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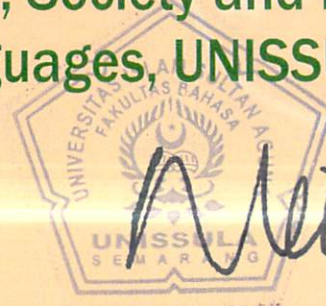
**PRESENTER**

in the National Seminar

'America and Indonesia in Culture, Society and Literature'  
on October 17, 2011 at College of Languages, UNISSULA, Semarang



**Didik Murwantono, SS., MHum**  
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Dean of College of Languages





Proceedings

NATIONAL SEMINAR

AMERICA AND  
INDONESIA  
IN SOCIETY, CULTURE  
AND LITERATURE

**Semarang, October 17, 2011**

**Editors**

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(Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta)

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**College of Languages  
UNISSULA SEMARANG  
2011**

Sultan Agung Islamic University  
[www.unissula.ac.id](http://www.unissula.ac.id)

UNISSULA PRESS 2011

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**ISBN: 978-602-8420-93-8**

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## MAKALAH UTAMA

## GLIMPSES OF CORRUPTION IN THE AMERICAN NINETEENTH CENTURY SOCIETY OF *RED HARVEST* VS THE INDONESIAN TWENTY-FIRST SOCIETY

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**Abstract:** A work of literature such as a novel is often a mental evidence of the author's socio-cultural condition. Through analyzing *Red Harvest*, a reader can have an overview of the different characteristics of a classical versus a modern hard-boiled detective. AT the same time, the story offers a glimpse of the American socio-cultural and political condition of the 1920s. In reflection, the story is interesting as it can be compared with the current Indonesian corrupted society.

**Key words:** American 1920s, classical detective, hard-boiled detective, corruption

### LITERATURE AS MENTAL EVIDENCE

Literature is a term used to refer to anything from creative writing to more technical or scientific work, which includes the works of fiction and non-fiction. As a work of fiction, the novel is an act of the writer's imagination in selecting, ordering and interpreting life experiences (Taylor, 1981). Like other art, a fiction may deal with significant or universal issues (Muller, 1994), that could embody the extrinsic

elements in fiction. In the *Dictionary of World Literature*, a novel is described as

the most protean of literary forms, is the least amenable to formal definition. At various stages of its development, it has assimilated the characteristics of other ways of writing essays and letters, memoirs and histories, religious tracts and revolutionary manifestoes, sketches of travel and books of etiquette, all the popular varieties of prose (Shipley, 1959, p.283).

Thus, a novel is a kind of literary form that may deal with the elements of history, religion, or travel, etc.

In the American Studies discipline, the novel as a product of literature is referred as a mental evidence of someone's or the American nation's life experiences. This means that understanding a novel cannot be separated from understanding its social, historical, and cultural background. This has been clearly stated by the Americanist, Henry Nash Smith, who believes that a study of a work is "at once biographical, historical, sociological and literary" (1960, p. 7). This is similar to M.H. Abrams' mimetic approach, which views "the literary work" as "an imitation or reflection, or representation of the world and human life" (1988, p.39). Consequently, as a mental evidence or social document, a literary work produced in a particular era would reflect the distinctive socio cultural values which are different to those written in other eras. This is supported by Bakdi Soemanto, who adds that "a literature is an artifact which serves for the common ground based on which any artifacts are its equals" (1999, p. 5). Thus, as an artifact, a novel can contribute to a world view of a particular era.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

One particular era, which I consider interesting to discuss, is the nineteenth century of America. The American society in the early nineteenth century is said to experience a change in their social attitudes. Shifting from an agrarian society of the eighteenth to the industrial society of the nineteenth century, the American society is vulnerable to crimes. Richard Slotkin, the author of *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890*, illustrates that in the early nineteenth century, there is a great wave of expansion in the economic sector which have to develop as the least rudiments of the industrial system. He further states that "this would produce a society antithetical to that envisioned in agrarian ideology – a society centering on great urban centers in which there would be sharply divided classes of capitalists and workers" (1986, p. 111). Frederick Lewis Allen also testifies that the era is abundant with "lawless and disorderly defense of law and order" in addition to an era of "unconstitutional defense of the Constitution, of suspicion and civil conflict – in a very literal sense, a reign of terror" (1964, p.39). The social control that is once exerted by the family and neighborhood to maintain a secure feeling of one another has played a decreasing role that a moral decadence is evident.

