

Research Investigation

An analysis of generic conventions seen within the whodunit sub-genre of Crime Dramas

Crime dramas are a popular genre amongst wide audiences, engaging them through the characters and the world they create, even if those worlds and characters are seemingly unbelievable¹, due to the '*instances of repetition and difference*'² within the genre, as stated by Steve Neale. These '*instances of repetition and difference*' allow audiences to recognise typical genre conventions to '*not only define each specific genre but also define the audiences' expectations of a narrative within that genre*'³, forming a universal idea of what makes up that particular genre.

Crime dramas often always follow the same codes and conventions⁴. Typical conventions audiences denote to recognise the crime drama genre are instances commonly established within the opening credits, as *they provide a glimpse into what we can expect from this particular episode*⁵, and the narrative, by using familiar macro elements such as iconography and codes. Conventional iconography typically seen within the crime drama genre range depend on sub genres, but ultimately demonstrate '*instances of repetition*'⁶, creating recognition surrounding that particular genre. Visual codes conventional to the crime drama genre consist of denotations of '*Police cars, blue flashing lights, crime scenes, police tape (do not cross)*'⁷, which create an identifiable genre. Further visual codes like setting are important within a genre, typically within crime dramas a conventional location consists of an '*urban setting*'⁸, taking place in larger cities to connote a sense of gritty realism, as denoted in popular crime dramas like '*Luther*' and '*Line of Duty*.' However, that is not to say that all crime dramas must take place in urban locations. In recent years, there has been a rise in rural located crime dramas, with the popularity of shows like '*Broadchurch*' and '*The Bay*,' as small-town murders connote fear amongst audiences. A consistent feature of crime dramas denoted across the years is the encodement of low-key lighting. This technical code, also known as *Chiaroscuro*⁹, has been a conventional to crime dramas for decades, and is commonly used to connote mystery and drama within a text.

¹ <https://thebicesterschool.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/TV-Crime-Drama-Revision-Booklet-2014-Exam-Topic.pdf>

² WJEC A2 Media Studies: Study and Revision Guide by Christine Bell

³ <https://www.savannahgilbo.com/blog/tropes>

⁴ <https://lawrencepikey.wordpress.com/2014/03/20/the-codes-conventions-of-crime-dramas/>

⁵ <https://filmlifestyle.com/movie-opening-credits/>

⁶ WJEC A2 Media Studies: Study and Revision Guide by Christine Bell

⁷ <http://trinityfilmandmedia.blogspot.com/2012/10/conventions-of-television-crime-drama.html>

⁸ <http://trinityfilmandmedia.blogspot.com/2012/10/conventions-of-television-crime-drama.html>

⁹ <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-chiaroscuro-definition-examples/>

The crime drama genre has gained popularity through its various sub-genres across different texts for years, with its prominence back in 1920s with the rise of the murder mystery, or 'whodunnit' genre, which is still popular today with the recent release of *'Knives Out'* (2019) and the remake of Agatha Christies' *'Murder on the Orient Express'* (2017) and *'Death on the Nile'* (2022). Although some typical crime drama conventions are denoted within the murder mystery genre, 'Whodunnits' further establish Neales instances of a genre '*differences*'¹⁰ through this sub-genre typical conventions. Audiences typically recognise the whodunnit genre by the conventional '*double narrative*'¹¹, meaning that one narrative is hidden (containing the murder plot) and gradually revealed while the other is the open narrative, which often transpires in the present time of the story¹². As stated by Todorov, the whodunit narrative is a '*paradigm for fiction in general because the story unfolds in relation not to a future event but one that is already known and merely lying-in wait*'¹³. Because of this, audiences are positioned the same as the characters within the narrative, following clues and red herrings in attempt to solve the case, therefore becoming an active audience.

