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.

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

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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.

II - Widening the Net

Novels of serious intent

P D James has always maintained, in all her talks, articles and interviews, that she does not write the contrived and whimsical entertainments of her predecessors; her concern has always been to write novels of realism based on the framework of the crime story. In fact, such has been the case. Critics have agreed that P D James has successfully exploited the formula and they have praised her writing and the intellectual calibre of her work.

Notwithstanding the importance of plot in detective fiction, an importance that James recognises and emphasises, it is the characters and the settings in a James novel that are more memorable than any of her plots. The detective plot in a James novel provides an intellectual stimulus to counteract the story which is often emotionally depressing and, on occasions, nerve-wracking and shocking. Moreover, it is the credibility of her characterisations and the literary quality of her writing, rather than the puzzles of her plots, that make even her early works such critical successes, thereby demonstrating that by creating realistic characters, and with an emphasis on mood and setting, a writer of detective fiction can extend a novel beyond the genre's parameters while still using the basic precepts of the formula.

Whereas classic detective novels were concerned only with the solving of the particular problem within the novel, as the critic Newgate Callendar is reported to have said of James, "she is 'basically a novelist who happens to put her characters into mystery stories'" (Gidez 5). James's later novels are written in the sprawling tradition of the novel of realism, rather than the tidy world of the Golden Age detective fiction writers. In the classic detective novel, characters were simply figures in the plot, pawns on a chessboard, James produces a world inhabited by a distinctive populace of rounded individuals.

Technically, classic detective novels are known as "closed" narratives,

hard-boiled detective novels are "open" narratives. Non-formulaic novels, also, are usually "open" narratives. James, although following a "closed" narrative mystery in all her novels, writes with an "open" narrative in terms of the overall scenario of her later novels. Classic detective novels, after solving the mystery and removing the murderer, leave a world untouched and unaltered. Although James's novels solve the puzzle, they also expose the reality that the world is not in any way improved by the unravelling of the mystery, not even by the apprehension of the criminal. Julian Symons, in his third revision of *Bloody Murder*, writes of *A Taste for Death*:

> The book showed James moving toward a deeper, though never portentous, seriousness in treating the actualities and implications of death and also using as sparingly as possible what she clearly finds at times to be the shackles of the orthodox puzzle plot. ... James's talent is for realistic description of people and places rather than for the intricacies of the crime puzzle. (293)

James emphasises the larger problem that the solution of an individual crime does nothing to address, the problem of crime and "evil" within society. Justice, retribution, punishment--nothing in the present justice system can remedy the effects that remain with the family and associates of the victim; nothing within the system changes the attitude of the criminal toward society. James uses women and feminism to foreground the seemingly insoluble problems of justice, punishment, revenge, and purely wanton crime. She subverts the conservative aspects of the detective novel, testing its parameters and confronting its ideological base.

Gidez quotes James as saying that the detective novel gives "an extraordinary realistic picture of what life was like at the time it was written much more so than many serious novels" (6). Her opinions of contemporary society are foregrounded by presenting, within the framework of the detective novel, realistic characters in believable circumstances involved in a series of criminal events which tear apart the everyday fabric of their existence.

The prime requisite in the non-formulaic novel, characterisation, is considered of pre-eminent importance, overshadowing plot in importance. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E M Forster maintains that plot and character are in conflict and that plot is

> the novel in its logical intellectual aspect: it requires mystery, but the mysteries are solved later on: the reader may be moving about the worlds unrealized, but the novelist has no misgivings. He is competent, poised above his work, throwing a beam of light here, popping on a cap of invisibility there, and (*qua* plot-maker) continually negotiating with himself *qua* character-monger as to the best effect to be produced. He plans his book beforehand: or anyhow he stands above it, his interest in cause and effect gives him an air of predetermination. (103)

Where plot is required to superimpose upon the characters it produces an ineffectual ending, according to Forster, due to the cause and effect requirements of the plot, its need "to be wound up," and there is a resultant "flattening-out" of the characters (102). Indeed, in James's novels, critics have often remarked on a disappointing and over-contrived ending.

Bruce Harkness, in his 1983 article on James and her work, has remarked on how the depth of characterisation engenders a paradox in the detective novel. He states:

> We value the classic mystery in part to the degree in which it approaches the straight novel. Yet there is a real line, hard to define though it may be, beyond which the detective fiction must not cross. If the mystery in some chapters becomes a novel, the genres become confused and our critical strictures inevitably are misapplied. We then hold characterisation to the standards of the novel, not those of detective fiction. . . . P.D. James's detective stories approach the quality of the straight novel throughout. In an odd sense, they are just too good. ("P.D. James" 132)

However, the classic works of detective fiction were written as entertainments

and their characters are stylised or fantasy, even fantastical, figures, idealised characters who are not reality based, and not meant to represent real people in the manner that James has said she intends her characters to be representative of real people. James crosses that "hard to define" line and her characters must be assessed from a different standard than those in classic detective fiction entertainments.

Transcending the genre

Coincidentally with her creation of Kate Miskin, James's novels become longer and denser, and the writing more closely resembles that of the literary novel. From the time that she published her first novel (*Cover Her Face*), critics have recognised the increasing literary merit of her writing and she herself has claimed that, beyond the obvious reading, she considers her work can be interpreted at several levels. Specifically, she has drawn attention to the second Cordelia Gray novel as one that she considers can be read on more than one level. However, the accessible reading of *A Skull Beneath the Skin* is an amalgam of the classic detective and romantic gothic and, as has been recognised previously, it achieved poor critical response.

Conversely, *A Taste for Death* (1986) is so evidently more than a straightforward "whodunit" that it has attracted serious critical readings as a novel. The instances are many. Betty Richardson, who compares *A Taste for Death* with T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* in its use of symbol and imagery, states that James's writing succeeds because it is "firmly based on myths and symbols that are commonplaces of modern culture as well as conspicuous features of well known literary works" (105). Penelope K. Majeske, also writing of *A Taste for Death*, considers that P D James "is a master allegorist, a superior practitioner of secular allegory" (119). They are only two examples of critics who consider that James "is more than a master purveyor of classic British mystery fiction" (Majeske 119), and whose work, they estimate, deals with more than the "mere orthodoxy" of doctrinaire crime fiction. Maureen

Reddy says: "Like all of James's work . . . *A Taste for Death* is serious fiction, an elegantly written and profoundly troubling examination of religious, philosophic, and social concerns implicit in the murder that sets the plot in motion" ("New Procedures for Police?" 84). According to Reddy, "*A Taste for Death* transforms the genre from which it springs by defying the genre's restrictions" (89).

Although James's testing of the boundaries of the detective novel is noticeable in the first instance in the Cordelia Gray novels, with the publication of *A Taste for Death* she makes a paradigmatic shift. Despite still being recognisably based on the classic formula, and complete with the necessary murder, murderer, and detective, it has been crafted into a different style of novel. James uses the elements of the detective novel as the warp on her story-telling loom. For her weft she takes the aspects of the literary novel, creating a cloth that is a parable of modern society.

As James has stated on many occasions, her novels, though they make use of the formula of detective fiction, are not simply light entertainment; her books, she claims, are meant to be fictions of serious purpose. During a recent interview in company with James, Ruth Rendell tartly informed the interviewer that neither she nor James are writing novels "subordinated to murder" (Turner 12). Furthermore, she insists: "People read them [James's novels] for the emotions, the interplay of characters, the descriptions, the beautiful pictures that Phyllis paints of East Anglia" (Turner 12).

The characters, both female and male, who inhabit James's recent novels withstand stringent analysis and reward by exposing personalities who extend our understanding of the human condition, an outcome that is the hallmark of transcendent literature. However, women characters in a P D James novel are more striking and unforgettable than the men; even Dalgliesh is authenticated by his juxtaposition with them. Her empathy with her women characters gives her writing a feminist flavour.

III - Interrogating the Suspects

Feminism and women writers of detective fiction

Detective fiction is recognised as being a male oriented genre and, historically, women writers in the genre have written from within that orientation, accepting society's male-centred perspective and making little attempt to offer a female viewpoint, yet often subtly inserting a subversive element into their novels. For instance, early novelists such as Agatha Christie and Georgette Heyer frequently presented their young heroines as brave and assertive, and slyly patronised various male characters. A delightfully ironic two-edged description of women's situation in Britain in the 1930s is given by Margery Allingham in *Flowers for the Judge*:

> Teddie Dell drew up the largest and most comfortable chair. "Sit down," she said, indicating it, and he obeyed her. Mr. Campion, the most unassuming of men, did not imagine for a moment that her solicitude was for his comfort, her tacit acceptance of the fact that his ease was all-important, was due in any way to his personal charm. Teddie Dell, he realized, was behaving as she always had and always would behave, since she belonged to that most ill-used sisterhood, some of them wives, some of them mothers, and all of them lovers, who really believe that there is in the mere quality of manhood something magnificent and worthy to be served. (249)

Other writers were even more explicit in their feminism. Dorothy L. Sayers, is considered the most overtly feminist of Golden Age writers. She is acknowledged as raising feminist issues openly in her novel *Gaudy Night*, which is set in a women's college at Oxford. Even so, she called in her series detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, rather than allow Harriet Vane to solve the novel's mystery unaided. Therefore, while a careful reading of the detective fiction of women writers exposes a tendency toward a feminist persuasion, they all continued to write within the dominant, male-centred position of the

genre, making little effort to change in society's attitudes towards women.

Kimberly J. Dilley, in her recent critical work *Busybodies, Meddlers, and Snoops* (1998), states: "Women use mass-produced texts to make potentially radical statements about themselves and their society" (xvii). Similarly, Kathleen G. Klein notes:

> Contemporary women-centered novels, even those not explicitly called feminist, are using the formula of traditional mystery fiction to trace a new investigation. They overwrite the palimpsest of given conventions without obliterating them completely. In these reworkings, readers can find what might be called archeological strata in layers of revisionist thinking about mystery fiction, women in society, authority, crime, and social justice. (12)

Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that, whether admitted or not, women detective fiction writers might harbour some feminist inclinations. At the very least they must agree with Elizabeth Harding when she says:

> Yes, I call myself a feminist in that I believe there are cultural, social and economic boundaries set for women which are immoral and unnecessary and which should be resisted publicly and privately. (Miller & Swift 139)

Notwithstanding this argument, feminist beliefs are not universal. In spite of the fact that women are moving into all the professions and arenas of activity once considered solely the province of men, even with the greater awareness and public acknowledgement of the gender bias within society, as Anne Cranny-Francis maintains, the fact that a woman writes detective fiction, even if she uses a female detective, does not make either writer or character a feminist. Nevertheless, she concedes, even these writers are "inevitably involved in changing the myth of the traditional detective," whilst feminist writers of detective fiction are making "a fundamental reassessment of the genre" (144).

However, when the novels of P D James (particularly the later ones) are read from a feminist standpoint, it is apparent that she writes with a

feminist awareness of society's bias toward men, and that she has an acute insight of how this bias makes it impossible for society to be fair, just or ethical. Consequently, James uses the sex of her characters to highlight the inequities built into society, and she employs the feminist features of her characters to foreground the difficulty she has with aspects of the regulation of law and order within society.

Women as characters in P D James's detective fiction

From her earliest writing James displays a distinct concern for women's position in society, and some of her best characterisations are of strong, autonomous women and the difficulties they experience in maintaining their independence. She creates many emancipated women in her novels, women who have, as Carolyn Heilbrun has called it, a clear "sense of their own selfhood, their own free sense of choosing" (*Reinventing Womanhood* 73). Even in her first novel James produces a female character who aims at self-determination. Sally Jupp, the victim in *Cover Her Face*, is James's first attempt to delineate the difficulties faced by a woman seeking to live independently.

James's novels accentuate the difficulties women face in their attempts to achieve autonomy. She delineates their efforts to realise a level of emancipation and status, and the obstacles they have to overcome to maintain whatever independence they attain. In a P D James novel, women's lack of power within society's structure is emphasised. Therefore, while certain of James's female characters stand out as strong, independent women, some are depicted as attempting independence and failing. Her early novels depict independently-minded women as having a measure of autonomy only if they remove themselves from competitive involvement in society. One such woman is Jane Dalgliesh in *Unnatural Causes*. After her mother's death, Jane had complied with her father's expectations that she should act as his housekeeper and general factotum. However, she had lived a private and concurrent life as

a successful ornithologist, a lifestyle she maintains after his death. Women who attempt a more overt control of their lives on their own terms often fail dramatically. Examples of the latter characters are many, starting with Sally Jupp in *Cover Her Face*.

James's work attracted an explosion of substantial critical analysis after the 1972 publication of her fifth novel, *An Unsuitable Job For a Woman*, a novel in which James subverts the hard-boiled private detective formula. The novel's protagonist, the woman with the unsuitable job, is a young private detective named Cordelia Gray--a heavily ironic representation of women's situation in society. In *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, James shows how impossible it is for a woman to function effectively in an environment which is not friendly to the female, and how inadequately a purely masculine role can be made to fit a woman. When, under critical pressure, James finally reprised the Cordelia character in her 1982 novel *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, she left the reader in no doubt of her female detective's inability to fill the role originally created in American fiction for the male hard-boiled private detective. It is a good example of James's method of displaying society's male bias. She does not, as subsequent authors have done, remake the formula so that it will accommodate a female detective, or the woman to fit the formula.

Cordelia Gray stands at the beginning of a line of popular female characters who take on society on their own terms. Although she does not succeed in becoming the female facsimile of her male counterpart, she completes her journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. She is able to retain her female identity while working in her chosen occupation, finally accepting her limitations and carving out her own niche position.

Currently, women writers (particularly in America) are producing the type of heroine that James has eschewed, and in the 1990s, critical writing is more concerned with addressing the newer, more aggressively feminist female detective, such as Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone, and Pam Nilson, Barbara Wilson's lesbian detective. These writers

have made their "fundamental assessment" and have created female characters who are powerful and self-confident in a manner previously attributed only to men. But these are fantasy figures, as much as were their fore-running male counterparts. Raymond Chandler accepted that "[t]he private eye is admittedly an exaggeration--a fantasy." However, he claimed in vindication that the character was "at least . . . an exaggeration of the possible" (cited in Mann 75). Possible such characters may be, but James, as a writer in the realistic mode, is unable to accommodate them.

In her more recent novels, James creates female characters who are living in an era when independence for women is less anti-social, less deviant. Women in the postmodern era are allowed success in previously male-dominated organisations. Yet, even now, women achieve such success at some cost, often by a commensurate loss in other aspects of their lives, sometimes, still, with a distortion of their female psyches.

Inspector Kate Miskin, a professional female police detective introduced by James in *A Taste for Death* (1986), is one of the new breed of late-twentieth century women working in an era when women are deemed to have equal opportunities with men in all realms of endeavour. She features again in *Original Sin* (1994) and in *A Certain Justice* (1997). Another successfully autonomous woman in the latter novel is Venetia Aldridge, barrister and murder victim. Whilst both women have succeeded in professions which are male dominated and controlled, both still face problems that their male colleagues do not. Indeed, in *A Certain Justice*, Mark Rawlstone, a partner in the same firm as Venetia Aldridge, acknowledges this fact. When asked if Venetia had any enemies he responds by saying:

> No enemies in the sense that she was hated. She could be difficult--well, we all can. Ambition in a woman, success in a woman, sometimes attracts envy, resentment. But I know of no one who wished her dead. (192-3)

Throughout these last three novels, Kate Miskin, successful police

office, admired and respected by her colleagues, struggles to come to terms with an increasing feeling of disaffection with the person she has become. While she struggles with these feelings, paradoxically, she grows in human terms. Kate struggles with an increasing conviction that her success in the male dominated police world is a hollow victory, and she grapples with a growing desire to involve herself personally with those around her, an inclination which runs counter to the police dictum of non-involvement by its officers.

James unveils, precisely, the obstacles women face as they strive to achieve success and the difficulties with which they must still contend, even after they have realised a measure of success. Therefore, despite the fact that James recognises the changes to women's autonomy in the forty years she has been writing, she continues to use her novels to identify and emphasise women's essential lack of power.

TWO:

Testing the Status Quo

I - The Many Faces of Eve

Introducing Sally Jupp

P D James's first novel, *Cover Her Face*, published in 1962, and her three subsequent novels, *Mind to Murder,*(1963), *Unnatural Causes* (1967), and *Shroud for a Nightingale* (1971), are cast well within the format of the genre, keeping close to the model of the classic detective novel. She uses the classic device of having a limited circle of suspects to the murder. The group consists of people who are either known to be present when the murder occurs, or to be acquainted with the victim and in a position to have committed the crime. The murder plot, true to the classic formula, is in the foreground of the story and constitutes the major part of the action, unlike her later books which offer a greater degree of character biography and social commentary so that the murder story becomes the background in the novel.

Cover Her Face, though, is a novel which interweaves the classic form of detective fiction with a victim chosen not only to illustrate the social standards of the period, but also to make a statement on the status of women at that time. In James's early novels many of the characters are the stereotypical individuals usually found in detective fiction. However, even from the first of her novels, certain of her women characters are outstanding in their conception and plausibility.

Sally Jupp, the victim in *Cover Her Face*, made every effort to retain her autonomy in spite of all the circumstances that contrived to subjugate her. Unfortunately for Sally, her method of taking total control of her own destiny is also the cause of her undoing and, ultimately, her doom. As with all of her future strong female characters, James reveals the measure of Sally's autonomy by exaggerating the difficulties she has in maintaining her independence.

