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**Striving for Autonomy:**  
Representative Female Characters  
in the Detective Novels of  
P D James

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## ABSTRACT

Representative female characters from several of P D James's detective novels are used to exemplify the changes in women's position in society during the four decades (from the early 1960s to the late 1990s) which span James's publishing career and which coincide with the period known as the second wave of feminism. Women characters have always taken a prominent place in P D James's detective fiction, and since the 1970s her books have increasingly foregrounded the problems that women have when working in male-dominated professions, revealing their increasing autonomy but also disclosing the continuing limitations of that autonomy. Her novels are acknowledged as becoming increasingly literary. In her early novels James followed the formula of the classic detective fiction genre quite closely. During the 1970s she experimented with novels that on the surface read as detective novels, while functioning subtextually in relation to myths and metaphors. In her most recent works she transcends the genre, using the detective formula simply as a framework for her novels of literary realism.

## Preface

I have always been an avid reader of detective fiction; I also enjoy well written fiction. Over the years P D James's work has come to fulfil both those categories. Moreover, there is, in her work, such a bias toward the female that I have always rated her as a feminist. She admits to considering herself a feminist but, she qualifies, not in a radical, extremist sense.

However, she is an Englishwoman who, prior to the second wave of feminism, joined the English Civil Service, a close bastion of class and male privilege. Although she left school at the age of sixteen with only a School Certificate qualification, she had received a Grammar School education. She further educated herself through night classes so that she could pass the Civil Service examinations, and rose to a high rank in the Service. She knows, she has said, the urge to succeed, although she hopes she has never acted with the naked ambition shown by one of her more recent characters, Venetia Aldridge.

Her interviews are full of references to women, to the difficulties they face, their positions in society, and to her female characters. She is very aware of women's status, and her novels all reflect this awareness. In her early novels, which follow the classic formula quite closely, this bias is muted, but apparent. When the second wave of feminism was in full swing, she echoed its sentiments with her protagonist, Cordelia Gray, but imbued her with her own sceptical uncertainties. As the twentieth century closes, she has "come out of the closet" with her character police detective inspector Kate Miskin, and she writes with realism about women working in male-dominated professions.

I still have a feeling of partisanship with James and her novels, and it has been a pleasure to re-read them all and to try and express in this thesis something of what I perceive in her work.

Irene Greenwood  
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# **Prologue:**

## **Opening the Investigation**

## Murder is revealed

P D James's first murder victim was a young housemaid. Sally Jupp was discovered by the assembled household dead in her bed, her door bolted from the inside, her baby son crying in his cot, and the window wide open. Two of the men made their entry into the room by way of a ladder and the window. As they opened the bedroom door, the women, ignoring a restraining male arm, "moved silently as if under some united compulsion to [the bed] where Sally lay" with her hair spread over the pillow, "like a web of gold."

Her eyes were closed but she was not asleep. From the clenched corner of her mouth a thin trickle of blood had dried like a black slash. On each side of her neck was a bruise where the killer's hands had choked the life from her. (*Cover Her Face* 47)

Thirty-five years later, in James's most recent publication, *A Certain Justice* (1997), the victim is again a woman, and again she is locked in her own room. But this time the death is more gory, the room is an office, and the narrative of the discovery of her body is told slowly and in greater detail.

On his early morning arrival at the law chambers where he is employed as Senior Clerk, Harold Naughton is greeted with a telephone call from Mrs Buckley, Venetia Aldridge's housekeeper. Her employer, a successful barrister and senior partner in the chambers, has not returned home during the night and, unlike her usual practice on such occasions, had given no notification that she would be absent. A very worried Mrs Buckley is phoning to see if Venetia is in her office. Unconvinced of the likelihood of Venetia being present, but politely obliging, Naughton enters Venetia's room using the spare key that he has in his custody. Immediately on entering the room he realises that something is wrong. The evidences of death assault his senses:

There was a smell in the room, alien and faint but still horribly familiar. He put out his hand to the switch and four of the wall lights came on.

What met his eyes was so bizarre in its horror that for half a

minute he stood rooted in disbelief, his mind rejecting what his eyes so clearly saw.

. . . .

She was sitting well back in the swivel chair behind her desk. . . . Her head was slumped forward on her chest, her arms hung loosely over the curved arms of the chair. He couldn't see her face but he knew she was dead.

