

# ‘Shameful’ Sexualities in Slovenian Crime Fiction from Moderna to the 21st Century

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Članek izhaja iz primerjalne analize protislovnega razmerja med konvencijami kriminalnih pripovedi in seksualnostjo, ki zajema klasično in trdo detektivsko zgodbo, policijske proceduralne romane in trilerje v povezavi z zahodno politiko seksualnosti, kot jo je opredelila Gayle Rubin. Članek predstavlja argument, da si obe področji delita skupni cilj: potlačitev in izginotje »sramotnih« oziroma neproduktivnih, neheteroseksualnih, nemonogamnih, promiskuitetnih ali drugače nenormativnih oblik seksualnosti. Članek na podlagi tega teoretskega okvira sledi dekonstruktivni analizi izbranih reprezentacij »sramotnih« seksualnosti v izbranih slovenskih kriminalnih zgodbah iz zgodnjega 20. stoletja in v slovenskih kriminalnih romanih iz 21. stoletja. Članek prek preučevanja pomenskih in pripovednih vlog »sramotne« seksualnosti razkriva kontinuiteto motivov »sramotne« seksualnosti v slovenski kriminalni pripovedi.

The article is based a comparative analysis of the contradictory relationship between crime narrative conventions and sexuality, encompassing classic and hardboiled detective fiction, police procedurals, and thrillers, in relation to the Western politics of sexuality as conceptualised by Gayle Rubin. It argues that both the crime genre and Western politics of sexuality share a fundamental purpose: the repression and disappearance of ‘shameful’ sexualities, including all forms of sexuality that are non-productive, non-heterosexual, non-monogamous, promiscuous, or that otherwise deviate from normative standards. Following this theoretical framework, the article undertakes a deconstructive analysis of selected representations of ‘shameful’ sexualities in Slovenian crime narratives from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and in contemporary Slovenian crime novels from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By examining the semantic and narrative functions of ‘shameful’ sexuality, the article reveals the continuity of motifs of shameful sexuality in Slovenian crime writing.

**Ključne besede:** sram, kriminalke in seksualnost, Zofka Kveder, Silvester Košutnik, Ljuba Prenner, Avgust Demšar, Tadej Golob

**Keywords:** shame, crime novels and sexuality, Zofka Kveder, Silverster Košutnik, Ljuba Prenner, Avgust Demšar, Tadej Golob

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## 1 From Absence to Disruption: Sexuality Across Crime Fiction<sup>1</sup>

In seeking to establish the connection between the crime fiction genre and sexuality, it is important to consider why sexuality constitutes a significant point of departure when it comes to understanding the structural and ideological dimensions of crime fiction, not only in general, as inscribed into its presumably transhistorical poetics, but also in its particular national or transnational and historical manifestations. The relationship between crime fiction and sexuality has been fraught with tension since the genre's inception.

In the earliest iterations of classical detective fiction, and in most of its modern and postmodern subgeneric developments, sexuality is hardly ever mentioned. This scarcity of sexuality can be attributed, first and foremost, to the ideological conservatism inherent in crime fiction (Knight 1980: 5; Mandel 1984: 72, 135). The genre – particularly in its detective story form – fundamentally seeks to reaffirm existing social structures and to legitimise institutional authorities. Within the detective story framework, the narrative typically revolves around a crime being committed – usually a murder – followed by the detective being tasked with identifying and apprehending the perpetrator. The crime introduces disorder, creating a moment of crisis or disruption, while the detective's solving the case represents order being restored. The classical detective story thus presupposes society's fundamental stability, overlooking what might be termed constitutive forms of crime.

The detective story framework typically treats crime as an aberration, rather than as a symptom of deeper structural issues. In a homologous manner regarding the social status quo, crime and sexuality share a common conceptual framework: both are disruptive and potentially subversive forces capable of altering established social relations. Moreover, sexuality – like crime – is frequently shaped as an enigma, an inscrutable force that resists containment. At the core of the relationship between crime fiction and sexuality, therefore, lies an intrinsic contradiction: sexuality is simultaneously central to and incompatible with the poetics or narrative structures of the crime genre. At the level of narrative form and genre conventions, sexuality manifests primarily through its absence or its sublimation. It is frequently presented as an interruption, a distraction, or an obfuscation of the detective's pursuit of rational resolution. Consequently, the structural logic of crime fiction both acknowledges and negates the disruptive potential

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of sexuality, positioning it as an implicit yet disavowed element within the genre's ideological framework.

