Tradition and Subversion in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

Sigrid M. King
Carlow University, United States

Abstract

Swedish author Stieg Larsson’s best-selling novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* both pays homage to and subverts the crime fiction tradition. Larsson’s strategy enables him to expand his work’s focus beyond “whodunit” to the social justice issue of abuse of public trust by those in power. Larsson’s tactic of subversion is particularly pronounced in his depiction of the corrupt Vanger family, use of graphic violence, and rejection of the Golden Age detective character. These elements are examined in juxtaposition to the country house, locked-room, and puzzle/secret code mystery traditions. Despite the elements that pay homage to traditional crime fiction, Larsson’s novel clearly questions the certainties and assumptions embodied in mysteries of the Golden Age.

*All art depends upon a constant, dynamic tension between convention and innovation.*

George Grella and John M. Reilly,
“Conventions of the Genre” (88)

Swedish author Stieg Larsson’s best-selling mystery *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*\(^1\) displays a fascinating tension between adherence to the traditions of crime fiction and subversion of those traditions. Larsson was an avid reader of crime fiction and self-consciously places his first novel’s plot within the genre through his adaptation of elements from the British Golden Age,\(^2\) particularly the locked-room mystery, the country house mystery, and the puzzle/secret code mystery. These subgenres historically focused on characters from privileged backgrounds and tended to reflect a conservative worldview. While Larsson pays homage to this tradition, he also subverts most of its assumptions through his critique of various power structures in Sweden, exposing corruption in the world of finance, ineptitude in the social safety net, and a dark underbelly of ultra-right-wing racism that reacts in a violent backlash against immigrants. This strategy expands the novel’s focus beyond “whodunit” to explore the social justice issue of abuse of public trust by those in power. Larsson’s critique is particularly pronounced in the depictions of the powerful Vanger family, use of graphic violence, and rejection of the Golden Age detective character.

---

\(^1\) Originally published in Swedish in 2005 with the title *Män som hatar kvinnor* (translated as *Men Who Hate Women*), the novel was published in English in 2008 with the title *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. The title will be abbreviated as *Dragon Tattoo* throughout this paper.

\(^2\) Golden Age crime fiction written between the two world wars includes works by Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, and Dorothy Sayers, among others. There have been several excellent examinations of the hard-boiled elements in Larsson’s novel, so beyond a brief mention of them, this article will deal primarily with the book’s use of the British Golden Age tradition.
violence, and rejection of the Golden Age detective character in favor of the crusading journalist Mikael Blomkvist and the young hacker Lisbeth Salander.

The plot of Dragon Tattoo opens with a telephone conversation between Henrik Vanger (the patriarch of a powerful Swedish family) and Detective Superintendent Morell, whose inability to solve the forty-year-old disappearance of Vanger’s great-niece, Harriet, introduces the novel’s parallel motifs of institutional failure and violence against women. That connection is reinforced by the juxtaposition of the headnote to Part One—“Eighteen percent of the women in Sweden have at one time been threatened by a man” (9)—with Mikael Blomkvist’s defeat in a case against the powerful financier Hans-Erik Wennerström. Facing jail time for libel, a stiff fine, and the possible ruin of his magazine, Millennium, Mikael grudgingly agrees to be hired by Henrik Vanger, through a professional firm, Milton Security, to investigate the disappearance of sixteen-year-old Harriet Vanger in September of 1966. In Mikael’s first conversation with Henrik, he learns that Harriet disappeared from the isolated family home, located on an island in a remote area of northern Sweden, and is presumed dead. After he begins his investigation, Mikael discovers that Milton Security has had him investigated by one of their operatives named Lisbeth Salander, an unconventional 24-year-old with a dragon tattoo. Impressed with her computer skills and photographic memory, Mikael convinces her to join him in the investigation of Harriet’s disappearance. Framing their investigation of Harriet’s case is the case involving Wennerström’s financial corruption, which reappears in the novel’s final section to link the two plots through their depiction of corrupted power.

