

CONVENTIONS AND INVENTIONS OF THE DETECTIVE STORY FORMULA IN JONATHAN STROUD'S *THE SCREAMING STAIRCASE*

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Abstract

Detective fiction is a formulaic genre that combines familiar narrative structures with the creative freedom of invention. According to John G. Cawelti, the detective story follows a recognizable pattern involving the introduction of a detective, the emergence of a mystery or crime, a logical investigative process, the announcement and explanation of the solution, and a conclusive resolution. This study analyzes *Lockwood & Co.: The Screaming Staircase* by Jonathan Stroud through the lens of Cawelti's detective story formula to explore how conventional elements are maintained and what narrative inventions are introduced. The novel incorporates key conventions of the detective formula, such as a central mystery, investigation, and rational resolution. However, it also presents significant inventions, including supernatural disturbances as the central crime, teenage protagonists as investigators, and a fusion of detective and horror genres. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the analysis demonstrates that Stroud retains the structural core of the detective narrative while modifying its elements to suit a contemporary young adult and supernatural context. These findings highlight the flexibility of the detective story formula and its potential for transformation without losing narrative coherence.

Keywords: Detective Fiction, Narrative Formula, Conventions, Inventions, Novel

INTRODUCTION

Popular literature, including the mystery genre, is often characterized by stories that follow specific patterns or formulas. John G. Cawelti, in his seminal work *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), states that "literary formula is a structure of narrative or dramatic conventions employed in a great number of individual works" (Cawelti, 1976). According to Cawelti, this formula offers a pleasurable combination of escapism and the comfort of familiar structure for readers. The mystery genre, in particular, is heavily dependent on this formulaic structure, which invites readers to engage in solving the puzzle alongside the detective character.

Edgar Allan Poe is considered one of the earliest writers in the detective fiction genre, notable for crafting stories where the main character also serves as the investigator. His 1841 short story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* is widely regarded as the first true detective tale, introducing the brilliant male detective C. Auguste Dupin (Veselská, 2014). However, detective fiction did not immediately gain widespread popularity at the time. It was not until the late nineteenth century that the genre reached broader recognition through Arthur Conan Doyle's short stories featuring Sherlock Holmes. Detective fiction grew even more popular after World War II.

According to John G. Cawelti, the detective story formula represents a standardized narrative structure that typically includes a particular situation, a pattern of actions, a set



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of character types and their interrelationships, along with a setting that aligns with both the characters and the events of the story. These conventions provide a framework through which writers can construct a coherent narrative. Despite this structural consistency, the formula still allows for invention, which may come in the form of additional mystery layers, altered plot sequences, or modified character roles—ensuring the story remains engaging and relevant over time.

Jonathan Stroud's novel *Lockwood & Co.: The Screaming Staircase* is a compelling example of a mystery narrative that can be analyzed through the lens of the detective story formula. Written in 2013, the novel tells the story of a small detective agency called Lockwood & Co., tasked with solving ghost-related cases in London. As the first installment in the *Lockwood & Co.* series, the novel blends mystery elements with the supernatural—an example of Stroud's inventive contribution to the genre.

Based on this context, the aim of this research is to identify and analyze how the detective story formula, as articulated by John G. Cawelti, is applied in *The Screaming Staircase*, and to examine what forms of invention are present within the novel.

Several prior studies have addressed similar topics. One such study, titled *Formula Detektif Klasik pada Cerita Anak The Secret Seven–Sapta Siaga: Kajian Formula Jhon G. Cawelti* (2024) by Yuli et al., found that the novel employs the typology of the classical detective story, including the presence of a hero who must reach a final goal. The research identifies six main phases in its formulaic structure: introduction of the detective, the crime and clues, investigation, announcement of the solution, explanation of the solution, and conclusion. The study also highlights invention in the form of an attempted theft plot, expanding the classic formula.

Another relevant study by Mustopa and Sudarisman (2022), titled *Representation of Hard-Boiled Detective Formula in The Batman (2022) By Matt Reeves*, focuses on the hard-boiled detective formula. While structurally similar to the classical formula, hard-boiled fiction features flawed detectives and typically urban settings, as opposed to the isolated or locked-room settings commonly found in classical detective stories.

Additionally, a study by Natasha et al., titled *Detective Formula in Agatha Christie's Death on the Nile* (2024), analyzes the protagonist's approach, methods, and decision-making process in solving a complex mystery, providing insight into the functioning of the detective figure.

