

Sensationalism and Crime in 19th Century America

Crime is always a topic that draws a significant amount of public attention and there are many reasons as to why this might be. It can be argued that crime stories are often ‘sensationalized’ by the media and this presents an interesting topic of discussion surrounding the connection between these two elements. However, we must first define sensationalism in the context of 19th century American literature. The leading research question that I initially developed was focused on defining sensationalism. It is necessary to have an understanding of this element of 19th century literature and journalism when drawing conclusions about how it is connected with true crime. However, before I began truly researching, I wanted to establish a definition of crime in the context of my research and how I will be using it in connection with sensationalism. In my opinion, some of the most sensationalized crimes are the most violent, so I placed an emphasis on crimes like murder, parricide, rape, and any other crime where a victim would be injured or seriously traumatized. I excluded petty crimes and those motivated by anything other than a wicked desire to hurt other people. It is important to understand that when crime is mentioned in my research, I am referencing the darker sides of human nature for people who are motivated by their own desire to cause harm to others. This connection between sensationalism and crime in 19th century America was the main guiding principle of my research.

After conducting much research around what classifies a work of writing as sensational, I uncovered a few different perspectives specifically focused on sensational novels and news reporting. Writing formatted as a novel that is classified as ‘sensational’ in 19th century American literature incorporated a variety of content that often included crime and stories that captivated audiences through a unique method of narration. Some of these narration techniques were

designed to withhold information from the reader and keep them invested in the story that was being told (Brantlinger 1). The ideas discussed in novels under this scope typically challenged common beliefs and cultural norms of 19th century America. Literature in the form of a novel that was classified as sensational typically included the characteristics identified by Brantlinger, which furthered my understanding of sensationalism in this form of 19th century literature.

Upon developing this frame of reference for sensationalism and novel based writing, I wanted to focus in more on news writing and journalism to gain a better understanding from this perspective. I began researching about sensationalism in the media, specifically focusing on the 19th century, and I found some intriguing resources about how news sources reported on crime. In her novel *Narrating the News*, Karen Roggenkamp presents an argument for what made journalism so unique during this period and asserts that a focus on the aspects of news reporting “which included the most sensational elements of human life” led to the manifestation of sensationalism (Roggenkamp 20). The elements of sensationalist novels and news reporting uncovered through my research served as evidence in my journey to define this genre, and sensationalism at its core in the context of 19th century American literature. After gaining a better understanding of how sensationalism was portrayed in different forms, it led me down a few different paths and raised questions in areas that drove me to conduct further research.

Before really diving into the way crime was portrayed in 19th century American literature and journalism, I wanted to have a better understanding of the significance of crime during this time period. I had developed a few research questions specifically focusing on the prominence of crime during the 19th century in America and whether or not there was a large increase in news reporting on this topic. While searching for information in this area, I uncovered a great resource

that provided a significant amount of context for 19th century America as well as the role crime played in this defining period. *Crime and the Rise of Modern America* by Kristofer Allerfeldt chronicles the late 19th century through the mid-20th century culture of America and the significance of crime during this period. For my research purposes, I utilized the discussion in the novel focusing on 19th century America and the role of crime. After providing a quick summary of this time period, the author goes on to describe how many things were developing within America in the late 19th century that led to the tremendous growth experienced in 20th century America. However, Allerfeldt also notes that there is a “huge expansion in crime” during the end of this era that influenced the direction of the country (Allerfeldt 2). This information answered my question about the prominence of crime during 19th century America, but I was unable to find anything about the frequency of news reports on this particular topic. I began researching more about news reports on crime and it led me down an interesting path with multiple avenues that connected back to sensationalism and the increase of crime in the 19th century, as mentioned by Allerfeldt.

One of the main questions I had developed after reaching this point was focused on how journalists and the news media during the 19th century reported on events, specifically crime. Given the significance of the media in modern society, I felt that it would be interesting to look further into the way crime was reported in news publications of 19th century America. One of the first newspapers I discovered from this time period that reported on crime was about the assassination of Chicago Mayor Carter H. Harrison in October of 1893. Being that this was one of the first newspapers I uncovered, I was surprised at the way it was written, much like a story rather than news. It almost seemed as if it was made up, including an extensive amount of details

and information that was sensationalized to rope the public in on this narrative (St. Paul Sunday Globe). When viewing this newspaper through the lens of sensationalistic writing, I was able to understand how this tactic in writing about crime of the 19th century was utilized. After uncovering this piece of information, I wanted to see how frequent this was in news reporting of crime.