In reflection to the Indonesian society of the twenty-first century, the American nineteenth century's condition seem to apply. From observation and from what is heard through the news media, I believe, there is an increasing number of people's moral decadence. Nowadays, Indonesians seem to have no burden in stealing what is not

theirs by right, and even murdering others physically and mentally to get into the status they dream of. It is interesting that most of the corrupters found by the anti-corruption watch agent are actually government officials. If in the twentieth century, Indonesians may not have heard about detectives, the twenty-first century is swarmed with them. Private detectives are given assignments to find out, for example, who is having an affair with whom, in addition to who is helping out with a corruption or murder case.

An historian Americanist, Irving L Gordon believes, "if social control were completely effective, society would have no crime" (1984, p. 491). However, as illustrated above about Indonesia's twenty-first century and America's nineteenth century, life is dominated by a mysterious authority that continually threatens the individual with betrayals and meaningless death. John G. Cawelti envisions this unique socio-cultural phenomenon as the one, which attracts American writers to use it as a theme for their novels. He explains that the increasing concern of corruption within the "governmental and corporate power and the failure of organizations to provide a sense of security and fulfillment for the individual" have led to the increasing popularity of a "melodramatic gangster protagonist into a heroic figure" that strikes out the "disorder, corruption, and injustice of society" (1976, p. 76).

Actually, in the federal government of America several law-enforcement agencies are maintained. Examples are the Justice Department with its FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration that deals with narcotics, and the Treasury Department, which maintains the Secret

Service whose job is to protect the President, in addition to the Revenue Service that prevents fraud and negligence of tax filing or the Customs Service that prevents smuggling. Although, these law-enforcement departments are institutionalized, the decrease off the enforcer's moral decadence and easiness to do corruption makes society quickly learn that they are not trustworthy. Society is pushed to find detectives as the representative of the law-enforcement of cities, counties and states. This is why, of the many kinds of literature, the detective mystery genre is an appropriate novel to discuss about the injustice of the American society. From studying detective mystery stories, the American nineteenth century is learnt and at the same time, Indonesian readers can pick up what moral behaviors and thinking can be applied to make a better future for the current Indonesian society

### CRIME IN DETECTIVE MYSTERY NOVELS

Crime, especially violent crime, has always been a sure-fire topic for the entertainment of the majority novel readers (Dukut, 1999, p. 77). From the beginning of written literature, readers have often been fascinated by the stories, which involve homicide, assault, and theft. Historically, I learn that the act of murder has been a favorite subject for the Greek and Roman dramatists, Shakespeare and other Renaissance tragedians. Murder has long been seen as an act that is unacceptable in a society. The criminal is usually expelled or destroyed, but never pardoned. However, even though the murderer is an appropriate villain, he is also "society's permanent scapegoat" (Symons, 1972, p.8). Behind

this is a psychological reason that the murderer is a personification of a devil and it is the death of the devil that could insure the purification of a tribe.

In the American society of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, crime is regarded as a religious and moral matter. People are convinced that an offense against the law is an offense against God. Henceforth, if someone commits a crime, that person is thought as having no morals because crime is seen as a result of an evil element in nature. Moreover, the American's fourth Puritan ethic, which states that "all men are born in sin and deserves damnation" (Crawford et al., 1966, p. 3) suggests that all men are potentially criminals.

People argue that they love reading crime stories because they all have some basic trait, which manifest itself in a fascination of tales of crime. Thus, as a result people often sympathize with the villain character. An example of this is the noble criminal of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* who although did wrong and proven to be the villain, is given sympathy by his wide audience.