Sally's desire to control all aspects of her life, and the secretiveness that

she feels such control demands, requires her to be manipulative and untruthful. Her secretiveness confers upon her a conviction of power over the people with whom she comes into contact and she uses her perceived power to play pranks on people, even to insinuate blackmail. But this sense of her own omnipotence makes her oblivious to the fact that others might have reactions other than those she is expecting; it makes her vulnerable when the people around her take her hoax seriously, leaving her exposed to violence. Sally Jupp was the author of her own fate, but she did not deserve to die. She died because "she enjoyed the feeling of power that . . . hidden knowledge gave her" (194).

Setting the scene

When a sudden death occurs at the Maxie's manor house, Martingale, the local police suspect murder. James sets *Cover Her Face* in the time-honoured setting of the classic detective novel, an English country gentleman's residence, a backdrop as typically conventional as any originating from Agatha Christie, Georgette Heyer or Ngaio Marsh. The Chief Constable of the county, concluding that his force is overstretched with "the still unsolved business on the fringe of the county" (48), quickly calls for assistance from Scotland Yard. Detective Chief-Inspector Adam Dalgliesh leads the team of detectives sent to the village to investigate the suspected murder. Some preliminary police work has been done, there has been an initial collecting of contiguous clues and the witnesses to the discovery of the body are under police surveillance. As Superintendent Manning tells Dalgliesh and his team: "I got a bit of ground covered before I knew they were calling in Central Office. . . . Victim is the maid here. Unmarried mother aged twenty-two. Strangled" (49). Apart from Manning's preliminary findings, Dalgliesh is without any previous local knowledge, and the reader follows the detective as he builds the case, assimilates the information, discovers the natures of the suspects, constructs a plausible motivation and reveals the personality of the

victim.

Sally Jupp, an orphan raised by an aunt and uncle, is considered, by many of the other characters in the novel, lucky to get a position as a maid assisting the housekeeper-cook, Martha Bultitaft, in the upper class Maxie household (on the recommendation of the warden of the home for unmarried mothers in which she was resident), and even more fortunate to be allowed to keep her baby with her. At the opening of the novel she appears aware of her good fortune and duly grateful.

Several of the characters who will play leading roles are introduced at a dinner party held at Martingale three months prior to the murder; it is the scene that opens the novel. Mrs Eleanor Maxie, wife of Simon, the terminally ill owner of Martingale along with Stephen, their son and Deborah Riscoe, their daughter, a young widow, are the members of the family hosting the gathering. Among the guests are Catherine Bowers, a nurse and the daughter of an old friend of Mrs Maxie's with whom Stephen has had an affair. Felix Hearne, family friend and suitor of Deborah, is introduced at a later date. One of the guests is the warden of the unmarried mothers' establishment, Miss Liddell, and Sally is the subject under discussion at the table. She is described by Miss Liddell as having "a quiet and refined manner", "quite well-educated, too. A grammar school girl! . . . a most superior type of girl for St. Mary's" (8). The family doctor, Charles Epps, also a guest, agrees--"She's a good mother and a pretty girl" (8).

At her entrance Sally is described as very thin: "The heavy, red-gold hair piled under her cap seemed too heavy a weight for so slender a neck. Her childish arms were long, the elbows jutting under the reddened skin" (9). But, notwithstanding the original impression, the image of a girl in need of care and protection is soon demolished. By the time Sally is murdered the reader has seen more than one of the "faces" that she presents publicly and feels quite well acquainted with her, sufficiently well to term her "two-faced" and deceitful. Sally's true and whole persona is unknown to any of the other

characters, or to the readers, until the end of the novel, when previously unknown aspects of her life are revealed. Finally, it is clear that Sally is a person of many "faces" so that she appears in a totally different light from the young woman introduced at the beginning of the book. Even so, as Dalgliesh remarks during his summing up of the circumstances that brought about Sally's death, "Her behaviour wasn't reasonable" (194).

The many masks of Sally Jupp

Sally, knowing her true situation, manipulates the world around her for her own amusement. Her husband is abroad and unaware of the birth of his son and she allows the people she is in contact with to believe that she is unmarried, thereby causing shame and grief to her aunt and uncle by her apparently immoral behaviour. She institutionalises herself into St. Mary's Refuge, the home for unmarried mothers, cynically allowing the state to support her for most of her pregnancy and for the first few months after her son Jimmy's birth. While there she behaves with such rectitude that the warden, Miss Liddell, has no reservations about recommending her as a housemaid to the Maxies. Indeed, as Deborah Riscoe remarks, "'According to Miss Liddell, . . . Sally is a model of all the virtues except one, and even that was a slip on the part of nature who couldn't recognize a high school girl in the dark'" (17). But, as the time draws closer to her husband's expected return, she becomes bolder, allowing her true opinions of her employers and their friends to surface.

She is aware that Stephen has allowed his sexual interest in her to cause him to misinterpret her visit to him at the hospital. Rather than realising that she is using him to impugn Martha Bultitaft, the housekeeper she has come to dislike because Martha is creating difficulties for her, he thinks Sally is attracted to him. Being a narcissistic young man, he sees this as a perfectly reasonable situation. Indeed, his sister, Deborah, is convinced that Sally is setting her cap at him. In turn, Stephen finds Sally sexually desirable, and

using the technique he had previously found successful with Catherine Bowers, he leads her to believe that he is offering her marriage in order that he can have sex with her. Whether or not Sally believes him, so used is she to keeping her secret that she neither turns him down nor tells him that she is already married. Instead, extending her power play, she allows the Maxies to think she has accepted Stephen's proposal of marriage, and that is her fatal misjudgment.

Her arrogance, her unshakable belief that the power is all on her side, is her downfall. She is blind to the fact that if people fall for her hoaxes, if they take her seriously, their reaction might have serious consequences for her. Miss Molpas, her previous employer, describes her as "a natural murderee" (164). Sally has been so successful in her previous excursions into the role of puppet-mistress, she has so enjoyed the sense of power she has felt, that she "underestimated the force of the anger and desperation which were confronting her" (195); she miscalculates the aversion that the idea of Stephen marrying her would arouse.

Sally has been described as alienated (Siebenheller 89-90). Her actions certainly arise from many years of unhappiness, from a childhood made bitter by the resentful accommodation that her aunt and uncle, the Proctors, afforded her. But Sally is happy at the present time. She loves her husband and her child and her pranks are self-amusements arising from a cynical nature; she is not a wicked person. Dalgliesh tells Victor Proctor that Sally's blackmail of him would have occurred only the one time, she was, in effect, simply asking for the return of money she considered to be rightfully hers; there would not have been a repeat demand. With hindsight, Deborah tells Proctor: "'She was only playing with you, pulling the strings for the fun of watching you dance'" (192).

If she had admitted to Stephen that she was married, if she had not allowed her mischievous, secretive nature to take the ascendency in this situation, then, as Dalgliesh says, "She would have saved her own life" (195).

But Sally, knowing her husband is due home within a couple of days and charged with the power that knowledge gives her of how astounded everyone will be when she presents her husband to them, is made reckless. As Felix Herne says of her: "She liked amusing herself with people. [But] they can be dangerous playthings. Obviously one of her dupes thought that the joke had gone far enough" (180). "She had to have drama if it killed her" (193), he remarks later. To which Dalgliesh responds: "In the end it did. If she hadn't played with people Sally would be alive today" (193).

The novel is a series of exposures of the masks Sally has worn in her dealings with the other characters, and the title becomes an ironic play on words: which of the many "faces" Sally has displayed is the one to be covered? There is Sally the housemaid, the unmarried mother, the girl out to trap Stephen (the young doctor and son of the house), the girl trying to model herself on the sophisticated Deborah (sister to Stephen) by copying her dress. Then, there is the girl who appears to amuse herself by clandestinely meeting with the naive and impressionable Derek Pullen; was she really the girl that he thought he knew? She is variously described as secretive, called a prankster and a storyteller. Miss Molpas describes her as "pretty, intelligent, sly and insecure" (161), commends her as "[m]eek, virtuous, quiet little Sally" (163), and denigrates her as untruthful, "She was a clever little liar was Sally" (164). But she is surprised to learn that Sally was an unmarried mother: "She struck me as too careful, too scheming for that kind of trouble" (164). Stephen, making his own investigation into Sally's past, correctly assuming that Jimmy's father might be unaware of his son's existence, bases this assumption on Sally's secretive nature and on his opinion of the explanation for her behaviour: "Sally was very independent" (160).

Victim of her era

It is the secretiveness that Sally Jupp feels obliged to cultivate in order to maintain her independence that makes James's portrayal of the victim so

remarkable and that causes *Cover Her Face* to break out of the mould of the classic detective novel, revealing it to be a realistic representation of its era. The novel is a window showing how often women must live dual lives, the public and the secret, in order to maintain their integrity of spirit. Today, in the late 1990s, the realisation that women have always lived such a dual life is a commonplace. Much research into, and publication of, the diaries and letters which have survived through the generations have brought to light the secret lives of women over the centuries.

After the relative freedoms that young women had gained after the first world war, and their strides towards independence in the twenties and thirties, the social climate went into a reversal following the second world war and female autonomy in the late 1950s and early 1960s was socially discouraged. Women were once more expected to enact a limited and homogeneous role in life. Girls were indoctrinated towards a sole expectation of a career as wife, mother, and home-maker. Strong social pressure was brought to bear upon young women to conform to this model, and equally strong pressure to dissuade any woman from independent action.

However, Sally's failure at independence is also traceable to the moral climate of the era that the novel depicts. Sally Jupp is a victim of 1950s morality as well as being the murdered victim of the novel. James is at pains to underline the morality of the period by including a "Home for Unmarried Mothers" and ironically emphasising Sally's supposed good fortune in gaining the position of general maid in the Maxie household and being allowed to keep her baby son with her.

Writing within a late 1950s ambience, James creates a murder victim who Richard Gidez regards as having a "complex personality" (18). Sally is a secretive, manipulative, mischievous young woman who presents herself differently to each character with whom she interacts. Sometimes she even proffers totally different "faces" to one person, as she does to Miss Liddell, the warden of St. Mary's Refuge. At one stage during the dinner party Miss

Liddell finds Sally looking at her,

> ...not [with] the submissive gratitude which had characterized the Sally Jupp of St. Mary's Refuge, but [with] amused contempt, a hint of conspiracy and a dislike which was almost frightening in its intensity. Then the green eyes had dropped again and Sally the enigma became once more Sally the submissive, the subdued, Miss Liddell's favourite and most favoured delinquent. (9)

Multiple personalities

Since they were intended to offer only very limited personalities at that period, women were inclined to suppress the aspects of their personalities that were socially unacceptable. Such psychic suppression often led to increasing mental instability with occasionally bizarre results and during the 1950s the phenomenon of the multiple personality gained some notoriety.

In 1954 two American psychiatrists, (Thigpen and Cleckley), published an article entitled "A Case of Multiple Personality" in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, and in 1957 this was expanded to a book length text and called *The Three Faces of Eve*. It was, also, made into a major motion picture. It recounts the psycho-analytic therapy of a woman who exhibits three persona, the repressed Eve White, and her *alter ego*, the "loose" and flirtatious Eve Black. Also manifested is the separate, seemingly well-integrated Jane, but who is a person without a past, and who suffers horrendous nightmares. In her final incarnation she becomes Evelyn White, who, after divorcing her husband, Ralph White, would remarry and become Evelyn Lancaster, free of the headaches, blackouts and nightmares that had been part of her previous persona, but lacking a full memory of her past.

Non-compliant women either "mad" or "bad"

The idea that one physical body could contain more than one personality was an idea that caught the public imagination. It fitted well into

the then-current psychological theories of the female psyche. Women who did not conform were often branded "mad", as feminist critics were to discover when the second wave of feminist theorising was researched in the seventies and eighties; and, of course, non-conforming women were considered "bad" in society's judgement. Unless acting within a very narrow range of allowable behaviours, women have always been regarded as either mad or bad. For example, Elaine Showalter, when discussing the treatment of mentally disturbed women in *The Female Malady*, states:

> The asylums are indeed confusing places,secretive prisons operated on Wonderland logic. Their female inmates are instructed to regard themselves as 'naughty girls' who have broken a set of mysterious rules that have to do with female conduct. (211)

Conversely, feminists discovered that often women displayed "madness" or "badness" to escape a demand to conform to an intolerable situation.

In *Cover Her Face*, James exposes society's continuing mendacious treatment of women with her rendering of Sally. She, too, has been institutionalised, in a Home established for young women whose behaviour has violated some of society's *mores*, and, consequently, has been considered a "naughty girl". But Sally had chosen to reside at the Home. It is her belief that society "salves its conscience more by helping the interestingly unfortunate than the dull deserving" and she "was in the position to put her theory to the test" (195). Furthermore, ironically, it "gave her a free home for seven months" (194). Sally knows that she has not breached society's moral rules, yet, because their knowledge of her circumstances is fragmented, her behaviour has seemed strange to many of the other characters. After her death and when the reasons for her murder have been established, her behaviour appears less bizarre:

> 'She was in a funny mood that day,' remembered Deborah. 'There was a kind of madness about her. I don't only mean copying my dress or pretending to accept Stephen. She was as

> full of mischief as a child. I suppose it could have been her kind of happiness.' (193)

Sally has taken great delight in turning society's rules back upon itself, taking circumstances which normally subjugate women to society's strictures to relieve her own situation. The disclosure that she is married places all her actions in perspective and she is seen finally in her integrated personality. As Mrs Maxie is reported to feel, "There was nothing left to discover about Sally Jupp which had power to surprise any more" (176).

According to Glenwood Irons, having a woman for a victim is a not unusual occurrence: ". . . the majority of the murder victims who meet their deaths between the covers of mystery fiction paperbacks, . . . are women" ("Gender and Genre" ix). But the multifarious Sally Jupp is a victim like no other, and, as Dalgliesh discovers, "at the heart of the mystery, the clue which would make all plain, lay the complex personality of Sally Jupp" (156). Sally Jupp leaps, fully formed, from the page, remaining enshrined in the mind of the reader when the intricacies of the plot have faded from memory.

However, following in the footsteps of earlier fictional independent women such as Moll Flanders, Sally Jupp, by her manipulative actions and multiple guises, reconfirms a standard for the measurement of independence in women. She exposes the first big flaw in any reasoning that women can be autonomous: if women live lives which comply with the rules of society, they fall under the authority of men; but, if they attempt to live flagrantly independent lives, a male-dominated society will destroy them.

II - Through the Eyes of Adam Dalgliesh

Women through the "Male Gaze"

After introducing Adam Dalgliesh in *Cover Her Face*, James works assiduously to establish his character in the three subsequent novels, building a real and rounded person through a variety of methods, but mainly by exposing his personality in terms of his relationships with women. Dalgliesh acts as a foil to many of James's female characters. Sometimes she juxtaposes his character with that of a female character who holds some significance for him. Often, because he is the main protagonist of the novels, the women are revealed through his subjective opinion, a method which affords a greater disclosure of his personality than that of the character he is viewing.

Feminist theory, adapting the principles of semiotics which state that language is embedded with encoded meanings from the dominant (male) ideology, has maintained that women can only express their ideas through the male signs and signifiers encoded into language; therefore there is no language for describing "woman," and language renders women invisible (de Lauretis 3). Moreover, women can only ever be seen through the limiting male description of her as "icon", "index", or "symbol" in the "male gaze" (de Lauretis 3). Furthermore, James's female characters in her early novels are excellent illustrations of patriarchal theory, that men hold all the power in society and keep women in subordination, the concept outlined by early second-wave feminists such as Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*. James, however, subtly destabilises Dalgliesh's homogeneous perceptions of the women in every instance, slyly in the case of Jane Dalgliesh, humiliatingly in the case of Deborah Riscoe, and violently in the case of Mary Taylor.

Jane Dalgliesh in *Unnatural Causes* is seen, almost totally, through the eyes of Adam Dalgliesh; Mary Taylor, a murderer, in *Shroud for a Nightingale*, is juxtaposed with Dalgliesh, and is revealed partly through his eyes, partly through her own thoughts, and partly through narratorial action.

Both are women who have attained independence notwithstanding earlier misfortunes, living their lives on their own terms. Deborah Riscoe, beautiful and conventionally feminine, originally introduced in *Cover Her Face*, is the traditionally passive female, a woman who has been raised simply to please men. Once she becomes Dalgliesh's lover she loses all substance, even her voice, existing simply in Dalgliesh's thoughts until her final, surprising act of self-assertion at the end of *Unnatural Causes*.

Jane Dalgliesh

Although James's portrayal of Jane Dalgliesh appears to offer the stereotypical example of an independent woman that was extant at the time, in fact, there is an ironical factor in that Jane's personality is sieved through Adam's viewpoint, and it is more probable that Adam is projecting his own view of Jane's reactions rather than the actuality of her perspective. With one exception, the reader is not privy to her thoughts, and her reported actions are mundane and everyday. She is clearly independent, living alone in her own cottage, Pentlands, situated on Monksmere Head in the village of Monksmere (a small settlement on the Suffolk coast composed mainly of writers, where her nephew, Adam Dalgliesh is spending his leave with her). However, she is a woman whose independence comes after a life of dependency that has been one of emotional bondage.

Considered by her mother to be "sensitive, uncommunicative and rather difficult" (*Unnatural Causes* 19), she suffers the double bereavement of having her fiance killed just six months before the 1918 Armistice, followed by her mother's death from influenza three weeks later. Her father, a country clergyman, "was so assured of the ultimate importance of his calling that it never occurred to him that anyone's gifts could be wasted in its service" (20). Without complaint, Jane acts as surrogate for her mother in parochial affairs until her father's retirement in 1945, remaining with him until his death ten years later. During this protracted servitude, she has "solaced herself with her

study of birds" (20), becoming "one of the most respected of amateur ornithologists" (20).