In the classic British detective story of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the legacy of the Enlightenment and Victorian sexual morality ensures that sexuality is sublimated within the narrative structure. Typically set in the tranquillity of a rural village or a close-knit community, the detective story unfolds as a puzzle, juxtaposing the narrative of the crime or criminal with that of the detective's investigative process. The detective's primary function is to reconstruct the truth – to decipher the enigma of the crime by determining who committed it, how, and why. In works such as the Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series or Agatha Christie's novels, the detective is characterised as a solitary figure – often an aristocratic intellectual or a scientist – who employs logic, forensic methodology, and analytical reasoning to solve the case. Sexuality, an irrational and passionate force, can hardly find place in the investigative process, given this rationalist framework (Cawelti 1977: 80–105).<sup>2</sup>

The hard-boiled detective story, which emerged as a distinct subgenre, diverges from the classical tradition in several respects, particularly those concerning the depiction of the detective, the nature of the crime, the setting, and the investigative process. Unlike the classical detective, who embodies rational genius, the stereotypical hard-boiled detective is a working-class character – a blue-collar investigator who relies less on intellect and more on physical endurance and street-level pragmatism. Set in the urban landscape of crime-ridden metropolises, the hard-boiled detective story eschews the classical assumption that crime can be entirely eradicated; instead, it acknowledges crime as an enduring and systemic element of the social order (Cawelti 1977: 149).

While sexuality is more overtly present in hard-boiled detective fiction than in the traditional one, it remains deeply problematic even here. The hard-boiled detective, unlike his classical counterpart, is sexually active but remains unmarried and emotionally unattached. His sporadic romantic or sexual encounters frequently serve as impediments rather than as meaningful relationships. The *femme fatale* – a seductive and deceptive woman – exemplifies this dynamic, as she manipulates the detective by exploiting his desires, thereby disrupting his rationality and impeding his investigative work. While sexuality is thus largely sublimated in classical detective fiction, it functions as an obstacle in the hard-boiled tradition, – as something the detective must overcome to solve his case. The *femme fatale* is often revealed, with the conclusion of the narrative, as being the catalyst

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<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Sherlock Holmes, one of the quintessential figures of classical detective fiction, has been interpreted as either asexual or gay (Lavigne 2012).

of the crime itself, which reinforces the notion that sexuality is inherently dangerous and destabilising (Žižek 1991: 41).

Despite their differences, classical and hard-boiled detective fiction share key thematic commonalities in their treatment of sexuality. Both traditions present the detective as ultimately insulated from the disruptive potential of sexual desire. In the classical detective story, this insulation is epistemological: sexuality is either absent or deemed irrelevant to the process of detection, and the detective's sexuality is seldom, if ever, the subject of inquiry. By contrast, the hard-boiled detective's sexuality is present in the narrative but must be actively suppressed; he remains perpetually vigilant against the allure of women, as yielding to desire threatens not only his investigative success but also his professional status and, in some cases, his moral integrity. While the classical detective is constructed as wholly immune to the perils of desire, the hard-boiled detective's struggle against sexuality permeates him with a sense of guilt – one that necessitates redemption through an act of heroism (Žižek 1991: 62–63). As a result, the classical detective, assumes a position of inherent innocence, his primary objective being the restoration of social equilibrium. The hard-boiled detective, by contrast, is burdened by his proximity to corruption and must therefore continually assert his detachment from the moral dangers posed by desire. In both cases, however, sexuality remains a disruptive force that must either be ignored or actively repelled for the detective to fulfil his role as the restorer of order.

In the police procedural, a subgenre of crime fiction that gained prominence after the Second World War, sexuality assumes a secondary or incidental role. The narrative structure revolves primarily around the collective work of a police investigative team, emphasising the various procedures and bureaucratic mechanisms that either reinforce or critique the police force as an instrument of state authority. The detective in these narratives may be either married or single. His personal life, however, remains largely peripheral to the central concern of solving complex crimes, which is most commonly the seemingly impossible murder (Dove 1982: 43, 93, 132).

Indeed, while the police procedural focuses on the intricacies of police work and forensic methodology, sexuality is here represented as a point of contention. The police procedural often unveils the diverse sexual identities and practices within a democratic society (under threat), exposing the tensions and prejudices that accompany discourses of sexual difference (Rees 2011). As such, sexuality is less an element of the detective's characterisation and more a broader social issue that the narrative confronts – often concerning institutional biases, discrimination, and crimes motivated by sexuality-based hatred.