A final study by Farid et al., titled *Formula Misteri dalam Permainan Jurit Malam Buatan Gambir Game Studio Kajian Genre John G. Cawelti* (2022), analyzes mystery formula in the context of a video game. The study identifies four main characters, 17 settings, 2 time frames, 20 atmospheres, and 7 mystery plotlines, with extrinsic elements such as cultural, social, and educational components. Invention in the game includes the addition and alteration of mystery plotlines, while conventions consist of: (1) crime and clues, (2) investigation, (3) solution announcement, and (4) explanation.

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method. The qualitative approach is chosen due to the research's focus on interpreting and analyzing the meaning behind the novel's text rather than quantifying data (Sugiyono, 2020). A descriptive method is used to

systematically describe the detective story formula and the inventions found in the novel. Data are collected through close reading and note-taking, focusing on elements that match the research questions: (1) introduction of the detective, (2) the crime/mystery, (3) the investigation process, (4) announcement of the solution, (5) explanation of the solution, and (6) the denouement. These data are taken directly from Jonathan Stroud's *Lockwood & Co.: The Screaming Staircase* and are analyzed by classifying them as either conventions or inventions, based on the framework proposed by John G. Cawelti. The primary reference for this study is Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), supplemented by relevant secondary sources from scholarly articles and related literature.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of *Lockwood & Co.: The Screaming Staircase*, the researcher finds that John G. Cawelti's detective story formula can be clearly identified, although it is adapted to a supernatural context as presented by Stroud. These adaptations constitute the novel's inventions.

Introduction of the Detective

A mystery narrative typically begins with the introduction of the character who will lead the investigation. This character often has distinctive traits or skills that set them apart from others. Within the detective story formula, this role is naturally filled by the detective.

"Of the first few hauntings I investigated with Lockwood & Co." (Stroud, 2013)

A detective is someone who conducts an investigation and offers a solution to a problem or mystery. In *Lockwood & Co.: The Screaming Staircase*, readers are immediately introduced to a small investigative agency called Lockwood & Co. In this case, the agency collectively functions as the detective. This suggests that the novel adheres to the detective story formula through the detective's introduction. This introduction is also presented at the very beginning of the narrative.

Cawelti explains that stories sometimes open by presenting the detective through a minor episode that demonstrates their investigative skill. This novel follows that pattern, beginning with a scene that shows Lockwood & Co. successfully completing a case—albeit not without complications. The agency is composed of three individuals with distinct roles: Lucy Carlyle, a "listener"; Lockwood, the agency's leader and a "looker"; and George, who is responsible for researching background information related to their cases. Another unique aspect of the protagonists is the absence of adult supervision. They are simply three teenagers running a small independent agency.

The cases handled by the agency involve repelling ghosts and securing haunted homes. This reflects an invention in the novel, as detectives typically deal with human perpetrators. In contrast, the detectives in this story confront ghosts or supernatural entities. This represents a development of the genre, which begins as mystery and then incorporates elements of horror.

Crime / Mystery

The emergence of a crime or mystery marks the initial conflict that propels the narrative forward. In *Lockwood & Co.: The Screaming Staircase*, the problem they face prior to the investigation is not the discovery of a corpse or a missing person report, but rather complaints about ghosts disturbing the living.

"The circumstances of Father's death were horrible enough, but recently the nightly... disturbances have been getting too persistent." (Stroud, 2013)

From this quote, we learn that Lockwood & Co. is called not because of Suzie Martin's father's death, but because of the increasing intensity of ghostly disturbances. Thus, Lockwood & Co. is expected to resolve the issue.

In the fictional world of the novel, ghosts are a deadly threat and bring terror to people at night. From this problem, agencies begin to emerge, tasked with handling what the novel refers to as "the Problem" and "the Source." Agents must identify the source in order to neutralize the threat.

The researcher found that the investigation in this novel is quite complex, as it connects two separate mysteries that ultimately turn out to be linked. The first mystery is the discovery of skeletal remains (later revealed to be those of Annabel Ward). The second mystery involves the Red Room and the Screaming Staircase—also known as the Combe Carey Hall case. This case is presented to the Lockwood agency by John Fairfax, a prominent London ironworks manufacturer.

"Well, there are many stories. The caretaker, Bert Starkin, is the one to ask about it; he seems to know them all. But certainly, the two best-known tales in the neighbourhood—the key hauntings, if you will—concern the Red Room and the Screaming Staircase." (Stroud, 2013)

At this point, *Lockwood & Co.: The Screaming Staircase* clearly follows the conventions of the detective formula by including a central mystery. However, the mystery or crime in this novel is not typical of traditional detective stories. Instead, the mystery revolves around hauntings. This represents an invention by Stroud within the narrative structure.