On her head was a full-bottomed wig, its stiff curls of horsehair a mass of red and brown blood. Moving towards her, he put the back of his right hand against her cheek. It was ice-cold. Surely even dead flesh couldn't be as cold as this. . . . Then he leaned forward and, stooping, tried to look into her face. The forehead, the cheeks and one eye were covered with the congealed blood. Only the right eye was unsullied. The dead unseeing stare, fixed on some far enormity, seemed, as he gazed at it, to hold a terrible malice. (*A Certain Justice* 106-7)

Unlike the women in the brief and antiseptic description of the finding of Sally Jupp's body in *Cover Her Face*, who stand immobile and silent, part of a tableau with the dead Sally as its centre, Harold Naughton participates actively and noisily during his discovery of Venetia Aldridge's body. He suffers a "disoriented incredulity" and his "heart leapt into life and began a pounding which shook his whole body." He hears a "strange disembodied sound, . . . a low incoherent moaning" which he realises is his own voice. He feels horror, terror, his hands shake and his breath comes in gasps. He is "mesmerized" by the sight of her, only able to move, leave the room and lock the door with great difficulty (106-7).

These scenes epitomise the contrast between James's earliest writing and her practised later works. Additionally, they exemplify the distance she has travelled in the execution of her craft, from genre detective fiction to sophisticated novel within the framework of the detective novel. But, most importantly, they also illustrate the changes that have occurred in society



between 1962, when *Cover Her Face* was published, and 1997, the year that *A Certain Justice* came out, particularly with regard to the changed status of women. For between these dates, society's perceptions of women had been greatly altered.

### **Women's growing emancipation**

James's novels mirror these changing attitudes toward women and chronicle the adjustments made to society through these altered perceptions. The four decades during which she has been publishing have coincided with the years that have been of great importance to the growth of women's independence and autonomy of action. Moreover, as she was over forty years old when she published her first novel, she was intimately acquainted with all aspects of being a woman prior to the rise of second wave feminism. The expanded field of opportunities which are available to women today, which were not available when she began writing, are disclosed in her novels and the advancements made by women in the last thirty-five years are revealed.

Women such as Sally Jupp and Venetia Aldridge are separated by more than thirty-five years of linear time, they are women who exist in what are effectively different cultures. Similarly, others of the women discussed in this thesis are situated in different worlds. Jane Dalgliesh, vicar's daughter and spinster, Deborah Riscoe, taking a job to fill the time but then making the move toward independence and a career, and Mary Taylor, successful career woman in one of the few vocations open to women of her time, are all accurate reflections of women of their period. Venetia Aldridge's outstandingly successful career as a barrister would have been beyond their imagining, an impossible dream.

Bridging the pre-Women's Lib era and late twentieth century's postfeminist angst is Cordelia Gray, a young woman taking a stride into a man's world in the 1970s, riding on the back of the maxim then current "girls can do anything," and torch-bearer of a more generalised hope that she

signalled an end to the subordination of women. Cordelia Gray--a female detective who launched an entire generation of fictional female detectives which continues to storm its way into, and to overwhelm, what had been a male oriented genre--proves herself well able to cope in many non-stereotypical situations. When she first appeared, Cordelia Gray was hailed as a truly feminist character. Joan G. Kotker writes:

. . . [in] the character of Cordelia Gray, as she appears in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, P D James has created a very brave young woman who has the courage to call to task the overseers of the world. . . . an outsider and a loner . . . she rejects the values of her society, developing instead her own code. Her message is that though we cannot control the events of the world around us, we can control how we react to those events and can choose the individual stance we take before the world.

This was a powerful message for women coming of age in the early 1970s, who saw in Gray and her defeat of the patriarchy, a hero for women. ("The Re-Imagining of Cordelia Gray" 58)

But Cordelia, although she offered a challenge to the patriarchy, remained an idiosyncratic character. It was left to a later generation of feminist women to breach the bastions of male monopoly professions, women such as Venetia Aldridge and Kate Miskin.

Kate Miskin is as truly a daughter of *her* time as were James's earlier characters of theirs. She is a late twentieth century professional woman, a police inspector succeeding in a male-dominated profession, but a woman starting to question the need to become an "honorary male" to acquire such success. The specific dilemmas that Kate's burgeoning doubts provoke in her serve to illustrate the more generalised problems that late twentieth-century women are interrogating as they gain greater equality of opportunities with men. But, women's questioning of the perspective in these once all-male

professions is, according to James, beginning to be echoed by some of their contemporary male colleagues.

