

‘A Tale of Three Cities’

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In the 1840s the city-mysteries genre of crime fiction flew around the world from Paris, touching down in London, Milan, Naples, Philadelphia, New York, New Orleans, St Petersburg, Budapest, Montréal and Melbourne, and many others.

Both the form – cheap serial publication – and the themes – false identity, malicious manipulation, cross-class violence – belonged to the massified metropolis of capitalist business. The writers reworked these concerns through different national traditions and varying socio-cultural contexts to realise both the fears and the aspirations that arose from the experience of ultra-modernity, from high finance to modern sewers.

This paper will look at the major differences between Eugène Sue’s hugely influential initiation of the form in Paris and G. M. W. Reynolds’ massive development of it in the socio-economically more advanced context of London: their contrasts converge dialectically in a revealing hybrid, a third city of mysteries, the France-oriented London generated by Paul Féval.