Dalgliesh identifies closely with his aunt Jane, he holds her in high esteem, he feels comfortable with her. Erlene Hubly contends that Dalgliesh admires women who are "reflections of himself" ("Adam Dalgliesh: Byronic Hero" 43), and he certainly relates to his aunt as though to another man: "His aunt was herself six foot tall and had a masculine appreciation of essential comforts" (21). Her role as a woman is a faint background figure that Dalgliesh is aware of without consciously acknowledging. That she continues to perform parochial-type duties for her neighbours, allowing her house to be used for meetings, serving coffee and comfort, is so acceptable to his masculine consciousness that it by-passes his notice. He finds her asexual and non-threatening, interesting only when she mirrors his own traits. Therefore, on an occasion when she appears in her only evening dress, a dress she has owned for years, that becomes her, and which is of a style once again in vogue so that she appears handsome and sophisticated, he becomes uncomfortable, finding her "individual, degage elegance" (121) alien to his concept of her.

To Dalgliesh his aunt is "so obviously self-sufficient that . . . even to feel affection seemed a kind of insult. But the affection was there and both of them knew it" (20). In fact, he is here projecting his own opinions of his aunt's feelings onto his aunt, as she is aware. At one point Jane's viewpoint is accessible, and it confirms her as much more open to affection than her nephew is, or thinks her to be, and very much aware of his feelings. When Adam concedes that he will have to admit failure to obtain some expected information for Inspector Reckless (the local inspector who is in charge of the murder case under investigation), Jane "cast a glance at him but asked no questions, and quickly turned her face away in case he should see, and be irritated by, her obvious concern" (183). She is aware of her nephew's bruised ego, and senses his humiliation.

Dalgliesh, on the other hand, sees his aunt in the absolutes of his own suppositions. He conceives his aunt as "the most detached, and incurious of women to whom the habits of birds had always appeared of greater interest than those of humans" (73); " . . . not a woman to feign polite interest where she felt none" (21); and ". . . the most self sufficient, least sentimental woman that he knew" (29). However, Dalgliesh is assigning his own proclivities to his aunt. From his limited and self-absorbed viewpoint, he perceives her as having an impersonal manner, of lacking interest in her fellows: "Never before had his aunt's uninvolvement struck him so forcibly; never before had it seemed so frightening" (237). He realises, then, that however much he admires her, he has no wish to extend his own tendency to detachment and aloofness to that extreme. Once again he is projecting his own characteristics upon her; he is judging her from his egocentric position; he is the one who is aloof and detached. As James says of him, "[h]e has a splinter of ice in his heart'" (Chisholm D2). Dalgliesh, although apparently moderated by his alternative life as a poet, fulfils the function of the rational male in society. He is the upholder of law and order and unbending justice. According to Sizemore, his ". . . uninvolved rationality places Dalgliesh in the tradition of male detective heroes, ... Only his writing poetry, . . . shows his potential for sensitivity" (157). In his recent case, "[h]e had felt no personal involvement, . . . and this detachment had, as always, been his strength" (*Unnatural Causes* 18-9).

His aloofness extends to his colleagues, who often view him as cold and arrogant. Bernard Benstock writes that Dalgliesh is "enigmatic and even ambiguous" (Benstock 111), going on to say that, "no one particularly likes him, . . . and those who have to work under his supervision usually harbour active dislike for his cold and reticent personality" (111). James is aware of these features of Dalgliesh's personality, traits that she does not relish in his character. She is quoted as having said during an interview: "He's so almost completely detached at times, even a little cold, and I wouldn't have thought easy to work for at all" (Sizemore 157). These tendencies in him become even

more explicit in the later novels. Cordelia Gray's late partner, Bernie Pryde, was deemed an incompetent detective by the perfectionist Dalgliesh and sacked from his squad (*An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*). Inspector Daniel Aaron (*Original Sin)* leaves the force rather than reach Dalgliesh's degree of non-involvement, unprepared to test the question which Dalgliesh put to himself in *Mind to Murder*: "How long could you stay detached, . . . before you lost your own soul?" (183).

However, Dalgliesh mistakes Jane's attitude. Rather than aloof, she is totally non-judgmental: "To Jane Dalgliesh people were as they were. It was as pointlessly presumptuous to try to change them as it was impertinent to pity them" (237). Contrary to Dalgliesh's perception of her, her quiet self-sufficient life does not imply an aloof, uncaring nature. In later years, Dalgliesh revises his opinion of his aunt's apparent remoteness when, after her death, he takes possession of her house, which she has willed to him along with a large fortune, and he discovers more about her life (*Devices and Desires*).

Jane, although emotionally self-sufficient, had always been open and caring towards people, as the fact that all her neighbours at Monksmere congregate at her house illustrated. It is her empathy towards him, and his opinion that they are alike, that have caused him to consider her as detached from human closeness as he is himself. Virginia Woolf wrote: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (*A Room of One's Own* 35). As a result of the esteem in which Dalgliesh holds Jane, he sees her as a reflection of himself. He judges her virtues his own, his faults he superimposes upon her.

Deborah Riscoe

At the beginning of Deborah Riscoe's relationship with Dalgliesh she appears as the type of woman whose individuality is subsumed by the man

who is her lover. Dalgliesh responds to her acquiescence in a conventionally male fashion expecting, because he has sought her out and paid her court, that she will demand a total commitment from him. However, this representation is offered through Dalgliesh's subjectivity, and Deborah proves to be more self-assertive than Dalgliesh had expected or the reader has been led to believe.

From her first appearance her dress and grooming are foregrounded, and her indolent lifestyle stressed, for instance, when Dalgliesh, in his summing-up to the Sally Jupp murder, comments that Deborah could not have been the murderer as her "finger-nails would inevitably have left scratches. No-one can grow nails that length overnight . . . " (*Cover Her Face* 202).

She and Dalgliesh met during the investigation in *Cover Her Face*. In fact, Deborah's mother, Eleanor Maxie, proved to be the murderer of Sally Jupp. She served a prison sentence and died shortly after her release from prison. Deborah and Dalgliesh first acknowledge their mutual attraction at the end of *Cover Her Face*, as Mrs Maxie is preparing to leave for prison, when "recognizing suddenly and without surprise that, had things been different" (203), they would have turned to each other to give and receive comfort. Later, in the novel's epilogue, Dalgliesh makes a detour through the village and meets Deborah again. She is walking, carrying a heavy basket, and he automatically stops his car to give her a lift, with "no time for indecision or awkwardness" (205). Immediately, "it had struck him to wonder at his boldness and her compliance" (205). But, after a brief conversation, during which time she is able to let him know that Felix Hearne is out of her life, he leaves, unable to find the words he wants to say to her. However, the atmosphere is one of ease, and, as they part, Dalgliesh feels, "with sudden and heart-lifting certainty that they would meet again. And when that happened the right words would be found" (207).

When they do meet again at the beginning of *Mind to Murder*, Deborah is in the employ of the firm that has published Dalgliesh's book of poems, a change in her life since her mother's death:

> 'I'm quite useful. I'm the general dogsbody. Shorthand and typing, too. I took a course.'
> 'You make it sound like a cure.'
> 'Well, in a way it was'
> (*Mind to Murder* 16).

Deborah is starting on a different type of life to the one she has been brought up to. How it will change her, neither she nor Dalgliesh then realise.

Once again he finds himself attracted to her, but he is still unsure of her response. Moreover, he expects that theirs will be a more than casual alliance, and he hesitates to make the move that might take him into a relationship that would call for a greater commitment than he feels comfortable about making. Dalgliesh, from his established male viewpoint, conceives the only particular in question is whether or not Deborah is sufficiently attracted to him to accept his invitation to dinner. After her initial consent, in his view, the rest will follow inevitably. Implicit in his opinion is the belief that once the man has made the choice, the woman has no further option. It was the established and unquestioned position in society of the era in which the novel was set, the early 1960s. Society, as feminists were to theorise, was what Kate Millett termed "patriarchal". She defines patriarchy as being a "sexual dominion" and "the most persuasive ideology of our culture . . . provid[ing] its most fundamental concept of power" (*Sexual Politics* 25). Dalgliesh, of course, viewed every situation from his position of male dominance.

Fortuitously, before he can take any action, he is called to the case. At that point he is saved from making his decision. However, at the end of the novel, depressed by his failure with the case, he decides to call Deborah, considering her to be an antidote to his feelings of gloomy despondency. Dining with her, he decides, "would commit him to nothing more crucial than seeing that she had a pleasant evening and paying the bill" (*Mind to Murder* 208).

During the period that elapses between the end of *Mind to Murder* and the beginning of *Unnatural Causes*, the association between them has grown increasingly ardent and meaningful. But, by the end of the later novel the relationship is over. The entire affair has been conducted off stage, and Deborah is a woman viewed simply through the eyes of Dalgliesh. The effect on Dalgliesh is important in exposing aspects of his personality, disclosing his essentially self-centred nature and his narcissistic tendency to use the women around him as reflections of himself, an ironical reminder of Virginia Woolf's observation.

Dalgliesh is convinced that Deborah expects him to marry her. Although Dalgliesh is strongly attracted to Deborah and as near to loving her as he appears to be capable of loving anyone, he questions whether he really wants a close relationship with another person. While he is on leave, staying at his aunt Jane's cottage, he feels that there is, between him and Deborah, an unstated understanding that he must make a decision about their future. He knows that his aunt Jane, because she makes "no demands on him, not even the demands of affection, . . . was the only woman in the world with whom he was completely at peace" (*Unnatural Causes* 21). He is aware that with Deborah he is not expecting, nor being offered, that type of relationship. He speculates about his loss of privacy, about "life in . . . [his] flat with Deborah always there, no longer the eagerly awaited visitor but part of his life, the legal, certificated next of kin" (*Unnatural Causes* 18). At a low point during the novel, he wishes he was with Deborah and he writes her a poem--"a ten-line metaphysical conceit" (Harkness 121)--suggesting his love and commitment to her, but he does not actually mail it to her. His indecision is, in itself, a decision which Deborah recognises.

While he is away, she makes her own decision. Refusing to "loiter about on the periphery of his life" any longer, she has taken a job in New York (*Unnatural Causes* 240), a career move which is a shock to a man who thought he was dealing with a woman working at a job to fill her time until

he, her Prince Charming, decided to make her permanently his own. Her brief note, which he receives at the end of the novel, brings a resolution to their affair. Although his immediate reaction is of loss and humiliation, he suspects that he is more relieved than sorry it is ended.

Throughout the novel, the reader's view of Deborah has been screened through Dalgliesh's thoughts. However, the reader gains no clear idea of Deborah as an individual, but through Dalgliesh's suppositions and expectations, she emerges as a generic "woman", of a certain appearance and temperament, placidly awaiting for Dalgliesh to decide whether or not he wants her permanently in his life. The Deborah who had been briefly introduced as a person in her own right in *Cover Her Face* is invisible as soon as she becomes "part" of Dalgliesh. Her life becomes his to decide upon. When she makes her decision to take the job in New York, it is a small window opening on the promise of future independence for all women.

After Deborah, there is never a suggestion that Dalgliesh, a long time widower, will enter into another such relationship, although, with Mary Taylor, he could, had circumstances been different, have enjoyed a meeting of equals.

Mary Taylor

Mary Taylor, the matron of the John Carpendar Hospital and Nursing Training School, is a woman who holds a position of importance, wielding considerable power within her own field. Her appearance is physically striking, her demeanour autocratic. She is tall with blonde hair "almost indistinguishable in colour from her skin" (*Shroud for a Nightingale* 18), high cheekbones and large, protuberant eyes like "pale veined gooseberries" (18). She has an elegance and "a confidence that [is] almost palpable" (72) and her own strength of character gives strength to all who work with her and to the patients with whom she comes into contact. Dalgliesh finds her formidable, admirable, irritating and obstinate. But he also finds with her a meeting of

minds and thinks she is "one of the most beautiful women he had ever met" (87). Dalgliesh is back in his professional role as he and the police team from Scotland Yard (once again called to a location outside London) investigate the suspicious deaths of two student nurses in a nursing school at the John Carpendar Hospital.

After Sister Ethel Brumfett's body is found among the ashes of a burnt out building, a suicide note is found in her room. In it she confesses to the murders of the two student nurses. Her motive: to prevent information they had gained about her becoming common knowledge; then she makes a further confession. She was, she claims, Irmgard Grobel, a German concentration camp nurse, acquitted of involvement in the deaths of Jewish prisoners. However, Dalgliesh believes it is Mary Taylor who is Irmgard Grobel. Furthermore, he is convinced that Mary Taylor killed Ethel Brumfett in order that knowledge of her past identity would remain secret.

The matron is another of James's complex characters. Although she is an excellent administrator, a gifted nurse, a clever, broad-minded, well-read woman, she is also a megalomaniac. While she has the ability to soothe the worries of her patients as she smooths their pillows, her thoughts are at variance with her actions: "How easy and how insidiously satisfying was this doling out of advice and comfort, each portion individually flavoured to personal taste!" (83). She is self-mocking about her talent to instil confidence. When her staff, also all eager to bring her their troubles and anxieties, approach her to have "just a word about the problem, Matron," she knows her attention to them will have a positive effect. Her interior monologue, however, is cynical and disdainful: "Hear what comfortable words our Matron saith" she mentally intones while she considers that "her whole life [is] a blasphemous liturgy of reassurance and absolution" (83).

She holds strong feelings about virtue and when learning of the petty blackmail that one of the murdered nurses has been practising is "swept by a sense of moral outrage" (79) when the dead nurse is also described as "good"

because she was religious. Her own credo is very bleak:

> There isn't any help. we are all alone, all of us from the moment of birth until we die. Our past is our present and our future. We have to live with ourselves until there isn't any more time left. If you want salvation look to yourself. There's nowhere else to look. (83)

Mary Taylor insists that Brumfett's story is true, and asserts "Irmgard Grobel is dead" (*Shroud for a Nightingale*, 282). However, the phrase is ambiguous. Although Mary Taylor is alluding to Brumfett, the fact that she is herself Irmgard Grobel opens the comment to interpretation, making it consanguineous with Felix Hearne's quotation from Marlowe: "But that was in another country and besides, the wench is dead" (*Cover Her Face* 182). Dalgliesh, however, lives in the present and, although Irmgard Grobel may have metamorphosised into Mary Taylor, he simply uses events in the past to provide him with clues to incidents in the present, and in this instance he is dealing with the murder of Ethel Brumfett by Mary Taylor. As a policeman it is his job to solve a crime by finding proof of wrongdoing so that the perpetrator can be brought to justice. To bring the matron to justice, however convinced he is of her guilt, he needs more than his unsupported conviction, he needs proof.

When he accuses her of murdering Ethel Brumfett he breaks the rules of police interrogation. He gives her no caution, knows he has no proof, but

> he had to hear her admit what he knew to be the truth. As if it were the most natural question in the world he asked quietly: "Was she dead when you put her into the fire?" (*Shroud for a Nightingale* 285)

At that point they are interrupted by the arrival of the consulting surgeon, Stephen Courtney-Briggs, and Mary Taylor leaves them as she goes to make arrangements for a ward replacement for Sister Brumfett. Dalgliesh suggests to Courtney-Briggs that he is aware the matron is Irmgard Grobel. After his initial outburst--"How do you know about Irmgard Grobel?"--Courtney-

Briggs, who has his own reasons for not exhuming the past, echoes Mary Taylor's assertion, stating, "with the obstinate finality of a man who knows he won't be believed: 'Irmgard Grobel is dead'" (287).

Courtney-Briggs leaves when the matron returns, and she resumes their conversation with a tacit admission. She asks, "What evidence have you?" and, when Dalgliesh admits to having none, she snaps, "Nor will you ever find any" (290). However, after Dalgliesh describes how, in his opinion, she killed Brumfett and burned the body, she demolishes his case but accepts that he will always try to prove it. But, she says, ". . . isn't the most courageous and sensible course to forget that this conversation ever took place, to accept Brumfett's confession for the truth which it is, and to close the case?" (294).

When he refuses to comply with her suggestion, she makes every effort to undermine his determination. She sneers that ". . . failure would be intolerable for Adam Dalgliesh" (293); she taunts him with using regulations, orders, "[a]n oath even" as shields against doubt. She likens her experience as a concentration camp nurse, the young Irmgard Grobel, to Dalgliesh's as a police officer: "I know. I sheltered behind them [rules] once myself. You and I are not so different after all, Adam Dalgliesh" (295). But both know there is a difference.

Indeed, to comply with Mary Taylor's suggestion that he conceal his knowledge of her guilt will not only damage his integrity as a police officer, it will call into jeopardy his very existence. It is, in fact, a demand for him to destroy his own essence. His response is the only one he can give:

> 'I can't suppress evidence or omit relevant facts from my report because I don't choose to like them. If I once did that I should have to give up my job. Not just this particular case, my job. And for always.' (*Shroud for a Nightingale* 294)

The matron, with her immediate insight into his personality, responds bitterly, tellingly:

> 'What would a man like you be without his job, this particular job?

> Vulnerable, like the rest of us. You might even have to begin living and feeling like a human being.' (295)

Indeed, Adam Dalgliesh is, simply, his job, and from *Shroud for a Nightingale* onwards James makes no effort to present him as other than a, rather exceptional, policeman.

