

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## GOTHICISING LONDON IN DETECTIVE FICTIONS OF ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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## ABSTRACT

Gothic and supernatural occurrences have always been an area of interest for the readers. With the rise of detective fictions in Eighteenth century England, the impenetrable, inscrutable gothic begins to appear flimsy to the enlightening discourse of rationale. The process of ratiocination employed by fictional detectives thrived on reader's imagination to look beyond the realm of the unknown. This desire "to know" beyond the restrained patterns of thought has given a different meaning to the gothic elements presented in detective fiction through surrealistic images. London was not only a rising commercial hub with metropolitan culture; its landscape had become the new abode of gothic with the rise in crime. The initial writings on urban crime pretended to be documented, but it was filled with archetypes and plots from preceding fiction, particularly the gothic novel. Tracing this interweaving of detective, crime fiction and the Gothic can be extremely revealing, as each genre is positioned differently at different periods in history: as in the early eighteenth century and nineteenth century gothic almost invariably privileges the rational over the forces of darkness that seeks to challenge it. My paper intends to explore Gothic and its relation to London, both in terms of city's cultural as well as geographical landscape by contextualizing Arthur Conan Doyle's popular detective fiction, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

**Keywords:** Gothic, London, Detective Fiction, Ratiocination, Crime

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The Detective novel has always been related to public interest in the problems of modern, urban life, particularly in crime. But crime as a feature of Western social life was not generally recognized until the rise of large cities in the early 1800s, a period that corresponds to the creation of a mass reading public. Paradoxically, fascinated by and

afraid of crime, new city-dwellers vilified and romanticized criminals, as well as those who fought them. The initial writings on urban crime pretended to be documentaries, but it was filled with archetypes and plots from preceding fiction, particularly the gothic novel.

Tracing this interweaving of detective crime fiction and Gothic can be extremely revealing, as each genre is positioned differently at different periods in history: as in the early eighteenth century and nineteenth century gothic almost invariably privileges the rational over the forces of darkness that seeks to challenge it. Horsley says, while “traditional detective fiction ultimately acts as a repudiation of the gothic (eschewing supernatural explanations, throwing light into dark recesses), it may also play extensively with it” (2005, P. 48). This point could be extended to suggest that throwing light into the dark recesses is fundamental to the gothic novel, and many of the classic Gothic novels also eschew supernatural explanations. So, ultimately the positioning of the traditional detective fiction as anti gothic is a response to chaotic, disorderly worldview. Detective fiction over the years has been evolved and codified in generic form which has made it appear as a byproduct of the modern rationalism rather than the legacy of the sensational or Gothicism. Contextualizing the late 18<sup>th</sup> century London, I would examine how the city’s landscape is romantically Gothicized with its unraveling implications.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word Gothic with multiple meanings. It refers to the Germanic tribes and their ravaging expedition in Rome and the rest of Europe in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. Etymologically, the word comes to mean barbarous as well. Historical approach reveals that by the eighteenth century in England, *Gothic* had become synonymous with the Middle Ages, a period which was in disfavor since it was perceived as chaotic, unenlightened, and superstitious. Renaissance critics erroneously believed that Gothic architecture was created by the Germanic tribes and regarded it as ugly and barbaric. This erroneous attribution continued through the eighteenth century.<sup>i</sup>

While the gothic novel in its original form fell out of favour after about 1820, its distinctive trope continued to influence other forms of nineteenth century fiction, including the Newgate Novel, Walter Scot’s historical fiction, the realist fiction of Dickens and the Bronte’s Sisters, the sensational novels of

Wilkie Collins, the ghost stories, the American Gothic of Edgar Allan Poe, and crucially, the detective fiction.<sup>ii</sup> Although these texts did not necessarily follow the stock formulae set down by the traditional Gothic writers, they found new ways of interpreting the gothic, enabling the genre to shift with the tastes of the time. Yet despite their differences, what all of the nineteenth century version of Gothic had in common were the features identified by Chris Baldick as intrinsic to Gothic narrative:

“For the gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening distort into disintegration” (1992, xix)