Tradition

David Geherin and Kerstin Bergman, among others, have noted how Larsson’s knowledge and use of the crime fiction tradition in Dragon Tattoo contributes to its success.³ In an interview before the book’s release, Larsson said, “I’ve read crime fiction all my life” (Winkler) and noted that as a young man growing up in a village in northern Sweden, he became familiar with traditional crime fiction by writers including A. Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy Sayers. Golden Age crime fiction focuses on people in positions of power, especially those of the upper-middle or upper socioeconomic classes in England. Dean A. Miller observes that class “has long played a role in crime fiction,” and most Golden Age mysteries feature a conservative worldview with an emphasis on “the stability, gentility, and familiarity of the traditional class system of England” (73). For Golden Age detectives Hercule Poirot, Roderick Alleyn, and Albert Campion,

³ Geherin describes the generic elements as “locked-room puzzle, the innocent man wrongly accused, a vicious serial killer on the loose, a family saga with long-buried secrets” (11), and Bergman identifies paratextual and textual elements that allude to the psychological thriller, the whodunit, the journalist detective story, the children’s crime novel, and the true crime story (40).
sought to repair the social order temporarily disrupted by the intrusion of a criminal act, they figured the power of order, which it was the goal of detection to restore. (Grella and Reilly 88)

Larsson alludes to crime fiction of the Golden Age when Henrik Vanger describes the day of Harriet’s disappearance. Noting that the only way on or off the island that day was blocked by an accident on the bridge, Mikael wryly observes that “the list of suspects consists of the finite number of people trapped here. A sort of locked-room mystery in island format” (Larsson 95). Vanger responds, “Mikael, you don’t know how right you are. Even I have read my Dorothy Sayers” (Larsson 95). This dialogue draws on two subgenres within traditional detective fiction: the lockedroom mystery (famously used by Edgar Allan Poe, Doyle, John Dickson Carr, Sayers, and many others) and the country house mystery (a staple of early detective fiction and a frequent plot device of Christie).

In the locked room subgenre, the crime (usually murder) takes place in a location from which it appears impossible for the murderer to escape, yet the locked room is empty when the body is discovered. To solve the case, an amateur detective questions the finite list of suspects and uses logic to determine how the crime was committed, usually through some elaborate device, such as a weapon hidden inside a mantle clock and timed to shoot when the victim winds the timepiece. Golden Age authors often expanded the locked-room setting to other seemingly impenetrable sites, such as Agatha Christie’s use of a moving train (in Murder on the Orient Express) and an island (And Then There Were None). In Larsson’s novel, Hedeby Island’s isolation is emphasized when an accident between a car and an oil truck entirely blocks the bridge—the only route to the island—for twenty-four hours. As Henrik describes it to Mikael, “During these twenty-four hours Hedeby Island was to all intents and purposes cut off from the rest of the world” (95). This isolation pays homage to the “closed-world setting” a technique that has its roots in Poe’s “narrow circumspection of space” (Hayne 76), as applied in his locked-room mystery “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Barrie Hayne argues that closed-world settings provide “the practical advantage to writers of limiting the body of suspects and, more or less, simplifying social differences” while also providing the impression of “restored order” (76). With its limited list of suspects, the locked-room mystery implies that a satisfactory and clear resolution will occur when the detective identifies one of the members of the family as responsible for the crime. Thus, in the locked-room mystery, larger social forces are rarely, if ever, examined as contributing to the crime.

Mikael’s conversation with Henrik also evokes a second Golden Age subgenre, the country house mystery, a specialty of Sayers. In the country house plot, the murderer is someone inside the house, someone trusted, usually a member of the aristocratic family who is not what he or she seems. The country house crime is often a variation of the locked-room mystery because the house is isolated during a storm, cut off from communication with the outside world through downed telephone lines and surrounded by a new snowfall that reveals through its untouched surface that no “outsider” could have committed the crime. Written after World War I, the country house mystery reflects a time in England in which families with inherited titles were starting to struggle to maintain their large family estates. As Bruce Murphy has observed, “Ironically, the
country house mystery was made popular at exactly the time when the social structure that supported it was going into irreversible decline; the end of World War I in 1918 was the beginning of the end of for the ancient regime and the world of the stately English country mansion” (113).

