



Formula Analysis of The Female Detective in *Enola Holmes* (2020)

Fransisca Putri Auraningtyas^{1*}, Vita Vendityaningtyas¹, Arri Kurniawan¹

¹Universitas PGRI Madiun, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: fransiscaputri@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Detective fiction is a popular literary genre characterized by recurring narrative conventions while remaining adaptable to contemporary contexts. This study analyzes the detective fiction formula in *Enola Holmes* (2020) based on Scaggs' (2005) framework and identifies how the film follows or modifies conventional detective fiction through its female detective protagonist. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design. The data consisted of scenes, dialogues, and screenshots from *Enola Holmes* (2020), supported by relevant books and journal articles, collected through documentation and repeated observation, and analyzed using a framework-based qualitative analysis grounded in Scaggs' (2005) discussion of detective fiction conventions. The findings reveal that the film constructs the detective fiction formula through the presence of mystery, a detective figure, investigation, clues, and resolution. At the same time, it modifies conventional detective fiction by portraying Enola Holmes as an independent female detective whose investigation is driven by both logical reasoning and emotional motivation. The study concludes that *Enola Holmes* (2020) maintains the essential conventions of detective fiction while adapting them to contemporary perspectives, demonstrating the flexibility of the genre in representing modern female detectives.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Popular literature, or poplit, refers to literary and media works produced for mass consumption and entertainment, marked by accessible language and engaging narratives. Banerjee (2023) argues that popular literature plays a vital role in conveying cultural and social values through simple yet meaningful storytelling, shaping public perspectives on issues such as gender identity, power, and interpersonal relationships. Detective fiction is one genre within popular literature that has grown significantly, known for its distinctive narrative structure and its adaptability to changing social contexts.

Detective fiction centers on the investigation of a crime, problem, or unexplained event that is gradually revealed through logical inquiry. According to Scaggs (2005), drawing on Todorov, detective fiction contains two narrative layers: the story of the crime and the story of its investigation. Over recent decades the genre has shown a notable shift in how female characters are portrayed, moving from sidekicks and victims toward intelligent, independent central investigators. Lawlar (2023) traces this evolution from the femme fatale of film noir to figures such as Nancy Drew, Miss Marple, and Veronica Mars, who function as moral and intellectual anchors within crime narratives.

This development is reflected in *Enola Holmes* (2020), which presents a young female protagonist who solves mysteries through logic, determination, and emotional strength rather than relying on others. Assidiqi and Muttaqien (2025) note that Enola is portrayed as choosing her own investigative direction while demonstrating independence and rationality, while Syahriyani and Novikasandra (2022) argue that the film conveys feminist values through signs of Enola's independence, intellectuality, freedom of choice, and right to privacy. Directed by Harry Bradbeer and adapted from Nancy Springer's novel series, the Netflix film was viewed by approximately 76 million households within its first 28 days and reached the Top 10 most-watched titles in more than 75 countries, indicating strong global reception, particularly among younger audiences. These features make *Enola Holmes* (2020) a rich text for examining detective plot structures through the lens of a female detective.

Popular literature has increasingly been recognized as a legitimate object of literary analysis. Maina (2024) argues that popular culture deserves scholarly attention because it reveals the beliefs and practices of its audience, while Vishniac (2018) highlights that twenty-first-century popular fiction is a significant field of study given its wide range of genres and its influence on the contemporary literary market. These perspectives support the view that popular texts such as *Enola Holmes* (2020) can be systematically analyzed to reveal structural patterns and social meanings rather than being treated merely as entertainment.

Formula analysis has previously been applied to a range of popular literary and cinematic works. Arianto and Ambalegin (2019) used a popular literary approach to show that Rurouni Kenshin and Miyamoto Musashi share similar heroic-journey formulas despite their distinct settings, while Salsabila and Assidiqi (2019) found that *Don't Breathe* constructs its thriller formula through complicated storylines, plot twists, violence, and suspense. Merawati and Astuti (2019) similarly applied formula theory to popular Indonesian Islamic novels such as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* and *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa*, finding shared formulas in theme, character, and setting. Although such studies confirm that formula analysis is well established for genres such as action, thriller, and adventure, the detective genre, particularly films with female detective protagonists, has received comparatively little scholarly attention, and limited work has examined how detective fiction formulas evolve to reflect values such as feminism, individualism, and intellectual autonomy.