Erlene Hubly has stated that "Adam's loves are narcissistic" ("Adam Dalgliesh: Byronic Hero" 43). From the first meeting with Mary Taylor, Dalgliesh had been aware of their similarities; he knew that he would enjoy her company beyond all others; he feels that they are like-minded people. When, later, he measures his knowledge of Mary Taylor as a cold-blooded killer against his awareness that they are like-minded individuals, Dalgliesh is afflicted with a dreadful self-knowledge of the possibility of evil being present within himself. His feelings towards Mary Taylor undergo a reversal, and he pursues "the case as if it were a personal vendetta" (298), as, indeed, it becomes. He identified so closely with her, initially, that it is the evil within himself that he is seeking to cast out.

Mary Taylor is aware of Dalgliesh's response to her. But she is not the warm, caring person that her external persona suggests. Mary Taylor is proud, ambitious, and ruthless. When, in the epilogue she commits suicide, it is not due to remorse for her crime. Rather, it is due to her loss of position and influence. To the end she sneers at Dalgliesh, accusing him of seeing "his job as the embodiment of the moral law" (297). Mary Taylor, in her drive for independence, becomes the victim of her own arrogance and sense of self-importance. She presumes her actions to be "the best for the hospital, the best for her [Brumfett], the best for me" (297), and she has no regrets. She places herself above the law, both moral and judicial.

Reflecting Adam Dalgliesh

In *Shroud for a Nightingale*, James gives Dalgliesh's personality its final unveiling. Dalgliesh is now "fleshed out," becoming a recognisable

person, someone other than the run of the mill fictional Scotland Yard series detective. He is established as a loner, a team leader but not a team player, a man with feelings of superiority which he recognises as a character failing, with a tendency to detachment and solitariness. He is a man who is often a harsh judge of others, yet he is a man capable of caring about other people and of showing compassion for their weaknesses.

Furthermore, Dalgliesh's character has been revealed to the reader through his interpretations of the female characters who have been of consequence to him. *Unnatural Causes*, with its revelations of his personality through his perceptions of Deborah Riscoe and Jane Dalgliesh, became the novel pivotal in establishing Dalgliesh as a realistic character, rather than a fantasy figure (like Hercule Poirot or Lord Peter Wimsey), or the cardboard stereotype of an imaginary police officer as is the case in many detective fictions. Dalgliesh has become that paradox--a human being.

THREE:

Challenging the Patriarchy

I - Cordelia's First Case

After *Shroud for a Nightingale*, P D James continued to write detective novels in a classic style using Adam Dalgliesh as her detective. In *The Black Tower* (1975) he works within a semi-amateur status similar to the one he held in *Unnatural Causes*. In the 1977 publication, *Death of an Expert Witness*, he is once more in his professional capacity. Both these novels are set in backgrounds that are familiar to James through her work as an administrator with the Health Department and the Criminal Department of the Home Office. Both novels are classic formulas with a closed community of suspects. Although Dalgliesh is still capable of growth as an individual, James has stabilised his character and, during this middle period, she works mainly at making (as has been said of another fictional detective) "an acceptable detachment in a young man, something less than an uncomfortable coldness of heart of an older one" (Mann 109), as he grows older without making an emotional commitment.

In 1972, in contrast to the Dalgliesh novels, James created Cordelia Gray, her first female detective. Cordelia is the young protagonist of *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, a novel styled ostensibly in the hard-boiled tradition, and James's first venture into that subgenre. However, the novel was to prove an interlude in the development of her detective fiction, and Cordelia, although welcomed with delight by readers and critics alike, was to feature in only two novels. Ten years after *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* the second Cordelia novel was published. *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, published in 1982, proved to be the last Cordelia novel. When questioned recently about the possibility of resurrecting the character, James replied that she had finished with Cordelia, whom she no longer needed, as she now had Kate Miskin (James's lecture, Wellington, 1998).

Women detectives

The female detective was not, of course, an entirely innovative idea. As Jessica Mann has said, "There were female detectives, but they were oddities, invented for effect, like the detectives who were blind, or crippled, or eccentric" (*Deadlier than the Male* 92). Craig and Cadogan claim that the "fortunes of the lady detective, as a literary figure, were closely bound up with the fortunes of the genre as a whole" (*The Lady Investigates* 13). The fashion in those female detectives has also been influenced by the period in which they originated. Agatha Christie, although not always allowing her heroines to solve the mystery, featured many independently-minded, adventurous young women in the 1920s and 1930s at a period when young women, at least in fiction, had gained a measure of autonomy of action. Many of these adventurous young women caught up in mysterious and adventurous circumstances were dependent on their employment as secretaries and companions for their financial support.

Others of Christie's female characters, acting as amateur detectives, are self-sufficient and self-supporting. Miss Jane Marple, an independent elderly lady with private means and Mrs Ariadne Oliver, a successful author of detective fiction and presumably a widow, are her best known examples. Indeed, elderly lady detectives have abounded from the beginnings of detective fiction: Anna Katherine Green's "Amelia Butterworth"; Patricia Wentworth's "Miss Silver"; and Gladys Mitchell's "Mrs. Bradley, Dame Beatrice" are examples.

Dorothy L. Sayers' Harriet Vane, mystery writer, occasional detective and eventual bride to Lord Peter Wimsy (Sayers' series detective), has been compared and contrasted with Cordelia Gray, particularly in relation to *Gaudy Night*, Sayers' overtly feminist novel. (See S L Clark and SueEllen Campbell). The principal difference between Harriet Vane and Cordelia Gray is that of status. Harriet is an amateur detective and Cordelia is a professional, private detective. Cordelia's professional status alone does not make her unusual as

there had been professionals among the earlier fictional female detectives. What makes Cordelia unique in the annals of detective fiction to that date is that she is broadly modelled on the American hard-boiled private eye. *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* breaks new ground since, from its inception, the hard-boiled detective novel had always been a completely male domain. However, it is a muted triumph. James's presentation of how efficiently (or inadequately) a female character can fit into the shoes of the stereotype character created by misogynist American male authors, the hard-boiled private eye, indicates the difficulties that a woman has when the system she enters conflicts with her own, hard-won value structure.

Introducing Cordelia

Cordelia Gray was P D James's most overt attempt to create an autonomous female character in her detective fictions to that date. Nevertheless, Cordelia Gray is a paradox; she does not satisfy the criteria necessary to become a hard-boiled detective in the male style. She proves unable to hold the idea of abstract "justice" (considered a male concept) on a higher plane than her regard for individual people (thought to be a female trait). Yet she is aloof and detached from the individuals around her, connecting emotionally only with the dead--her mother, her father, and the victim, young Mark Callender. Emotional detachment is considered a male characteristic, but Cordelia also displays the traits regarded as singular to women such as empathy and a proclivity for seeing people and situations in shades of grey, rather than a clear-cut black or white.

Neither does she fit into the pattern of later female detectives such as Kinsey Milhone and V I Warshawski. These women bring to the job an extroverted vigour and sexuality that Cordelia would have found alien. Cordelia is introspective and, although not prudish, presents a certain primness. In fact, she wears an aura of inaccessibility and brings a type of sexlessness to her role. Although she had thought of "virginity as . . . a

temporary and inconvenient state" (82), she found "[l]ovemaking . . . over-rated, not painful but surprising. . . . [an] alienation between thought and action" (83). She has had lovers--"Georges whom she slept with because he was gentle and unhappy . . . and Carl who was young and angry and whom she had liked so much that it seemed churlish not to show it in the only way which seemed to him important" (82)--but she remains unsure of what it means to love someone.

"Difference" and "Androgyny"

The late 1960s and early 1970s were exciting years for the women who were engaged in the women's liberation movement or who simply considered themselves feminist. After the so-called "swinging sixties", when the puritanism of the 1950s was overcome by the sexual freedoms that the new contraceptive pills allowed, women realised that, by gaining control over their reproductive systems, other freedoms also were possible. Nonetheless, the ingrained social *mores* and the embedded dominance of masculine ideology in the language generated multiple and conflicting theories about what exactly was meant by the word "woman".

Two of the terms that emerged from this period were "difference" and "androgyny". Arguments flew thick, fast and furious between feminist theorists. Some contended that the differences between men and women were more than the obvious anatomical ones, and they debated whether these differences were innate or culturally formed phenomena. Literary theorists discussed the "difference" between language seen as male-centred, with "woman" apparent only as an "absence", and what some feminists theorists have termed "feminine writing" (Cixous) or "woman's language" (Irigaray).

Conversely, some theorists argued towards an androgynous ideal for human beings, that is, men and women differentiated by sex characteristics but "exhibiting a combination of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine traits" (Myra Macdonald 222). Carolyn Heilbrun, in her early critical work,

Toward a Recognition of Androgyny (1964), describes "androgyny" as seeking "to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate," that it "suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes" ("Introduction" x). More recently in literary criticism, the term androgynous has come to refer to characters who refuse to be stereotyped on the basis of their sex, preferring to be judged on their abilities, and thus, the term fits into feminist theorising. As Kimberly Dilley points out--"particular job descriptions are not innate to the sexes"--and she suggests that androgyny is "one way of moving from sexual stereotyping in fiction" (40).

In *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, Cordelia Gray fits into the profile of the androgynous character, that "girls can do anything," that there is no such thing as a job that is unsuitable for a woman. But she also conveys an idea of asexuality in the androgynous individual. Additionally, there is a sub-text within the novel which is suggesting that, although the girl might be able to do the job, it is questionable that the job is the kind of job a woman might want to do. Cordelia, a Puck-like young person, is physically and emotionally the kind of woman who can believably fit the role. She combines cat-like features and a physical agility with a personal aloofness as great as Dalgliesh's. At the same time, she brings a feminine sensibility to the job of private detective.

Cordelia's history

Cordelia Gray is a person alone. Her mother died at her birth, and her father, a peripatetic Marxist poet and revolutionary, abandons her to a childhood spent in a series of foster homes, where she learns to be whatever it takes to keep her foster parents happy, but not how to give and receive love. As a result of a bureaucratic bungle coupled with her father's lack of response to the education authority's communication, she is placed in a Catholic secondary boarding school and educated by nuns. She proves to be a good scholar and the nuns consider her capable of achieving a scholarship to

Cambridge. However, on this occasion her father does respond to their correspondence and demands that she leave school and go to live with him. He uses her as a secretary, errand girl, servant, until his death a few years later. Following her father's death, she makes her living as a temporary office assistant until Bernie Pryde, having hired her as an office worker, decides she would be better employed as his assistant. He offers her a partnership in his detective business, a seemingly generous offer, although there is a hint that a partnership was cheaper for him than paying a wage. After his death by suicide she inherits the agency and becomes its sole proprietor.

In order for Cordelia to be accepted as a credible character in a role that had always previously been filled by particularly cynical, trenchant and tough male individuals, James needed a character poorly socialised but with the requisite strong ethical traits that would give her the strength of character to follow her own bent. Cordelia's mental, physical and emotional, even spiritual, qualities are carefully crafted to fit a persona that is plausible in a job that has previously not been recognised as, at the very least, a usual occupation for a female.

Although Cordelia is presented as an open and candid person, the result, apparently, of her training at the hands of the nuns, as a younger child she learns to behave with a deviousness that allowed others to feel more comfortable. For instance, she early grasps that her foster parents are less anxious if she appears to be happy, "that to show unhappiness was to risk the loss of love" (*An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* 20). Furthermore, she accepts that her father, for whom she must abandon her chance of an academic life for that of a "wandering life as cook, nurse, messenger and general camp follower" (65), sees her as a possession rather than a person. Until (roughly) the twentieth century women were considered the chattels of men, a tradeable asset, and expected to behave to please the men (father, brother, husband) who had rights of ownership over them. Early (first-wave) feminists attained some rights for women, and during the second-wave of feminism many more

freedoms for women were achieved, but the remnants of past beliefs lingered. It is only quite recently that these paternalistic theories have become so rapidly outdated that critics writing in the late 1980s and 1990s find Cordelia a puzzle, and wonder "why she never seems like a modern detective" (Klein, "Modern Detectives" 155).

Therefore, although Cordelia can be perceived to be a person of independent action, her journey to autonomy is like the effort of a butterfly to emerge from its chrysalis as she struggles to rid herself of past beliefs and perceptions. She often reacts deferentially to the wishes of others, rather than asserting her own opinions, if it suits her purposes at the time. But she will stubbornly follow a course she has decided upon if she thinks she is in the right, and if it is the course that she wants to follow. She is courageous but not aggressive in her stubbornness, and her lack of experience is balanced by her intelligence, sincerity, and alert observations. Cordelia's introductory characteristics are aptly described as "a combination of experienced naivete and innocent worldliness" (Klein 155). Her personality is developed and moulded throughout the duration of the novel and by the end of the narrative it is finally, though not fully, realised. Cordelia appears to have passed through a rite of passage; she has completed her apprenticeship and her experiences give her confidence and faith in her abilities (Bakerman 113).

Independence and emotional growth

Cordelia is often perplexed by people's responses to what she considers a simple matter of fact, particularly by "the capacity of older people to be outraged by simple facts when they seemed capable of accepting any amount of perverse or shocking opinion" (*An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* 19). When Mavis, the barmaid, wonders if Cordelia's mother would consider it suitable for Cordelia to be running a private detective agency, Cordelia responds, "I only had a mother for the first hour of my life, so I don't have to worry about that" (19). However, she is at a loss to understand why her frank admission

causes such shock and outrage among the bar patrons. Cordelia, though, does care about her mother's opinion, or, at least, the opinion she feels her mother would hold. For, as a result of her lonely, love-starved childhood, Cordelia has created an emotional relationship with the mother of her imagination. Cordelia calls for support from this imaginary figure whenever she feels in need of approval, and her "mother" invariably endorses her actions. Therefore, as she often did, Cordelia "in imagination, . . . consulted her mother. It was just as she expected: her mother thought it an entirely suitable job for a woman" (19).

In her investigation into Mark Callender's suicide, she discovers that he was, in fact, murdered, shockingly, by his own father. As she uncovers the clues that lead to the discovery of young Mark's murderer, Cordelia also exposes Mark's personality and finds herself identifying with the dead Mark more strongly than with the group of live young people in Cambridge. Consequently, she assembles her own persona as she thinks back through her life and begins to compare her own convictions with what she learns of Mark's outlook. She realises that not only is she identifying with the dead young man, "with his solitariness, his self-sufficiency, his alienation from his father, his lonely childhood" (87), but that she has "come to see herself as his avenger" (87). By avenging Mark she will compensate the young Cordelia for a life that had been less than kind and just. Cordelia Gray is the personification of the anger that women feel towards the authoritative male figure, usually the father. Sir Ronald Callender, Mark's father, is the personification of the distant, cold, unloving father.

By the end of *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, Cordelia will have evolved sufficiently to be her own woman, but during the novel her independence is often an illusion. Her background has given Cordelia a poorly developed sense of identity, and little opportunity to develop it further. The irony in the title is emphasised by the fact that she has become a professional detective quite simply because, for the first time, she has been in a position to

develop her own individuality. Bernie offers her an identity when he makes her his partner and imparts his complete experience of the procedures of detective work. He is a failure as a detective, as Cordelia realises, but he is the first person, since Sister Perpetua, to recognise her potential as an individual. Therefore, however independent Cordelia may seem, she has been, as Heilbrun has stated is generally the case with women, unable "to discover for herself an identity not limited by custom or defined by attachment to some man" (*Reinventing Womanhood* 72). Additionally, as her investigation develops and she learns more of the living Mark's personality, he begins to hold an intimate significance for her and she starts to identify closely with him. Her perceptions of Mark create different demands of her than her original commission requires, and exert a control over her, shaping her actions, because what were Mark's needs have become her needs. However, by taking these actions she discovers her own strengths, so that finally she is less driven by chance events, and she begins to attain her own independence.

Cordelia makes many choices that help her to a measure of independence as a woman. For example, she refuses to be influenced from her course as a professional observer by the lure of fellowship with Mark's young Cambridge friends, a real temptation to the lonely young outsider. Still, however much she seems to be heading towards autonomy, ironically, some aspects of Cordelia's investigation during the case expose her apparent independence of action as specious. At times, rather than acting under her own rational command she is functioning under extreme emotional pressure and her reactions to events are emotional rather than the reasoned responses usual to the formula.

Her empathy with Mark arouses emotions which are new to her, confusing her and interfering with her ability to think rationally, and leading her into arrogantly judgmental decision-making. In order that the complex situations of Mark's birth and death remain undisclosed, she interferes with evidence so that the identity of Mark's murderer's murderer (Elizabeth

Leaming, revealed as his natural mother) remains concealed. Additionally, she also perjures herself at the coroner's hearing, giving evidence that suggests Sir Ronald committed suicide with her gun, when, in fact, she had witnessed his death as Miss Leaming pulled the trigger of her (Cordelia's) gun. Her actions have been described as the result of a youthful idealism and a belief that, by her cover-up, she is "achieving a higher justice than . . . would have been possible in a court of law" (Joyner 120). In fact, her actions are the result of a judgment clouded by her over-involvement in the case due to her close identification with Mark Callender.

Cordelia and Dalgliesh

Cordelia has been ranked as an "outsider" and a "loner" (Kotker 58), idiosyncrasies of the hard-boiled private eye, but qualities not necessarily indicative of detachment. However, during her investigation Cordelia is intensely conscious that she is working alone, and she often feels totally isolated. At one point, this feeling of isolation leads her to doubt, briefly, "her ability to solve it [the case] alone" (106). She wishes there was someone she could trust with whom she could discuss events. However, the mood quickly passes. She concludes that

> [s]he was on her own and that, when she came to think about it, was no different from how it had essentially always been. Ironically, the realization brought her comfort and a return of hope. (106)

In fact, although Adam Dalgliesh is not overtly the detective of the novel, it is his theory of detection which guides Cordelia through each step of the mystery until she reaches the solution. Therefore, he is, in reality, with her throughout the case, moving though the novel like a grey eminence.