The country house detective, who is “a well-connected guest” (Aird, “Country House” 94) is called on by the family to conduct an investigation in a way that will protect the family from scandal. Golden Age detectives who were “well-connected” to the British aristocracy include Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey (son of the Duke of Denver), Margery Allingham’s Albert Campion (with secret connections to the royal family), and Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn (son of a Baronet). The Golden Age detective is usually “an attractive, likable character with whom, however eccentric or remote, the reader is able to identify,” a detective who is “frequently mannered, but invariably mannerly,” and whose personal life is “unrevealed except where information is absolutely necessary for the plot” (Aird, “Conservative Worldview” 85).

Larsson draws on the country house tradition in several ways. Catherine Aird describes the typical British country house as containing “owners (usually old, ill, and wealthy), their heirs (often impoverished and sometimes undeserving), and assorted dependents and guests” who have gathered for a weekend celebration (Aird, “Country House” 94). Henrik Vanger, who has hired Mikael to investigate the disappearance of Harriet Vanger, is not well and mentions several times that he expects to die soon. Henrik is an “industrialist and former head of the Vanger companies, once renowned in the fields of sawmills, mines, steel, metals, textiles. Vanger had been one of the really big fish in his day, . . . one of the twenty-point stags of the old school, . . . the backbone of industry in the welfare state, et cetera” (Larsson 71). Like many British aristocratic families that began to experience the crumbling of their fortunes between the wars, the Vangers “had been racked in the past twenty-five years by reorganizations, stock-market crises, interest crises, competition from Asia, declining exports, and other nuisances” (71).

The Vanger house also reflects the country house tradition of an estate owned by a wealthy family, “historically situated on the outskirts of a village” and “often placed in an isolated setting” (Aird, “Country House” 95). When the murderer is revealed during the detective’s gathering of the family for the climactic scene, if a family member is the murderer, he or she “will be seen as someone not worthy of his or her inheritance—a gambler or a drinker or ‘not quite straight’” (94). Mikael first sees the house after a big snowstorm and learns that Vanger lives in Hedeby, a small harbor town that begins “on the mainland and spilled across a bridge to a hilly island” where the Vanger estate consists of the main house (“the master’s domain”) and several smaller houses inhabited primarily by the remaining members of the Vanger family (Larsson 76, 78). The scene of the crime is also described in a way that reflects the country house tradition: the annual gathering of the Vanger family for dinner in September of 1966, which Henrik describes as “a tradition which my father’s father introduced and which generally turned into pretty detestable affairs” (93). Sheng-mei Ma sums up the homage to the country house subgenre, describing the setting as taking place “within the Vanger family island, an insular, incestuous family alienated from the outside world as well as from other family members.”
In addition to his homages to the locked-room and country house subgenres, Larsson also invokes a third element of the crime fiction tradition: the puzzle mystery that features a secret code, which operates along with the plot’s closed circle of suspects to promise a rational, clear solution to crime and a restoration of order. The puzzle mystery focuses on the intellectual game of methodically solving the murder, which “should not be, or appear to be, graphically violent” (Keating 89). Details about the victim’s body or the grisly nature of the murder scene are avoided, while details of the secret code or puzzle are the focus of the narrative. Early crime fiction that features the secret code includes Poe’s “The Gold-Bug” and Doyle’s The Sign of the Four among others. In the Golden Age, Sayers famously used the Playfair cipher in her 1932 novel Have His Carcase, with the keyword “monarchy” promising a connection to the royal family. The code is most often employed by the criminal and may involve a plot to undermine the government or some other representative of the social order. In other works of crime fiction, the code is associated with the criminal’s attempt to cover up some crime from the past, as in the colonial conspiracy crime in The Sign of the Four. This reflects Martin Priestman’s observation that “Where the powerful figure is the murderer, it is to preserve the status quo by suppressing knowledge of a past crime” (155). Larsson uses the puzzle/secret code tradition throughout Dragon Tattoo, from the pressed flowers to the coded entries in Harriet Vanger’s date book that reveal the serial murders. The combination of women’s names, initials, and five-digit numbers is confounding until Lisbeth and Mikael realize that the dates reveal that there were two murderers: Gottfried Vanger had initiated his son Martin in the brutal killings he committed, and now Martin is a serial killer.