Beyond formula-based studies, other scholarship examines the broader historical development of female investigator tropes in detective fiction. Farah (2019) found that female investigators were often marginalized as victims, corpses, or supporting figures in earlier detective fiction, while contemporary narratives increasingly portray women as active detectives who balance rational deduction with methods shaped by social realities, functioning as symbols of protest within patriarchal settings. More recent research has examined the *Enola Holmes* franchise directly: Dalimunte et al. (2025), using feminist stylistics to analyze *Enola Holmes 2*, found that male characters were still more frequently positioned in professional and investigative roles despite the film's feminist-centered narrative, suggesting that gender-progressive framing in the franchise is not always fully consistent. Together, these studies indicate that although detective fiction increasingly foregrounds female investigators, the extent and consistency of this shift still warrant closer textual examination — a gap this study addresses through *Enola Holmes* (2020).

This study addresses that gap by analyzing how the detective fiction formula proposed by Scaggs (2005) built around the presence of a mystery or crime, a detective figure, an investigation process, clues, and resolution is constructed and adapted in *Enola Holmes* (2020). Specifically, this study aims to (1) examine the construction of the detective fiction formula in *Enola Holmes* (2020) based on Scaggs' (2005) framework, and (2) identify the ways the film follows or modifies conventional detective fiction formulas through its female detective protagonist.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design. Following Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative research is used to explore and interpret meaning derived from a phenomenon through detailed data and the researcher's interpretation; accordingly, this study describes and interprets how the plot structure of *Enola Holmes* (2020) aligns with or modifies the detective fiction conventions explained by Scaggs (2005). Following Ajayi (2023), who distinguishes primary data as first-hand data collected directly by the researcher from secondary data previously collected by other parties, the primary data of this research is the film *Enola Holmes* (2020), directed by Harry Bradbeer, written by Jack Thorne, and released on Netflix on 23 September 2020. The secondary data consist of academic journals, books, and scholarly articles on popular literature, Scaggs' (2005) detective fiction theory, and female detective narratives, used to strengthen the theoretical foundation and provide comparative insight.

Data were collected through documentation and repeated viewing of the film with note-taking. Following Bowen (2009), who describes document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing documents to extract meaning and identify patterns. Relevant scenes were documented through screenshots and dialogue transcripts, then categorized according to Scaggs (2005) five elements: crime or mystery, detective figure, investigation process, clues and suspense, and resolution. To strengthen trustworthiness, the study applied theoretical triangulation with cross-checking interpretation across the framework's elements and evidence triangulation to support each interpretation with more than one type of film evidence, following Noble and Heale (2019).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), consisting of data condensation (selecting and categorizing relevant scenes and dialogues according to Scaggs' framework), data display (organizing the condensed data into structured descriptions per element), and conclusion drawing and verification (interpreting the patterns to determine whether the film follows, modifies, or diverges from Scaggs (2005) detective fiction structure, with findings re-checked against the film data).

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. The Construction of the Detective Fiction Formula in *Enola Holmes* (2020)

This section presents the construction of the detective fiction formula in *Enola Holmes* (2020) based on Scaggs' (2005) framework. The findings show that the film constructs the detective formula through five major elements: crime or mystery, detective figure, investigation process, clues and suspense, and resolution.

3.1.1 Crime or Mystery

The findings indicate that the crime or mystery element is introduced through two interconnected mysteries that initiate Enola's investigation.



Figure 1 Eudoria Holmes' Disappearance

Figure 1 depicts Enola Holmes at Ferndell Hall on the morning of her sixteenth birthday. She wakes expecting to spend the day with her mother, Eudoria Holmes, but after searching the house finds no trace of her. Enola's restless movement through the empty rooms visually establishes the sudden, unexplained absence that opens the film's central mystery.