Cordelia never openly acknowledges that she is operating to the routines prescribed by Dalgliesh, the hated "Super." While conscientiously following the detective methods she has learned from her late partner (such as

examining closely, labelling, and packing into her scene-of-crime kit any suspicious articles she finds at the scene which could turn out to be clues), and with his maxims (always quoted as gems of wisdom from "the Super") ringing in her mental ear, she is, in fact, using techniques and responding to aphorisms that Bernie remembered from his time in Dalgliesh's squad and to which he faithfully adhered. Therefore, it is no surprise that when Dalgliesh (who has had a watching brief on the case unbeknown to both Cordelia and the reader until the end of the book) is able to emulate Hercule Poirot and, by the simple exercise of sitting in his chair and reading reports on the events (using "the little grey cells"), solve the mystery without leaving his office.

It is tempting to think that Bernie Pryde is dedicating his own cliched principles to the greater authority of his former boss. However, in all previous novels Dalgliesh has invariably guided himself with such axioms as "Never theorise in advance of your facts" (34), an adage appearing, for example, in both *Cover Her Face* (55), and *Shroud for a Nightingale* (67). Ironically, at the end of *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, Dalgliesh projects his tendency to epigrammise onto the dead Bernie when, after he has given a verbal report of Cordelia's case to his Assistant Commissioner, he admits: "There is no real evidence and as Bernie Pryde used to tell us, hunch is a good servant but a poor master" (203). Then he bursts out: "God, how that man could churn out his horrible platitudes!" (203), and with further irony he once more censures Bernie (or gives him the credit) when he says to his superior: "Whatever mischief that child was up to in Cambridge, she was working under his [Pryde's] direction" (204).

Yet, to the contrary, Cordelia's every action could have been taken under Dalgliesh's direct command as she follows his guidelines, sieved through her memory of Bernie's tutoring, as faithfully as any present member of his team. Even on the witness stand she

> remembered a piece of Dalgliesh dogma, reported by Bernie, which seemed to her at the time more appropriate advise for a

> criminal than a detective. 'Never tell an unnecessary lie; the truth has great authority.' (178)

Although Cordelia maintains her independence to the extent that she solves the mystery of the crime without his direct intervention, this chimera of Dalgliesh (Dalgliesh's investigative concepts filtered through Bernie Pryde's tutelage), haunts the background of the novel. It is a wry reminder that, at the time of writing, any apparent autonomous affairs by seemingly independent women were usually, directly or indirectly, under male control.

In his investigation into the adequacy of the coroner's findings of the events surrounding Sir Ronald's death, Adam Dalgliesh has sifted through the evidence and appraised himself of all the facts and incidents pertaining to the incident. His deductions have led him to a conclusion that is close to the reality of the situation--and Adam Dalgliesh works according to the rules. Only the serendipitously accidental death of Miss Leaming in a car crash, bringing closure to the case, allows Cordelia to escape her just retribution for her tampering, at the scene of the crime, with clues relating to the circumstances by which Sir Ronald Callender met his death.

When Cordelia is interrogated by Dalgliesh, she again feels totally sequestered and dependent upon her own resources. The interview that she has with Dalgliesh at the end of the novel is a long and difficult one. During the time she spent with Bernie Pryde she developed a loathing for his old boss, "the Super," "the supercilious, sapient, superhuman Super" (35), on account of the poor treatment she feels Bernie received from Dalgliesh. The rancour that Cordelia holds against Dalgliesh for the wrongs she feels he had done Bernie, combined with the residual hatred that she feels for the authoritative male on her own and Mark's behalf, are reflected in her attitude towards Dalgliesh. He, picking up on her antagonism, feels indignant due to his ignorance of the cause of her hostility. It makes him feel, he reports, that "during a perfectly ordinary interrogation . . . [he is] corrupting the young" (204). Nevertheless, they part amicably. In her relief that the case is over, that

she is free to leave, Cordelia bursts into tears and "blurted out her pent-up misery and anger" (202). She lashes out at Dalgliesh as she rids herself of her accumulated antagonistic emotions, centring her charge on his (in her imagination) treatment of Bernie. It proves a cathartic event. Finally, she admits that they are like-minded people when she decides that "he credited her with his own brand of intelligence. She had behaved as he would have behaved" (197). Contrary to the previous three novels in which a view of independent women was filtered through Dalgliesh's beliefs, in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, Dalgliesh is reflected through Cordelia's suppositions.

Cordelia--an incompletely independent identity

Cordelia proves that a woman can be a success as a private detective. Physically and rationally, she shows herself to be as adept as a man, and she does so without denying her humanity. She remains pledged to an ideal of love and goodness. Despite all her experience to the contrary, Cordelia remains sanguine about the innate goodness of human beings, even to the extent of suppressing her memory of her heated exchange with Sir Ronald. When she faces him with her reasoned belief that he is the killer of his own son, she qualifies her accusation by saying, "But I can't believe it. I can't believe that a human being could be so evil" (162). Sir Ronald counters her outburst by stating: "If you are capable of imagining it, then I am capable of doing it" (162).

Therefore, the Cordelia who is characterised as open and honest is opposing her own nature when, as she returns to her office and "reality" after her adventure in Cambridge, she appears ready to accept Mr. Fielding's commission to spy on his girl-friend. Fielding, described as middle-aged and wearing a tight blue suit, has a furtive gaze which is described as "avaricious, prurient" (205), from "pig eyes sharp as flint among the fleshy folds of the face" (204). The agency office and its surroundings, which Cordelia notes as unchanged in their sordidness, are reassuring to her putative client. Cordelia's

acceptance and invitation, "I understand, Mr. Fielding. Won't you come in" (205), in answer to Fielding's "a man likes to know where he stands. You get me?" (205), is a surrender to circumstances and is at odds with her character.

The private detective agency, though, has come to represent to Cordelia the manifestation of her own identity and, as such, she clings to it. She vows to keep the agency going as long as possible, stifling the fear and dislike of aspects of the job she has suffered during the Callender case. Her determination to retain the agency is seen as a measure of her success by critics such as Craig and Cadogan who, when summing up *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, state:

> When P D James heroine Cordelia Gray ends by accepting a divorce commission it is an indication of success, since it implies she is going to keep her agency in business. (226).

However, the agency which has become a symbol of her success in the eyes of the world is actually representative of her failure to be true to her own qualities. Rather than establishing her as independently successful, her acceptance of Fielding's commission simply proves she is conforming to the prevailing idea of success in detective work. It, also, illustrates her failure in creating an autonomous identity, retaining instead the identity devolved upon her by Bernie and others.

The case in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* could have ended grievously for Cordelia except for random, and fortuitous, occurrences. Throughout the novel Cordelia is at the caprice of a benign fate; even her self-determined actions which could have ended disastrously are redeemed by favourable happenstances. By her very ambiguity she possesses the only type of persona which could adapt to a world that was still implicity governed by the idea of strictly separate roles for men and women.

II - Cordelia's Last Case

Although *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* was a resounding critical and popular success such was not the case with the second Cordelia novel, *The Skull Beneath the Skin* (1982). Whereas Cordelia is considered effective in the first novel, solving the mystery and avenging Mark (the victim whose death she is hired to investigate), in the second case she is seen as a failure, unable to bring to any kind of justice the murderer of Clarissa Lisle, the woman she has been hired to protect. The period of the novel is vague (in chronological time there is a gap of ten years between the two books), but the tenor of the background information places it a couple of years after the time of the first novel. In *The Skull Beneath the Skin* there are allusions and intimations that, between the first and second (the last) of Cordelia's reported cases, Cordelia does conduct other investigations, but that these are of the lost and found variety consisting of "[r]escuing lost cats, shadowing errant husbands, tracing runaway teenagers" (55). "Real" detective work is confined to the two cases narrated.

It is apparent, moreover, that rather than considering Cordelia a character with total autonomy, James is using her to reveal that autonomy for women in a patriarchal society is an oxymoron. As the subtleness of her message, in the first novel, obscured its reception, she makes it more obvious in the second by a more blatant parodic approach. By using the same pattern to her plot and shifting the emphasis, she produces a novel that stresses the impediments that women must overcome when they attempt to make their way in a society instituted by and for males.

For instance, in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, Cordelia asks Sir Ronald to provide her with an authorisation naming her his enquiry agent (35). In *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, she is required to pass herself off as a secretary to her client, Clarissa Lisle, Lady Ralston, which gives her no authority

whatsoever to follow her instructions to guard Clarissa against the death threats she has been receiving, or to investigate when the threats become a reality. Both the need for written authorisation and the lack of an innate standing, it is intimated, are due to her youth, and, more assuredly, on account of her being female.

Dalgliesh plays no part in *The Skull Beneath the Skin* (1982), other than in Cordelia's wool-gathering thoughts at the beginning of the novel. After the emotional release of her first meeting with Dalgliesh, Cordelia develops a "crush" on him. In *The Black Tower*, she discovers that he is in hospital and sends him a hand-picked bunch of flowers. He is moved, but perplexed, seeing it as "a touching, very young gesture" (13) and wondering how she knew he was ill. Later, she admits, that though she felt he was a person she could commit to, "that brief madness was over" (*The Skull Beneath the Skin* 54), occurring, as it did, at a time when she was seeking a father-figure. Although, as previously discussed, she is not sexually inexperienced, she continues to appear indifferent to extended or successive sexual involvement, and zealously guards the privacy of her flat: "Adventures occurred elsewhere. She knew that if any man shared that narrow bed for her it would mean commitment" (*The Skull Beneath the Skin* 54). Nonetheless, although there is no suggestion that they develop a close relationship, references in novels other than the two Cordelia novels suggest that she and Dalgliesh remain on friendly terms, sometimes meeting to dine together.

Post-modern Cordelia, a satire

There is one contemporary critic, however, who judges the novel in more flattering terms. In Sally Munt's view, the novel is entering the realm of postmodern metafiction and is satirical in intent (23). The indications supporting her convictions, she claims, lie in the self-reflexivity of such observations as: "This is a story-book killing: a close circle of suspects, isolated scene-of-crime conveniently cut off from the mainland, . . . " (*The*

Skull Beneath the Skin 187), and, "[t]he butler did it. Even in fiction, so I'm led to believe, that solution is regarded as unsatisfactory" (*The Skull Beneath the Skin* 296). The novel reads as a parody of crime fiction genres. It is such a mixture of subgenres that the effect is pastiche. The melange of detective fiction in a closed environment, spy fiction, gothic and romantic gothic suggest that James intended to produce a satire.

James follows a similar plot line in *The Skull Beneath the Skin* to that used in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* and several settings and characters are reworkings of scenes in the earlier novel. For example, both novels open with descriptions of the agency, obviously not a place to instil confidence in persons looking for first-class investigators. Of course, in neither case was the client seeking such a detective. Sir Ronald, ostensibly hiring a detective to uncover the truth behind his son's apparent suicide, actually is expecting to endorse the coroner's finding. His initial intent was to engage Bernie who, he knew, was a failed Scotland Yard detective. Cordelia, it seemed to him, would present the same level of competency (or ineptitude), if only because she was a women. In the second novel she is once again hired with the expectation that her efforts will be second-rate.

During the novel, Cordelia's feeling of autonomy is eroded at every turn. Instead of starring as a clever, independent, young female private-eye, she is relegated to a position as "part bodyguard, part private secretary, part investigator and part - well, nursemaid" (11) to a spoilt actress, and her status diminished to that of amateur by her employer, Sir George Ralston, who is only hiring her to quiet his wife's fears, fears which he considers are groundless. As he points out to Cordelia, if he thought there would be any risk "to my wife or to you, I wouldn't be employing an amateur" (12). In fact, the job turns out to be extremely dangerous and unpleasant, and Cordelia, as in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, is again in danger of losing her life.

However, in *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, rather than being saved by a

middle-aged woman as she was in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, Cordelia, in the tradition of romantic/gothic novels, is saved from downing by a sailor who is passing conveniently close by. Coincidentally, he is returning to her the belt with which Mark had hanged himself, that she had used to help herself climb up the well in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, and which has now, at second hand, played a part in her latest rescue. According to Sally Munt, "it is a conventional generic closure that female operatives are rescued from a violent death in the final few pages by a protective man, often a potential suitor" (23-4), however clever and independent the woman. But James gives a wry twist to even this ritual. After subtly suggesting that the tired and unsuccessful Cordelia is succumbing to the masculinity of her rescuer, responding to her awareness ". . . of his hands beneath her breasts, of the strong sea-smell of his jersey, of a heart beating strongly against her own" (363), she returns Cordelia's feeling of autonomy to her when she receives an urgent call from her office assistant, Miss Maudsley.

An additional sign of lack of any confidence in Cordelia's ability is the need for her work to be authenticated by a male. In *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* the validation is provided by Adam Dalgliesh, when he reaches the same conclusions that Cordelia has reached, based on the evidence she has provided. In *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, however, although she again solves the mystery, she is considered a failure as she cannot provide the proof to convince the police of the legitimacy of her suspicions. It is her word against that of Ambrose Gorringe, the man who has attempted to kill her. Even when her credentials are substantiated, as a woman running a second-rate detective agency her conclusions carry little weight.

Twelve hours after Cordelia is brought back to the island by her rescuer, after she has been thoroughly interrogated by the police, while she is waiting for the launch which is due to return her and the police inspector to the mainland, Miss Maudsley telephones with a "new case, . . . terribly urgent, a lost Siamese kitten, a seal point. . . . And Mrs Sutcliffe has just

rung. Her Pekinese, Nanki-Poo, is lost again" (370). Cordelia accepts her destiny with no hesitation and a degree of thankfulness.

Cordelia - self-authenticated

The Cordelia at the end of *The Skull Beneath the Skin* is much surer of herself and her identity than the young woman who, before the start of the case, has been so vexed with the concerns of her detective agency that she "played with the temptation . . . to walk away from it all" (6). She realises she has had enough of "real" detective work. She may have failed to succeed in a "man's" world, but it is no longer a world in which she aspires to succeed:

> Animals didn't torment themselves with the fear of death, or torment you with the horror of their dying. They didn't burden you with their psychological problems. They didn't surround themselves with possessions, nor live in the past. They didn't scream with pain because of the loss of love. They didn't expect you to die for them. They didn't try to murder you. (371)

She has discovered her own strengths and preferences, she feels able to make her own decisions, she is confirmed in her own identity, she feels inviolate.

At the start of the novel she knows that in society's estimation, her work, which has come to depend solely on the recovery of stray animals and missing teenagers, is judged of little value. As Kotker points out:

> It is a commonplace of mystery and detective fiction analysis that one measure of the stature of the detective is the seriousness of the cases he or she is asked to solve. For this reason, the crimes investigated are murder and large scale theft, and a detective who specializes in finding missing persons is far above one who specializes in finding missing dogs and cats (unless of course they are jewelled dogs and cats along the lines of the falcon in *The Maltese Falcon*). (63)

But, by the end of the case she realises that, for her, what she and Miss

Maudsley and Bevis, her part-time help, are doing, and succeeding at, has its own worth. It may not satisfy her forever, but, in the meantime, "[i]t was a job that needed doing, one that she was good at" (371).

Cordelia is no longer the androgynous woman of *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. During her recent case she has learned to appreciate her difference from men as a positive attribute. Nixon has stated that, "[i]n feminist terms, . . . Cordelia represents a distressing regression, . . ." (Nixon 43). But that is not the case. Cordelia's realisation that she has had enough of "real" detective work is not an admission that women, as a type of sub-species, are unsuited to some jobs on account of their sex. Cordelia has discovered her identity as a *person* one who has tried an occupation and found it one she had come to dislike. Cordelia is confirmed in her own female identity, she is free of any man's control and she is, finally, autonomous.

Cordelia and metaphor

Moreover, although it has not been the aim in this thesis to do more than study some of James's female characters in light of women's increasing emancipation, note should be made of the fact that, with the Cordelia novels in particular, James has written narratives which can be analysed on several levels and both would reward that type of analysis. Presenting Cordelia, in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, as a creditable detective and the novel as striking a blow for the emancipation of women is to effect only one reading. Cordelia is a metaphor for all women in the male-centred society and many of her actions and discoveries can be analysed as metaphors and allegories. There are many examples. For instance, during her inspection of the front garden of the cottage (in which Mark had been staying), Cordelia comes across "a crumpled page of an illustrated magazine" which, upon her examination, proves to be "a colour photograph of a female nude" (54).

> The woman had her back to the camera and was bending forward, gross buttocks splayed above booted thighs. She was smiling saucily

> over her shoulder in a blatant invitation made more grotesque by the long androgynous (my emphasis) face which even tactful lighting couldn't make other than repellent. (54)

It is a picture which Cordelia finds disturbing, but she is at a loss to understand why. At first, she wonders if she is becoming obsessed with Mark that she finds his possible ownership of the picture so disgusting, but, finally, she comforts herself by deciding it might have nothing to do with him. However, on another level, the androgynous head on the overtly female body can be read as a suggestion that women, by attempting to attain equality with men, are in danger of making themselves repellent, in both senses of the word.

Women writing of women detectives

Feminist critics of the detective novel have pointed out that creating a female detective is not simply a matter of changing the sex of the detective. Maureen Reddy, in her book *Sisters in Crime*, has asserted: "Far too often, strong women detectives are found filling the (gum) shoes of strong male detectives, with only the gender changed" (Reddy 6). Anne Cranny-Francis states:

> [R]ole-reversal is not a simple process; placing a female character in a male role transforms not only the role itself, but every other element of the plot as well. To make a female detective convincing as a character, to have her operate as more than just an honorary male, reinforcing the masculine identity of the characterization by her aberrant, but temporary, occupation, requires a radical reassessment of the characterization of the detective and the narrative in which she functions. (143).