The fundamental or the common traits of Gothic fiction are evident enough to be laid down. Usually, the narrative begins around a castle, ruined or intact, haunted by the curse of some evil spirit, whose labyrinths, dark corridors, and winding stairs further extends the parameters of gothic chill. It invariably involves the extreme landscape, like rugged mountains, thick forest or icy wastes and extreme weather. Chief among these traits is the sense of a fearful inheritance in time, the awful legacy of the past intruding onto the present.<sup>iii</sup> More often, the omens and ancestral curses bring about magical or supernatural manifestations. Robert Mighall argues that in the Victorian period, this became the single most defining feature of the Gothic. Moreover, he suggests, Gothic narrative were no longer characteristically set in the past, representing a barbarous period distanced from the enlightened modernity of their readers’ but were typically set in a present disrupted by the “threatening reminder” of scandalous vestiges of a former times that should have been discarded in the in the onward march of progress and enlightenment. As Mighall explains, “where the vestigial is found (in the monasteries, prison, lunatic asylums, the urban slums, or even the bodies, minds, or psyche of criminal, deviants or relatively normal subjects) depends upon historical circumstances”

The new emphasis on the “bodies, minds or psyche” of criminals and deviants has obvious implications for the relationship of Gothic to crime fiction. In the nineteenth century, the two are not clearly distinguished. The earliest writers of detective fiction- Edger Allen Poe, Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle could also be said to be the writer of Gothic fiction. There are traces of Gothic in most crime narratives, just as there are crimes in most gothic novels. In *A Counter History of Crime Fiction*, Maurizio Ascari argues that the separation of the two is an artificial one; produced by early twentieth century critics’ investment of rationalism. In the climate of literary modernism, Gothic was deeply unfashionable, and as a consequence of Gothic associations, was stripped from the detective story, which was regarded as merely a logical puzzle, ending by celebrating the triumph of rationalism. Ascari demonstrates that critics selectively composed the detective fiction canon in order to confirm this view, rejecting anything that did not fit as Gothic or sensational’.

Indeed, most detective writers from Gaboriau and Doyle to Chesterton and Christie suppress the violent and the visceral in their tales, preferring logical steps of reason to the puncturing of bodily contours, the gasps of final breath, and the unruly spurt of blood. As the genre developed and was codified in the early twentieth century, the abstract problem-solving function of detective fiction was separated off from its more sensationalistic aspects; terror and suspense. The markers of the gothic and later twentieth century noir fictions were considered pollutants in a purified fictional sphere of abstract reasoning. In his 1928 tongue-in-cheek formalization of the rules for detective fiction, the Englishman S. S. Van Dine stipulated that only murder, the most violent of crimes, is worthy of the genre. Yet it was Van Dine's rules that marked the apex of the detective genre's "purification" from the very violence that murder implies; rule no.16, for example, cautions against irrelevant details and "atmospherics" that might distract from the purpose of detective fiction-namely, "to state a problem, analyze it, and bring it to a successful conclusion." Such an abstracted conception of traditional detective fiction fails to do justice to the complex

shades of violence that have haunted the genre since its very inception.

The structural changes in the gothic elements began to appear after the 1820s when the rapid urbanization had begun to transform the medieval landscape. With the progressive advancement in commerce trade and industry, London began to emerge as one of the major, in fact, the first metropolitan city with distinct cultural traits. After 1830, there had been a phenomenal rise in the urban slum population. The vagabonds, urchins, beggars, poor destitute began to thrive in the sub urban areas while the city became the underbelly of crime.

The buildings with spooky dungeons, underground passages, crypts and catacombs became the signifier of gothic in urban space. Sara Hackenberg drives our attention at degrading condition of churchyards that had overflowed with the dead bodies. Having conferred London with a title ‘necropolis’, she argues that “In early nineteenth century London, corpses were a repeatedly resurfacing and sometimes explosive issue. Simultaneously relics of venerated dead bodies had become objects of almost daily encounter for Londoners.”<sup>iv</sup> Catherine Arnold notes that by 1842, London’s two hundred churchyards were reeking decay, creating noxious effluvia that led, to a “pervasive contamination of air and water”. Unsurprisingly, these events made their way into popular fictions reflecting upon the early Victorians’ apprehensions of the ways dead might overshadow the living body. This idea is notoriously realized in the ‘penny blood’ fictions.<sup>v</sup>