This led me to uncover a series of newspapers from The Chicago Daily Tribune reporting on the first known serial killer in America, H.H. Holmes. The newspaper itself was created in such a way that when viewing it through the lens of sensationalistic journalism, it clearly incorporated elements meant to have a dramatic influence on the public. The headlines served to grab the reader's attention through sensationalized ideas like the suspect's seemingly real grief for his actions. A significant portion of the newspaper also included a discussion on Holmes' appearance, highlighting certain characteristics about him like his eyes, nose, and ears, claiming that this could indicate a level of insanity (Chicago Daily Tribune). When viewing this newspaper with the understanding of how sensationalism was developed and functioned in 19th century America, it is very clear that reporting of this nature was meant to increase public interest in the area of crime in literature and as a whole. This connection between sensationism in news reporting and crime led me to focus more research in the area of literature specifically. I found the topic of Americas first true 'serial killer' to be very interesting, and especially because he became known during this time period. This led me down a rabbit hole of seemingly endless information. I had a hard time sifting through some resources that would prove to be not as useful, but I did find a wide range of resources focusing on H.H. Holmes, The Chicago World's Fair, and violent crime in general.

Researching for information about America's first documented serial killer led me down a few different paths, primarily focusing on the news reporting of the crimes, as well as literature based on H.H. Holmes and this time period. I uncovered a very useful bit of information from the Library of Congress which included a timeline of events documenting the life of H.H. Holmes and how he ended up in Chicago. The timeline provided information about crimes committed by Holmes and the trial before his execution on May 7, 1896 (Library of Congress). This information gave me a frame of reference of what to look for when searching for news articles about specific events involving Holmes and the crimes he committed. The website also provided useful strategies for conducting further research, as well as selected articles pertaining to the topic which led me to newspaper archives from various publications. One newspaper from California reported on the life and crimes of H.H. Holmes in such a way that it would certainly strike fear into citizens living across the country. The headlines were greatly dramatized and included lines such as "Buried in a Cellar" and "Record of Many Killings" that would shock the world in order to raise public interest through sensationalized stories (The San Francisco Call). Another newspaper from Utah reported on Holmes and included shocking elements in the headline such as "Trap Doors, Secrete Elevators and Stove, Wherein Bodies of Women Were Burned, Haunted Man for Nineteen Years" (The Ogden Standard). The way that the story of H.H. Holmes was portrayed by the news media during the 19th century demonstrates the role of sensationalism in reports on crime during this time period. Reading actual newspapers from this time period helped me gain a better understanding of how sensationalism functioned within journalism and answered my question in this aspect, however, I was still curious about the connection to other forms of literature.

I had developed some questions about the relationship between sensationalism in news reporting and how this influenced other literary works based around this time period, and I came across Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City*. Focusing on the crimes of H.H. Holmes during the Chicago World's Fair, Larson tells an impactful story based on real events. The author's note at the beginning of the novel describes how there will be many strange things might be included in the book and that no matter how morbid they may seem, the novel is no work of fiction (Larson). My initial question about the influence of sensationalism on novel based writing was somewhat answered by this statement from Larson because it described how some of the information he included was direct evidence from the time period of Holmes' crimes. Some perspectives could be classified more as historical fiction and the sensationalism of crimes could have varying levels of influence on works of literature. Another novel I uncovered through my research provided background information on Holmes and gave insight as to why he might not have come into the limelight of other prolific killers like Lizzie Borden. It is argued that this could be because of the lack of understanding for the motivations of Holmes, as the world had never been exposed to the idea of a serial killer before (Geary). This could explain the sensationalist journalism surrounding the crimes of H.H. Holmes and how it influenced other literary works depicting this time period. Some elements of the novels could be blatantly sensationalized, but there is no real way to determine this because the way journalism functioned in the 19th century.