Investigation Process

The investigation in this novel resembles that in other detective stories, involving interviews with witnesses and archival research. In the cases handled by Lockwood & Co., they first interview their clients to obtain clear information about how the ghosts are disturbing them. Then they search for additional information in libraries through archives or newspapers. George plays a significant role in conducting this research, while Lockwood and Lucy usually conduct direct investigations at the scene.

"I reminded him of the deadly reputation of the Hall. George argued we'd need at least a fortnight, and preferably a month, to properly research its history." (Stroud, 2013)

This quote reveals that George and Lucy disagree with Lockwood's decision to accept John Fairfax's offer to take on the Combe Carey Hall case. They believe that due to the building's reputation as a ghost-infested site, they must proceed with caution and adequate preparation to avoid danger.

Previously, at Mrs. Hope's residence, Lucy and Lockwood nearly lost their lives because they acted before receiving George's background research. Therefore, they do not want to repeat the same mistake.

A notable difference in this novel's investigative process is the absence of suspect interviews. Instead, the characters explore the haunted locations where the disturbances occur. Their investigations typically result in identifying the ghost's type, method of haunting, and likely source location. The invention here lies in how Stroud replaces the logical reasoning and alibi analysis typical of traditional detective fiction with supernatural investigation methods.

Solution Announcement

Lockwood suspects a connection between the Annabel Ward case and Fairfax. He is suspicious of Fairfax's decision to approach their relatively small agency, despite being one of the most powerful businessmen in London.

"I reminded him of the deadly reputation of the Hall. George argued we'd need at least a fortnight, and preferably a month, to properly research its history." (Stroud, 2013)

At this moment, Lockwood is on the verge of announcing that the Annabel case is nearing resolution, though he still needs evidence to support his hypothesis. This hypothesis remains unknown to the reader until the explanation stage. Meanwhile, Lockwood continues investigating Fairfax in parallel.

Solution Explanation

At the conclusion of both the Combe Carey Hall and Annabel Ward cases, Lockwood finally reveals what he has suspected all along. He explains that Fairfax was directly involved in Annabel Ward's murder—he had killed his former lover with his own hands.

"On the train down I read about your early years in the theater and remembered that Annie Ward had acted too. I guessed that might have been your connection. I also noticed that you acted under your middle name: Will Fairfax. At once that gave a new solution to A ≠ W. Not Annie Ward, but Annie and Will." (Stroud, 2013)

Here, Lockwood explains the initials on Annabel Ward's pendant, which indicate a close relationship between her and Fairfax. Previously, Fairfax had claimed not to know Annabel at all.

Denouement

"He lay facedown on the rug in the center of the room, with his eyes wide open and his arms outstretched as if in supplication. The medics had the adrenaline needles ready, but they didn't try to use them. It was already much too late. Fairfax had suffered first-degree ghost-touch, and it had left him swollen, blue, and dead." (Stroud, 2013)

The story concludes with the revelation of Annabel Ward's murderer. Fairfax, the culprit, receives fitting punishment: a level-one ghost-touch that leaves his body swollen, blue, and ultimately lifeless.

“A week after our return to London, when we’d slept long and fully recovered from our ordeal, a party was held at 35 Portland Row. It wasn’t a very big party—just the three of us, in fact—but that didn’t stop Lockwood & Co. from properly going to town.” (Stroud, 2013)

Meanwhile, the Lockwood & Co. agency gains the publicity they had long desired by solving a long-unsolved case. They celebrate with a party at home, rejoicing in their success.

CONCLUSION

The detective story formula is a series of conventions used by writers to build detective narratives. This study shows that the formula is clearly identifiable in Jonathan Stroud’s *Lockwood & Co.: The Screaming Staircase*. Stroud employs familiar narrative elements consistent with the classical detective story, such as the introduction of the detective figure, mystery, investigation, and resolution. However, to distinguish his work from conventional detective fiction, Stroud introduces several inventions. These include a backstory that traces Lucy’s journey to joining Lockwood & Co., the introduction of ghost-related disturbances as the primary mystery, and the blending of horror with detective storytelling. These modifications exemplify how a traditional formula can be adapted to suit contemporary literary trends and audience expectations without losing its narrative core.

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