

## COLIN DEXTER'S MRMORSE IN THE WORLD OF OXFORD

**Ruchika Bhatia**

Scholar

Department of English,  
University of Delhi,  
Delhi-110007

### Abstract

Oxford has always enjoyed a gripping influence worldwide. Such is its impact that around the world people aspire to be a part of this great institution. It is interesting to study what makes it such a global and cultural phenomenon and how its imagery has been incorporated in literary tradition. As an establishment it is renowned for its inspiring gothic spires and looming domes, and how it has empowered hundreds by its rigorous educational system. A system that instills intelligence, values, good judgement, and fierce pride in a sense of Englishness that becomes synonymous with national character. It then becomes critical to examine how the topography of a place can inspire writers to write about it in totally different ways and create disparate images of the same existing structure. How an institution that is symbolically relevant for the values it upholds and the prestige for which it has been revered for ages, can be infiltrated by corruption and can instigate crime. Though Oxford has always been endowed with creativity, it can also pose as the murder capital for the literary world.

Colin Dexter, in particular, moves away from the romanticized version of the mystical Oxford city that has been valued for its historical past, but exposes the flaws of a modern creation that is consumed by its traditional uptight snobbish attitude. The shifting economic paradigms cause a struggle between the 'public' and 'private' and how this battle disrupts the social fabric. Family as a social institution gets compromised resulting in moral degradation and psychological alienation of its members. Mr Morse, who is himself a professional detective, becomes a witness to societal degeneration and the resultant crimes which he must resolve for peace to be restored. Dexter's Oxford is no more a mythic place of beliefs and high standards but has transformed into a site of transgression, which reflects the dualism of a celebrated past and the conventional state of crime and moral depravity.

The best way to explore the city of Oxford is not with a travel guide, rather through many works of literature that use the city as a backdrop, a character, or both. Oxford as a city is steeped in literary tradition. Her secluded colleges have motivated writers and thinkers since the University's medieval beginnings, while her famous spires and gothic towers have inspired verse after verse. The university is famed as an educational institution which boasts of graduates who -

grew to be future politicians, scientists, and noteworthy writers. The infrastructure itself epitomizes an “Oxford” state of mind; a way of existence and of understanding the world, that often finds expression at the hands of novelists. Such writings provide rare insights into the city’s happenings, its history, people, and other essential truths. On taking a closer look at the writings produced by the minds inspired by the environment of Oxford, one has to wonder if there is a causal connection between the amount of fairy-tale, fantasy, and tragic-fiction produced by its atmosphere. Of course, there are many alternate realities presented, different temporalities and even bizarre situations, and perhaps, it is true that the intellectuals are inclined toward the unusual. This suggests how Oxford is endowed with creativity. But, it is also intriguing to think why Oxford poses to be the fictional murder capital of the world? Most crime fiction has this particular provincial town in the centre of England, as a setting to present murderous crimes.

The modern vein of Oxford crime fiction chooses to break away from the traditional romanticized representation of the city and shifts toward depicting it as it is—a city where there are not one, but two universities, a number of other educational establishments, thriving commercial and business enterprises, even a huge population which has no connection with the University at all. Thus, breaking away from the stereotypical representation of the city in literature which is essentially mystical, the ‘real’ Oxford is more trending and thriving. This paper discusses the diverse shades of the city, that is, in the vein of *romantic*, *historic*, and most importantly *transgressive*, and how Mr Morse (Colin Dexter’s sleuth) traverses these walls as a detective. John Dougill<sup>1</sup> says in the introduction to his survey, *Oxford in English Literature* (1998), “Oxford is depicted as a city of dreams and a world of its own, enclosed, secluded, conservative and eccentric, a closed community with its own customs, its own rituals, and its own concerns. Idealized it becomes a cloistered utopia, a student paradise, or an Athenian city-state.” This trend in Oxford writing developed in the nineteenth century, first with the Romantic early years of the century, particularly with William Hazlitt, though himself not an Oxford-man but described it as the city “with glistening spires and pinnacles adorned...the sacred city...the palace of enchantment..<sup>2</sup>” Later, Matthew Arnold in his “Thyrsis,” published in 1866, called it “the sweet City with her dreaming spires” (lines 19-20). There is a certain timelessness associated with Oxford, which somehow surpasses the desire towards modernity. And so Oxford developed a particular literary character of mystery and nostalgia.