One pressing question that still had not been answered at this point in my research was why Americans were so obsessed with violent crimes and reading the narratives presented in newspapers of the 19th century. After conducting some research about the interest Americans had

in violent crimes, I discovered the way news reports about crime were written with gripping titles and such great attention to detail that the reader could not help but to become enveloped in the story and the emotions they felt from reading it (Shon 1). The sensational aspects of the writing might have given normal everyday people a glimpse into their own darkest desires that are not accepted by society. Even in modern America, there is a substantial amount of people obsessed with true crime and the motivations of some of the most unhinged minds in the world. I could not help but wonder if this was a result of sensationalism in news reporting and literature of the 19th century that influenced public perception and interest in crime which led me to research more about the darker sides of human motivations. Some scholars believe that humans have an innately dark nature, and this compels them to commit violent acts against others (Block). The darkest desires of human nature came to light in American culture upon the discovery of the first true serial killer in America. H.H. Holmes was identified as the first true serial killer in America, and during the 19th century many people felt that it was a threatening possibility that he could be representative of American culture (Schmid 51). The sensationalized elements of Holmes' crimes led to an increased public interest in the realm of violent crime, explaining why it was such a large part of American culture during the 19th century. It can even be said that "Americans incorporated crime into their culture" more than any other geographic location during this period (Allerfeldt 3). This can still be seen in modern society because of how prevalent sensationalized crime stories are, demonstrating the lasting influence of crime stories in allowing everyday people to explore the darker sides of human nature.

This point is where my research came full circle, and I was able to connect all the elements of sensationalism in 19th century America with the way crime was reported and the

lasting influence this had on individuals and society as a whole. Essentially, ideas that were meant to invoke a strong sense of emotion within a reader worked exactly as they were meant to. American citizens began reading more and more stories about true crime. These violent and merciless accounts of murder, parricide, rape, torture, and kidnapping became such a large part of the culture in 19th century America that it has had an influence all the way through the current era. The “historical roots of ‘sensationalism’” have become so engrained in American culture because of the “emotionally charged content” produced by journalism in the 19th century (Wiltenburg 1). This idea extends further than the factual reporting of crime during the time period because many essays about crime and punishment sparked public interest further. Additionally, many authors began creating their own “versions of actual crimes and criminals” (Richter 4). The sensationalized ideas surrounding crime did not just influence a group of people, but rather manifested themselves into American culture, creating a time period saturated with stories about the more violent side of humans. When looking in the right places with the right perspective, it is very apparent that this was the dawn of the obsession with true crime in American culture because of the way sensationalized stories affected readers.

After conducting much research on this topic, I developed a greater understanding of the significance of sensationalism and crime during the 19th century, as well as the lasting influence it had on American culture. People wanted to read about horrible and dramatic crimes based on ‘true’ accounts, which led to the increase in sensationalized news stories of 19th century America (Allerfeldt 8). The research that I conducted led me down a few different paths that presented information exemplifying the connection between news reporting on crime, sensationalism, and how this influenced other forms of literature. The 19th century saw the dawn of mass circulation

of newspapers and “created a thirst for ever more sensational, gruesome and extraordinary crimes which sold cop[ies] and fed the hyperbole of the headlines” (Allerfeldt 3). The lasting influence of sensationalism in 19th century America can be seen in modern society based on the prevalence of true crime stories and level of public interest. Americans began to express great interest in sensationalized stories about crime and this ultimately led to a public interest that extended beyond true events. Many writers began incorporating elements of real violent crimes into their own interpretations, furthering public interest in this area.

Ultimately, my research led me to develop a much greater understanding and appreciation for how sensationalism functioned in 19th century America. The connection of this literary element with crime came to fruition during this time period and has had a dramatic influence on American culture and perception of crime. I feel that my research proved to be very beneficial in allowing me to uncover more information about this time period and I found it really interesting to see the influence it has had all the way through modern society. Writing with the intention of evoking strong emotion within a reader can be very impactful and the research I conducted allowed me to examine this element of American literature and develop a greater understanding of how it functioned in the 19th century.

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