Enola: A week ago, on the July morning of my 16th birthday, I awoke.

*Enola: Mother? **To find that my mother was missing.** (Breathing heavily)*

Enola: She'd left Ferndell Hall, our home, at some point during the night. Mother? And didn't return.

Enola's narration "...to find that my mother was missing" expresses her confusion and concern about the unexplained situation. According to Scaggs (2005), the presence of an unexplained event at the beginning of the story is essential in detective fiction, as it drives both the detective and the audience to seek answers. This dialogue therefore establishes Eudoria's disappearance as the central mystery that motivates Enola's investigation and drives the narrative throughout the film.



Figure 2 Tewkesbury's Hidden Situation

Figure 2 depicts the first meeting between Enola Holmes and Lord Tewkesbury on a train during Enola's journey to London. Enola discovers Tewkesbury hiding inside a luggage compartment, and the cramped, secretive staging of the scene visually signals that a second, parallel mystery has entered the narrative alongside the search for Eudoria. This encounter becomes the starting point of Enola's involvement in Tewkesbury's case.

Enola: Please get out of this carriage.

*Tewkesbury: I can't. **I'm in hiding.***

Tewkesbury: Bit of a to-do. Bribed a porter to put me in this and get me onboard.

Tewkesbury's statement "I'm in hiding" confirms that he is being pursued by unknown individuals, introducing a second mystery into the narrative. As Scaggs (2005) explains, detective stories often involve a structured development of mystery through interconnected events, and here the disappearance of Eudoria Holmes and the threat against Tewkesbury become linked through Enola's investigative journey. The mystery is therefore framed not only as an external, criminal problem but also as a personal one that motivates Enola to investigate independently.

3.1.2 Detective Figure

This section presents the findings related to the detective figure in *Enola Holmes* (2020). The findings reveal that Enola Holmes is portrayed as the central detective through her observation, reasoning, and independent decision-making.

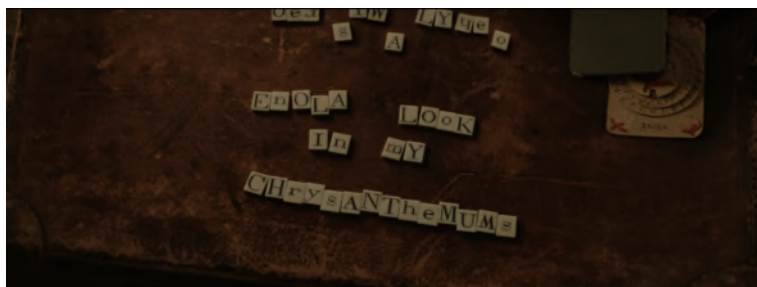


Figure 3 Analysis of Eudoria's Clues

Figure 3 depicts Enola Holmes examining objects, coded messages, and symbols left behind by her mother at Ferndell Hall shortly after Eudoria's disappearance. Her focused, methodical movement through the room visually establishes her as an observant, analytical character who relies on logic as well as intuition and creativity. Although Eudoria is not physically present in the scene, the clues function as indirect communication between mother and daughter.



Figure 4. Enola's Disguise Strategy

Figure 4 depicts Enola Holmes preparing a disguise during her journey to London, after her brothers attempt to send her to a finishing school. Her transformation in appearance visually reflects her decision to continue the investigation independently and outside her brothers' control. Realizing that she must proceed on her own, Enola changes her appearance to avoid recognition while continuing her search for clues.

Enola: The corset, a symbol of repression to those who are forced to wear it.

Enola: But for me, who chooses to wear it, the bust enhancer and the hip regulators. Will hide the fortune the mother has given me.

Enola: And as they do so, they will make me look like that truly unlikely thing.

Enola's narration "they will make me look like that truly unlikely thing" reflects her strategic thinking and her resistance to the social expectations imposed on women of her time. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, who is typically portrayed as emotionally detached and highly rational, this dialogue shows Enola combining logic with personal motivation and adaptability. This difference indicates a shift toward a more contemporary, female-centered representation of the detective figure while still fulfilling its core function of observation and reasoning.

