

Skull beneath the skin

[Law](#), [Justice](#)



The avowed aim of the crime fiction genre is a quest for justice for the victims of crime. This is driven by our fears and desires. It is the moral responsibility of the detective to solve the crime, and see that moral order is restored. As humans we have an innate sense that justice must be served; the quest of the detective becomes ours as well. Murder, being the ultimate crime reflects our fear of death and our desire to see moral retribution. It is part of the human condition to understand the world around us and from this desire stems an existential anxiety and a fear of the arbitrary and inexplicable cruelty of fate.

Life is fraught with moral ambiguities. Appropriately the title *the skull beneath the skin* refers to the fact that death is ever present lurking beneath the surface just as a skull hides beneath the face. P. D James challenges the traditional conventions of the crime fiction genre. She clearly incorporates a combination of intuitionist, realist and hard-boiled styles of Crime fiction and even explicitly draws attention to these by intertextually referencing other crime works such as Marlowe, Webster and Shakespeare.

In her novel James transforms the simplicities and crudities of the old-fashioned detective story, which usually approach the plot as an intellectual puzzle of “ whodunit”, into a modern detective story concerned with psychological truth and the moral ambiguities of human action. The classic detective story rests on the fundamental idea that “ the good will triumph and the bad will be punished”, leaving the reader with a reassurance that justice will be served. However, James’s subverted approach to the genre demonstrates realism as depicted by the moral ambiguities and the relative nature of truth.

The novel's unsatisfactory approach to reality is effectively utilized in her plot, which mirrors a cynical modern awareness that life is not necessarily just or fair. For example, we are morally ambiguous about Simons' murder of Clarissa, we see it as provoked and justified and we sympathise with him. James offers us an enigmatic ending rather than any restoration of justice or social order- it is unclear to the reader whether or not Cordelia will be able to prove Ambrose's guilt or whether he will be brought to justice. Her readers recognize that in reality there is no stable, secure or protective refuge against evil or murder.

Despite the fact that PD James sought to elevate crime fiction into literature, she does conform to the conventions of attributing motives to a number of suspects. This tangle of motivations creates an atmosphere of suspense and intrigue for the reader, allowing her to delve into the psychological truth of her characters. This complexity of plot and character is consistent with James's view of the detective genre. This technique engages the audience enabling them to identify with the detectives quest to find those responsible for the murder so that order can be restored.

James goes to a lot of trouble to establish the possible motives for Clarissa's murder. Clarissa is detested by everyone, due to her egotism, faithlessness and manipulative personality. This alienates everyone involved with her, giving each person a strong motive for menacing her with notes containing death threats and later for murdering her. Tolly, her devoted assistant has reason to resent Clarissa. Clarissa denies Tolly the right to see her dying daughter, as it would interfere with her performance of Macbeth.

Ironically, Clarissa was playing Lady Macbeth, but she herself was possessed of evil. Courcy Island is an artificial environment of the egotistical dream of Ambrose Gorringe. It is a world of Victoriana with Macabre memorabilia, such as the marble arm of the princess, which even repels the antique dealer when handling it because "it reminds me of death". This setting is a microcosm of British high society, with its servility rituals such as fancy dinner parties and constant maid service. These rituals act as a facade and a disguise for feelings, motives and human flaws.

The society at Courcy contrasts vividly with the simplicity and morality of Cordelia, who is happiest locating lost cats in her detective agency, "Animals didn't torment themselves with the fear of death... they didn't burden you with their psychological problems.. they didn't surround themselves with possessions". Conversely James's novel is very concerned with all three of these human flaws. In traditional detective fiction, the setting is an essential part of story. It is not only a backdrop for the action but also creates atmosphere and helps provide clues that are necessary in the investigation.

Typical of the Intuitionists text, Courcy Island is a classic closed setting physically and socially cut off from the outside world, which can only be accessed by boat. In this respect the investigation is limited to a certain location and group of people, creating an atmosphere of fear and suspense, intensifying the sense of immanent threat- "Here on the southern shore where the mainland couldn't be seen, it was easy to imagine that the island

was totally lost at sea.. ". Crime fiction is often set in a hostile world, which appears dangerous and threatening.

In the novel, this danger is alluded to by the awareness of the characters of its violent and bloodstained history including its chambers of horrors and its morbid past of murders, plagues and tortures, " They saw the skulls at once. One whole wall was patterned with them, a grinning parade of death". As Cordelia begins her investigation she learns many dark secrets and we as an audience realize that the occupants of Courcy Island may go to extreme and violent measures to protect these secrets. Not only does this indicate danger in the past, it alludes to danger in the present.

These factors of setting combine with the references to the fear of death, which permeate the novel, give it a macabre atmosphere. In the modern world we are continually faced with images of death in our everyday lives. We feel our powerlessness in the face of death, and this fear haunts human existence. Thus the reader finds comfort in seeing murderers brought to justice. Ironically, when Gorringe is finally exposed as the murderer, we have no such assurance from James that justice will prevail. Clarissa's fear of death verges on the paranoid, giving us the title of the novel. She tells Cordelia, " I always see the skull beneath the skin".

This fear is exacerbated by the death notes she receives with their well-known quotations focusing on fears, judgments and the inevitability with death. " On pain of death let no man name death to me " (Brachiano's words from *The White Devil*). These references become ominous motifs and help build the sinister atmosphere. They are ultimately the reason Cordelia is

called upon to watch over her-“ Cordelia felt their potent and nostalgic power”. James makes even the physical environment of the Island become part of a deathly ambience: “ Outside the accumulated heat... like a sweaty fumed soaked blanket.. utting of air”. Finally, Cordelia fails in her assigned task to prevent the murder of Clarissa and is indeed threatened herself with death. This realism is typical of James’s non-idealized approach to detective fiction genre. Cordelia is not a super sleuth who triumphs in the punishment of the perpetrator. She is meticulous and thorough in her procedure of the investigation. However, she is exhausted by the psychological complexities and lacks the consolation of knowing that the perpetrator will be punished.

She welcomes the new cases of lost cats. This is almost a sense of anti-climax in the context of detective fiction. Her incursion into the world of psychological complexity has confronted her with the fear of death and the quest for justice. However she is happy to suspend herself from this intimacy with death and to resume a humble existence. Much of our lives consists in appreciating the mundane. Therefore, we to have to suspend the fear of mortality, as well as the desire to understand “ the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”.