By 1870, the Newspapers began to contribute significantly in disseminating the sensational and horrific news. There was an enormous nineteenth-century demand for sensation-horror news, and the press quickly adjusted its product to suit the market. The most popular themes concerned respectable family men who killed to keep their reputations intact, or who succumbed to greed and lust. Such stories were particularly appealing in a society in which private probity and public image were of central importance. Sensation-horror news supplied

a license to explore the forbidden world of deviance, while simultaneously reinforcing dominant social values by highlighting the wages of sin. Violence was explored in pornographic detail, but a discreet veil was drawn over matters sexual. Murder reports contained graphic accounts of gore, but editors rarely risked shocking the readers by using such taboo words as "prostitute." Blood and guts sold newspapers, and London's newspapers were locked in intense competition for more readers.

Against this background came the apparently inexplicable, exceptionally brutal, psychotically misogynistic Ripper murders of 1888. With the six gruesome, unsolved murders of Prostitutes in Whitechapel, a new form of excessive crime entered Gothic repertoire: serial killings. Serial murder was, of course, not identified as such until the 1970s, and had numerous precedents (both real and fictional) prior to the Whitechapel murders, but it was at this point that serial killer narrative caught the popular imagination and began to be told in the recognizably modern form. Once it became clear that a serial killer was at work, the London press went into overdrive; the papers were full of stomach-churning accounts of mutilated female bodies, although the stories remained characteristically vague about the removal of the women's reproductive organs. L. Perry Curtis has examined the way in which the Ripper murders were covered in the London press, and discussed what that coverage reveals about late-Victorian society. "Into the partial vacuum created by all the unknowns in this horror story," Curtis writes, "rushed the kind of fears and fantasies that were usually hidden behind the doors of reticence or repression and therefore deemed unfit to print" Along with the gore went the search for explanations, and speculations about the killer's identity. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*, which had just opened on the London stage, provided a central trope for the murders; the actor who played the central role was so convincing that he himself was rumored to have been the Ripper. Others, believing that no Englishman could commit such crimes, equated the murders with the savagery of the African jungle, the American West, or the "wilds of Hungary"(P.126)

The curiosity to identify the killer and his purpose behind the killings had made Victorian readers anxious only to be transformed this anxiety later into a powerful detective figure. It is interesting to note that the Whitechapel crimes happened just after the year in which A. Conan Doyle introduced Sherlock Holmes, the master detective, to the world. Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet (1887)* presents itself as scientific-and its excursive reflections on analytical deduction have provided fine fodder for theorist to examine the theoretical readings of the genre. But less critical attention has been given since then to the story's more troubling images conveyed through Watson's narrative. Narrating the dreadful experience of observing the body, he writes "On his (the dead body) rigid face there stood an expression of horror, and as it seemed to me, of hatred, such as I have never seen upon human features.... I have seen death in many forms, but never has it appeared to me in a more fearsome aspect than in that dark grimy apartment, which looked out upon one of the main arteries of suburban London."(Chap iii P. 19)

This motif, of a blood spattered body in the heart of civilization, points us to a key discursive context for understanding early detective fiction's uneasy toggle between blood and reason. The idea brought to Freud that civilized man has only partially succeeded in repressing his primitive, savage instincts allows us to regard with skepticism the detective novel's emphatic distancing of detective from criminal, rational investigator from murderous criminal. Sherlock Holmes's detective and analytical methods compels Watson to write about his deductive faculty but many a times, unintentionally, he compares him with a beast:

"As I watched him I was irresistibly reminded of a pure-blooded well-trained foxhound as it dashes backwards and forwards through the covert, whining in its eagerness, until it comes across the lost scent."(Chap iii Pg 21)

Who would have known that a real hound would be eagerly awaiting Sherlock Holmes in the later published *The Hound of Baskervilles*. The bizarre crime is conceived with horrifying sense as it evokes the mystery and horror of the supernatural. There are not one but three atmospheric settings:

London, a gloomy ancestral hall, and a desolate moor. Doyle stages his climax, at which evil is at last confronted and exposed, with great showmanship. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* begins like any regular case, with Holmes and Watson being consulted by a prospective client in Holmes' lodgings at 221B Baker Street. The scene is soon shifted; however, to Baskerville Hall on Dartmoor, a far cry from the urban and suburban settings in which Holmes solved cases such as the *The Red-Headed League*. Instead of a missing person, or a puzzling detail, the case begins with a full-blown family curse involving a supernatural hound. In fact, the novel is very different from the cerebral world of the Holmes short stories. In plot as well as setting *The Hound of the Baskervilles* tends towards the Gothic, with warning of "the powers of darkness", the sound of a woman sobbing in an old house at night and an old local legend which is disbelieved by the bluff American Sir Henry. This is an obvious contrast to the eccentric details which Holmes usually deals in, such as the dust on someone's trousers, or the positioning of a rug.

The denouement continues the Gothic tone, with a chase through the Great Grimpen Mire and the apparition of the giant dog. When all is revealed, the crime is traced to a member of the old family in disguise, paralleling the obsession with descent and family trees in novels such as *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *The Castle of Otranto*(1764). One of Holmes's major clues was recognizing the family resemblance between Stapleton and an old portrait in Baskerville Hall: he speaks of "a throwback...both physical and spiritual...The man is a Baskerville, all right". When the case is cleared up, and the appearance of the family "phantom" explained, the images that really stick in the reader's mind from *The Hound of the Baskervilles* are not the detection or the logic with which Holmes unraveled the problem. Instead, we remember the spectral hound, the wild moors and the old mansion. It is probably for this reason that *The Hound of the Baskervilles* has been filmed at least six times – it provides a gripping mystery with spookily picturesque Gothic elements.

The Hound of the Baskervilles as the only one of the four novel-lengths works that includes no

separate, retrospective narrative. In each of the others the events underlying the mystery and leading to the crime form a distinct tale—a tale that does not involve Holmes and Watson and has its setting far from Baker Street. In *A Study in Scarlet* it is the account of Jefferson Hope and the Mormons; in *The Sign of Four*(1890) it is Jonathan Small's story of the Agra Treasure; and in *The Valley of Fear* (1914) there is the episode of labor union terrorism among the Allegheny coal miners. In each case the purpose of the "flashback" is to provide colorful incident and exotic atmosphere beyond that contained in the crime and its solution. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* the Baskerville legend which Dr. Mortimer reads to Holmes and Watson may seem similar to the episodes mentioned, but in fact it performs a quite different function. The legend is a beginning to the action rather than a clarification at the end; it is essential to the actual crime, and its atmosphere permeates the enveloping mystery. In a way, *The Hounds of Baskervilles* retains the gothic elements, especially the surrounding landscape that makes the plot more intriguing.

H. Phillips Lovecraft, in his spirited analysis of horror titled *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, writes that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear...and men with minds sensitive to heredity will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life". The artist creates a fearful ambiance which frequently finds form in the exotic and alternate world depicted. Hence, the gothic stories elicit trepidation, and formally it uses suggestions and understatement to summon the human factors of fear in both an emotional and intellectual sense. What the gothic story does is to use suggestions as well as understatements to "objectify fear" by giving fear a specific form; hence the horror tale gives form to our fears in everything from unsettling landscape to an unidentified object. John Cawelti, in *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, notes that "the key characteristic of the type is the representation of some alien being or state and the underlying moral fantasy is our dream that the unknowable can be known and related to in some meaningful fashion (P. 49). The effect may be to arouse fear, but the tale's overall consequence is to purge us of the "the

fear of fear" by making our dead malleable. The gothic elements sets up situations in which fear is pervasive, such as specter prowling the dark fog-shrouded streets of London, but through the courage of the hero detective we discover that the dead of night is far less intimidating than we had thought.