Many writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century wrote of Oxford in this mystical vein which one might call as *romantic*. Of Oxford crime writers Dorothy Sayers falls directly into this category: her one crime novel set in Oxford, *Gaudy Night* (1935), views Oxford not just as a city of intellect but also of significant personality. In one passage, her heroine Harriet Vane, looking down on Oxford from nearby Shotover Hill, sees it as ‘improbably remote and lovely as the towers of Tir-nan-Og beneath the green sea rollers.’ This description provides a heavenly semblance to Oxford with other-worldly attributes. It is important to remember that *Gaudy Night* was published when women were not allowed to study at Oxford, and it certainly represents the authorial dream of women’s acceptance as men’s intellectual equals. She visualizes this with her warm and careful depiction of the dons of her women’s college, even

---

<sup>1</sup> As taken from Miranda ward, “Books to read Before Visiting the City of Dreaming Spires,” in *A Literary Guide to Oxford*. (England, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Hazlitt, “Oxford,” *London Magazine*, 1823 reproduced in *Selected Essays* as edited by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Nonsuch Press, 1930)

though fictional (based on Somerville where she herself studied) giving a rusty feminine essence to this male dominated world.

Sayer's *Gaudy Night* was not the first crime novel to be set in Oxford, there were several predecessors including two Sherlock Holmes short stories. Few are set in Oxford itself but Oxford mystique permeates them all, even though not as serious as Dorothy Sayers, they display a charming seductive playfulness. Hence, they are less of *romantic* but more updated with the newer ways of investigation involving technicalities and deductive logic. Another aspect is the over burdening history of the city, bound with the development of the university and its colleges. Oxford's *historic* offers another fruitful theme: a symbolic space where intellect reigned supreme. A place that has aspired many to pursue a life of academic excellence, and still continues to do so. The historical value of place like this helps in generating a deep emotional bond with its occupants and psychologically invests in them for their intellectual development. With these strands enmeshed intricately, fictional Oxford still manages to appear as a very real and physical city: guarded by its walls of eminence.

Colin Dexter appears to be the first to break out of the *romantic/historic* classification and adopt the *transgressive* mode, as *his* Oxford abandons the glorified historic past and evolves as an intricate world of crime. Even in the twentieth century Britain, the aesthetic and moral values ascribed with Englishness, seemed inherent in Oxford elite. In context of crime fiction, these qualities were reflected as the absence of violent struggles, a detective who used his intellect rather than physical strength to fight crime, and a rural or an isolated small-town setting rather than a big bustling city. Colin Dexter says about his detective in *The Daughters of Cain*, "Morse was never the man to hunt through a haystack for a needle. Much rather he'd always seek to intensify (as he saw it) the magnetic field of his mind and trust that the missing would suddenly appear under his nose."<sup>3</sup> Dexter realized that in the real world, murders were solved by the police and his detective is duly a policeman with all the necessary support provided by the Thames Valley Police, the forensic labs, assistance in documenting evidence, use of search warrants, and the authority for thorough interrogation. Morse, as created by Dexter, a man with his paraphernalia, symbolizes the sharp, astute, and isolated figure, as much an enigma as the cases he solves. He never uses his first name, preferring to be called only as "Morse," and it was not until the near end of the detective's career that Dexter revealed the "E" in his initials which stood for "Endeavour": signifying the innate quality of a man attempting to achieve his goals, in this case, investigating criminal cases. Dexter himself was a fan of cryptic puzzles and crosswords, and Morse was named after the champion solver Sir Jeremy Morse, one of Dexter's arch-rivals as a clue-writer. Thereby, Morse's last name associates him with codes, puzzles and hidden meanings – an appropriate implication as a crime detective. He has an obsession with cryptic crossword puzzles, which provide plenty of plot devices and analogies in his cases. Morse is intricately created by Dexter, a character who owns a Lancia (a red vintage Jaguar), was fond of English beers and good Scotches, and a regular opera goer, which make him instantly likeable despite his sullen temperament.

