

Crime fiction conventions



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The conventions of any genre are the implied rules and framework pertaining to compositions that are considered generic. Variations and manipulations of these conventions result in sub-genres. While sub-genres will continually emerge and evolve our standard conventions of the genre will always stay true. The standard conventions of crime fictions can be categorised to reflect narrative, setting, character, theme and style.

P. D James's *Skull beneath the Skin* is a crime fiction text which conforms to the conventions of the genre. The narrative features two crimes of murder. The investigation is conducted by a private investigator Cordelia Gray, who is initially hired to protect Clarissa.

The story is told from the perspective of the sleuth, and thus the audience also become involved in the investigation. James's text is primarily set on Courcy Island, an isolated setting conducive to a 'closed circle' of suspects, conforming, to the cosy subgenre of crime fiction. P. D James has incorporated several conventional characters into her crime fiction text.

The sleuth is Cordelia Gray, a Private Investigator who is highly observant and meticulous, as demonstrated by her detection of crucial clues, such as the missing jewellery box, which leads to denouement of the crime. Gray exhibits her resourcefulness by tracking down a crucial piece of evidence at the Speymouth library, and then logically deduces that Ambrose Gorrington was complicit in the murder to prevent his exposure for tax fraud. Two murderers are depicted, with the victims being Clarissa Iles and Simon Lessing.

Clarissa is despised by the majority of the “closed circle” on Courcy Island as she is perceived to have individually wronged each of them and hence provided them with motive. Clarissa is murdered by Simon Lessing, who in turn is murdered by Ambrose. As the perpetrator of Clarissa’s death, Simon should conventionally be portrayed as evil. However, the audience sympathises with the tragic story of Simon, an innocent child whose values were perverted by an unjust world.

In this way, the text challenges the thematic convention of good and evil, whilst simultaneously conforming to the convention of the weak human condition. Ambrose, on the other hand, is the conventional evil criminal of crime fiction texts. He organises the rehearsals at his island with the explicit intention of murdering Cordelia. His motive for murdering Cordelia is personal greed. He is cunning and manipulative, persuading Simon to take his own life to remove his own association to the murder. When Simon resists, Ambrose seals his doom by ruthlessly overseeing his drowning. Ambrose is clever and provides a suitable intellectual challenge for the sleuth, declaring that he will avoid prosecution by discrediting Gray.

Skull beneath the Skin challenges the thematic convention of justice. Lawful justice is seemingly not achieved, since Ambrose and Simon elude prosecution for their crimes. However, natural justice is achieved, personified through heroine Cordelia. “If the police would have to make their own decisions. She had already made hers..

. She would tell the truth, and she would survive?”. The text conforms to most of the stylistic conventions of the genre. The novel uses a conventional

tightly constructed linear narrative. James develops characterisation by devoting chapters to each of the suspects, and through descriptive settings which also define character, such as the implications of the morbid history of Courcy Island for its immoral owner Ambrose Gorringe. James also juxtaposes descriptive imagery of setting with the brutal imagery of murder to create an atmosphere of tension. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* is a heightened central perspective film that places the audience in the shoes of the first person narrator and amateur detective L. B Jefferies.

Jefferies is confined to a wheelchair after breaking his leg whilst working as a photographer. He is a man of action and but finds himself confined to his apartment which acts as the closed setting for the entire film. His curiosity for the world is restricted and he finds he can best pass time watching and analysing the behaviours of his neighbours through a pair of binoculars.

It is through this character Hitchcock examines the nature of love, relationships and exploits our weakness of wanting to know others business. Hitchcock makes the audience question the morality of voyeurism. As with each character, the audience too absorbs into to the temptation. Hitchcock designed the film in such a manner that Jeffries eyes become those of the audience. The morality of voyeurism is truly questioned when suspicions are stirred by an apparent murder in an adjacent apartment. The murder is the result of a failed marriage and is what the plot pivots upon.

On two occasions Jeffries' suspicions appear to be unfounded. The main characters as well as the audience become disappointed that in fact no murder has been committed. This

disappointment stirs a sense of guilt, which further draws the audience in to the story. Jeffries becomes deeply interested in the lives of his neighbours. Each character is defined by their relationship status, he gives them names such as 'Ms Torso' and 'Ms Lonely heart'.

Marriage is particularly questioned with the older married couple who can't have children and the newlyweds who already seem to be having difficulties as well as Jeff and Lisa's relationship with Jeff's issues toward commitment. Some parallels are noted between the characters, the most interesting being that of the similarities between Jeff and Lisa's relationship and that of the Thorwald's. In each relationship the roles have been reversed, Lisa and Lars are similar in that they both strive for a peaceful and loving relationship and are both active by nature while Jeff and Mrs Thorwald are complainers who are restricted to one area. Hitchcock's genius is seen in his ability to manipulate the audience's imagination it is what we don't know and don't see is what builds the suspense and works on the audience's fears and insecurities.

The film itself does not show the murder or dismemberment of the body, not even a drop of blood. This is because the maximum affect will be created even more effectively by doing the minimum on screen, which in turn allows the maximum affect in the minds of the audience. Hitchcock through Rear window comments on the state of society, we like the characters of the film have come to accept this invasion of privacy as commonplace 'We've become a race of peeping toms'. He also comments on the state of relationships and casts a dark shadow over the nature of marriage through the Thorwald's and the newlyweds, but also

casts some light through the characters of Jeff and Ms Lonely-hearts who both ultimately find happiness.

Roald Dahl's crime fiction text *Lamb to the Slaughter* challenges many of the conventions of the genre. The narrative features the crime of murder, the victim brutally suffering a skull smashed to pieces. However, the crime is told from the perspective of the perpetrator, challenging the conventions of the genre. Hence, the composer does not seek to surprise the audience with clues or red-herrings, instead plotting an exciting evasion of justice.

The setting of the narrative is both detailed and plausible – a conventional suburban home. The characters of the text challenge the conventions of crime fiction. There is no distinct moralistic hero to solve the crime, as neither of the two detectives receives much characterisation. However, they are both represented as irrational and illogical, committing the foolish error of getting rid of the primary piece of evidence – the murder weapon. The crime is a domestic disturbance gone horribly wrong with the wife murdering her husband. However, the thematic convention of good and evil is turned around with the slaying.

The victim is represented as heartless and despicable for declaring that he would separate from his pregnant and devoted wife, the perpetrator of his murder. The wife, after irrationally committing the murder, begins to despair about the fate of her unborn child as she is prosecuted for murder. Hence, she evades capture, not for her own selfish reasons but apparently for the future of her unborn child.

Therefore the thematic convention of the weak human condition is adhered to, while convention of good and evil is distorted. The perpetrator acts in a conventionally convincing manner, developing a trustworthy alibi and rehearsing her behaviour for the police interview. She cunningly convinces the police to dispose of the murder weapon, demonstrating her intellectual dominance of the detectives through an evil ??? giggle??? that denotes her guaranteed escape from prosecution. The text conforms to stylistic conventions of the genre, with a tightly structured linear narrative. The juxtaposition of detailed and routine setting with the sudden and brutal imagery of murder is a conventional stylistic technique used with great effect in the text.

In conclusion, *Skull beneath the Skin*, *Rear Window* and *Lamb to the Slaughter* are three diametrically opposed crime fiction texts. While James??[™] text conforms to most of the genres conventions, Dahl??[™]s text challenges them and Hitchcock??[™]s film hardly even considers them. However, they can all be considered generic Crime Fiction texts, an example of the breadth of the genre concept and the ever evolving conventions.