Within the whodunit genre there are many codes and conventions denoted that make it so recognisable to audiences, one of these being the setting in which they take place. Unlike typical crime dramas, the whodunit genre is conventionally set within the '*genteel society and in a closed space – a sealed room, a country house, or a transcontinental train*'¹⁴ denoted by the work of Agatha Christie, in contrast to the harsh urban atmosphere of modern crime dramas. This is conformative to the genre as characters are theatrically contrived¹⁵ within high societal settings until the case has been solved by the detective within the narrative.

Character archetypes are conventional to the whodunit genre just as they are within a typical crime drama. The whodunnit genre typically follows the character archetypes of the *Sleuth, Sidekick, Villain, Victim, Suspects and Red Herrings*¹⁶. The *Sleuth* character is one of importance within the murder mystery genre, as" *this is the person who will ultimately solve the crime*"¹⁷, audience easily recognise this character archetype by their heroic nature within the plotline, and ability to piece together the clues to solve the case like characters such as *Poirot* or *Sherlock*. Other archetypes of importance within the whodunit genre are the *villain*, the

¹⁰ <http://gbhsmedialeewall.blogspot.com/2017/09/theory.html>

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whodunit>

¹² Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Nordic Noir on Page and Screen

¹³ *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* by Mark Currie

¹⁴ https://www.ehow.co.uk/info_12259035_6-key-conventions-common-murdermystery-plots.html

¹⁵ https://www.ehow.co.uk/info_12259035_6-key-conventions-common-murdermystery-plots.html

¹⁶ <https://writershelpingwriters.net/2013/11/mystery-writing-basics-characters-plot/>

¹⁷ <https://writershelpingwriters.net/2013/11/mystery-writing-basics-characters-plot/>

suspects, and the *victim*. The *villain* archetype is conventional to the genre as this is only revealed at the end, connoting mystery within the narrative, therefore establishing the genre. The *suspects* are also conventional characters in a whodunit genre, as without them genre conventions like *red herrings* wouldn't play out within the narrative and the plot would be disinteresting.

An '*instance of reptation*'¹⁸ within this sub-genre is the key convention of *red herrings* and *clues*. The murder mystery genre is built on the foundation of *clues*, as they aid the detective and the reader in solving the case¹⁹. *Red herrings* are also a genre convention denoted across not only whodunits but across most crime dramas not matter the sub-genre. *Red herrings* hold purpose within murder mysteries to appear "*as a clue, but instead sends the detective in the wrong direction*"²⁰ as well as the audience as *the detective* purposes as the audiences second set of eyes.

Research

Analysis: Partners in Crime: The Secret Adversary (S1, Ep 1)

A typical convention within the crime drama genre is an opening title sequence, denoting visual, written and audio codes and conventions as they aid in '*setting the tone, atmosphere and characters for the audience*'²¹. Within the opening sequence of Partners in Crime: The Secret Adversary, a clear atmosphere of the murder mystery genre it depicts. The opening sequence denotes a fast-paced montage of many actions codes (Barthes) of protagonist duo Tuppence and Tommy Beresford, such as long shots of running down flights of stairs and mid-shots chase scenes, all typical conventions of both murder mysteries and cramas. As well as this, the title sequence is accompanied by the non-diegetic audio code of the repetitive (Neale) jazz string score typically denoted in Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle adaptations, connoting a sense of mystery and '*setting the tone*'. Another way in which the *atmosphere* is set for the audience is through the use of many visual codes we recognise within crime dramas. The use of the colour red during the montage signifies the genre due to the connotations it holds; blood, danger, and love, which are all elements included within the narrative. Denotable iconography such as a gun anchors the genre further due to the connotations of crime and death, thus succeeding in the purpose of a title sequence.