Morse is significantly an icon. Highly intelligent yet eccentric, one who dreads spelling mistakes, proven by the fact that he manages to point out at least one mistake in every document presented to him. He is essentially an intellectual snob, who also enacts flamboyance of class and taste, unaffordable by an ordinary policeman. He is presumably an embodiment of white, male, upper-class Englishness, considered an example of gentleman detective, most common in British

---

<sup>3</sup> Dexter. *The Daughters of Cain*. (London: Macmillan, 1994)

detective fiction, somehow aligning him with the stiff upper-lip attitude of Oxonians. This is in sharp juxtaposition to the working class origins of his Welsh middle-aged sidekick, Lewis. Morse's relationship with authority and figures of power is mostly abstruse; his association with Lewis clearly demonstrates the replacement of old hierarchies with the new. Morse is a part of a professional world where competence and compliance are mandatory for one's survival. This world is in stark contrast to that of Sayer's amateur sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey, who pursues detection as a hobby, whereas, Morse is part of a fierce working environment. Many cases bring him at the centre of Oxford world where he may find himself intellectually at power, but is allowed to be a part only because some crime has been committed. Within this space he is isolated and caught between the contesting world of 'outside' and the 'inside' haven of books. His engagement helps him discover a cultural identity and a nostalgic elitism for his readers.

These conventional images reassert an iconography of Englishness, also aligned to the topography of Oxford. It is a world of ancient streets and architecture now cluttered with modern symbols of civilization such as bars and shopping centres. Many authors have used this topography for their own advantage, incorporating geography for map-making and adding complexities to the plot. A deeper understanding of the geography is mandatory for detective works as it comes handy for understanding the psychology of the place and its residents. Solving any mystery clearly involves reconstructing the actions of individuals involved through time and space. Recreating Oxford is not a simple task as any other place in the world because it is consumed by its snobbery and elitism, and is corrupted by secretiveness and factionalism making it difficult to unravel the hidden secrets and crimes. Morse's involvement enables him to disrupt this grandeur and expose its banal realities. Despite its physical beauty, Oxford is portrayed as being as imperfect and ordinary as any individual. It is no longer an overburdening presence but is reflected as just an idealized university with its flaws.

The issues that threaten the harmony of the place are of heterosexuality compromising the sanctity of wedlock, conflicts between the working-class and their unsympathetic bosses, issues of family, and how these collectively wreak havoc. Morse's own status as single provides assurance against the moral degradation of most married men around him. And he is forced to establish a cultural association between sexuality and death, that is, crimes were committed to satisfy bodily passions consequentially culminating in murders. Women are seen as seducers, leading to moral degradation, and sometimes even death. Men appear overburdened with their role as bread earners and in an attempt to reinforce their masculinity they deceive their wedded wives and exploit the vulnerability of the single women they seduce. Inevitably family becomes a trap and a site of transgression, which guarantees the indiscretion and degradation of its members. Romanticizing of the family life has ended and instead it becomes a subject of criticism, where each inhabitant (man/woman) gets castigated.

The theme of family is linked to the socio-economic mobility of the middle class and the financial independence of both the parents. This results in the blurring of the social roles of each, whereby a mother could be easily replaced by an electronic jukebox. Eventually it causes broken family ties and a sense of displacement and alienation among the members of the society. This marks a generational shift which Oxford as a setting is made to deal with. Yet, literary Oxford continues to be both mythical and real. This dualism gets reflected in crime stories as in other types of fiction. But like all myths the ancient idea of Oxford remains unchanging and perpetually reinventing.

## Works Cited

- Brophy, Brigid. "Detective Fiction: A Modern Myth of Violence?," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (Spring, 1965): 11-30. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 July 2015.
- Dexter, Colin. *Last Bus to Woodstock*. New York: Macmillan London Ltd, 1975.
- Dexter, Colin. *The Daughters of Cain*. London: Macmillan London Ltd, 1994.
- May, Radmilla. "Murder Most Oxford: Critical Essay," *Contemporary Review*. London. 2000.
- Ward, Miranda. "Books to Read Before Visiting the City of Dreaming Spires," *A Literary Guide to Oxford*. London. 2008.
- Sayers, Dorothy Leigh. *Gaudy Night*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935.
- Thomas, Lyn. "In Love with Inspector Morse: Feminist Subculture and Quality Television," *Feminist Review*. No. 51. (Autumn, 1995): 1-25. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 July 2015..