### **Ambition fulfilled**

Currently James, albeit still a very popular author with a wide following, commands less interest amongst academic critics of the detective fiction genre. She does, however, receive serious critical attention as a writer of very literate, and literary, novels. Thus she fulfils her earliest aspiration, revealed at the time she started writing, when she disclosed that she had "high ambitions" of not only of attaining success as a writer, but of achieving serious attention as a novelist:

I did want to be regarded seriously as a novelist. I felt that writing a detective novel would be a marvellous apprenticeship. ... There are so many constraints. There are so many internal structures and tensions. And then as I proceeded in my writing career, I began to believe that you can remain in that so-called formula and still say something true about men and women and about the society in which we live; and that is what as a novelist I try to do. ("The Art of the Novel" 6)

Meanwhile, serendipitously and contiguously with her growth in stature as a novelist, her novels have reflected the changes affecting women's place in society. They offer a record of the increasing acceptance of women's equality with, and independence from, men during the period known as the second wave of feminism.

**ONE:**

**Framing the Investigation**

## I - Securing the Scene

P D James, at the start of her writing career, elected to write detective fiction because, she says, "it didn't occur to me to begin with anything other than a formal detective story" ("The Art of the Detective Novel" 4). She had read, and enjoyed, so many detective novels over the years that she felt confident she would succeed in writing one. In fact, according to Kathleen G. Klein, her instincts were sound. Klein (in her essay "Women Times Women Times Women") declares, "mystery fiction is not a genre which reveals itself in a single novel" (9). She goes on to say that total immersion in the genre is a necessary requirement to becoming either a writer or critic of detective fiction. Furthermore, the detective novel fulfils James's preference for structure in a novel: "I think a novel should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Like life" (James 5). Additionally, she mentions that she thought the tight formula of the detective novel would provide a most helpful discipline for a novice writer.

### **Detective fiction genre**

Detective fiction, a sub-genre in the crime fiction genre, has always kept within a tightly formulaic construction. Early adherents of detective fiction were at pains to establish the parameters within which the writer should operate. Well-known examples are Ronald A Knox's "A Detective Story Decalogue" which lists ten rules that a writer of detective fiction must follow. S S Van Dine expanded this list to one that contains twenty commandments from which the detective novel must not deviate. P D James has always acknowledged the prescriptions of the genre and she defines the formula of the detective novel quite precisely:

There will be a violent death; a limited circle of suspects all with motives, means, and opportunity; false clues; and a tenable ending with a solution to the mystery which both author and reader hope will

be a satisfying consummation of suspense and excitement but which the reader could himself arrive at by a process of logical deduction from revealed facts with the aid of no more luck or intuition than it is reasonable to permit to the detective himself. (Quoted in Radice 1-2)

John Kennedy Melling argues that such close fidelity to the formulaic rules has meant that, after the heyday of the classic and hard-boiled forms, detective fiction was left with nowhere to go. The result was that it became either parody or pastiche (*Done to Death: Parody and Pastiche in Detective Fiction*). However, although modern women detective writers make use of both categories they do not constrain themselves to writing only within these styles.

### **Classic or hard-boiled?**

There are two interesting phenomena in the development of detective fiction. The first is the preponderance of women writers in Britain, from the early part of this century up until the present time, who have carried on a developing tradition, the classic detective novel. The second concerns the thriving industry among women detective fiction writers in America, who have taken a sub-genre developed in America by misogynist male writers in reaction to the British tradition, the hard-boiled detective novel, and subverted it to feminist ends. P D James has inspired critical analysis as both a traditionally classic detective fiction writer and as the initiator of the female hard-boiled detective, although this latter area is one she has abandoned.

During the Golden Age of the classic detective novel it was the puzzle and the plot which were considered the most important components of the genre. Writers aimed for a riddle with a logical solution. The puzzle, the presentation of the clues, the solving of the mystery, the unveiling of the perpetrator, were of paramount importance. Everything has a meaning in the classic detective novel; anything mentioned is mentioned for a reason. If scenery is described it is because it holds a vital clue. Clues are contained in conversations, in the author's or narrator's casual references to glances at

clocks or flowerbeds or gardensheds. In fact, the most "in passing" remark will often be the pivot to the solution. Nothing is extraneous to the plot.

Though it is often claimed that P D James is the natural successor to the acknowledged mistresses of the classic detective story, succeeding to the crown of Queen of Crime-writing, and standing in a direct line with Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh, her renowned predecessors, she repudiates the suggestion. She acknowledges her debt to her fore-runners, particularly Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham, but denies carrying on in their tradition. Indeed, a P D James novel is a novel of dense realism in which a detective puzzle is embedded; this is especially so with regard to her later books, those written from *A Taste for Death* onward. However, the critic Robin W. Winks (in "The Sordid Truth") declares "James . . . discovered that life is not a series of masks; it is a series of confessions" (215). While admitting that her books are "realistic portrayals of life and death," he insists that

James is a writer in the classic sense, where the vital clues to the question of Who, and, at least as important to her, Why, are slipped into place neatly, fairly, unobtrusively, sometimes as much by a turn of phrase, a sense of style, a nuance, as by overt statement.