As a hybrid subgenre of crime fiction, the thriller presents a paradoxical relationship with sexuality. Structurally, the thriller is often predicated

on paranoia, a narrative mode designed to elicit suspense, anxiety, and heightened emotional engagement from the reader (Glover 2003: 135). This emphasis on an ever-escalating sense of danger and uncertainty frequently relegates sexuality to a functional or instrumental role rather than allowing it to exist as a fully developed thematic concern. Paranoia and sexuality appear inherently at odds; the former demands vigilance, detachment, and a focus on survival, whereas the latter implies intimacy, vulnerability, and desire. In cases where the thriller overlaps with the hard-boiled tradition, its treatment of sexuality remains consistent with that of the hard-boiled novel: the protagonist may engage in fleeting or superficial sexual encounters, but these relationships are often filled with deception, betrayal, or imminent danger. More broadly, expressions of sexual desire in thrillers tend to be transitory and subordinate to the demands of the plot. Like the classical detective, the thriller's protagonist is frequently characterised as a solitary figure – a 'lone wolf' whose independence is both a narrative necessity and a structural constraint that precludes sustained romantic or sexual engagement (Palmer 1979: 38).

The above review of sexuality across various crime fiction subgenres highlights how each (sub)genre forms a distinct symbolic literary space in which sexuality is represented in specific ways. Do these representations collectively represent broader and more universal politics of sexuality – both through the poetics of narrative structure and the ideological framing of sexual desire and identity? While classical detective fiction largely avoids sexuality, the hard-boiled novel argues its disruptive forcefulness; the police procedural narrative foregrounds sexuality as a site of social conflict, and the thriller reduces it to a peripheral or instrumental function. Each genre, in its own way, inscribes a particular logic of sexuality, shaping how desire, identity, and sexual transgression are articulated within the crime fiction framework. From the perspective of politics of sexuality, this framework both reflects and reinforces the broader social discourses on sexual norms, deviance and regulation.

## **2 Shameful Sexualities and the Politics of Desire in Slovenian Crime Fiction**

As scholars in the humanities and social sciences acknowledge, sexuality is not an inherent or purely biological drive but a socially and culturally constructed discourse – one that is regulated, propagated, and continually reshaped by historical and social forces. Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, conceptualises sexuality as a historically and culturally produced discourse, one that is deeply intertwined with repressive social

structures, rooted in Christian moral traditions, and instrumental in the regulatory mechanisms of the modern state and human sciences (Foucault 1978: 15–74).

Drawing on structuralist and poststructuralist epistemology, Gayle Rubin, in an essay, *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, develops a highly relevant theoretical framework that questions the underlying structures of meaning governing sexuality in the West. Engaging indirectly with Foucault's perspective, Rubin examines the persistent hierarchy of sexual value and the punitive stigmas that reinforce it, namely hierarchies deeply rooted in Western religious traditions and perpetuated through popular culture. She highlights how dominant cultural narratives frame erotic diversity as dangerous, pathological, or even a threat to social order, national security, and the moral integrity of future generations (Rubin 1999: 152).

Rubin's broader critique focuses on the mythological and ideological division of sexuality in modern Western societies into binary categories of 'good' and 'bad'.<sup>3</sup> She argues that only those sexual acts deemed 'good' within this framework are granted moral complexity, legitimacy, and social recognition, while all others are marginalised or pathologized. This rigid moral taxonomy demands conformity to an idealised standard of sexuality, reinforcing normative expectations and restricting the possibility of alternative expressions such as non-monogamy, polyamory, queer sexuality, or other forms of sexuality that transgress socioeconomic or cultural limitations. It is crucial to recognise that Western thought and the politics of sexuality remain structured around these binary oppositions, where legitimacy and illegitimacy are not neutral descriptors but mechanisms of social regulation and control (Rubin 1999).

Understanding Rubin's theory from the perspective of emotions, one can argue that 'good' sexuality elicits pride, while 'bad' sexuality elicits shame. Rubin also observes that the Western politics of sexuality and the hierarchy between good and bad sexuality are closely tied to class. The 'good' forms of sexuality are associated with higher social classes, while the 'bad' forms are linked to lower social classes. This distinction carries several implications regarding the potential subversiveness that sexuality inherently embodies. What is the politics of sexuality in Slovenian crime

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<sup>3</sup> Good sexuality is generalised as natural, blessed, normal, and manifests itself in married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, private, heterosexual relationships between individuals of the same generation. Bad sexuality is generalised as unnatural, abnormal, or cursed, and it manifests itself in extramarital, non-reproductive, commercial, casual, intergenerational, group, or other unconventional relationships (Rubin 1999: 153).

fiction? Do these narratives reinforce, challenge, or negotiate the prevailing distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' sexuality? The following analysis explores the meanings and functions of 'shameful sexualities' across four crime narratives from different historical contexts: Zofka Kveder's (1878–1926) short story *Eva* (1904), Silvester Košutnik's (1874–1944) tale *The Arsonist* (*Požigalec*, 1910), Ljuba Prenner's (1906–1977) novel *The Unknown Perpetrator: A Provincial Crime Tale* (*Neznani storilec: malomeščanska kriminalna povest*, 1939), and selected 21st-century crime novels by Avgust Demšar (1962–), the most prolific contemporary Slovenian crime writer.

