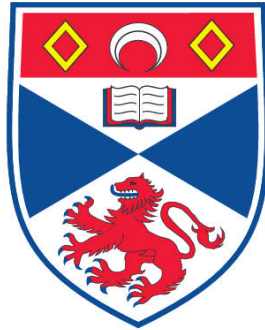


**THEOLOGY IN SUSPENSE:  
HOW THE DETECTIVE FICTION OF P.D. JAMES PROVOKES  
THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT**

**Jo Ann Sharkey**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil  
at the  
University of St. Andrews**



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THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS  
ST. MARY'S COLLEGE

THEOLOGY IN SUSPENSE:  
HOW THE DETECTIVE FICTION OF P.D. JAMES PROVOKES  
THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF DIVINITY  
INSTITUTE FOR THEOLOGY, IMAGINATION, AND THE ARTS

IN CANDIDANCY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

BY  
JO ANN SHARKEY

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15 APRIL 2010

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## ABSTRACT

The following dissertation argues that the detective fiction of P.D. James provokes her readers to think theologically. I present evidence from the body of James's work, including her detective fiction that features the Detective Adam Dalgliesh, as well as her other novels, autobiography, and non-fiction work. I also present a brief history of detective fiction. This history provides the reader with a better understanding of how P.D James is influenced by the detective genre as well as how she stands apart from the genre's traditions.

This dissertation relies on an interview that I conducted with P.D. James in November, 2008. During the interview, I asked James how Christianity has influenced her detective fiction and her responses greatly contribute to this dissertation. However, James's novels should be interpreted and explored in the manner that they are received by the reader. How the reader receives and responds to the novels, not only how James writes the novels, is what causes her stories to provoke theological thinking.

By examining Christian symbolism that is present in setting, character, the Detective Adam Dalgliesh, and plot, this dissertation seeks to assert that James contributes to a theological conversation through her popular detective fiction.

I, Jo Ann Sharkey, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 40,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in October, 2007 and as a candidate for the degree of Master of Philosophy in October, 2007; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2007 and 2010.

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My greatest appreciation extends to the community of faith and learning at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, whose professors, staff, and students have supported me in the final months of my dissertation.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my family. The love and confidence that my parents keep in me is a continuous source of joy and strength. This work would not be possible without the support of my mother, Lucille, and my father, George, as well as the support of Sarah, Robert, Brian, and Lucy.

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## Introduction

P.D. James is one of Britain's most prolific detective novelists. In a career spanning over fifty years, James has written sixteen detective novels, a Christian fable, a literary analysis, an autobiography, and several other works of non-fiction, short stories, and articles. Although James is known for being a confessing member of the Anglican Church, she does not write obvious Christian stories. Only her novel, *The Children of Men*, published in 1992, is overtly religious.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, several of the titles of James's detective novels suggest glimpses or vestiges of Christianity. *Original Sin* is a doctrine from Christian theology. The title of her novel *Death in Holy Orders* combines the Christian sacramental practice with the foreshadowing of violence. The term, "Holy Orders" refers to the process of ordination that occurs in many Christian denominations, including the Anglican Church. *Devices and Desires* is a phrase taken directly from the Book of Common Prayer. To unreligious readers, this phrase may be less recognizable as a Christian reference; however, the title would be familiar to anyone in the Anglican Church or to anyone who reads the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>2</sup> By utilizing Christian words and phrases in her titles, James insinuates to her readers that her novels will address theological themes.

Since her first novel in 1962, James has become increasingly more concerned with theological matters. Her novels differ in the manner in which they incorporate Christianity. Sometimes religion is casually referenced through a character or a

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<sup>1</sup> James claims that, "*The Children of Men* is more specifically theological in a way.... Really, it did not start off as a theological book or a Christian book. But that's what it's seen as because of the christening at the end. The thesis is good against evil, and this group of people, one of them is a convinced Christian. So it did work, it did become a Christian novel strangely enough." P.D. James, interview by author, London, England, November 19, 2008. Hereafter shall be referred to as James, Interview.

<sup>2</sup> The first line of the Evening Prayer from a General Confession reads, "Almighty and most merciful Father; we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts." *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1945), 23.

setting, such as the church fête that she depicted in her first novel, *Cover Her Face*. Other times, religion is a constant presence that lingers in the background, which happens in *A Taste for Death*, where two murders occur at a church. The author consistently presents Christianity in some way, yet it is always indirectly and never quite whole-heartedly.