### Subversion

Larsson’s decision in 2002 to start writing his own crime fiction was strongly influenced by his progressive politics and work as an investigative reporter. “An ardent leftist all his life” (Acocella), Larsson had spent many years as an investigative journalist writing about social problems in his publication Expo. Despite his enjoyment of mysteries, he felt dissatisfaction with early crime fiction in which “there’s not much about society,” observing that in “real life people are integrated into society” (Winkler). Larsson’s progressive politics were deeply rooted in a critique of flawed or corrupted social systems, including the criminal justice system. However, much early crime fiction, centering on detectives like the Pinkertons, “linked the solution of the crime and the resolution of disorder with the maintenance of social class structures, the protection of property for those who possessed it, and the identification of criminal disorder with social destabilization” (Reilly 84). Many Golden Age writers “imply in their fiction the accepted impartiality of the judicial process and its award of condign punishment” with the blame “laid on the shoulders of its perpetrator and not on society at large” (Aird, “Conservative Worldview” 85). The certainty of justice and appropriate punishment in Golden Age crime fiction is described in significantly theological language by W. H. Auden, who sees the country house milieu as “the great Good Place”: a “society in a state of grace” that is restored once “the fallen one is identified” (qtd. in Roth 157), clearly linking a moral righteousness with the inhabitants of the country house world.
Despite his use of some elements of the country house subgenre, Larsson did not reinforce its conservative worldview. Instead, he writes from a “radical worldview” which works to “undercut the legitimacy of class structures by portraying the wealthy as debased, revealing the established institutions of law and order to be dysfunctional, indicating that the little fellow was the victim of it all” (Reilly, “Radical Worldview” 86). Larsson’s depiction of Swedish power structures is part of a larger context of social critique in Swedish crime fiction that can be traced to the works of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, whose ten-novel police procedural series, Historien om ett brott (The Story of a Crime), published in the 1960s and 1970s, helped establish the crime novel as “a sociological tool to critically dissect the Swedish welfare state” (Kärrholm 136). Their novels also examine the role of Swedish society and governmental failures in crime, putting less responsibility on the individual criminal (137). A friend of Larsson’s, John-Henri Holmberg, describes how Dragon Tattoo provides a sharp contrast with the popular perception of Sweden’s Social Democratic government: “Swedes think that their country is uniquely egalitarian (Larsson presents considerable differences between rich and poor), that Sweden is politically neutral (Larsson shows a burgeoning right), that the Swedish health-care system is the best in the world (Lisbeth is imprisoned in a state hospital),” and Larsson depicts the Swedish power structure as “an instrument of violence wielded against individuals who threaten the privileges and power of those who have managed to gain control of it” (qtd. in Acocella).

A major area of subversion of the Golden Age worldview is Larsson’s depiction of the powerful Vanger family through details of setting and character that help raise questions about the subgenre’s basic philosophical assumptions. In the traditional country house mystery, the ancestral family house is decorated with “visible reminders of [the owner’s] ancestors in the form of portraits” as well as a “hidden room” or secret passage (Aird, “Country House” 94). In contrast, instead of Henrik Vanger surrounding himself with portraits glorifying the Vanger family’s history, he has only a framed photograph of Harriet in his study. The art work on the walls is the large collection of pressed flowers that started as gifts from Harriet and then resumed after her disappearance. Henrik believes the anonymously mailed flowers are from Harriet’s killer, taunting him by replicating gifts from the girl he lost. Symbolically, Henrik’s choice not to surround himself with images of his family signals his distaste for his degraded relatives and his distancing of himself from them. Harriet is the only family member he feels is worth loving. The rest of the Vanger family is depicted as despicable, hardly representatives of Auden’s idealized “society in a state of grace.” Henrik says,

I detest most of the members of my family. They are for the most part thieves, misers, bullies, and incompetents. I ran the company for thirty-five years—almost all the time in the midst of relentless bickering. They were my worse enemies, far worse than competing companies or the government. . . . [Their] story will make Shakespeare’s tragedies read like light family entertainment. (Larsson 86)

---

4 Their work was followed by that of other crime fiction writers who provided a critique of Swedish power structures, including Henning Mankell, Olov Svedelid, and Liza Marklund, among others (Kärrholm 137).
The Vanger family is portrayed as a debased place of business rather than an honorable dynasty. Henrik’s brother Richard was a Nazi sympathizer, anti-Semite, and member of the Swedish Fascist Battle Organization, as well as a brutal man who beat his wife and son Gottfried. Gottfried was a violent drunkard who drowned near the isolated cabin where he abused his children, Harriet and Martin. His wife Isabella is self-centered and largely abandoned their children to his brutalities.