### 3 'Shameful' Sexuality in the context of Slovenian Moderna

When discussing 'shameful' sexuality in literature in the Slovenian context and when discussing sexuality in relation to the genre of crime fiction, one needs to consider the period of Slovenian *moderna* and, in general, the modernising period between the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which saw the emergence of a vast diversity of literary representations that linked sexuality and crime. The period of the Slovenian *moderna* (1889–1918) is seen as the period which opened up the literary space to erotic and sexual themes in literature. This can be attributed to broader democratic social and cultural changes in European societies in general.

As indicated in the British sociologist, Anthony Giddens' influential book *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (1992), the condition for female epistolary friendship and intimate friendships between women was in the form of a double helix intrinsically linked with the simultaneous democratisation of both, the public sphere and the relationships between men and women. The birth of intimacy as a semi-private, literary or public discourse was linked with the gradual democratisation in private and public life: the condition for democracy is intimacy and vice versa (Giddens 1992: 184–204).

These historical and social developments shifted and culminated in the period of *moderna*, a period that introduced female writers into Slovenian culture and public sphere (Jensterle Doležal 2023: 18). In the Slovenian context, female intellectuals, writers, and feminists gathered around the literary journal *Slovenka*. Their intimate personal correspondence was an important platform for practicing parrhesia for women's political and social emancipation. Slovenian women writers embodied the concept of the so-called new woman, created by 19<sup>th</sup>-century feminism as a positive representation of femininity or women as intellectuals, publicists and writers (Zajc 2024). Despite the progressiveness of these literary representations of intimacy

and women in the Slovenian context at the turn of the century,, the feminist movement and women's emancipation accompanying it was here only in its beginnings, and the social position of women was far from ideal or equal to men. At the turn of the century, only women of wealth had voting rights. Their being educated was considered indecent by the clergy (Leskošek 2002: 35–37). Marriages were still arranged for economic benefits (Leskošek 2002: 73–74), women had very limited reproductive rights, and abortion was illegal. In these conditions, the literary utterances of erotic desire or its representations were still largely repressed or sublimated.

### **3.1 'Shameful' desire in Zofka Kveder's *Eva* (1904)**

Zofka Kveder's short story *Eva* is by no means a detective story or a proper crime narrative, but its content does contain two of the crucial elements of a detective story: the murderer and the (murdered) victim. The detective character is absent. However, one could argue that the symbolic space of the detective character, who is usually an idealised reflection of social norms, is abstract – taken precisely from repressive social norms or repressive patriarchal historical reality, which plays sort of a phantom-like character. The story's main protagonist, *Eva*, a strong and beautiful young Slovenian woman, is engaged to a man currently serving in the army, but working as a farmhand. *Eva* is voluntarily taken over by the charm of the 'black and ugly *vlah* and farmhand'. After coitus with this man, *Eva* becomes pregnant, and then commits suicide.

In the manner of a detective story, the question one might ask is why she killed herself and what her motive was and the answer is not perplexing. The first motive for her suicide could be linked to the politics of sexuality and, of course, the suicide's social-historical context. If she had decided to keep the child and live, she would have given birth to an illegitimate child, to a bastard she would have had with a coloured and poor man, a foreigner, a person set lower in the hierarchy of legitimate sexual relationships, in the given historical context.

The second, still, social motive pertains to the life after the birth of her child that awaited her in that historical era. Women, if with illegitimate objects of the familiar patriarchal economic capital, could not marry, were excommunicated from their communities, and could not carry out certain professions. They were left on the streets, often abandoned by society (Leskošek 2002). This short analysis shows that Kveder's story is as much about the representations of 'shameful' sexual desire as much as it is about the grave consequences of unsublimated and liberated female sexual desire. *Eva* is a representation of non-normative femininity (Mihurko 2024: 10) and

one of Kveder's many rebellious female characters (Borovnik 2007). She commits adultery in "a half-collapsed shack where loggers and hunters once spent the night" (Kveder 1904).

### **3.2 Promiscuous Murderer in Silvester Košutnik's *The Arsonist* (1910)**

*The Arsonist* is one of the very few crime stories or tales written in the period of Slovenian *moderna*. The story's main protagonist, Rok, a foreigner and a blacksmith by profession, visits a fictitious Slovenian village, Rožnice, seeking work in the village smithy. He persuades the old blacksmith to allow him to move into his house and to work in his workshop. Rok eventually marries Kristina, the blacksmith's daughter. A year later, they get a baby, while the old blacksmith is fatally injured by a horse. Rok takes over his workshop. One day, when he is away on a business journey, Kristina and the baby unexpectedly die. Soon after that, Rok marries the beautiful and rich Lizika Mlinar, who, as the only child, inherits everything after her father. A year after that, however, Lizika Mlinar discovers she has a sister, Marija, who causes Rok's gains from Lizika's inheritance to be halved. In the meantime, Lizika unexpectedly dies while Rok is away on a business trip. 18 years pass, and rumours spread among the villagers that Rok intends to marry Mlinar's second daughter, Maria. Because Rok (with Lizika's inheritance) helped the Mlinar family financially, they owe them their daughter Maria, and their wedding is already in preparation.

