

The hardboiled detective from PI to CTU & CSI

PI/Private Eye, CTU/Counter Terrorism Unit, CSI/Crime Scene Investigation

'... down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished or afraid. The detective... must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honour – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it... He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common men. He has a sense of character or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and passionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks – that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, disgust for shame, and contempt for pettiness.'

Quoted from:

Raymond Chandler, The Simple Art of Murder (New York, Vintage 1998)

While the image of the hardboiled private detective coalesced in the 1930's, and this image is directly linked to the novels and short stories written by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and notably the films made from these sources, the character of the PI has become an archetypal figure in relation to crime and detection and this persona embodies features which are still recognisable in contemporary film and television today. In relation to this role the hardboiled private eye/cop/crime scene investigator/counter terrorism agent, carries most, if not all, of the following traits:

Their life hunting criminals is what defines the identity of this detective/investigator/cop/agent. Their job is a calling, an obsession; something they have to do, because no one wants to find the truth more than them, and no one is better at finding it.

Their talent for investigation make this detective/investigator/cop/agent 'special' and their skill is much more than a learned ability. They have an innate talent for understanding criminal intent; the thinking, methods, purposes and motives of criminals. Their understanding of criminal demonstrates an exceptional wisdom in relation to understanding people and the society they habit.

This detective/investigator/cop/agent is smart and verbally adroit. This detective will use charm, flattery, rudeness, bullying, lying, deception, manipulation, bribery and threats to achieve their goal and solve the crime. Some detectives are more genial than others, but they are no less steely in their determination.

The detective/investigator/cop/agent works by observing and spotting falsehood and deception that others fail to detect. They question and interrogate in a way that challenges the integrity and honesty of the person being questioned and this ploy works to reveal the true nature of the criminal which may be hidden from others.

Their ability to find clues and understand crime can often give this investigator the right to work outside the legal limits of the law and beyond the morality of ordinary people, 'civilians', although not the society as a whole. They can go 'off book', because they will be proved right by taking this path.

The detective can work undercover with criminals, and/or may have a close relationship with a criminal foe, because there is an implicit understanding of similarities between them. However, the detective/investigator/cop/agent never crosses to the other side.

The environment in which the detective/investigator/cop/agent works can often be corrupt or incompetent, but this does not matter; the job still needs to be done.

Even if the contemporary cop/agent/investigator is officially part of a team such as a police force, the CSI or CTU, they are still apart within it and can even be antagonistic or contemptuous to colleagues who are less able, unwilling and the detective can even openly detest those who are corrupt or not 'up to the job'.

Family, friends, and home life are all secondary to the need to investigate. If there is a special relationship in their lives it may be a loved one who is dead, and/or someone who makes their need to investigate more necessary than ever. This relationship spurs on the need to solve the crime and catch the criminals even if it damages or destroys the relationship on a personal level.

If the detective forms a personal relationship during an investigation, this may well hinder or stall the solving of a crime and be seen as the detective succumbing to weakness or betrayal.

The female seductress and betrayer, the femme fatale, appears in detective fiction, but does not dominate. In most cases the detective succeeds by overcoming any moment of weakness and solves the crime, while it is the criminal who is completely snared, betrayed and destroyed by the femme fatale.

The detective's morality is in many ways superior to the standards of the person, organisation, bureaucracy, state, they serve, because this detective has a personal code of honour that cannot be corrupted

While the detective is morally superior to others in society they do not take or want a superior position, but remain servants and they have no wish to take charge or lead the way. Perhaps the reason why the crime-solver can never take charge is that they have no overarching ideological belief which would allow them to envisage and create a better society; they cannot claim any right to lead others. However, as detectives they still occupy a special role in the system, even if they cannot fundamentally change it. As a crime fighter they often have a dogged determination, their code, which is matched by a stoic acceptance that corruption and crime are inherent to human nature and society.

The detective faces two main types of adversaries; the first can be categorised as fools, saps, foils, henchmen; criminals who are predictable, commonplace, weak, and stupid and they can be treated with contempt by the detective, because they are so easy to trap. These weak criminals often work in the service of a master criminal who is a worthy adversary to the detective.

The detective and the master criminal share the same traits they are intelligent, they can understand people's motives and manipulate their weaknesses. What separates them is that the criminal serves their own needs and desires and the detective serves a code of honour with a sense that justice still has a value to the society at large.

At some point during an investigation it may well be acknowledged that the detective could be a very successful criminal, because of their skills, but this possibility is rejected. This rejection is based on the detective believing that there is an essential separation between good and evil; the detective tries to do good, those who are evil can do nothing but harm; a society that embraces crime is evil, because it is self-destructive and preys on the weak.

A prime difference between the master criminal and the detective is money. The criminal loves money and the power it gives. The detective has no interest in money or any of the pleasures or privileges that it can bring. One of the most insulting things to do to a detective is to try and buy them off.

In relation to violence the detective/investigator/cop/agent can take punishment, and also be violent in a way that is cruel and callous, but this violence is not savoured as a sadistic pleasure, because this violence is pragmatic and its sole aim is to serve the hunt for the solution to the crime; it is purposeful and never personal.

The detective is unafraid. They cannot be stopped by threats or the possibility of danger. The criminal uses fear to intimidate others, but the detective is immune to this. Being unafraid is one of the key elements that make the detective a special person.

Because the investigator uses violence pragmatically and their special ability is defined through their intelligence and detecting skills their identity is not defined through highly developed violent skills such as martial arts, or gun play; superb and unmatched skills in martial arts is an attribute of a hero from another tradition.

The city based investigator may finish their investigation like the hero of the cowboy Western in a duel or shoot out, like a sheriff, or heroic gunslinger, but this is not an essential ritual for the investigator and the criminal can simply be led away to face their accepted disgrace and rightful punishment.

In the majority of cases the detective/investigator/cop/agent will succeed and simply move on to their next case. When and if they solve the crime but fail to catch the criminal, or the criminal has betrayed them directly they reach a point of collapse and purposelessness, but this does not change or alter the detective/investigator/cop/agent; they do not give up as such. Instead they have reached a situation when they have finally come across a crime where they cannot impose their will and reached the limit of their ability to bring justice, order, and safety to the world. They have lost this case, but there will still be another crime to solve when they have recovered from this significant failure.

Most of the notable characters who fit into the role of 'super sleuth' are men, but female detectives are also present, especially in Mrs Marples, the creation of Agatha Christie.