During the nineteenth century, several major changes take place in the literature of crime. The essentially religious or moral feeling of crime in the previous century develops into a form of entertainment. Leslie A. Fielder (1966, p.49) mentions that crime stories such as the mystery detective story fascinates them because it "symbolizes the capitulation of the recalcitrant artist to the bourgeois community". Thus, crime and punishment becomes a pleasurable intellectual and emotional stimulation for people (Cawelti, 1976, p.56). What Cawelti means by



this, is when readers feel sympathetic for the innocent character, they discover a certain pleasure in reading the fiction. The personal sense of sin, which haunts the reader, becomes a motivation for reading about the pursuit, the capture and the punishment of the fictional character.

Howard Haycraft mentions that in the United States in the 1940s, crime stories represent a quarter of all new fiction, and the most of the copies are sold to rental or public libraries (cited in Symons, 1972, p. 6). With this condition, the newly turned middle class society reads crime stories in their leisure time. These crime stories have become "something enjoyed in loneliness" (Fielder, 1966, p. 43). In Adam's interview with a psychoanalyst, Janet A. Kennedy, MD, it is clarified that "most readers consciously or unconsciously seek out crime or detective stories for the vicarious pleasure of identifying with both victim and the victimizer" (1972, p. 193). In addition, Sue Asbee who follows Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, argues that people read crime fiction to test their "wits, perceptions and puzzle solving abilities with and against the ultimate reader-in-the-text and decipher of signs, i.e. the detective" (1990, p. 161). In other words, the theory allows the reader to be on the same level as the detective, as far as a lack of knowledge about who the villain is at the beginning of the story.

At the opening paragraph, both the reader and the detective are unaware that the circumstances given in the story is to introduce the detective him/herself. As a reader, I see and hear whatever the detective sees and hears because the introductory paragraphs has manipulated and involved me to do so. At the same time, however, I can remain detached

by observing the actions of the detective. This method builds up a continuously high interest in continuing reading the novel. However, Janet A. Kennedy, MD also believes the reason for why people need to read mystery stories today is "to be reassured that they cannot be understood" by others or to be left mystified. Henceforth, there is a boom in crime novels (cited in Adams, 1972, p. ....).

With the separation of church and state and the consequent disassociation of religion and law, Cawelti (1976, p.56) believes that crime is increasingly viewed in terms as "aesthetic" as well as "moral". He further explains that the development of an aesthetic delight in unusual crimes is in fact, accompanied by two other nineteenth century's crime literature trend. One is the "romanticization" of crime, which shows the criminal as a victim of an unjust corrupt regime. The other is the development of a scientific approach to "crime as a social problem", whereby the criminal acts are not seen as evil deeds but as the result of a detective social arrangement or heredity (1976, p. 56-57).

The new society which emits a sense of this threat, and of the apprehension of disorder, manages to show "the rational and scientific inquiry that played such an important part in the characterization of the detective of the late and early twentieth centuries" (Cawelti, 1976, p.58). Thus, the mystery offered by the story most often appeals to the reader both consciously and unconsciously. The suspense it creates is not merely passive and alarming but also an active and pleasurable experience. The story about crime or murder may shock and disorientate, but the suspense arising from ferreting out the clues, from tracking a

subtly devised sequence of events to a satisfying conclusion in the detective mystery story, is both enjoyable and stimulating. The late president, Abraham Lincoln, reads no other fiction than the detective mystery story (Fielder, 1966, p. 497). Likewise, Lord Rosebery is proud to possessing the first edition of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* and John F. Kennedy prefers to read *James Bond* spy stories, which is a sub genre of the detective mystery story. These just emphasize that people do read crime literature for the sake of pleasure.