Right at that time, Jože Rakun, a poor vagabond and folk musician (at the wedding) who was falsely accused of arson, stops in the village and recognises Rok not only as the arsonist but also as a murderer. He told the priest a story from 18 years earlier, when he had spent the night in the attic of Rok's house, where he had witnessed Rok hammering a nail into Lizika's head while she was asleep. Rakun and the priest dig up Lizika's and Kristina's remains and find a nail in each of their skulls. The perpetrator is exposed and sentenced to death after admitting he had murdered out of greed. The poor vagabond Rakun then marries Marija.

When compared to Kveder's Eva, some common traits can be found in *The Arsonist* regarding the ideological messaging and the status of the murderer and the victims. The murderers in both stories are promiscuous, and both political messages share the implicit norm that Slovenian women should marry and have children with Slovenian men. Victims in both stories are women who had 'shameful' sexual relations with a foreigner. The sexual politics of the story is clear: a foreigner visits a Slovenian village and steals the Slovenian 'private property' (Slovenian women). This teams with the idea of a romantic Slovenian love, which comes to fruition after

the detective riddle is solved and the foreigner imprisoned.<sup>4</sup> However, the stories differ regarding the status and role of shame.

Sexuality, shame and class are intertwined in both stories. However, while Eva internalises shame that originates from the broken social norm of respectful sexuality, Rok, the perpetrator, is shameless. The tale's ending and Rok's fate in the end function as a shaming mechanism, comparably reinforcing the social norm of respectful sexuality – a married monogamous relationship between Slovenians.

### **3.3 *Promiscuous Murderer and Victim in Ljuba Prenner's The Unknown Perpetrator (1939)***

*The Unknown Perpetrator: A provincial crime tale* is regarded as the first Slovenian crime novel, written by Ljuba Prenner (1906–1977), a transgender lawyer and writer. The analysis of *The Unknown Perpetrator* sets it aside from other stories as it includes a detective character (or a number of detective characters) that mimics the classic detective story. The novel itself is also already a hybrid crime novel. It combines a couple of elements from the classic detective novel (the closed community of potentially guilty individuals, the detective who identifies the perpetrator through logical reasoning, the rural setting) and a few elements from the hard-boiled detective novel (the novel ends with action or a violent confrontation between the detective and the murderer, in which the detective wins).

In the suffocating provincial town of Lipnica, a young woman, Ančka, is murdered. Many detective characters are involved in the detection process, organised around the lost cigarette case with the initials M. T. The detective characters include the judge Dr. Slivnik, France Barnavt, who is the judicial apprentice and the main detective character, the inept gendarme Maks Ferline, Dr. Rup, the doctor or forensic pathologist. Interestingly, other villagers, who function as an extension of social control and authority, are also involved. The potential suspects include a cattle smuggler, a pharmacist, Tine Marhat, Milan Terpinar, an unemployed man, and a medical student, Tone Merkač. The mystery is solved through logic or the deductive reasoning of the judicial apprentice Franc Barnavt, who identifies the murderer by excluding all the men from the village whose names do not start with the initials M. T. The murderer attempts to flee the law and is shot by the gendarme.

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<sup>4</sup> In the first Slovenian crime stories, the perpetrators are often foreigners (Prussians, Germans and Jews) (Kmecl 1975: 120).

The victim is Ančka Mavc, a 24-year-old woman who had undergone a backstreet abortion prior to her death and died from a gunshot. She had intimate relationships with several of the men from the village whose names started with the initials M. T. Tine Marhat, a pharmacist who was single, was in love with her. Milan Terpinar, was a single unemployed man. Tine Merkač, the third man she had relations with, was a medical student, and her murderer. The detective character France Barnavt finds out that Tine Merkač paid for Ančka's illegal abortion because he had no intention of marrying her. Because she "threatened him with scandals and suicide" and because Tine had already "found himself a wealthy Jewish widow in Zagreb" (Prenner 1992: 143), he murders Ančka.

From the perspective of politics of sexuality and 'shameful' sexualities, *The Unknown Perpetrator* has several things in common with *Eva* and *The Arsonist*. As in *Eva*, 'shameful sexuality' is part of the perpetrator's murder motive. As in *The Arsonist*, the story's ending and Ančka's and Tine's ultimate fates (death) function implicitly to shame both the promiscuous victim and the promiscuous perpetrator, who broke the social norm of respectful sexuality by having illegitimate sexual relations (abortion, sex before marriage, sex with foreigners).

