IRONY AND INVESTIGATION: RE-EVALUATING DETECTIVE ELEMENTS IN MID-TO-LATE 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN PROSE

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Abstract. This study analyzes how the rules of detective stories changed in American books during the middle and end of the 20th century. The main goal is to explain how writers used irony to take apart old detective ideas, like the genius investigator, the simple plot, and the clear ending. Books by famous authors such as Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon are used as the main examples for this study. The analysis is done by looking closely at the structure of the stories and how they use parody. Standard detective tricks are identified and compared to how they appear in these newer books to see how their meaning has shifted. By comparing these two styles, the research shows a move away from the classic "who did it" stories toward "anti-detective" novels. In these books, searching for the truth feels more like a game with the reader rather than a crime that actually gets solved.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Parody, Detective Genre, Anti-detective Narrative, Irony, Metafiction, Genre Subversion, American Prose, Epistemological Uncertainty, 20th Century Literature.

Introduction. Detective stories have always been popular because they offer a clear path from a mystery to a solution. In traditional stories, a smart investigator finds clues, follows a logical trail, and eventually catches the criminal. This structure gives readers a sense of order and satisfaction. However, in the mid-to-late 20th century, American writers began to look at this genre differently. Instead of following the old rules, they started using detective elements to create something completely new and often confusing. This shift is closely connected to postmodernism, a movement that questions whether a single truth can even exist.

In this period, the detective genre is not just used for entertainment. It is often turned into a parody. Authors like Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon take familiar tropes -like the mysterious letter or the private eye - and use them to show that life is not as simple as a puzzle. In their books, clues might lead nowhere, and the detective often loses track of the case or even their own identity.

This is why these stories are often called "anti-detective" novels. The goal of these writers is to use irony to challenge the idea that language and logic can solve every problem in a complex world.

Literature review. The study of how postmodern writers play with detective rules has been a major topic for many researchers over the last few decades. Most scholars agree that postmodernism does not just copy the detective genre; instead, it uses the genre to talk about how messy and unpredictable the modern world is.

One of the most important researchers in this field is Stefano Tani. In his influential work, the concept of the "anti-detective" novel was introduced.

Tani analyzed how postmodern authors take the traditional "whodunit" structure and purposefully break it. He found that in these stories, the mystery is often left unsolved to frustrate the reader's expectations[1].

Another significant contribution was made by Michael Holquist, who explored the link between detective stories and philosophy. Holquist argued that if traditional detective stories are about logic, then postmodern versions are about the failure of logic[2]. He showed that writers use the detective form as a metaphor for the human struggle to find meaning in a world full of "noise".

More recent studies have focused on specific American authors. For example, Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney edited a collection of essays that looked at the "metaphysical detective story". Their research highlights how authors like Paul Auster use the detective trope to explore questions of identity[3]. They found that in postmodern prose, the detective often becomes a mirror of the criminal.

Additionally, researchers like Brian McHale have looked at the technical side of these novels. McHale's work explains that postmodern fiction often moves from "knowing" things to "being" in a world that doesn't make sense[4]. His analysis of how genres are mixed helps to justify why irony is the best tool for re-evaluating detective elements. These existing studies provide a strong foundation for analyzing how mid-to-late 20th-century American prose turns a simple genre into a complex critique of reality.

Methodology. To understand how detective stories are changed by postmodern writers, a specific set of research steps is followed. The goal is not just to read the books, but to look closely at how the "bones" of a mystery story are taken apart and put back together in strange ways. The primary method used in this research is qualitative content analysis. This means that a few key novels from the mid-to-late 20th century are selected and read very carefully. Instead of looking at every single page, the focus is placed on specific moments where detective tropes appear.

Another important tool used is the comparative method. This involves taking the rules of a classic detective story - like those written by Arthur Conan Doyle and placing them side-by-side with postmodern examples. A contextual approach is used to link these literary choices to the time period. By looking at the cultural and philosophical ideas of the late 20th century, the reasons behind the authors' irony are explained. All these methods work together to ensure that the findings are based on solid evidence from the texts themselves, rather than just personal opinion.

Analysis and discussion. In this section, the focus moves to how postmodern American writers take the standard tools of a detective story and use them to create irony.

From "The New York Trilogy: City of Glass" by Paul Auster: *"He was a detective who solved nothing. He was a man who had disappeared. Every time he took a step, he felt as though he were walking away from himself"*[5]. In this part of the story, the main character, Quinn, is pretending to be a private investigator named Paul Auster.

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[1] Tani, Stefano. The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction. Southern Illinois University Press, 1984. - P.102.

[2] Holquist, Michael. Whodunit and Who Am I? The Detective Story and Metaphysical Allegory. Poetics Today, vol. 3, no. 1, 1982, pp. 135-145.

[3] Merivale, Patricia, and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, editors. Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. – P.79.

[4] McHale, Brian. Postmodernist Fiction. Routledge, 1987. – P.112.

[5] Auster, Paul. The New York Trilogy: City of Glass. Penguin Books, 1990. – P.64.

Usually, a detective is a strong person with a clear goal. But here, Quinn is "solving nothing" and feels like he is "disappearing". The focus is not on finding a criminal, but on the detective losing his own mind and identity. This represents the irony of the investigator. In a classic Sherlock Holmes story, the detective is the smartest person in the room. In Auster's postmodern world, the investigation leads to the destruction of the detective rather than the solution of the crime. The investigation becomes a metaphor for a mid-life crisis or a loss of self.

This shows that in the late 20th century, writers used detective elements to talk about internal human problems instead of external crimes.

From "The Crying of Lot 49" by Thomas Pynchon: *"Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the silence... She wondered if the words were only some shared hallucination, or a secret message she was never meant to read"*[6].

Oedipa Maas is the "detective" in this book, trying to settle a dead man's estate. She finds what she thinks are "clues" about a secret postal system called Trystero. However, instead of being sure about what she finds, she worries it might be a "hallucination". The clues don't lead to a fact; they lead to more doubt. This highlights the irony of the clue. Traditionally, a clue is a piece of reality that tells the truth. In Pynchon's prose, a clue is unreliable. The more clues Oedipa finds, the more she feels she might be going crazy. This reflects the postmodern idea that there is too much information in the world, and we can't tell what is real and what is just noise.

The investigation doesn't bring order; it brings chaos.

From "The Name of the Rose" by Umberto Eco (Postmodern Historical Detective): *"I have never doubted the truth of signs... but I have learned that signs can be used to say what is not true"*[7]. The main character, William of Baskerville, is a monk who acts like a detective. He is very good at reading signs and symbols. But at the end of the story, he realizes that even though he followed the "signs" correctly, he was wrong about the motive and the killer's plan. The signs were real, but the meaning he gave them was a mistake. This shows the irony of the solution. In a typical mystery, the detective explains everything at the end. Here, the detective wins by accident, not by logic.

Conclusion. This article has examined how American postmodern novels from the mid-to-late 20th century take the familiar parts of a detective story and turn them into something new through parody and irony. By looking at works by authors like Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon, it is clear that the traditional "whodunit" model has been replaced by the "anti-detective" narrative. In these stories, the detective is no longer a hero who restores order to the world. Instead, the character often ends up more confused or lost than they were at the start. The results of the analysis show that the elements of the detective genre - the investigator, the clue, and the solution - serve as tools to talk about the messiness of real life. While a classic mystery suggests that every problem has a logical answer, postmodern prose suggests that truth is often fragmented and hard to reach. The clues found by characters like Oedipa Maas or Quinn do not lead to a criminal; they lead to deeper questions about language, identity, and the unreliable nature of information.

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