Moreover, to make the female a feminist, "much more is required of feminist detective fiction than the substitution of a feminist for a male private

eye" (Klein, "An Unsuitable Job for a Feminist?" 221). Kimberly Dilley, writing about women authors in the 1980s and 1990s, states that the American writers of feminist detectives (Paretsky, Grafton, Muller, for example) all realised that though they were attracted to the hard-boiled type of novel, when they came to write their own novels using a female detective "it [the hard-boiled genre] was not meant for them as females," so that these authors "worked to create their own definitions of heroism, adventure, and what is 'appropriate'" (20). Their novels, therefore, whilst "not a treatise on feminism" are "a window on the feminisms of many women living their lives in a masculine-dominated Western society" (20).

James, writing almost two decades earlier, epitomises, through her character Cordelia Gray, the paradox of the female detective in a hard-boiled genre. On the one hand, if she is judged as an outsider, a loner, a person whose values and ethics are at odds with society's, she is a successful representation of a hard-boiled detective, but a failure as a woman. If, on the other hand, she displays the feminine characteristics of caring and cooperation she is no longer filling the criteria of a private-eye. Consequently, Cordelia's vocational activities bring her into conflict with her own nature, with the result that, as Klein says, "Either feminism or the formula is at risk" (202).

Feminists reading detective fiction

Detective fiction, when read from a feminist perspective, reveals its underlying ideology--and that is invariably the ideology that is dominant and prevailing (Reddy). Klein maintains that "[a]dopting the formula traps their authors" ("An Unsuitable Job for a Feminist?" 201) unless the feminist detective is "both aware and committed" to rejecting

> a social paradigm which dishonestly pretends to uphold a system of values based on a disinterested ethic but is actually grounded in interested power structures, especially as those structures and systems deliberately exclude women. (202)

She maintains that only if a woman is writing as a woman within a feminist ideology will she succeed in subverting the existing formula of the detective novel.

In *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, James writes as a woman, that is, from a female viewpoint with an understanding of women's situations, and she creates a detective who brings to her role the psychology of a woman. Is Cordelia a believable female detective undertaking an assignment or is she a woman attempting to assume the part of a male hard-boiled detective? Cordelia certainly fills the former condition, but in the process of developing this character James, whether by design or accident, demonstrates that a woman cannot succeed as a detective in the hard-boiled detective mode unless she denies aspects of her own female psychology. As Klein concludes in her criticism of the two Cordelia novels,

> the double-voiced discourse between the detective novel as it ordinarily is and the cases of Cordelia Gray which only borrow elements of that format for the central tale but not the full narrative, provides a sharp contrast between the presentation of a woman detective and the male model. ("Modern Detectives" 158)

It becomes apparent, therefore, that in order for a detective novel to be a feminist novel there must be a deliberate intention to alter the formula and to subvert the system that traditional detective fiction upholds. The novel must be written with a consciously feminist awareness of the feminist ideology that accepts an androgynous approach to work, ability, and intelligence. Although James does not adhere rigidly to the hard-boiled formula, in an ostensibly simple private-eye type novel, using a female detective, James quietly and thoroughly deconstructs the hard-boiled, detective novel.

FOUR:

Infiltrating the Male Bastions

I - Introducing Kate Miskin

After *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, James abandons her foray into the esoteric realm of the private eye and returns to the police force, the official setting for murder and detection. Using the Dalgliesh format, she moves into the realistic mode in order to force "the detective formula out of its mould and into a discussion of [the] realistic problems facing the characters" (Irons, "New Women Detectives" 129). However, she does not relinquish the idea of developing a female detective character. In *A Taste for Death* (1986), James creates Inspector Kate Miskin of the Metropolitan Police Force. With the arrival of Kate, James's novels are more explicit in their examination of the problems still faced by independent women, especially those women working in such male-dominated professions as the police and the law. Maureen Reddy (in her discussion of *A Taste for Death*) states:

> James tackles the thorniest problems: What kind of woman might be attracted to police work and yet refuse to be merely an honorary man? . . . What is the role of empathy? What is the relation between a woman police officer and traditional conceptions of law and justice? (Reddy 89)

Women and male-dominated professions

Kate Miskin certainly serves as a foil for the delineation of the problems that women face both within their working environments and within the wider society. However, to say, as Sally Munt maintains, that Kate Miskin is created specifically for *A Taste for Death* so that James can feature "[s]ocial issues specific to women . . . abortion and reproduction, career choices versus domestic responsibilities, ageism and older women" (*Murder By the Book?* 24) in the novel, transmutes James from novelist into pamphleteer. The fact that James can be shown to use female characters to highlight societal problems in

all her novels has already been noted. She has been concerned with women's position in society and their rights, or lack of them, from her first novel, and she has created many characters who can be shown to symbolise these concerns. Yet James is, first and foremost, a writer of fiction, as she vigorously maintains. Her female protagonists are formed with a depth and rigour that make them rounded, believable people, and she is reported as saying, "it's not that one says I'll deal with female rights in this novel--given a woman character, you are faced with them, it's essential to her situation" (Munt 212, n88).

Consequently, the argument it is not that Kate is created in order to show 'realism' in this specific novel, but that she is conceived at this particular time in the 1980s because it became possible to portray realistically a senior female police detective working alongside, and at the same tasks as, senior male officers. Therefore, in addition to the problems that Munt lists, the novel illustrates the *persisting* problems that women face working in what were once almost exclusively male professions in the 'real' world.

From the that she began writing novels, it had always been James's intention to write detective novels using a series detective; Adam Dalgliesh was no accident. However, since she held to a further intention, that of producing novels based in reality rather than simply entertainments, novels which were realistic, significant and relevant to their times, she felt she required a professional, rather than an amateur, detective. Furthermore, to be truly authentic, in order to offer a serious message beyond the entertainment value of a detective story, she considered that her only reasonable choice for a professional series detective, at that time (the end of the 1950s), was a senior policeman (James 6). Now, as she remarked in a talk given at the Wellington City Gallery in 1998, it would be possible to choose a *woman* police officer for the role and, if she were beginning her writing career in the 1990s, she might well choose to do so.

Feminism and the costs of success

Kate represents the modern woman who has flourished since, what has become known as, the sexual revolution and the onset of the second wave of feminism. At her introduction she appears free of financial worries and emotional ties, with her own apartment complete with her own mortgage, in charge of her own sexuality, able to take a lover and prevent a pregnancy--an independent professional woman. Munt claims that Kate's independence is "expedient," and that Kate is "intended to service her senior officer" (24). She dismisses Kate as having "an unequivocally heterosexual femininity" (24), and she wonders if this is how "feminism was assimilated in the late 1980s culture, reproducing the New Woman as sexy and strong, and still essentially feminine" (24). The situation is quite the contrary, according to James, and success for women working in male-dominated professions comes with considerable emotional mutilation.

However, while a case can be made for the feminism of James's female detectives, Cordelia Gray and Kate Miskin, and also of several of her other female characters, according to James the traits that are needed to make a successful detective are neither male nor female; they are characteristics which can be common to both. James's treatment of her series police detective, Adam Dalgliesh, is influenced by these feminist/androgynous qualities and James is quoted as saying that Dalgliesh "is not drawn from real life but has the qualities I admire in men and women--courage, independence, intelligence and sensitivity" (Gibbs 95). When Dalgliesh chooses Kate to become a member of his squad it is for the qualities that he perceives her as possessing, such as "intelligence, courage, discretion and common-sense" (16). These are qualities that Dalgliesh admits to admiring in a detective and very similar to the traits that Dalgliesh himself possesses. As he is at pains to assure himself, he does not choose her because of any sexual attraction that she holds for him.

As he works more closely with her, he discovers that she reacts to situations as he would and he entrusts to her aspects of the job that in the past

he would have done himself rather than delegate to one of his (macho) male colleagues. Furthermore, he discovers she has a respect for the people she is dealing with that matches his own, unlike the attitudes of many of her colleagues. In *A Taste for Death*, as the case progresses, Dalgliesh finds he is comparing the attitudes of the two officers (Kate Miskin and John Massingham) and that Massingham is suffering in the comparison. After an unsuccessful and inconclusive initial meeting that Dalgliesh and Kate have had with Carole Washburn (mistress of the victim, Paul Berowne), Dalgliesh wonders if Carole would have spoken more freely to Kate alone. Kate's answer indicates the contrast between her and Massingham:

> 'Possibly, sir, but only if I'd promised to keep it confidential, and I don't see how I could have done that.'
>
> Massingham, he suspected, would have promised secrecy and then had no compunction in telling. That was one of the differences between them.
>
> 'No,' he said, 'you couldn't have done that.' (*A Taste for Death* 301).

To be chosen as part of the new squad that Dalgliesh is heading presents a watermark achievement for Kate Miskin. Still, Kate's successful rise to her present level within the police ranks has meant she has had to subjugate tendencies that are deemed "feminine" and accentuate the ones considered "masculine." Carolyn Heilbrun describes such biases as stemming from "received ideas" which, she points out, include the terms "masculine" and "feminine" and she defines these terms thus:

> 'masculine' equals forceful, competent, competitive, controlling, vigorous, unsentimental, and occasionally violent; 'feminine' equals tender, genteel, intuitive rather than rational, passive, unaggressive, readily given to submission (*Androgyny* xiv).

Indeed, Munt describes Kate as "hard, deductive, ambitious, taciturn, private, principled, honest and loyal--a model hero" (Munt 24). Kate's achieved success has been at the expense of certain of her female attributes and, in the

process, she has had to become an honorary male.

During the squad's first case, the investigation into the violent death of Sir Paul Berowne, which is covered in *A Taste for Death*, Kate begins to question just what kind of person she is becoming as she climbs through the ranks of the police force. This stocktaking of her ethical standards is forced upon her by the increasing incapacity of her ageing grandmother to live by herself, and of her own position as her grandmother's only remaining relative. It sets her upon a journey of self-awareness and emotional growth that continues throughout the novel and through the two following novels, *Original Sin* and *A Certain Justice*.

During *A Taste for Death*, she does learn to trust her feelings and those of other people, to become more open to people, more empathetic, so that by the end of *A Taste for Death* she even feels emotionally strong enough to let down her guard sufficiently to thank Dalgliesh for giving her the opportunity to work on the team, adding "I've learnt a lot" (508). These words, as Reddy says, "are resonant with meaning" (85). She knows that as well as learning more about the techniques of detection, she has grown as a person, learning more about herself and other people. Dalgliesh, empathetic in these situations, particularly as they reflect his own experience, replies: "One always does. That's what so often makes it painful" (*A Taste for Death* 508).

Introduction to the Squad

Twenty-seven year-old Inspector Kate Miskin, already a senior police officer at Scotland Yard, is among the group of police officers hand-picked by Commander Adam Dalgliesh to form the elite squad established to deal with sensitive crimes. Kate is aware that, as Dalgliesh believes he needs to include a woman in his squad, she is chosen for the new squad "because of her sex, not despite it" (Reddy 86-7). However, Kate knows that Dalgliesh is not "the man to make routine gestures to feminism, or to any other fashionable cause come to that" (*A Taste for Death* 172). She is fully aware that he has selected

her specifically on the basis of her career record, and that, although the squad needed a female officer, she is not simply any female body called in to plug a gap. Indeed, Dalgliesh has thought it so important that the squad should include a senior woman detective that "he had devoted his energy to choosing the right one, rather than speculating how well she would fit into the team" (16). Reddy recognises that Kate understands the dynamics of the situation and that she is pragmatic about the sex discrimination that she is exposed to, treating it as "one of the 'disadvantages' of the job, . . . accepting this fact of life in a gendered society calmly" and not "internaliz[ing] the sexism she finds around her" (Reddy 87). But, while this is indeed the situation at the time, the constraints this acceptance places on her female inclinations towards empathy and involvement have an accumulatively detrimental effect on her emotional equilibrium--a consequence which requires eventual confrontation.

Dalgliesh's choice of Kate for the female detective on the squad, though based on her work record and her interview performance and not on any personal attraction he felt for her, was also, as previously remarked, influenced by the fact that she has many qualities which are similar to many of his own characteristics. As Kate's character evolves, the resemblance between their characters becomes more apparent. Some of the similarities occur because Kate models herself on the man whose career she would like to emulate; others are innate. Regardless of all other considerations, she is clever, hard-working, eager to learn--and driven to escape from her beginnings. Her selection presents an important opportunity for the ambitious young officer and she is keen to make a success of the chance she has been offered. In the event she proves herself an effective choice, and subsequent novels establish her position on the squad.

Kate, the Squad's constant

Kate does not feature in James's next novel, *Devices and Desires* (1989), which again uses the formula of Dalgliesh on vacation. As he prepares

to leave his office, his thoughts centre on the detectives prominent in *A Taste for Death*, their whereabouts and their continuing positions with the force:

> He had earlier said his goodbye to Inspector Miskin and she was now out on a case. Chief Inspector Massingham had been seconded to the Intermediate Command Course at Bramshill Police College . . . and Kate had temporarily taken over his place as Dalgliesh's second in command of the Special Squad. (*Devices and Desires* 10)

It is a technique which serves to keep Kate alive in her readers' minds. Thus, by the time *Original Sin* is published in 1994, Kate is well established as a permanent series detective.

In *Original Sin* she is partnered by Inspector Daniel Aaron, Massingham's replacement, who joined the squad three months earlier. Although they are of equal rank, she is the senior detective on the squad. However, their partnership is of short duration. The murders in *Original Sin* are murders of revenge for events which occurred during the Second World War, when a Jewish family was killed through an act of treachery. Daniel's allegiance to his Jewish upbringing proves more compelling than his ambition and the novel culminates in a situation in which Daniel is unable to discharge his impartial duty as a police officer when he finds himself in sympathy with the murderer.

Therefore, in *A Certain Justice* (1997), James's most recent novel, Kate once again has a new partner. Daniel Aaron has left the police force and he has been replaced by Inspector Piers Tarrant, twenty-seven years old and unmarried. Piers, an Oxford university graduate with a degree in theology, transferred to the Special Squad three months earlier from the Arts and Antiques Squad. The murder victim in the case central to the Special Squad's investigation in this novel, Venetia Aldridge, presents a striking portrait of a successful and independent woman, and illustrates the cost which success can extract from a woman.

Throughout the three novels in which she appears (*A Taste for Death*,

Original Sin, and *A Certain Justice*), Kate Miskin travels on her private odyssey of emotional growth, a journey which allows her to admit to family ties, to lose some of her detachment toward the people she has to deal with in her public life without destroying her professionalism, and to become more emotionally involved with the people with whom she has more personal relationships.

II - The Rise of Kate Miskin

A professional career woman

By the 1980s more than ever before, women were making their way into all the working and professional arenas previously restricted to men, proving themselves as forceful, competent and rational as any man, and more so than many. Yet, still they faced complications, often encountering barriers artificially raised against them by their male colleagues. Kate is no exception. Her position as an independent woman has come at a price and her success as a professional police officer is built on a shaky foundation of personal denials.

Kate is a professional career woman whose job is the most important thing in her life. Yet, in order to reach her present position she has repudiated many close emotional ties, held herself aloof from personal relationships, and rejected her past. Indeed, the philosophy she has adopted to live by is encapsulated in a couplet remembered from her schooldays:

> What matters it what went before or after
> Now with myself I will begin and end.
> (*A Taste for Death* 170)

She has fabricated a carapace of detachment to shield herself from the vulnerability to which her feelings for other people expose her as she single-mindedly pursues success within the police force. But the defensive shield is stifling her humanity. As her empathy is kindled by the people she meets during the case, the shell begins to crack and fall away.

During her first case with the Special Squad (in *A Taste for Death*), her atrophied emotional life is resuscitated as she deals with the dilemma that her ageing grandmother presents. The problem is resolved by her grandmother's murder, but it stimulates her growing self-awareness. In *Original Sin*, Kate is poised and confident in her job, but she is brought to a greater awareness of her emotional barrenness. The perception that she was gaining, in *A Taste for Death*, of the destructive effects that a police officer's job could have on her

character is crystallised in *A Certain Justice*, and she comes to terms with her background and strengthens her own personality.

Kate's history

Kate joined the police force straight from school. When, in *A Taste for Death*, Carole Washburn asks her why she decided to become a police officer, she answers:

> I didn't want an office job. I wanted a career where I could earn well from the start, hope for promotion. I suppose I like pitting myself against men. And they were rather against the idea at the school I went to. That was an added inducement. (*A Taste for Death* 367)

There were other incentives which she did not mention, such as, getting away from Ellison Fairweather Buildings, where she had spent all her growing years, and from her grandmother, who still lived in the "meanly proportioned, dirty, noisy flat on the seventh floor of a post-war tower block" (171).

Kate Miskin has come a long way from a childhood that can only be called deprived, one much more disadvantaged than those of either Sally Jupp or Cordelia Gray. For Kate is illegitimate, orphaned at birth, her father unnamed, and raised by a grandmother who acknowledges a begrudging responsibility towards her. Her early life in the poor conditions of the Ellison Fairweather Building has fuelled an ambition for more congenial surroundings.

In her overpowering ambition to escape from her background, Kate declines the university education suggested by her careers adviser, insisting that university would be three wasted years, that she wants to start earning immediately. At the assurance that she would get a full grant, be able to "manage", she responds fiercely, "I don't want to have to manage. I want a job, a place of my own" (*A Taste for Death* 367). The police force attracted her and has fulfilled her hopes of a good career.