#### 4 Shame in Contemporary Slovenian Crime Novels

Before analysing Demšar's crime novels through the lens of the literary meaning and function of 'shameful' sexualities, it is necessary briefly to outline Slovenian crime fiction's historical development. The development of the crime genre in Slovenia does not overlap with the Western historical trajectory of crime fiction, which begins with the classical and hard-boiled detective novel and progresses to the psychological crime novel (centred on the victim or the perpetrator) and its later manifestations in the police procedural narrative and thriller (Žižek and Močnik 1982: 347). Unlike British crime fiction, Slovenian crime fiction emerged under the influence of German Romanticism. As a result, the earliest Slovenian crime stories and novels developed as hybrids, blending characteristics of the classic detective story with characteristics of the hard-boiled detective narrative.

Since crime fiction in Slovenia is not part of the indigenous literary tradition and has a relatively short history, only a few crime or detective stories were written before the Second World War. Furthermore, the aesthetic innovations of *moderna* reinforced a heightened awareness of the distinction between high and low literature, between highbrow artistic works and lowbrow genre fiction. Crime fiction, perceived as formulaic and of lesser literary value, was, and continues to be, regarded with scepticism. As Igor

Grdina notes in the afterword to *The Unknown Perpetrator*, crime fiction did not gain significant attention during the socialist period (Grdina 1992: 150), despite an increase in the circulation of translated foreign crime novels. It was only in the postmodernist period (Sl. *postmodernizem*) that Slovenian crime fiction truly began, although even then, it had already been heavily influenced by the aesthetic innovations of postmodernism. Faithful to the conventions of the genre, particularly the police procedural narrative, it was only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that Slovenian crime fiction experienced significant growth, when several writers began producing serial crime novels. Authors like Sergej Verč, Tone Frelj, Avgust Demšar, Tadej Golob, Mojca Širok, and Irena Svetek have contributed to this vast growth. It could thus be argued that Slovenian crime fiction has multiple and discontinuous beginnings. Taken from this perspective, the analysis shows an uncanny continuity in the politics of sexuality, particularly in the meaning and role of ‘shameful’ sexuality in Demšar’s novels and Slovenian novels in general.

#### 4.1 Murderous Fear of Shame in Avgust Demšar’s Crime Novels

In *Oil on the Balcony* (*Olje na balkonu*), the victim is discovered in an apartment building already at the beginning of the novel. Klavdij Potokar, a divorced crossdresser, is a respected medical doctor who “held people’s opinions in very high regard” (Demšar 2020a: 176). It is revealed that Potokar took his own life after being blackmailed by the photographer Samuel Vraz, who had voyeuristically photographed him dressed in women’s clothes and threatened to expose the photographs. Overcome by the fear of being shamed and his ‘illegitimate’ sexuality being publicly exposed, Potokar ultimately commits suicide.<sup>5</sup>

In *Thin Ice* (*Tanek led*), the murderer, Danilo Toplak, a school psychologist, kills three female teachers to conceal an extramarital affair with one of them, driven by his fear of his violent wife’s retribution if she ever found out. When the detective team catches Toplak, the omniscient narrator summarizes Toplak’s shame in: “There is nothing illegal in trying to satisfy your overambitious wife or in being ashamed to admit that you do not know how to rebel against her” (Demšar 2020b: 145). In a similar fashion, the murderer in *Europe* (*Evropa*), Nataša Jenko, murders as a response to the shame inflicted upon her by the men in her life (Demšar 2021a: 197–200).

<sup>5</sup> Demšar’s non-binary or sexually ‘illegitimate’ characters are not all ‘bad’, yet some still remain morally ambiguous. However, this presents a minor deviation from similar characters in the past Slovenian crime narratives.

In *Miloš*, the motives of the shamelessly homophobic mother, Ljuba Hočevar, are also deeply entwined with ‘shameful’ sexualities. She murders her gay son, Peter Hočevar, along with his lover, Luca Bianchi, and the prostitute Nataša Ogrinc, who has weekly sexual encounters with Ljuba’s husband, Karl Hočevar. When questioned about why she staged her son’s murder to appear as a suicide, Ljuba explains: “Suicide is a lesser evil for family honor [and a socially more acceptable disgrace] than homosexuality” (Demšar 2021b: 385).

Demšar has written twelve novels, yet he uses shame as a meaningful, plot-driving emotion, explicitly or implicitly tied to murder motives only in four. In the case of Tadej Golob, another prominent contemporary Slovenian crime fiction writer, ‘shameful’ sexualities are not directly linked to the murder motives, yet they can be associated with the (guilty) victims and often also to the shaming detective characters.