#### **POE AND HIS PREDECECORS: CLASSICAL VS HARD-BOILED DETECTIVE**

Supported by many critics such as Adams (1972), Bahr et al (1996), Cawelti, Crawford et al (1996) Peithman (1981), Ross (1961), Shipley (1960), Symons (1972) and Van Spanckeren (1997), I have found that Edgar Allan Poe is the person who first articulated the detective mystery story in the 1840s with his "methods of deduction and bizarre personal habits" (Dukut, 1999, p. 81) in the detective character of Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin. The eccentric detective formula for a detective to have a "pure poetic intuition bordering on omniscience, a man of peterhuman powers, unlimited power of divination and godlike genius" (Roth, 1973, p. 118) has been followed by the popular classical detective mystery of Sherlock Holmes and even the modern hard-boiled twentieth century's TV detective shows of Ellery Queen, Magnum P.I. or Remington Steel.

If in the classical there are scenes where Dupin and Sherlock do their work in classy style, i.e. they would wear a particularly striking

detective outfit with their language and manners that shows about their educational standards, the hard-boiled detective is usually described as a down-to-earth person using civilian clothing so as to blend easily into the crowd. The super intellectual detective of the classic, who knew more than the foolish police, is shattered by the advent of the American hard-boiled that flourished during the 1920s. Detectives that once avoided and even scorned violence is transformed to one that sees violence as natural to drinking. The language that is colorless becomes poignant as that of a cigar smoke. The belief of the supreme power of reason in the detective's character becomes as fallible as the next man that puts faith in his gun. As explained previously, the increased corruption in the society gives acceptance to the over powering gangster that made a collapse in the moral code. A successful detective is therefore, a person that can triumph over his enemy.

Shaped by the pulp magazines, the hard-boiled detective mystery, which sells for "ten cents and never more than twenty-five" (Rhum, 1977, p. xvi) is a popular demand. Knowing that society in the nineteenth century is full of corrupted people who would take any means to get rich quick, even at the sake of others' weakness, then in its development, detective mystery stories tend to make full use of the disorderly chaos as the setting of their stories. In *Red Harvest*, for example, it is illustrated that at the top of the chaotic society are the corrupt lawyers and politicians. The gangsters and the bootleggers follow, and at the bottom is the lonely representative of order, like the honest cop turned detective:

*"For forty years old Elihu Willsson – father of the man who had been killed this night had owned Personville, heart, soul, skin and guts. He was president and majority stakeholder of the Personville Mining Corporation, ditto of the First National Bank, ... the city's only newspaper ... Along with these pieces of property he owned a United States senator, a couple of representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state legislature. Elihu Willsson was Personville, and he was almost the whole state"* (Hammett, 1986, p.7).

Set in the era of the 1920s towards the 1930s of America, which undergoes Depression, the story continues to state how business has become rotten that Elihu began to kick his employees back to a pre-war circumstance. Bill Quint as a representative of the Industrial Workers of the world of the 'wobblies' tried to make an industrial sabotage, but the workers prefer a strike that lasted eight months:

*"...The wobblies had to d their own bleeding. Old Elihu hired gunmen, strike-breakers, national guardsmen and even parts of the regular army, to do this.*

*But said Bill Quint, old Elihu didn't know his Italian history. He won the strike, but he lost his hold on the city and the state. To beat the miners he had to let his hired thugs run wild. When the fight was over he couldn't get rid of them...* (Hammett, 1986, p.7).

*"The strongest of 'em now is probably Pete the Finn. This stuff we're drinking is his. Then there's Lew Yard. He's got a loan shop down on*

*Parker Street, does a lot of bail bond business, handles most of the burg's hot stuff, so they tell me, and is pretty thick with Noonan, the chief of police. This kid Max Thaler – whisper – has got a lot of friends, too. A little slick dark guy... Gambler. Those three, with Noonan, just about help Elihu run this city – help him more than he wants. But he's got to play with 'em or else'-* (Hammett, 1986, p.8).