Moreover, she has been able to satisfy her desire for her own place and for the last two years, in what is described as "the first step in a planned

upward progress," she has been living in her own flat in Charles Shannon House, a flat which she is buying "on a carefully calculated mortgage" (*A Taste for Death* 169).

The flat means more to her than four walls and a roof, it is her citadel, her fortress against the world, the first place she has thought of as home, even though she regards it as a stepping stone in the journey to the remaking of the poor child into the self-made professional woman. Alongside her ambition for continuing promotion in the police force it is her dream to move, eventually, to "one of the converted warehouses on the Thames," with their "wide windows overlooking the river, [and] huge rooms with their bare rafters, a distant view of Tower Bridge . . ." (169).

Treatment by colleagues

In spite of the fact that Kate is a successful police detective who already holds the rank of inspector when she joins the Special Squad, she is still, on occasion, constrained to make compromises not required of her male colleagues and to abjure her own femininity to attain and maintain that success. Furthermore, many police officers in the male-dominated institution retain a bias against the inclusion of women officers in a frontline squad. One such officer is Dalgliesh's second in command, Chief Inspector John Massingham, who has been described by Bruce Harkness as "honest, down to earth, hardworking, perhaps ruthless and sensual; but a solid professional policeman" ("P D James" 121). By his own admission,

> Massingham still half-regretted the days when women police officers were content to find lost children, search female prisoners, reform prostitutes, comfort the bereaved, . . . putting them [female officers] in the front line . . . only made the job of their male colleagues even more onerous. In Massingham's view the instinct to protect a woman in moments of high danger was deep-seated and ineradicable, ... (*A Taste for Death* 101)

People like Massingham, who hold firmly to these opinions, expect men to be masculine, women to be feminine, according to Carolyn Heilbrun's definition of "received ideas" noted earlier. They expect, also, that their roles should manifest these qualities. It is not, therefore, simply that Massingham feels negative about Kate acting in what he perceives as a masculine manner, he also feels positively that his own role as a man demands that he should act in the defined masculine fashion in relation to women police officers.

Earlier in her career Kate, then a sergeant, worked with Massingham when he was a divisional detective inspector, and found him difficult to work with. Though both acknowledge the other's competence, she finds him an irksome working partner still. His preconceptions, though often unspoken, affect his attitude to her, placing a stress on their relationship and creating a tension in their working alliance, and Kate finds herself prone to frequent "spurt[s] of resentment" caused by his manner.

Her knowledge of how he will react in certain situations provokes her into taking an overly defensive position in her dealings with him. For instance, she is "seized with a spurt of envy and resentment" against Massingham as she worries about future problems that her grandmother's ageing will place upon her, as her grandmother's only relative. Kate knows that if their situations were reversed, "[e]ven if he had a dozen difficult and demanding relatives no one would expect him to have to cope" (*A Taste for Death* 179). She suspects that "if she did have to take time off from the job he would be the first to point out that, when the going got really tough, you couldn't rely on a woman" (179), although, if a crisis was to occur with his own elderly relative, he would expect both to rely on a woman and to find her reliable. Kate, acting on impulse, knowing that Massingham lives at home with his retired father, asks him, "What would happen if your father fell ill?" His reply--"I hadn't thought. I suppose my sister would fly home from Rome"--confirms her suspicions. "Of course, she thought. Who else? The resentment against him which she had begun to think was fading spurted into

life" (*A Taste for Death* 431). As Kimberly Dilley has pointed out, women "are held responsible for the care of others, especially people who are weak or vulnerable" (90).

When both her fears and her prophecy are confirmed and her grandmother is mugged and, though not seriously hurt, is unable to be left alone in the short term, his reaction is totally predictable. She is in Massingham's office when she takes the call from the hospital and his response, when she tells him she will have to take the rest of that day off and probably the next, is exactly as she expected: "Can't they get someone else to cope?" and, "It's not going to be convenient" (431).

Later, when Dalgliesh remarks that they had better get on as there is a lot to be done, he agrees. Then he adds: "It's a pity we haven't Kate. This tends to happen with women officers, the inconvenient domestic emergency." Dalgliesh's response is cold: "Not noticeably, John, particularly not with that officer" (*A Taste for Death* 438).

Emotional well-being of group - a female responsibility

However, when Dalgliesh selected Kate to join the squad it was for the benefits that he felt her presence would engender. For instance, though aware of Massingham's prejudices concerning women police officers and knowing there had been frictions in their previous partnership, Dalgliesh considers that Massingham has "learned to discipline some of his prejudices . . . as he had the notorious Massingham temper" (*A Taste for Death* 16), and that he will "work with Kate Miskin loyally and conscientiously because he respected her as a detective" (*A Taste for Death* 101). In Dalgliesh's judgment, any rivalry aroused by Kate's presence in the squad could have a beneficial result in that, the "macho freemasonry which frequently bound together a team of all male officers" would find Kate's proximity "iconoclastic" (16-17).

Therefore, the burden of making the arrangement work rests with Kate, but it is no more than she expects. Part of her credo states: "You did the job

so that your male colleagues had to respect you even if it was too much to expect that they would like you" and "[y]ou made no unnecessary enemies; it was hard enough for a woman to climb without getting kicked in the ankles on the way up" (*A Taste for Death* 219). In this respect, Kimberly Dilley suggests that "[t]he woman police officer is a metaphor for all women" in a "masculine-dominated society" (90).

Relationships with colleagues

Additionally, in Kate's opinion, a woman is unwise to become emotionally involved with the men she works alongside and another part of her credo states: "You kept your private life private, unmessy. There were men enough in the world without being trapped by propinquity into sexual entanglements with your colleagues" (*A Taste for Death* 219).

Her relationships with her working partners in the three novels are as different as the men themselves. Kate considers that Piers Tarrant, her partner during the Aldridge case, is "one of the most sexually attractive officers with whom she had ever worked. It had been an unwelcome realization but she had no intention of allowing it to become a problem" (*A Certain Justice* 113). Whether or not Inspector Tarrant finds Kate attractive is never revealed. Indeed, the reader is not allowed into the mind of Piers Tarrant, and his actions are reported by the narrator and occasionally commented upon by Dalgliesh.

After the initial acknowledgement of his sexual attractiveness, Kate's main reaction to Tarrant is one of puzzlement, and irritation at his cavalier attitude to his job. His manner to her is always one of perfect correctness, but there is an aloofness about him that she finds alienating. She feels that he shares an "unstressed camaraderie with Dalgliesh" from which she is excluded. She gains the impression that "for Piers, nothing was of overwhelming importance, nothing could be taken seriously because, for him, life was a private joke, . . ." (*A Certain Justice* 210). She knows that she

could not be light-hearted about her job as he seems to be about his; her career has been too hardly won. She finds him as antithetical to her, in his own way, as Massingham had been, but without the astringent liveliness produced by that edge of competitiveness which Massingham brought to the partnership.

However, where Massingham was concerned she had had no difficulty in maintaining a businesslike distance. She had always felt a resentful antipathy towards him, an instinctive dislike that, though it contained some class resentment (he was, after all, the Honourable John Massingham, son of Lord Dungannon), was deeper and more fundamental. It is not, however, the "antagonism of an unacknowledged sexuality" (*A Taste for Death* 322-3). He is not the kind of man she finds physically attractive; in fact, she "finds red-haired men physically unattractive" (*A Taste for Death* 322). Although, on occasions, she had come close to liking him, such softenings in their relationship were almost immediately repudiated by some occurrence which rekindled their mutual aversion. These are not the sorts of feelings that she has towards her latest partner. She resents Piers Tarrant for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that he is Daniel Aaron's replacement.

With Daniel Aaron, her partner in *Original Sin*, she had had an easy, warm and friendly working relationship. Although Daniel had been very attracted to her from the beginning of their partnership, and Kate finds him equally attractive, she maintains the distance she has always kept between herself and her colleagues. Only on one occasion has their mutual attractions been acknowledged. One night Daniel asks Kate out for a drink, ostensibly to discuss the case. They take their drinks out to into the garden at the rear of the tavern, and stand, with their glasses resting on the top of the wall, watching the nocturnal activity on the river. As their talk becomes more personal and they exchange information about themselves, they both experience the pull of the attraction that lies between them. To Kate it is "a charge of physical longing so strong that she had to put out a hand and steady

herself against the wall to prevent herself from stepping forward into his arms" (*Original Sin* 290). She turns aside from his movement toward her, her gesture "slight but unmistakable" (290). Her rejection of him is the result more of her ingrained personal proscription against intimate relationships with fellow officers than a physical aversion to Daniel. She decides to be brutal in her rebuff, and she makes use of her recent break-up with her lover, Alan Scully, although she is not perfectly truthful when she alleges:

> 'Look, I've chucked the man I love because of the job. Why should I mess it up for someone I don't love?'
>
> 'Would it mess it up, your job or mine?'
>
> 'Oh Daniel, doesn't it always?' (*Original Sin* 290).

By the end of the novel, her feelings towards him have deepened, although she is only aware of her sorrow that he has thrown away a promising career. After he has left the Force, when a relationship is possible under Kate's rules, he makes no effort to keep in touch with her. She has no idea of his whereabouts or what he is doing and she acknowledges that she misses him (*A Certain Justice* 209).

Kate as lover

When Kate is called to the case in *Original Sin*, she is in the throes of unpacking at her recently purchased flat in the Docklands. Helping her to unpack and to shelve her books is her lover Alan Scully. Kate and Alan had met two years prior to the Berowne case when she had been part of the team investigating a burglary at his flat.

Before meeting Alan, Kate's sexual experiences were limited to casual episodes, physical but not emotional. She found that "she could enjoy sex while despising the source of her pleasure," not, she realises, a good basis for any long term relationship. Indeed

> She was amused, but also a little dismayed, to realize by the time she was eighteen that she was thinking of men as they were alleged so

> often to regard women, an occasional sexual or social diversion, but too unimportant to be allowed to interfere with the serious business of life; . . . . (*A Taste for Death* 175)

Alan, a quiet man, a librarian and book collector, was unlike any man Kate had known previously. He introduced her to authors she would not otherwise have read and generally opened up an intellectual life for her. He also proved himself a more than adequate lover; indeed, "he had demolished one of her firmly held assumptions, that intellectuals weren't interested in sex" (*A Taste for Death* 176). However, Scully is about to step out of her life, leaving an intimate place which no one else fills during the rest of *Original Sin* or the following novel, *A Certain Justice*.

Kate has often wondered how she would feel should this day ever come. During the Berowne case, disgusted with Berowne for keeping a mistress "tucked away in the equivalent of a Victorian love-nest to serve his purpose when he has an odd moment to spare for her" (*A Taste for Death* 301), she bursts out to Massingham, "The man was a shit" (301). Massingham points out that there was no element of coercion, that Carole Washburn is well able to support herself. Kate persists in her argument that it is always the woman who pays emotionally in such a situation.

Massingham's riposte disconcerts her. He suggests that when she is "feeling censorious," she might consider how easy it would be for her to make a choice if she were forced to choose between her lover and her job (*A Taste for Death* 302). His remarks cause her to question her true feelings for Alan: "Suppose I have the choice, promotion or Alan, my flat or Alan?" But she quickly dismisses the questions as leading to "imaginary choices, ethical dilemmas," which "she would never have to confront . . . in real life" (*A Taste for Death* 323).

"Real life," however, has arrived, and she must make her choice. Initially, they had settled into an uncommitted but comfortable "loving friendship," but Alan's own commitment has become deeper and he wants a

stronger commitment from Kate. Scully has been offered a chance to work at Princeton University for three years and he is keen to take up the opportunity. But Kate is even more important to him and he wants her to marry him and for them to start a family. To prove his commitment to her, though, he offers to refuse the Princeton post and to retain his London job in order that she may keep her job, if she will agree to marry him or, at least, make him a firm commitment.

Commitment - only to the job

It is a commitment that Kate is not willing to make. As she watches Scully placing her books onto the shelves she has had newly fitted, she has a clear vision of her life as a successful and ambitious professional woman. Although she knows she has given affection and loyalty to Alan, their relationship in her life of "well-organized self-sufficiency" is "the equivalent of a fashion accessory" (*Original Sin* 121), another possession along with the flat and the car and the job.

Kate's sex life resonates with echoes of Cordelia's attitudes and Dalgliesh's experiences. Both Kate and Cordelia consider their flats private, inviolate from outsiders. But, whereas Cordelia kept her lovers out of her personal space, Kate allows Alan entry. However, each time that he "stepped through the door, uncurious, unthreatening, carrying as always his plastic bag of books, even his gentle presence . . . seemed for a moment a dangerous intrusion" (170). Kate's rejection of his proposal will result in a total break between them. Alan Scully will leave for the States and move permanently out of her life. Echoing Deborah Riscoe, who "could no longer bear to loiter about on the periphery of his [Dalgliesh's] life waiting for him to make up his mind" (*Unnatural Causes* 240), Alan Scully is "tired of being on the periphery of her life. . . . seeing her only when the job permitted" (*Original Sin* 122), never more to her than lover.

For three years Alan Scully has been her lover, a "necessary

accoutrement" to her life, "intelligent, personable, available when needed, skilful in bed and undemanding out of it" (*Original Sin* 121), but it is all she wants from him, and she can neither give nor receive a greater commitment. As she realised when she joined the Special Squad, nothing was, or ever would be, more important to her than her job.

III - The Authentication of Kate Miskin

Moving on

After the dramatic ending to the Berowne case in her flat--the siege by Dominic Swayne, Berowne's murderer, and his resultant murder of her grandmother--it would have been understandable if Kate, in an extremity of loathing at the dual violation of Swayne's invasion (his intrusion into her private space as well as his murder of her grandmother), had moved immediately. Instead, she stayed in Holland Park for a further nine months, feeling

> that to leave at once would be a desertion, although she was not sure from what, perhaps from a reality that had to be faced, knowing too that there was expiation to be made, things she had to learn about herself, ... (*Original Sin* 118)

When she does move, however, the flat she moves to comes complete with an "entryphone" and a chain and two security locks on her front door, making it a flat that "was particularly suitable for a police officer" (119).

Her new home in Docklands overlooks the River Thames and, with windows facing in two directions, and two balconies, she has a double outlook, as far as Limehouse Reach in one direction and the Isle of Dogs in the other. She has vistas of wharves and docks, and the overhead Docklands Light Railway. It is not, of course, the epitome of her desire, not a flat in "one of the great converted warehouses near Tower Bridge with high windows and huge rooms, the strong oak rafters and, surely, the lingering smell of spice" (*Original Sin* 118). Such a flat, similar to the one that Dalgliesh lives in at Queenhithe, was still far beyond her means, but her new flat, "which after careful searching she had chosen, wasn't a poor second" (118).

During the time she remains in her first flat, she does come to a better understanding of herself, helped, especially, by her reconciliation with her grandmother just before her death, and the admission by old Mrs. Miskin of

the guilt she had always felt because she had wished it had been her daughter who had lived rather than Kate. Her legacy to Kate is to gift her the facts about her parentage. Kate is delighted to learn that her mother wanted her, naming her "my sweet Kate" and astounded by the irony that her father, killed before her birth, a married man with two children, had been a policeman.

Alienation of the "outsider"

One of Kate's more important perceptions concerns her growing realisation that the police force can only have the effect on her that she allows it to have. She knows that

> [s]he had chosen to be a police officer deliberately, knowing that the job was right for her. But she had never, even from the first had any illusions about it. . . . Every job had its disadvantages. . . . She had made her choice. . . . she had no regrets. (*A Taste for Death* 218-9)

However, one of the problems Kate must deal with as a female police officer is a feeling of being excluded, the awareness of an affinity between the male officers that she is unable to share. It is not until she considers her response to Piers Tarrant in *A Certain Justice*, that she becomes aware that the feelings that she had buried as she aimed to be a successful officer included the awareness that she was an "outsider" that she was unable to relate to men as "one of them." At first,

> [s]he wondered whether she was jealous . . . of that unstressed camaraderie which he [Piers Tarrant] had with Dalgliesh and from which she felt that she, as a woman, was subtly excluded. (*A Certain Justice* 210)

Eventually, she realises that while she has been climbing to her success, she has been emulating the men around her, playing by their rules and sacrificing many of her female qualities. Her discussions with Daniel Aaron had further stimulated her awareness of the dehumanising effect that being a member of the police force could have on the individual officer. The shock of Daniel's

dramatic abandonment of his police career intensified her initial realisation. Piers Tarrant, unwittingly, acts as the next catalyst who causes her to acknowledge that she must, in the saying of the period, "find herself" and remain true to her own identity or she will become nothing.

In retrospect, the feeling of alienation had always been present in her rivalry with Massingham. When she is obliged to take leave to attend to her grandmother after her grandmother has been mugged, she has the sensation of relinquishing the field to her rival. At the door, as she leaves Massingham, she glances at him and, seeing his "carefully controlled face" and knowing that he is exulting because she is out of the running for the next two days, she thinks: "He and AD are on their own now. It'll be like the old days" (*A Taste for Death* 431).

Alienation from self

Concurrently with her ongoing struggle to find acceptance as an equal with the male officers in the police force, Kate begins a journey of self-discovery. She seeks to determine her identity as a woman, to accept her roots, and to integrate the disparate parts of herself into a whole person. It is during the early stages of the Berowne case that she admits, for the first time, the many uneasy feelings about herself which she has hidden away from her conscious thoughts. Most obvious is her rejection of the grandmother who raised her and who is the symbol of her unloved and deprived childhood.