Another area of subversion is Larsson’s amateur detectives, Mikael and Lisbeth, whose values are contrasted with those of the powerful Vanger family. As investigators, they are hardly the “well-connected” detectives of Golden Age mysteries and certainly not members of the same social class as their employer, Henrik. In fact, Mikael is surprised to learn that during the summer of 1963 his family lived on the Vanger property while his father worked as a machinist for the Vanger paper mill. Like Mikael, Lisbeth is at the opposite end of the spectrum of social power from the aristocratic detective Lord Peter Wimsey in Sayers’s mysteries. Dependent on the Swedish welfare state, she typifies the lowest end of the socioeconomic hierarchy, but her strong sense of justice makes her morally superior to most of the Vanger family. Mikael and Lisbeth have more in common with detectives from American hard-boiled crime fiction by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Elmore Leonard, individuals who are “singular” figures who “cannot be hostage to corrupt institutions [because they are] unaffiliated with social elites and, moreover, disaffiliated from their value systems” (Reilly, “Radical Worldview” 86). Like Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, they also have their own moral code that guides their actions.

Larsson also overturns Golden Age conventions by making his murders “graphically violent” (Keating 89). As Lisbeth and Mikael investigate the serial murders from the past, they uncover victims, such as Rakel Lunde, who was “found naked and tied to a laundry-drying frame in her back garden, with her mouth taped shut. Cause of death was a heavy rock being repeatedly thrown at her” (376). Gottfried Vanger’s brutal murder of Rakel is linked through imagery to Lisbeth’s rape by Nils Bjorman. The “hidden room” of the English Golden Age country house is traditionally used to provide escape in a locked room mystery or to provide a suspenseful atmosphere. However, its relatively benign purpose is transformed in Larsson’s novel to something much more terrifying and relevant for contemporary society: Martin’s hidden basement room in which he tortures the immigrant women he has kidnapped and videotapes their ordeal before murdering them. Mikael is beaten, suspended by a chain, and tormented by Martin in a way that connects him with the mistreatment of immigrant women who are trafficked, thus placing him “within society,” as Larsson intended. Mikael is not just the victim of a deranged killer in this scene; he is a reminder of what is happening to trafficked women every day. Martin explains to Mikael that he kidnaps and tortures these women “because it’s so easy. . . . Women disappear all the time. Nobody misses them. Immigrants. Whores from Russia. Thousands of people pass through Sweden every year” (447). Mikael’s helplessness in this scene reverses the complete control exercised by Golden Age detectives like Hercule Poirot who call a final gathering of the closed circle of suspects and masterfully reveal the criminal. Instead of Mikael and Lisbeth staging the final confrontation in the Vanger family library, Mikael finds himself trapped in Martin’s secret room where he is tortured by Martin until Lisbeth saves him.
The country house mystery’s assumption of restoration of order for its powerful family and appropriate justice for the killer is also undermined in Larsson’s novel. Donna King and Carrie Lee Smith argue that “We can read the millennium trilogy as interrogating oppressive social norms and at the same time see it as exposing the intractability of real structural change” (xv). The Golden Age allusions in the novel may set up the expectation of a case with the clear solution and appropriate administration of justice typical of the tradition. However, the novel starts with a “cold case,” Detective Superintendent Morell’s inability to solve the mystery of Harriet’s fate for forty years, indicating a failure of the authorities involved and raising questions about the effectiveness of conventional criminal justice. After Lisbeth rescues Mikael, the wounded Martin flees and is killed when he drives into an oncoming truck, thus escaping arrest and conviction by the legal system. After witnessing his accident, Lisbeth returns to the hidden room, removes all traces that she and Mikael were there, and tells Mikael, “If you call the police, I’m leaving. I don’t want to have anything to do with them” (Larsson 462). Her reasons for this are connected to her own history with police and her distrust of the judicial system. When the Vanger family lawyer, Dirch Frode, learns about the room, he pleads with Mikael and Lisbeth not to go public, fearing that the scandal would destroy the Vanger Company, causing the loss of work for 3,000 of Hedestad’s inhabitants and bringing great distress to his friend and employer, Henrik, who has been hospitalized. Mikael struggles with the irony of devoting his professional life to “uncovering things which other people had tried to hide” and feels that he “could not be party to covering up of the appalling crimes in Martin Vanger’s basement” (514). Lisbeth proposes her own brand of justice, telling Frode, “Martin videotaped his victims. I want you to do your damnedest to identify as many as you can and see to it that their families receive suitable compensation. And then I want the Vanger Corporation to donate 2 million kronor annually and in perpetuity to the National Organisation for Women’s Crisis Centres and Girls Crisis Centres in Sweden” (514). This unconventional application of justice reflects the larger social justice concern about flawed criminal justice systems in the novel and the Millennium series.