#### **4.2 Shaming detectives in Tadej Golob’s crime novels**

The narrative of *Virus* (2021), the fourth crime novel in Tadej Golob’s series, unfolds through two interwoven storylines. The first follows the Ljubljana detectives from the Homicide and Sexual Crimes Unit, led by Taras Birsa, as they investigate the murders of three bachelors: Stanislav Kovač, Franko Tepina, and Mirko Lamut. Over the course of the investigation, it is revealed that these men were part of a paedophile ring in which Sabina Kovač was abused, and that they were killed as an act of revenge by her brother, Andrej Kovač. The second narrative portrays the tumultuous private life of Chief Inspector Birsa and his wife against the backdrop of Slovenia’s socio-political climate during the coronavirus pandemic.

In the first storyline, the novel indirectly addresses shame associated with inadequate sexuality related to one of the rapists. During the detectives’ visit to the fictional village of Šentjanž (near Štanjel), they interview Stanko Tepina, who describes his late brother as follows: “He didn’t have a family because he was shy, he didn’t know how to deal with women. Sure, he would look at some – he wasn’t, God forbid, a homo – he just didn’t know how to handle them” (Golob 2021: 137).

A second instance of shame, also indirectly related to sexuality, is tied to the victim of the rape. It shows when the investigator Tina Lanc visits Sabina Kovač in the mental institution Hrastovec in Slovenske gorice, where she now, either mentally ill or mute, resides. Dr. Jazbec, the institution’s director, remarks on the question of family visits as follows: “For a third of the residents the number of visits has increased. Lately, the attitude toward people with special needs or the mentally ill has changed. Their families are

no longer ashamed of them, which is reflected also in the visits. I don't know whether Sabina's family is ashamed of her or not, but until recently she has had no visitors" (Golob 2021: 186). Both examples are indirectly associated with 'shameful' sexualities, yet shame is here more explicitly attributed to homosexuality and disability than to the genuinely shameful act of rape.

A third significant example of shame in *Virus* is not connected with sexuality but rather reflects a recurrent motif in Golob's novels: the shaming of detective characters. In the second narrative, at the Ljubljana Police Directorate, the virus-infected and corona-sceptical Birsa humiliates his colleague Brajc, accusing him of neglecting his own health responsibilities: "I'll probably whine and pray that the clinic for infectious diseases buys another respirator, but a person has the right to it then. At eighty, not earlier. Tell me, since when is fear a virtue in this country? I'm scared, [he grimaces], I'm scared. So what? Fuck off and be ashamed of yourself!" (Golob 2021: 194–195).

In *Oj, Triglav, moj dom (Oh, Triglav, My Home, 2023)*, three friends – Ana Marija, Darinka, and Lana – are interrogated by Birsa and his team after climbing Slovenia's highest peak, Triglav, together with Dani Vasič, the main murder suspect in the presumed killing of Janez Berlot. In addition to this shared experience, the three women are linked by a 'shameful' past, as each of them had had sexual relations with Vasič on separate occasions. Investigator Lanc employs shame as a tactic to clarify the circumstances, attempting to determine whether their encounters with Vasič were consensual (Golob 2023: 377). Ultimately, it is revealed that Vasič is a rapist who drugs his victims, but he is not a murderer. In this context, 'shameful' sexualities are more explicitly than in Demšar's novels connected to the process of the crime investigation, the resolution of the mystery, and the identification of the perpetrator. Here, shame functions as a coercive mechanism directly linked to the authority's attempt to enforce acceptable social norms and to ascribe collective guilt.

Nevertheless, the detectives in Golob's crime fiction are only seldom subjected to shame associated with 'shameful' sexuality. One such instance occurs when Birsa, in conversation with Lanc, expresses shame over their past adultery (Golob 2023: 217). The adulterous relationship, however, is first evoked in Golob's debut novel *Jezero (The Lake, 2016)*, where the 'shameful' sexuality of the investigators plays only a secondary role in the development of the narrative and in the resolution of crimes, compared to the 'shameful' sexualities of victims and perpetrators (Golob 2016: 386).

In Demšar's and Golob's Slovenian crime novels, the underlying motive for the crime often stems from the fear of private matters becoming public, particularly when it comes to intimate relationships. If 'shameful' sexualities do appear, their meanings and didactic functions are closely tied to the

persecuted criminality, negotiating with the conservative politics of sexuality. Within this framework, characters with illegitimate sexual identities internalise social norms, leading them to commit murder, or suicide out of shame or the fear of being shamed, or becoming shameful individuals, and this presents a means for the resolution of the enigma of crime.