From the outset of 'Partners in Crime', the audience can depict the murder mystery crime drama from the establishment of the location. The opening scene takes place on a traditional seemingly high-class train, denoted by the full length shot on the platform and the mid-shot on the carriage, conforming to the conventional location of murder mysteries, a setting in which

¹⁸ WJEC A2 Media Studies: Study and Revision Guide by Christine Bell

¹⁹ <https://rainford.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/8.6-6-Key-Conventions-Common-to-Murder.pdf>

²⁰ <https://rainford.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/8.6-6-Key-Conventions-Common-to-Murder.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.zilliondesigns.com/blog/what-title-sequences-can-teach-you-about-design/>

takes place in a *genteel society*. This could also signify intertextuality to Christies previous work such as *'The Murder on the Orient Express'*, which many audiences would recognise, conforming to Neale's theory as *'genres are instances of repetition and differences'*, in this case it demonstrates the repetition of a transcontinental train. However, the setting is not limited to this, as the episode progresses the audience can denote an instance at an iconic location in London, *The Ritz*, connoting high society, but also many instances of London back allies, subverting the *'genteel society'* and connoting mystery and thrill. Because of this, *'Partners in Crime'* establishes both conventions of murder mysteries inspired by Agatha Christie and elements of more contemporary crama through city location.

A common convention throughout crime dramas is the narrative taking place in medias res, this is established in the opening scene of *Partners in Crime: The Secret Adversary*. A narrative taking place in medias res *'starts with the action or conflict'*, this helps the audience to be fully immersed into the narrative, through the action-packed nature of crime dramas. The opening scene of *'Partners in Crime'* takes place in medias res, where the scene takes place on the transcontinental train. The scene starts seemingly peaceful, denoted by the mid-shot of the ordinary couple protagonists Tuppence and Tommy Beresford. This is when the narrative changed, and the audience denote the *'action or conflict'* by the mid-shot of a man unknown to audiences being shot, comforting to the genre, as well as creating enigma.

Lighting is a key convention with crime dramas, specifically low key lighting, due to the fact that *'lighting can suggest the narrative'*²². It is typical of crime dramas to encode low key lighting as it provides connotations of mystery and enigma and is *'effective for drawing attention to serious subject matter or the darker, emotional side to the story'*. In *Partners in Crime*, there are many instances of low-key lighting due to the genre. An instance where low-key lighting has been used for a typical effect is when protagonist Tuppence Beresford investigates an unknown location from a clue she had found. Through the use of a combination of long and mid-shots, the audience are able to denote the derelict building in low-key lighting, connoting a sense of danger or mystery ahead. This is a recognisable feature from Agatha Christie adaptations, and it captures the murder mystery genre in all its glory.

Character theorist Propp argued that *'characters could be classified into certain roles that progress a story'*²³. In traditional crime dramas like *'Partners in Crime'*, there are clear character roles within the narrative; *'the detective, the victim and the villain'*²⁴. *'Partners in Crime'* follows the protagonist Tuppence Beresford and her husband Tommy, as amateur sleuths' detectives, which is a subversion of many crime dramas which typically follows qualified detectives. In

²² <https://thebicesterschool.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/TV-Crime-Drama-Revision-Booklet-2014-Exam-Topic.pdf>

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<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zgydhv4/revision/1#:~:text=Propp%20argued%20that%20stories%20are,roles%20that%20progress%20a%20story.>

²⁴ <https://www.blackpoolgrand.co.uk/crime-drama-infographic>

addition to this, the opening scene of the episode creates enigma within the first five minutes through the hidden identity of the villain Brown. From the outset this character presents traits in which we denote with an '*antagonist*'²⁵ villain. This is due to the denotation of the unknown man shooting another, to retrieve an undisclosed object. This is a recognisable feature of murder mystery genre, as it allows the narrative to progress through the encodement of enigma and red herrings.

²⁵ <https://www.blackpoolgrand.co.uk/crime-drama-infographic>

[https://www.filmsfatale.com/blog/2020/9/25/the-whodunit-why-we-love-them\](https://www.filmsfatale.com/blog/2020/9/25/the-whodunit-why-we-love-them)

<https://rainford.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/8.6-6-Key-Conventions-Common-to-Murder.pdf>

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