The original Swedish title for The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo—Män som hatar kvinnor—translates as “Men Who Hate Women.” The novel depicts through several plot lines, the destructive impact of violence on the psyches and bodies of women, as well as the ways in which those with power manage to perpetuate and conceal these crimes. In Dragon Tattoo, it is Lisbeth that best exemplifies Larsson’s critique of Swedish power structures. King and Smith argue that in the novel, “violence against women takes center stage, [while] Larsson also examines shoddy journalism, out-of-control capitalism, incompetent law enforcement, and a Swedish state that fails to protect its citizens” (xiv). Through Lisbeth, “Larsson’s explicit narratives of sexual violence show how people in authority abuse their power, and he emphasizes the links between sexual abuse and institutional power” (Villalón 35).

Lisbeth’s subversive character can be traced to Larsson’s interest in and early book reviews of mysteries by Sara Paretsky, Val McDermid, Elizabeth George, and Minette Walters (Winkler), the first three of whom are alluded to in Dragon Tattoo. One of Larsson’s biographers, Kurdo Baksi, observes that Larsson was a fan of second-wave feminism’s female crime writers and that they helped shape his creation of Lisbeth Salander as an investigator (Baksi 151). At one point in Dragon Tattoo, Larsson has
Mikael “reading a novel by Sara Paretsky” when he hears “the door handle turn and [looks] up to see Salander” standing in the doorway (Larsson 396). This clever allusion links Lisbeth to Paretsky’s V. I. Warshawski, who often exposes corruption in social systems.

Lisbeth’s embodiment of the failure of Swedish systems to protect its citizens also has its origins in events from Larsson’s life. In his 2010 biography, *Stieg Larsson: The Man Behind The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Kurdo Baksi writes about an event that took place in the summer of 1969, which Baksi believes “affected Stieg so deeply that it became a somber leit-motif running through all three of his novels” (146). Baksi goes on to recount how, when Larsson was fifteen, he witnessed a gang rape committed by three of his friends on a camping trip, and he failed to stop them, an injustice that haunted him for the rest of his life. Baksi writes that the girl’s “screams were heartrending, but [Larsson] didn’t intervene” (146). Larsson called the girl several days later and tried to apologize for his failure of courage, but she refused to forgive him. Baksi believes that this incident had a direct impact on Larsson’s lifelong commitment to social justice and his dedication to empowering women. Larsson’s partner of many years, Eva Gabrielsson, has argued that “for Stieg, Lisbeth was the ideal incarnation of the code of ethics that requires us to act according to our convictions” (Gabrielsson). This connection also helps explain why within the more familiar confines of the crime fiction genre, he inserts a troubling and challenging character, one who disturbs our assumptions and raises questions about the genre and about justice.