## 5 Conclusion

The first point this study makes is to examine the paradoxical relationship between literary representations of sexuality and various historical subgenres of crime fiction, which are shaped by a predominantly conservative narrative formula that frequently aligns with Gayle Rubin's model of Western politics of sexuality. Secondly, it explores the politics of sexuality within specific examples of Slovenian crime fiction, tracing its evolution from its early beginnings to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While Kveder's *Eva* is not a crime story in the strictest sense, it inaugurates a persistent and influential motif of 'shameful' sexuality during the *moderna* period, a time when patriarchal Catholic morality, institutionalised through social norms and laws, gradually began to erode. It is telling that, despite being written nearly three decades apart, Košutnik's *The Arsonist* and Prenner's *The Unknown Perpetrator* share *Eva*'s motif of 'shameful' sexuality, with both crime narratives reinforcing the legitimacy of 'good' and socially sanctioned sexuality by portraying adultery, promiscuity, and class-related sexual transgressions as primary catalysts for suicide and murder. From a historical perspective, the conservative poetics of crime fiction closely mirror the broader conservative social politics of the pre-World War II period.

What is particularly noteworthy is the persistence of the motif of 'shameful' sexuality in 21<sup>st</sup> Slovenian crime fiction, as illustrated in four Demšar's novels and three of those by Golob. This continuity persists despite significant historical transformations and the liberalisation of laws regulating marriage, abortion, and sexual identities and practices. Such persistence indicates that the processes of democratisation in Slovenian society remain incomplete and that sexuality continues to constitute a fundamental dimension of human identity (Foucault 1978: 156). It functions simultaneously as a primary marker of individual identity and as a mechanism of productive social control.

## Data Availability Statement templates

The article is based on research data from existing and publicly available sources (textual sources, databases) listed in the References section.

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## »SRAMOTNE« SEKSUALNOSTI V SLOVENSKI KRIMINALNI PRIPOVEDI OD MODERNE DO 21. STOLETJA

Članek v prvem delu izpostavi protislovno vez med konvencijami kriminalne pripovedi in seksualnostjo. Analiza kaže, da je seksualnost v različnih zgodovinskih oblikah kriminalne pripovedi konstitutivno odsotna, potlačena ali problematična. V klasičnem detektivskem romanu je seksualnost večinoma odsotna, medtem ko v trdem detektivskem romanu deluje kot grozeča motnja in ovira, ki jo mora lik detektiva premostiti za rešitev detektivskega primera. V policijskem proceduralnem romanu je področje seksualnosti pogosto mesto družbene kritike, medtem ko je seksualnost v trilerju bežna, instrumentalna in drugotnega pomena. V nadaljevanju članek predstavi poststrukturalistično teorijo Gayle Rubin, ki se nanaša na zahodno politiko seksualnosti. Članek s pomočjo razlikovanja med »dobro« in »slabo« oziroma »sramotno« seksualnostjo pristopa k raziskovanju razmerja med žanrskimi konvencijami in reprezentacijami seksualnosti v (ne)popolnih slovenskih kriminalnih pripovedih, ki so jih napisali Zofka Kveder (Eva, 1904), Silvester Košutnik (*Požigalec*, 1910), Ljuba Prenner (*Neznani storilec: malomeščanska kriminalna povest*, 1939), Avgust Demšar (*Olje na balkonu*, 2020; *Tanek led*, 2020; *Evropa*, 2021; *Miloš* 2021) in Tadej Golob (*Jezero*, 2016; *Virus*, 2021; *Oj, Triglav, moj dom*, 2023). V črtici Zofke Kveder je »sramotna« seksualnost, ki vodi v Evin samomor, povezana s »sramotno« spolno željo in dejanjem glavne protagonistke, ki se zaplete z moškim druge etničnosti in nižjega družbenega sloja. V povesti Silvestra

Košutnika je »sramotna« seksualnost povezana s promiskuiteto morilca Roka, v prvi slovenski kriminalki Ljube Prenner pa je poleg promiskuitetnega morilca »sramotna« seksualnost povezana tudi s promiskuitetno žrtvijo umora. Podoben pomenski vzorec oziroma motiv spolne konservativnosti vztraja tudi v analiziranih slovenskih kriminalkah Avgusta Demšarja in Tadeja Goloba, v katerih je »sramotna« seksualnost povezana z morilskimi motivi, zasramovanimi žrtvami, osramočenimi detektivskimi liki, identifikacijo krivca in razrešitvijo zločinske uganke. Repräsentacije spolne konservativnosti v kriminalnih pripovedih iz prve polovice 20. stoletja se pojavljajo tudi v sodobnih slovenskih kriminalkah 21. stoletja, čeprav je prišlo do liberalizacije zakonodaje o poroki, splavu in spolnih identitetah.

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