The case in *A Taste for Death* is the first for the newly formed squad, the beginning of a new stage in Kate's career. She is ambitious for success and eager to impress Dalgliesh. However, at the end of the first, long day of the investigation, she finds a message on her answering machine from her grandmother's social worker. She reacts with feelings of "guilt, resentment and depression" (177). The message reports that, while her grandmother was out collecting her pension, her flat was broken into. She telephones her grandmother and makes arrangements to meet with her and the social worker

at the flat the following day.

Late the next morning, after she and Dalgliesh have concluded an interview, he mentions that the postmortem examinations on the two murder victims, Berowne and Mack, will take place during the afternoon, and that she might like to observe, a "suggestion, which she translated as an order" (218). Although aware that at three o'clock she is expected to be at her grandmother's flat for the arranged meeting, she decides to attend the postmortems. While she rationalises that "at this moment, the dead had to take priority over the living" (218), she feels a sudden "spasm of distaste, almost a revulsion" (218). The feeling of repugnance, she realises, is not levelled at the actual autopsy; that is simply the most recent of many and she is inured to the sight. The disgust is aimed at herself and the way that she is repudiating her fundamental compassion as she competes for recognition in the masculine world of the police force:

> But for the first time since she had joined the CID, a small treacherous voice, whispering in self-distrust, asked her what exactly it was that her job was doing to her. (*A Taste for Death* 218)

However, the feeling of aversion toward the person she is becoming is fleeting, the pinprick of unease is transitory. It is quickly buried, along with other similar feelings, as she climbs the ladder of success.

But it is a temporary respite. While she realises that her job is the most important thing in her life, yet she also knows that she "can't make the law the basis for . . . [her] personal morality" (478). Although she is not a religious person, indeed, she feels no need for "a supernatural religion" (478), her realisation that she is in danger of losing any feeling of humanity brings a recognition that she needs to develop her own humanitarian philosophy if she is to live at ease with herself. The residual unease stays with her, finally erupting as a serious problem in *A Certain Justice* long after her place on the squad is assured. At a time when she has reached a plateau in her career, where she should be able to relax her ambitious drive to certain extent, she

feels "this nagging unrest, this sense of something that in the hard years she had been able to put out of her mind, but which must now be faced and come to terms with" (*A Certain Justice* 209).

Just before the start of the Aldridge case, Dalgliesh, always alert to the moods of his team, is aware of the change in Kate's manner, "a small alienation of confidence as if she was no longer sure why she was there or what she was supposed to be doing" (*A Certain Justice* 200). He knows that Kate had been fond of Daniel, "how fond he had never thought it his business to enquire," and wonders if her "present slight draining of enthusiasm might, . . . be due to the loss of Daniel" (*A Certain Justice* 201). He suspects, with his usual insight, that she might be wrestling with a resentment against Piers Tarrant, simply because he is Daniel's replacement, and trying to cope with what she would consider an unfair and unworthy feeling. He hopes it is no more, that the "old confident, opinionated Kate" (200) was still really there, because he cares enough about her to want her to be happy. But Dalgliesh first concern is for his squad. He knows that the emotional state of his staff reflects in the well-being of the group. So, "[h]e would watch the situation, more for the good of the squad than for hers" (*A Certain Justice* 201).

However, Dalgliesh is not aware that the soul-searching is a culmination of emotions that Kate has been struggling with ever since she joined his Special Squad. Furthermore, he does not know that, during the case they worked on together in *Original Sin*, she and Daniel had discussed the conflicts that Daniel grappled with, caused when his Jewish background clashed with his duty as a police officer. At that time, Daniel, wrapped in his own problems and unaware of Kate's background, accuses her of being "so confident," of "never having to face a moral dilemma" (425). He declares: "The criminal law and police regulations: they provide all you need" (425). His words, although he does not realise it, parallel Kate's self-questioning, and the change that Dalgliesh sees in her is on account of all the disquieting feelings that she has not yet come to terms with. Emotions stirred by her

grandmother's mugging and her death, temporarily silenced, have been brought to the surface by Daniel's cataclysmic actions and resignation. As Dalgliesh recognises, she is "no longer sure why she was there or what she was supposed to be doing" (*A Certain Justice* 200).

During the novel (*A Certain Justice*) Kate, while going about her job in her usual professional manner, seeks to formulate a philosophy of life apart from the cold justice system she is sworn to uphold and which Daniel had suggested was all the philosophy she needed. Characters of significance, whose backgrounds and experiences help her to place her own upbringing in context, include Venetia Aldridge, the victim whose murder sparks the case, and Garry Ashe. It is her experience with the sociopathic Garry Ashe (a recent client of Venetia's), and her discovery that his history is similar to her own, combined with the unveiling of Venetia's chilling history, that enables Kate to shed the ugly chrysalis of her childhood, and to accept that she is the sum of all her life experiences. By the time the case in *A Certain Justice* is ended, her humanity is all the armour that she needs.

Venetia Aldridge - a shooting star

The physically independent Inspector Kate Miskin becomes emotionally strong when she casts off the self-made burden of her past. All James's characters, like all people, carry with them the emotional baggage of their past lives; most are less successful than Kate in dealing with it. During the Aldridge murder investigation, while Kate is laying the ghosts of her past life and developing her integrated persona (becoming the character that will allow her to be not only a successful police officer but also a successful woman), she wonders "what luggage Venetia Aldridge had brought from her privileged past, to that successful life, to that lonely death" (*A Certain Justice* 213).

In fact, Venetia has risen above the reverses of an unloved and difficult childhood to become a successful career woman. The difficulties she has experienced, both as a child and as a adult, to reach her present position,

because she is female, have shaped the person she has become. She comes from a middle-class background, an only child, and her father, the headmaster and owner of a small school for boys, is a violent man. His stern, authoritarian rule of the school is tantamount to cruelty and leads to the suicide of one of his pupils, his own ruin, and, indirectly, the ultimate fate of his daughter.

At the time of her death Venetia Aldridge is an eminent barrister. She is rich and powerful and poised to become the head of the chambers in which she is a senior partner when she meets her nemesis. Her success has reaped her an unexpected reward--her early and violent death. In her zeal to reach success in her chosen profession many of her female qualities have been overridden. She has developed a tunnel-vision view of life, focusing upon her own needs and ambitions and excluding the emotional needs of others. Her eminence as a barrister is bought at the cost of her capacity for empathy and sympathetic understanding. Even after her death, "the many who had admired her and the few who had liked her" (*A Certain Justice* 3) could find nothing more personal to say of her than that she would have been pleased to know that her last murder trial was set in her favourite court at the Bailey. She has developed a sharp tongue and an arrogant manner. She generates no warmth of personality to anyone with whom she comes into contact.

Her aloofness stems from her childhood when the scandal of her father's over-severity and the subsequent closing of his school is subsumed in her embarrassment over the dismissal of a teacher who has befriended her. Edmund Albert Froggett, BA, was a man with a passion for the law, a passion he had been unable to satisfy himself owing to his physical inadequacies but a passion that he had passed onto Venetia. However, her father discovering that she was spending time with "the Frog" in his personal quarters, had put a salacious interpretation upon their innocent friendship, embarrassing his 15-year old daughter with his insinuations and dismissing Froggett from his employ without reference.

From then on, Venetia had bent all her energies to her studies, gaining "three top-grade A levels" (39) and a place at Oxford where she gained a "first-class degree . . . followed by an equally brilliant academic success in her Bar examinations " (39). But she had been left with a distrust of men, and a sweepingly supercilious opinion of them: "The strong could be devils, the weak were moral cowards. . . . never again would she put herself at the mercy of a man" (39). Still, in the end she finds herself at the mercy of a man, and he is merciless. Although she dies for reasons that should not have led to her murder, and although the actual reason for her death could be as applicable to a male barrister, Venetia has become an unlikable person and an unmourned victim. The lessons that Kate Miskin learns about handling success in a male-dominated environment whilst maintaining her integrity as a woman are lessons that Venetia Aldridge has been too arrogant to assimilate.

Exorcising the past

It is not until the finale of the case in *A Certain Justice* that Kate is able to put the past in the past where it belongs. Just prior to the start of the Aldridge case she visited the Ellison Fairweather Buildings, one of the groups of high-rise council flats in London, in an effort to lay her ghosts. It was in one of these flats that Kate had spent all her life until joining the police force, and her grandmother still lived there until just prior to her brief stay in Kate's own flat, and her death. Initially, Kate thinks that it has failed as an exercise in exorcism. Later, she gradually acknowledges that her past, and memories of it, are ineluctable, that they are responsible for the person she has become and that her past must "be remembered, thought about, accepted, perhaps even given thanks for since it had taught her how to survive" (*A Certain Justice* 213).

It is during a conversation that Kate has with Octavia, Venetia Aldridge's daughter, at the end of *A Certain Justice*, that Kate acquires the final self-awareness that allows her to place her past finally into its proper

perspective. Octavia is in hospital recovering from a knife wound inflicted by her fiance, Garry Ashe. Ashe is a young murderer whom Venetia had successfully defended against a charge of murdering his aunt. He murders another woman, Janet Carpenter and, on the run from the police, he takes Octavia as his willing hostage. When the police discover his hiding place, he threatens to kill her, holding a knife to her throat. Dalgliesh orders Tarrant to shoot Ashe, and Octavia suffers a cut to the neck, maybe occurring during Ashe's death throe. Octavia, however, continues to grieve for Ashe and to censure the police for their treatment of him. She defends him to Kate: "He wouldn't have killed me. He wouldn't have cut my throat" (383). But Kate has already decided that Garry Ashe had intended to force the police to shoot him, and that he had probably meant to take Octavia with him. Octavia cries out at Kate's accusations: "You don't know that really. You don't know him. He never had a chance" (383). Kate is tempted to respond--"he had health, strength, intelligence and food in his belly. . . . He had a chance" (383)--when Octavia rushes on with her impassioned defence of Ashe:

> You don't know where he was born. He told me about it. I'm the only one he did tell. In one of those high-rise estates in north-west London. It's a terrible place. No trees, no green, just concrete towers, shouting, ugliness, stinking flats, broken windows. It's called Ellison Fairweather Buildings. (383)

With a shock, Kate realises that she has "shared a past, separated in years but rooted in the same childhood memories" (384), with the young man she has just been mentally labelling a psychopath, "that convenient word devised to explain, categorize and define in statute law the unintelligible mystery of human evil" (383). Moreover, she realises that the homily which she had thought of offering to Octavia applies equally to herself. Like Ashe she had had her chance, her choice though, had been the opposite to his.

When Kate finally accepts that, maybe, her childhood had been no worse than many others, that "[t]he past had happened. It was part of her now

and forever" (*A Certain Justice* 384), she is able to get on with her life. By contrasting and comparing herself and her life choices with Garry Ashe and his choices, she perceives that the past does not need to be resurrected as a perpetual reason, or excuse, for present day actions. The past has happened, it has shaped her present, but it is her present that becomes the past shaping her future. She has laid her past to rest and at that point her character is matured and confirmed, and she is settled into her role.

Epilogue:

Wrapping up the Case

Motives

In this thesis, an attempt has been made to follow Kimberley Dilley's dictum that it is incumbent upon feminist scholars "to analyze popular texts with regard to women and their relationship to the narratives" (xviii). Carolyn Heilbrun, writing in 1979, had stated: "Women writers . . . have failed to imagine autonomous female characters. . . . [they] do not imagine women characters with even the autonomy they themselves have achieved" (*Reinventing Womanhood* 71). However, in the two decades which have passed since that was written women have entered into a new era, and the autonomous female heroine is becoming a commonplace.

Dilley outlines the different evaluations that women critics (such as Jessica Mann, Kathleen Gregory Klein, and Maureen T. Reddy) have made of women's relation to detective fiction, both as writers and characters. Reddy, she maintains, shows the detective novel as "well suited to women's struggles over social definitions and the power of language to control and define" (xix). P D James novels, initially implicity and latterly explicitly, address feminist issues. They pursue the increasingly independent lives led by women at the end of the twentieth century.

James is reported to have said, in an interview with Jane Bakerman in 1977, that although "she considers herself to be a feminist 'in the sense that I like and admire women very much,' she is not 'in sympathy with the more extreme factions of Women's Lib'" (cited in Kotker 63). However, even if she publicly dissociates herself from overtly feminist commentary "the genre's historical development," as Munt has remarked, "[ensures] feminism's muted presence" (25). P D James writes genre fiction in which

> [t]he major generic themes are represented: alienation, death, retribution, and the effects of murder on all concerned. . . . combine[d] . . . with gothic motifs, claustrophobic atmospheres, and tortured alliances. (Munt 23)

Moreover, as is the case with any writer of contemporary fiction, James is a

reporter of the world she inhabits, and her novels also address many of society's problems. She presents the modern world as an unknowable world, lacking as it does the assurance of the "eternal verities" believed to be knowable by earlier generations. Furthermore, as Munt also records, all of James's novels display

> classic structures enriched with a novelistic emphasis on characterization, realism, literary allusion, and the employment of diverse points of view. (23)

Indeed, as early as 1981, the authors of *The Lady Investigates* noted the "literariness" of James's work, saying that

> In literary terms, the woman investigator has benefited from the narrowing of the gap between detective fiction and serious fiction . . . [and] in the hands of writers like P D James . . . she can take her place among the most agreeable of contemporary heroines. (13)

Craig and Cadogan are referring specifically to James's character, Cordelia, in this reference. As was discussed earlier, James herself considered the Cordelia novels would respond to several levels of analysis. Since that time (as also previously remarked), James's novels have been treated to frequent serious criticism. But it has been the premise of this thesis that, from her first novel, all James's work responds favourably to critical investigation.

"Male Gaze" or "Female Gaze"?

In her first four novels, James illustrated how, in the 1950s and 1960s, there were only sparse and stereotypical opportunities available to women who wished to achieve an independent lifestyle. In succeeding novels she introduced examples of the increasingly extensive range of jobs available to modern women whilst accenting the difficulties with which women were still faced as they tried to take advantage of these contemporary opportunities.

In James's first novel, *Cover Her Face*, Sally Jupp's personality is viewed from many viewpoints; virtually all the characters in the novel express

their opinion of Sally Jupp, how she thought and why she acted as she did. Sally tried to live life to her own rules and she became a victim of the era she lived in. Yet, even at the end, she remains a mysterious character. In the three novels following (*Mind to Murder, Unnatural Causes, Shroud for a Nightingale*), the idea of women visible only through the "male gaze" was suggested, and explored in the representative characters of Jane Dalgliesh, Deborah Riscoe and Mary Taylor who are seen, mainly, from Adam Dalgliesh's viewpoint.

However, in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972), the novel which was to present an anomaly in style in the steady flow of her detective fiction, James abandons both her familiar settings and the classic plot. Following her four 1960s "apprenticeship" novels, James experiments with a novel set (loosely) in the sub-genre of the hard-boiled private eye, subverting the genre by replacing the usual hard-bitten male detective with an inexperienced, idealistic young woman. The point of view, almost totally through the eyes of Cordelia Gray, highlights the difficulties that a woman encounters when she leaves the safety of her stereotypical roles and attempts to assume the role that was designed explicitly for a solitary and cynical male character. The two Cordelia novels mark the beginning and end of the period that can be termed her "journeyman" phase. It is also a period of experimentation. The two Cordelia novels are written in totally different styles but using very similar plots. During this period, James also experiments with a "straight" novel, *Innocent Blood*, and adds to the "Dalgliesh" canon with two more novels: *The Black Tower* and *Death of an Expert Witness*.

Resolution

From the mid-1980s onward James's novels again change in style. *A Taste for Death, Devices and Desires, Original Sin* and *A Certain Justice* are much more than "whodunits." They dwell less on the murders and the mystery of the murderer and more on the characters' motives, not only for the criminal

acts, but for the many reasons why people act the way they do in the fictional world that parallels the world we know. The crime aspects of the novels become secondary to the more "novelistic" features of James's work. In these later books she features women's difficulties in society and particularly in "masculine" occupations like the police and the law. She creates Detective Inspector Kate Miskin, an outstanding characterisation of a successful working woman. Additionally, she investigates the making of Venetia Aldridge, an eminently successful woman and a shocking example of where excessive ambition can lead.

James engages with the problem of the brutalising effect that the police force has upon its officers, both women and men. James's characterisation of Kate suggests that the gentle and nurturing behaviour thought to be the sole province of women is culturally inspired and not an innate response, and that such conduct is available to both sexes. The unfeeling detachment displayed by police officers is due to the way the police is structured and is not an integral part of the male psyche.

In effect, James is implying the abolition of gender boundaries. Daniel Aaron quits the police force, unable to submit to its regulations. Kate, loving her job but struggling to keep her emotional equilibrium, realises that it is not because she is a woman, not that she is in conflict with some inherent "feminine instincts," but that the rigidity of the hierarchical organisation of which she is a member (and her driving ambition to succeed and rise in that hierarchy) is putting her at risk of losing her common humanity. She perceives, by the conclusion of *A Certain Justice*, that she must find ways of interacting with the people she comes into contact with, in the course of her work, in ways which allow her to preserve her professionalism while acting with a compassionate involvement. Kate epitomises the intersection of feminism with postmodern society. P D James has, once again, proved a valid conduit of the current ethos.

However, it is Kate and the many other unforgettable characters that

James has created that make her novels impressive; the detective stories within the novels are easily forgotten. James's characters not only stay in readers' memories, they are sufficiently memorable to step from the pages of her books and to travel alongside us. P D James's later novels are, truly, her "masterworks."

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