Lisbeth’s subversive role is connected to the book’s section headnotes citing statistics about violence against women. The statistic introducing part three is “Ninety-two percent of women in Sweden who have been subjected to sexual assault have not reported the most recent incident to the police” (Larsson 445). This data’s revelation of silence around sexual assault is integral to the situation of Lisbeth, whose court-appointed guardian, Advokat Nils Bjurman, begins forcing her to engage in sex in return for access to her money (222). The abuse continues until Bjurman commits a sadistic and devastating rape that causes her significant physical injury (241-51). Bjurman makes his power over her clear as he says, “If you’re nice to me, I’ll be nice to you . . . . If you make trouble, I can put you away in an institution for the rest of your life. Would you like that? . . . It would be your word against mine. Whose word do you think would carry more weight?” (222-23). Throughout the novel, Lisbeth keeps secrets about her own past because she does not trust people in authority. Patricia Yancey Martin explains that in the trilogy, readers learn that the “police, prosecutor, prime minister, and segments of the Swedish intelligence service [had looked] the other way or actively [committed] gross injustices against Lisbeth Salander” (39). Lisbeth’s experience with violence and misuse of authority is linked to the disappearance of Harriet Vanger, who also experienced rape and abuse, and to the serial killer Martin Vanger, Harriet’s brother.

As *Dragon Tattoo* develops, Lisbeth becomes Mikael’s investigative partner and demonstrates traits often associated with traditional crime fiction’s male detectives,

---

5 Baksi believes that two other events, the 2001 murder of model Melissa Nordell by her Swedish boyfriend and the murder of Fadime Sahindal, a Swedish-Kurdish woman, by her father later that year, also contributed to Larsson’s focus on the issue of violence against women (113).
particularly Sherlock Holmes. She is eccentric, displays problematic social skills, is somewhat isolated, and takes only the investigative cases that interest her. Psychiatric experts who interviewed her during her troubled early years describe her as “introverted, socially inhibited, lacking in empathy, ego-fixated, [demonstrating] psychopathic and antisocial behavior, difficulty in cooperating, and incapable of assimilating learning” (Larsson 160). While their assessment is not entirely accurate, the similarities to Holmes are striking. Her employer at Milton Security, Dragan Armansky, is first “bewildered” by her, but eventually realizes that he initially misjudged her: “He had taken her for stupid, maybe even retarded” (41). Lisbeth’s appearance is also unconventional and incompatible with depictions of dapper Golden Age detectives like Poirot or Wimsey. Lisbeth does not seem particularly interested in charming influential people, so Armansky has not allowed her to meet the firm’s clients, until Vanger’s lawyer insists on meeting her. The description of her appearance in this scene highlights her lack of concern for social niceties and subverts the Golden Age detective’s depiction as “mannered and mannerly”:

Salander was dressed for the day in a black T-shirt with a picture on it of E.T. with fangs, and the words I AM ALSO AN ALIEN. She had on a black skirt that was frayed at the hem, a worn-out black, mid-length leather jacket, rivet belt, heavy Doc Marten boots, and horizontally striped, green-and-red knee socks. She had put on make-up in a color scheme that indicated she might be color blind. In other words, she was exceptionally decked out. (Larsson 48)

Instead of trying to win over those she encounters, she is described as having “a talent for irritating the other employees” at work and as “not having the right attitude” (40, 41). Her attitude, dress, and use of hacking as an investigative tool mark her as an interesting departure from the traditional detective.

Lisbeth complicates the traditional gender roles for female characters in crime fiction. In Dragon Tattoo, she is not the passive female victim who must be saved by the male detective. In fact, the investigator who most often resorts to violence is Lisbeth, not Mikael. Mikael’s main weapon is his intellect rather than his physical strength, and while Lisbeth also relies on her considerable intellect, she does not shy away from defending herself or going on the attack, when necessary. During Dragon Tattoo, Lisbeth is subjected to violence from men, but instead of being defeated by it, she fights back, attempting to kill or permanently disable the perpetrators with a confidence unusual for a 24-year-old. Despite being 4 foot 11 and weighing only 90 pounds, she saves Mikael’s life in their climactic confrontation with Martin, and she turns the tables