This long analysis of fear factor is necessary in order to see just how Doyle's *The Hound of Baskerville* serves as excellent proof that horror need not be thrashed in explicit gore to be effective. Indeed, *Hound of Baskerville* not only elicits dread, primarily through atmosphere, but it purges dread through its celebrated ending. Over the body of Stapleton's giant dog Holmes pronounces his version of the hero's vaunt: "We've laid the family ghost once and for ever". In the story, the detective himself repeatedly remarks upon the unmatched complexity of the case, but its formidableness is chiefly suggested through the agency of Dr. Mortimer, who brings the affair to Holmes's attention. Many times Holmes stresses the similarity between Mortimer and himself with respect to their devotion to science. "This is a colleague," he remarks to Watson, "after our own heart" (Chap. iii), and he compares Mortimer's knowledge of human skulls to his own ability to identify newspaper type (Chap. IV). Thus when Mortimer reflects that "There is a realm in which the most acute and most experienced of detectives is helpless" (meaning the supernatural), it carries considerable dramatic weight. Holmes's reaction adds to this effect. He is struck that "a trained man of science" should entertain a supernatural explanation of Sir Charles's death: "I have hitherto confined my investigations to this world. ... to take on the Father of Evil himself would, perhaps, be too ambitious a task" (Chap. iii). Holmes is speaking facetiously of course, but the scene does place squarely before us the possibility that there may be limits to the ways of reason.

The significance of introducing the gothic elements in the narrative lies in the fact that it enhances the resonance of mystery by overwhelmingly blocking the reader's mind. This makes the puzzle more complex and hard to get hold of. The detective approaches the crime by

demystifying or sublimating the inexplicable into a rationalized discourse with the help of his erudite curiosity. However, this erudite curiosity could make him almost like the criminal he pursues during the course of his detection. Andrew Gault in his article *Curiosity's Killer Instinct: Bibliophilia and the Myth of Rational Detective* suggests that, "if we take seriously the eccentric ardor with which these detectives pursue their investigations, we begin to see that detective fiction may well do something beyond convert (through sublimation) disorder to order, savagery to reason; it may actually provide a critique of reason itself, by exposing the libidinal-even savage-energies that subtend it." (P. 50)

This linkage is also manifest in the *Adventure of the Speckle Band* wherein Sherlock Holmes when, with reference to a physician-turned-killer who specializes in deadly snakes, he notes the capacity of modern science to revert to barbarism-not despite reason but because of it: "When a doctor goes wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge. Palmer and Pritchard were among the heads of their profession." (Pg 140) Poised before the horrors of the night, and himself eager for the cover of darkness, Holmes describes an architecture in which detection follows a path of mythic descent, and which emphasizes depth as the explicit opposite of the two-dimensionality of interiorized coziness. His contest with the deadly mysteries of the night is simultaneously a confrontation with depth, and Enlightenment now emerges literally as a conflict, less metaphysical than technical, between light, which articulates facade, and the ever-receding boundaries of a world that light has made limitless.

Holmes is often shown as counteracting rather hysterical theories that seem informed by gothic writing notably in 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire' (1927), 'The Adventure of the Devil's Foot' (1917) and in 'The Hound of the Baskervilles'. This seems a little ironic given Conan Doyle's later firm beliefs in spiritualism. Since the late nineteenth century, Western intellectuals have tended to depict 'modernity' as being incompatible with 'enchantment'. Thus Max Weber argued that two aspects intrinsic to modernity, rationalization and

bureaucratization, were inimical to the magical attitudes toward human existence that characterized medieval and early modern thought. Michael Saler's article recovers a different outlook, one that reconciled the rational and secular tenets of modernity with enchantment and that underlies many forms of contemporary cultural practice. The popularity of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is taken as an exemplary instance of a specifically modern form of enchantment. First, Holmes's own form of rationalism, 'animistic reason', offered an alternative to the narrower instrumental reason that cultural pessimists claimed as a defining element of modernity. Second, many adult readers at the turn of the century and beyond were able to pretend that Holmes was real, and his creator fictitious, through the 'ironic imagination', a more capacious and playful understanding of the imagination than that held by the early Victorians. Both animistic reason and the ironic imagination made Holmes an iconic figure who enacted and represented the reconciliation of modernity and enchantment, whereas Doyle, unable to accept this reconciliation, resorted to spiritualism, a holdover of 'premodern' enchantment.