Atmosphere becomes action, the buying of the daily paper becomes the central fact, a leaning ladder becomes an obvious pointer to an unobvious conclusion. (216)

Erlene Hubly disagrees. In her article "The Formula Challenged," she contends that the world view in classic detective novels was of a knowable and orderly universe, a universe where crime was an irregularity and logic could solve the mystery. James world view is quite the reverse, Hubly claims. James, according to Hubly, presents a world that is normally evil and chaotic, with good a temporary anomaly. At the end of her article Hubly concludes that James's novels are "a curious blend of several forms--the romantic and the realistic, the classical and the hard-boiled" (521).

Raymond Chandler disparaged the classic detective novel as being "second-grade literature because it was not about the things that could make first-grade literature," that it was an "arid formula" (98). Targeting, particularly, Dorothy L. Sayers' type of novels, he writes:

If it started out to be about real people ... they must very soon do unreal things in order to form the artificial pattern required by the plot. When they did unreal things, they ceased to be real themselves. They became puppets and cardboard lovers and papier-mache villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility. (98)

Chandler was both champion and exponent of the "hard-boiled" detective novel which he claimed was based in the reality of crime and criminals, in the "mean streets" of a city, not, as was so often the case in the classic novel, in the artificial setting of a weekend house-party in a country mansion. His detective is a man of action, fighting on the side of right, not a man playing at intellectual games. He is an honest man, lonely and proud, seeking a hidden truth, a man of honour, displaying an acceptance of all humanity but intolerant of corruption--the modern-day equivalent of Chaucer's "gentile knight parfait." But in the end, of course, the hard-boiled novel becomes a Romantic quest novel, rather than a novel of sordid Realism.

When P D James created her female private detective, Cordelia Gray, the protagonist in the novel *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1962), she subverted the hard-boiled subgenre. In place of the typically cynical, tough male detective she substituted a candid, unsophisticated young woman. Cordelia was enthusiastically received as a character showing "proto-feminist promise" (Nixon 33). Women authors of the nineties write novels featuring overtly feminist private detectives, and currently it is in vogue for novels in the hard-boiled mode to centre on a woman private detective. These recent novels in the hard-boiled style correspond with the feminist quest for female independence.



### **From idealism to realism - extending the formula**

Erlene Hubly, in "Adam Dalgliesh: Byronic Hero," notes that Norma Siebenheller discusses James's novels in terms of the traditions of realistic fiction. As previously remarked, the sanitised murders which have been noted in the classic detective novels have no place in a later James novel. Nancy Carol Joyner states: "James is a firm believer in realistic detail. . . . This predilection is observed nowhere more forcibly than in her description of the corpses that inevitably appear in her novels" (115).

In her first three novels James's description of the method used in the actual murder is in a style customary to the classic novel, that is without dwelling on the violent technicalities of the crime, without a total recall of the gory minutiae whenever the scene is revisited during the course of the novel. However, in her more mature novels, as she becomes surer and more self-assertive in her style, as she moves away from a strict adherence to detective fiction formula to follow her inclination to use the genre to write the novels of her choice, she reprises the murder scene, complete with details of the corpse's mutilation, on many occasions. Accordingly, the horror of the event is always in the forefront of the reader's mind, and violence becomes a functional phenomenon in her novels. No longer is it possible for the reader to imagine that at the end of the book, "when the action is over and the murderer named, the victim will get up, brush himself off, and carry on with his life" (Siebenheller 5). Or, as James herself is said to have remarked: "Christie's victims are so politely described that the reader sometimes expects them to get up off the floor and take a bow" (Joyner 116).

Indeed, in a James novel there is no final scene of the sort presented in a classic detective novel where, as the detective resolves the mystery and names the murderer, the world in the novel is returned to its pre-crime status. As Hubly notes,

Adam, although he may identify the murderer and thus remove him from society, presides over no celebrations, recreates no new society

from the ruins of the old, feels no satisfaction for a job well-done.  
("The Formula Challenged" 520)

Unlike the classic detective novel, a P D James novel presents a view of society that is chaotic and unredeemable and, in spite of the fact that the solution to the puzzle is offered, the reader is seldom left with the sense that, in the end, everything is neatly tidied away, all ends tucked in, and all made right with the world. On the contrary, James is at pains to show that murder has a "contaminating effect" altering the lives not only of the criminal and the victim, but of all who are in any way connected to the crime, the criminal or the victim. Indeed, by the end of a James novel, the reader is aware that nothing can mend the broken and disrupted lives of all who have been affected not only by the crime but also by the investigation.