---

6 Lisbeth’s complex character generated tremendous interest on the Women’s Studies List Serv, and debates about the potential misogyny or empowerment in Larsson’s depictions of violence against her resulted in an exploration of various perspectives in the essays included in the 2012 anthology Men Who Hate Women and Women Who Kick Their Asses: Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy in Feminist Perspective, edited by Donna King and Carrie Lee Smith. In Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture, Jeffrey A. Brown argues that “torture scenes [such as Bjurman’s rape of Lisbeth] have long been a staple of action-oriented films featuring male heroes” from Douglas Fairbanks to Daniel Craig in the 2006 James Bond film Casino Royale, and may be associated more with a protagonist’s heroism and strength than with the character’s victimization (Brown 25).
on Nils Bjurman by physically immobilizing him with a Taser, restraining him, and forcing him to experience the physical torment he caused her. She also permanently marks him as a rapist by tattooing him with words that she hopes will protect others in the future: “I AM A SADISTIC PIG, A PERVERT, AND A RA-
PIS” (Larsson 263). In the next two novels of the Millennium Trilogy, readers learn that throughout her early life, Lisbeth has been a fighter, from her childhood overshadowed by a brutal father whom she attempts to kill, through her institutionalization in a mental hospital, and adolescence marked by multiple foster homes and arrests.

Lisbeth is strong and dangerous, but she is not the conventional femme fatale. While she can be sexually assertive once she trusts someone, she does not present herself primarily as a sexual being and does not use sex to manipulate others. For the femme fatale, sex is a powerful tool to achieve male protection or collusion, but for Lisbeth, her sexuality is carefully protected because her body has been exploited by others. Lisbeth also subverts the conventional heterosexuality of the classic femme fatale, moving comfortably between male and female partners during the novel. Throughout Dragon Tattoo Lisbeth shifts fluidly among the traditional roles of investigator, criminal, and victim, and can, on occasion, be all three almost simultaneously.

Lisbeth’s computer hacking is a strategy that Larsson uses to reimagine/reinvent the puzzle/secret code element of traditional crime fiction. Throughout Dragon Tattoo, she cracks the codes of fire walls in various computers (including Mikael’s), culminating in her “surfing through Wennerström’s cyber-empire,” which consists of “options, bonds, shares, partnerships” that reveal that “Wennerström was devoting himself to fraud that was so extensive it was no longer merely criminal—it was business” (Larsson 554-555). Wennerström’s abuse of power bookends the novel, and it takes Lisbeth’s code-breaking skills to bring him to justice in the novel’s final chapters when she turns over her information to Mikael for publication in a Millennium exposé. Lisbeth also steals three billion krona from Wennerström’s account to give herself freedom from Bjurman’s control. Unlike earlier code breaking that enables the detective to restore order and safeguard those in power, Lisbeth’s computer code breaking ensures the downfall of the powerful. The fact that she must break the law in order to do it carries the subversive message that justice can only be obtained outside traditional means.

In Dragon Tattoo, Larsson draws on and ultimately subverts traditional crime fiction to expand his focus beyond the British Golden Age “whodunit” to a complex work relevant for 21st-century concerns about abuses of individual and institutional power. Near the end of Dragon Tattoo, Mikael revises his earlier comparison of Harriet’s case to a Golden Age “locked-room” mystery by saying, “this isn’t some damned locked-room mystery novel” (502). This change in Mikael’s perception reflects Larsson’s challenge to early crime fiction’s conservative worldview through his undermining of the certainties of the Golden Age mystery. While he pays homage to the influence of the country house, the locked room, and the puzzle/secret code mystery, Larsson makes significant changes to those conventions to root his story in a brutal, contemporary world. In his depictions of the corrupt and dangerous Vanger family, use of graphic violence, and subversion of

---

7 While Lisbeth’s hacking skills are exaggerated for effect, they are within the tradition of earlier detectives like Holmes who used sometimes fanciful science/early technology to solve crimes.
the Golden Age detective, Larsson rejects the tidy endings of traditional crime fiction in favor of a more open-ended, complex crime that is firmly rooted in societal problems. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* depicts a world in which traditional assumptions must be challenged because crime does not occur in the isolation of the locked room or country house, pitting the wits of the criminal against those of the detective. Instead, crime occurs “in society,” and must be examined within that context for there to be any real justice.
Works Cited