3.1.3 Investigation Process

This section examines the investigation process carried out by Enola Holmes in *Enola Holmes* (2020). In the film, Enola actively conducts investigations through observation, deduction, and strategic decision-making, which drive the narrative and reinforce her role as a detective.



Figure 5 Decoding the Hidden Message

Figure 5 depicts Enola Holmes analyzing a coded message left by Eudoria Holmes after borrowing a pencil from a newspaper vendor in London. Her concentrated expression as she writes out the numbers visually conveys the active, hands-on nature of her investigation. The scene takes place shortly after Enola meets Lord Tewkesbury on a London street, where she immediately turns her attention back to decoding her mother's message.

Enola: Numbers turn into letters, which form into (Continues reading numbers indistinctly).
Enola: Meet me Royal Academy five tonight, mother. Well, that's unexpected

The line “Numbers turn into letters” marks Enola’s moment of realization during the decoding process, revealing the hidden meeting instruction “Meet me Royal Academy five tonight.” This dialogue demonstrates the analytic, deductive process Scaggs (2005) identifies as essential to bridging mystery and resolution. It shows how Enola combines logical reasoning with active investigation, following the clues to London and gathering further information to move the narrative forward.



Figure 6 Investigation of Tewkesbury's Case

Figure 6 depicts a conversation between Enola Holmes and Lord Tewkesbury after Enola escapes from the finishing school chosen by her brother. Their face-to-face exchange visually marks the point at which Enola begins actively piecing together the political motive behind the threats against Tewkesbury. During the discussion, Enola asks direct questions and carefully evaluates the political information she has gathered throughout her journey.

Enola: An injustice has occurred. It's time to right some wrongs. You want a culprit, find the motive.
Tewkesbury: I don't understand.
Enola: When were you due to be inducted into the Lords?
Tewkesbury: Imminently
Enola: How would you have voted on the bill?
Tewkesbury: The same as my father. I'd be for it.
Enola: Who knew that? And who stands to gain the estate with your father dead and if you die?
Tewkesbury: My uncle. You think this is my uncle's doing?
Enola: Doesn't it make sense?

Enola's questions “Who knew that? And who stands to gain the estate...?” and Tewkesbury's answer, “My uncle,” show her connecting separate pieces of evidence to reach a logical conclusion. According to Scaggs (2005), the investigation process is essential in developing the narrative of detective fiction, as it bridges the mystery and its resolution; this dialogue illustrates Enola performing that bridging function through active questioning and deduction, combining intellectual reasoning with the physical action of traveling and disguise.

3.1.4 Clues and Suspense

This section discusses the use of clues and the creation of suspense in *Enola Holmes* (2020). In the film, clues and suspense are presented through coded messages, unexpected events, and dangerous situations that continuously challenge Enola during her investigation.



Figure 7 Interpretation of the Flower Code

Figure 7 depicts Enola Holmes in her mother's painting room, examining an envelope hidden behind one of Eudoria's paintings. Her careful unfolding of the message visually foregrounds the coded clue as a central object of investigation. The intimate, quiet setting of the room contrasts with the danger elsewhere in the story, emphasizing the personal nature of this particular clue.

*Enola: (Opened the envelope from the mother's painting and found the flower message code) **Our future is up to us.** What future?*

Eudoria: There are two paths you can take, Enola. Yours or the path others choose for you.

Enola: Our future is up to us. (Chuckles)

The decoded phrase “*Our future is up to us*,” echoed in Eudoria's earlier statement about the two paths Enola can take, functions as a clue that directs Enola's next actions. This aligns with Scaggs' (2005) view that clues function as guiding elements in detective narratives. The exchange shows how the film uses symbolic, personally coded messages rather than conventional physical evidence to advance the investigation.