It is clear from the above quotations that Elihu Willsson is the top political figure who manages the city and is helped by Finn a speakeasy owner, yard who sells illegal services and merchandises, Noonan the corrupt police and Thaler the city gambler. With this kind of management, it comes to no surprise if the citizens have a low trust on the city's order. In this case, as readers, we only need to reflect to how no matter how clean our Indonesian leaders once were, it seems, they may stumble on people who tend to invent corruptive ways so a disordered politics intervene with the government's actions.

Unfortunately, in the *Red Harvest*, the bad political condition above is added more with the depiction of the police as enforcer, who turned out to be as crooked. One can read between the lines of the novel's first page description of the policemen's attire:

*"The first policeman I saw needed a shave. The second had a couple of buttons off his shabby uniform. The third stood in the centre of the city's main intersection – Broadway and Union Street – directing traffic, with a cigar in one corner of his mouth"* (Hammett, 1986, p.1).

With this picture, as readers, we can also reflect to how it was before the anti-corruption watch personnel have managed to regulate the Indonesian police department to be filled with younger, cleaner, and more healthily built staff, in order to achieve some kind of trust worthiness from the surrounding community.

The use of clipped, tough prose of the American vernacular is also characteristic of the hard-boiled detective mystery story. Continuing with Elihu, his slangy, prejudiced and witty language while in conversation with the Continental Op or the detective are as follows:

*"Well, damn it—It's my money and I won't have it wasted on a lot of damn-foolery. If you won't take it for what you've done, give it back to me."*

*"Stop yelling at me," I said. I'll give you nothing except a good job of city-cleaning. That's what you bargained for, and that's what you're going to get. You know that your son was killed by young Albury... With your son dead, you've been able to promise them that the newspapers won't dig up any more dirt (Hammett, 1986, p. 43).*

A hard-boiled detective story is also full of physical confrontations. As an example is this following showdown from the novel:

*Men crawled all over me, opening the valise, he'ping themselves to the contents, bombs made of short sections of two-inch pipe, packed in sawdust in the bag. Bullets bit chunks out of the car's curtains.*

*Reno reached back for one of the bombs, hopped out of the sidewalk, paid no attention to a streak of blood that suddenly appeared in the middle of his left cheek...*

*A sheet of flame was followed by deafening noise. Hunks of things pelted us while we tried to keep from being knocked over by the concussion... (Hammett, 1986, p.129).*

Because the hard-boiled detective embodies the threat of judgment and execution, he is introduced as a commoner who is often intimidated also by physical violence, e.g. an assault, capture or attempted assassination that may cause him his own life if he cannot keep ahead of the criminal's activities. Therefore, being human, he can also be tempted by a never-ending bribe to stop an investigation, because the criminal has connections with either the police or influential political figures.

While in Edgar Allan Poe's classical formula, the criminal is less important than the detective's intellectual explanation of the crime; the hard-boiled detective is shown to be morally committed to find the justice people search for. Thus, more than often, there would be frequent conflicts with the police authority. Within this context, readers will psychologically become satisfied knowing that a detective will return the justice people hunger for. Fortunately in the novel, for the detective, who is known to have a great ability in taking care of himself, has attracted rich, powerful, sexy and beautiful clients who desperately need his professional help. So, even though there may be hard hitting actions

or adventures in the novel, there is always the denouement of the detective cooing or being cooed by the beautiful client.

It is interesting to note of Cawelti's opinion that "the real hostility of the hard-boiled story is directed toward women and the rich" (1976, p.158) just because the new status of women in the 1920s America is an economic and social competitor, in addition to the object of sexual desire and symbol of popularity that produces the tension needed in a hard-boiled story. So, there are cases, where the beautiful client, at the end turns out to be the real criminal. Thus, the female character in the hard-boiled are not only possessed but also destroyed.

With that in mind, if we were to reflect to Indonesia's current condition, is the above condition applicable or is it something we must be prepared for? How influential are Indonesian women to the development of a country, recently? This question can be left open and answered by anyone who is also interested in analyzing other American detective mystery novel and try to relate it with the historical, social, cultural, and political perspectives of Indonesia.

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