraced. According to a widely accepted definition, the pastoral reflects "an urban poet's nostalgic image of peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting"<sup>7</sup>. In this concept, the tranquility and innocence of the village environment provides a convenient background against which the criminal deed is accentuated more sharply so that the idea of guilt develops quite naturally and unambiguously.

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### 3 The Plot of Oil on Water

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<sup>7</sup> M.H. Abrams, **A Glossary of Literary Terms**, New York 1981, s.v.



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