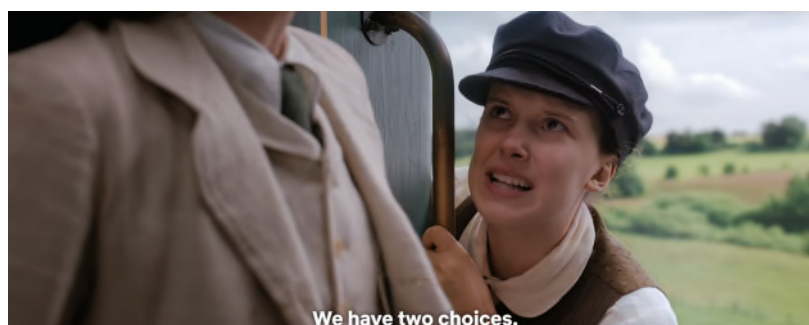


Figure 8 Train Confrontation Scene

Figure 8 depicts a dangerous confrontation on the train involving Enola Holmes, Lord Tewkesbury, and a mysterious assassin, shortly after Enola discovers that Tewkesbury is being pursued. The cramped, physically tense staging of the scene visually heightens the sense of danger. Both characters are placed in a life-threatening situation and must find a way to escape before the assassin catches up with them.

Enola: Do you trust me?

Tewkesbury: No! (Breathes heavily)

Enola: If we time correctly, we can leave him stranded.

Tewkesbury: Time what correctly?

*Enola: Listen Tewkesbury, **we have two choices.***

Tewkesbury: And which one involves me not dying?

Enola: This one!

Enola's clipped, urgent lines “*we have two choices*” and Tewkesbury's panicked response create suspense through an unresolved, high-stakes situation. According to Scaggs (2005), the balance between clues and suspense is crucial in detective fiction, as it allows the audience to follow the investigation while also experiencing tension. This dialogue exemplifies that balance by pairing the ongoing mystery with immediate physical danger, keeping the audience uncertain about the outcome.

3.1.5 Resolution

This section discusses how the mystery in *Enola Holmes* (2020) is resolved at the end of the narrative. In the film, the resolution is presented through the revelation of the conspiracy surrounding Tewkesbury and the partial explanation of Eudoria Holmes' motives, which gradually answer the central mysteries developed throughout the narrative.

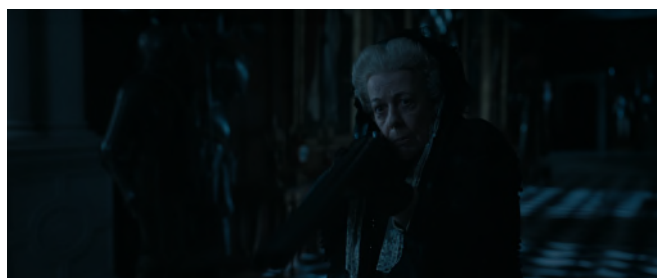


Figure 9 Revelation of the Antagonist

Figure 9 depicts the final confrontation between Enola Holmes, Lord Tewkesbury, and Tewkesbury's grandmother at the family estate, at the moment she is exposed as the person behind the repeated attempts on his life. The scene takes place after Enola successfully uncovers the conspiracy behind the repeated threats against Tewkesbury. The revelation is conveyed primarily through physical action and framing rather than explicit dialogue, so no transcript is presented for this scene.

Although no dialogue is quoted for this scene, the confrontation itself visually confirms that Enola has successfully connected the clues to identify the person responsible. This resolution provides a clear, logical explanation for the threats Tewkesbury has faced throughout the story. According to Scaggs (2005), a logical resolution that identifies the culprit and explains the motive is a defining feature of detective fiction, and the Tewkesbury case follows this convention closely, marking the culmination of Enola's investigation.



Figure 10 Enola's Acceptance of Her Mother's Decision

Figure 10 depicts a conversation between Enola Holmes and Eudoria Holmes after Enola resolves Tewkesbury's case and reunites with her mother. Their calm, seated conversation visually contrasts with the film's earlier chase sequences, signaling that the narrative has shifted from action to emotional resolution. No transcript is presented for this scene, as the moment is conveyed largely through Eudoria's explanation and Enola's quiet, attentive reaction rather than a quotable exchange.