The widespread popularity of contemporary Hollywood production of Sherlock Holmes (2009) is substantial enough to prove why Sherlock Holmes is still a popular figure among his followers. With an acute sense of observation and logical deduction, Holmes derives personal information of which the individual is often unaware of. That is precisely what makes his readers say to him, "Are you a magician"? It seems enchantingly magical; however, unlike performing magician, Sherlock rationally explains the logic behind his verdict and make it as if it were a sleight of hands. The conflict between supernatural elements and the scientific rationalizing discourse within the Victorian society is also quite explicit in the cinematic version. The plot point nods to *The Hound of Baskervilles*, where a string of seemingly supernatural events is finally explained through intuitive reasoning and scientific savvy. Separated by centuries, the film manages to capture the essence of contemporary London with its Hansom cabs rattling down the muddy streets of London. Much of London portrayed in the movie is

technological *misce én scene*. It is put to the full with Holmes and Watson charging through a range of locations from the headquarters of a Freemason-like organization in the West End to a shipyard and a butchery warehouse along the Thames in East London; there is even a visit to a wonderfully gothic High Victorian cemetery. The climax of the movie runs from the Palace of Westminster to the incomplete Tower Bridge (which was built between 1884-94, so was probably at the close to completion stage on the outer structure, as shown in this movie set in 1891).

The gothic elements permeate throughout the narrative. The film begins in a Gothicized place where after a string of brutal, ritualistic murders, Holmes and Watson arrive just in time to save the victim and uncover the killer: the unrepentant Lord Blackwood. As he approaches his scheduled hanging, Blackwood, who has terrorized inmates and jailers alike with his seeming connection to dark and powerful forces, warns Holmes that death has no power over him and, in fact, his execution plays right into Blackwood's plans. And when, by all indications, Blackwood makes good on his promise, his apparent resurrection panics London and confounds Scotland Yard. But to Holmes, the game is afoot. Racing to stop Blackwood's deadly plot, Holmes and Watson plunge into a world of the dark arts and startling new technologies, where logic is sometimes the best crime-fighting weapon. Reflecting upon the weather of London, Irene Adler says, "London's so bleak this time of year." The repetitive image of a crow at crime scenes, old mansions and shady streets of London are powerfully evoked in the film for gothic effects.

The struggle between good and evil forces is evident in gothic literature as a reflection of the ideals of Victorian society to maintain control at all times. Holmes's control over himself and others is as much an effect of his intellect as it is his lack of emotion. He is both superhuman and inhuman, embodying gentlemanly ideals and vices at once. This duality in his character contributes to the theme of control over the uncontrollable, allowing him to become both a Gothic monstrosity and a Victorian gentleman. Holmes is simultaneously the

Victorian ideal and enemy: he is completely in control at all times, but he does so through rejecting his humanity in favor of intellect, and allowing sexuality to be a part of the process of gaining control

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#### END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Today, the word *Gothic* primarily describes a style of European architecture which flourished from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries, though the word seems originally to have referred to any non-classical (Greek or Roman) architecture.

<sup>ii</sup> Newgate Fiction refers to the collection of factual criminal biographies; the Sherlock Holmes stories are fictional representations of criminal cases in which the detective solves the crime and identifies the perpetrator. The format, structure, and function of the two crime narratives are very different and the criminographic developments which occurred in the years that separate them are a major part of the history of the crime fiction genre. See the article *From the Newgate Calendar to Sherlock Holmes* by Heather Worthington.

<sup>iii</sup> Sara follows a different line of argument where she identifies the corpse and the Figure like resurrection man and Varney's Dracula with a politically repressed working class.

<sup>iv</sup> This could be observed in a number of Gothic fictions. The first Gothic Novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) sets the tone for subsequent Gothic Fiction.

<sup>v</sup> The term Penny dreadful came into popular usage around 1840. The early Victorian dreadful, many of which were published by Edward Lloyd, were based on the tradition of Newgate Calendar and the Gothic Novel. See *Penny Dresdfuls: Late Nineteenth – Century Boy's Literature and crime* by Patrick A. Dunae.