During their meeting, Eudoria explains the political reasons behind her disappearance, and Enola listens and gradually comes to understand, though not fully accept, her mother's decision. This interaction becomes an important emotional moment that reflects Enola's maturity and personal growth by the end of the story. According to Scaggs (2005), classical detective fiction typically concludes with a complete, logical resolution in which all mysteries are solved, yet *Enola Holmes* (2020) both follows and modifies this convention, since Eudoria's story remains only partially resolved, favoring emotional development over total narrative closure.

3.2. The Ways *Enola Holmes* (2020) Follows or Modifies Conventional Detective Fiction Formula

The findings show that the film follows Scaggs' (2005) conventions through its structured presentation of a central mystery, a detective figure who reasons and deduces, a clue-driven investigation, sustained suspense, and a logical resolution of the Tewkesbury case. This is consistent with Sartika (2022), Purnami et al. (2025), and Wijaya et al. (2023), whose analyses of other popular narratives similarly find that a central mystery, an intellectually capable protagonist, systematic investigation, and eventual resolution remain the core structuring devices of formula-based popular fiction.

At the same time, the film modifies several conventions. First, it replaces the typically male, emotionally detached detective with a young, independent female investigator who drives the narrative herself rather than assisting a male lead a shift consistent with Purnami et al. (2025), who found that *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* likewise maintains the classical detective formula while adapting it through a teenage detective protagonist and contemporary narrative techniques, and with Fadhila and Adi's (2021) finding that contemporary detective fiction reshapes the detective figure through female representation and resistance to patriarchal norms. This is further supported by Lawlar (2023), who explains that female detectives in contemporary media have evolved from secondary characters into central protagonists who embody intelligence, independence, and moral authority an evolution Enola exemplifies by combining deductive reasoning with emotional motivation and personal agency. Second, Enola's investigation is driven as much by emotional attachment to her mother as by logic, adding a personal, character-driven dimension uncommon in classical detective fiction. Third, the narrative blends detective conventions with action-adventure elements, chases, disguises, and physical confrontation, producing a more dynamic pace than classical, dialogue-driven detective stories. Fourth, the resolution is only partially closed, leaving aspects of Eudoria's story open in favor of character growth over total narrative closure. Finally, themes of independence and resistance to Victorian-era gender expectations run throughout the film, introducing feminist values into the detective formula. These modifications echo Wijaya et al. (2023) and Pamungkas and Nugroho (2023), who similarly find that popular narratives preserve their core genre formula while introducing innovations that keep the genre relevant to contemporary audiences — indicating that the changes identified here reflect the genre's ongoing evolution rather than a departure from it.

These findings also carry implications for English Language Teaching. Understanding the detective fiction formula can strengthen students' genre awareness by showing how elements such as mystery, detective figure, investigation, clues, and resolution are systematically built into a narrative text, supporting both reading comprehension and narrative writing. Identifying these elements through dialogue and scene evidence further develops students' critical thinking and evidence-based interpretation, while the film's Victorian British setting offers material for intercultural learning alongside language study, positioning detective fiction film as a resource that integrates language learning, literary analysis, and cultural understanding.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how *Enola Holmes* (2020) constructs and modifies the conventional detective fiction formula using Scaggs' (2005) framework. The findings show that the film successfully constructs the formula through the integration of mystery, detective figure, investigation, clues and suspense, and resolution, thereby maintaining the fundamental structure associated with detective fiction. At the same time, the film modifies several conventional elements, portraying a young female detective as the central investigator, incorporating emotional motivation into the investigation, adopting a dynamic, action-oriented storytelling style, applying a partially open-ended resolution, and embedding feminist values through Enola's independence and resistance to patriarchal expectations. Overall, *Enola Holmes* (2020) both follows and modifies the conventional detective fiction formula, demonstrating that the genre remains flexible enough to accommodate contemporary social values and audience expectations while preserving its essential narrative identity. Future research is encouraged to examine other detective fiction films, series, or novels, or to apply different theoretical lenses such as feminism, characterization, or audience reception, to further enrich the study of detective fiction within popular literature.

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