James claims that she first wrote detective fiction out of a desire to entertain and “because it suited [her] skeptical and perhaps slightly morbid imagination.”<sup>3</sup> In *Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography*, James further elaborates on what initially attracted her to the detective genre by declaring that:

I may have needed to write detective fiction for the same reason as aficionados enjoy the genre: the catharsis of carefully controlled terror, the bringing of order out of disorder, the reassurance that we live in a comprehensible and moral universe and that, although we may not achieve justice, we can at least achieve an explanation and a solution.<sup>4</sup>

Although James may credit her initial attraction to the detective genre to mundane desires, details gathered from her life reveal that her Christian faith influenced why and how she writes detective fiction. Her success as a writer can be characterized by her desire to explore motives for evil, to order loves which are disordered, to redeem her fallen characters, and to seek justice. She writes more than simple detective stories concerned merely with determining who the murderer is. Ralph Wood, a P.D. James critic, proposes that, “Her novels keep us at the edge of our chairs because she makes us want to know not only *who* “done” it but also *why*? That plot and character are so deeply intertwined makes James’s novels bear repeated

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<sup>3</sup> P.D. James, “Why Detection?” The Official Website of P.D. James, <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/pdjames/guardian.html> (accessed October 31, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> P.D. James, *Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 12.

readings, as most crime fiction does not.”<sup>5</sup> James differs from most mystery writers because of her concern for what is behind the “who” and the “why.” She does not create her novels for the simple entertainment value that they may bring if the reader is able to solve the puzzle and determine the culprit before the detective does by the last chapter. Instead, James addresses societal, communal, and religious issues in her novels. This is what sets her detective fiction apart from other novels. However, rarely is James recognized for the religious value that her novels offer. Instead, she is often discussed as a writer who addresses ethical or even moral issues of society. But her critics hesitate to acknowledge the religious nature of her novels. Perhaps this is due to the declining religious interest and practice in both the United States and Great Britain, where James’s novels are most popular.

Despite there being very little literary analysis that addresses the religious nature of James’s novels, it is impossible to ignore the theological nature of James’s writing. From the title of several of her novels to the Christian settings, characters, and plots featured in many of her novels, it is evident that James has a religious consciousness. In her detective stories, Christian remnants suggest the presence of the divine. In this dissertation, I shall explore how James keeps theology in suspense in the detective novel by provoking her readers to think theologically with her subtle references to Christianity through her use of setting, characters, the Detective Adam Dalgliesh, and plot. The historical and theoretical development of the detective novel is examined in the first chapter. Although James’s novels are unique, they show influence of the historical detective novel. Evidence of the gothic and golden age eras are especially apparent in James’s writing. In the second chapter, I shall explore how James presents minor but explicit elements of Christianity through her use of setting.

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<sup>5</sup> Ralph C. Wood, “A Case for James as a Christian Novelist,” *Theology Today* 59 (2003): 587.

James keeps Christianity always at hand by her varied presentations of religious locations. Sometimes these religious settings provide a place of solace and spiritual guidance. At other times, however, the religious settings expose hypocrisy and violence in the church. In this chapter, I shall also show how James keeps the religious vaguely present through setting even when it lacks a Christian purpose. Finally, we will look in her novels to find examples to support how James is concerned for the decline of the Anglican Church.

I will continue my exploration of the explicit but minor elements of Christianity in James's novels with an examination of characters. The third chapter will look at three types of characters—those within the church, those outside the church, and those unrelated to the church—and will explore how characters within these groups still manage to arouse theological thought. Each character is examined in light of his or her response to the church and whether he or she stands in support of, opposed to, or disinterested in Christianity. I will show how James is able to provoke her readers to think about the church by her use of characters, even when she abstains from writing about openly Christian characters, through her detective novels.

The fourth chapter is a more intimate examination of James's predominant character, Detective Adam Dalgliesh. I propose that Dalgliesh moves from reverent agnosticism to a more participatory faith in Christ. Evidence for this proposal is supported by Dalgliesh's relationships with priests, participation with Christian practices and rituals, his relationships with women, and his pursuit of justice. Dalgliesh is also compared to the historical, literary model of the detective as well as the "priest-detective."

In the fifth chapter, I will explore the theological implications of murder. James is influenced by various Christian theologians. Her work reflects the thoughts

of theologians such as Augustine, Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann, and Miroslav Volf. I will demonstrate how these theologians offer explanations for the motives for murder by means of disordered love, estrangement, and exclusion. We will also study the influence of W.H. Auden's essay "The Guilty Vicarage," and show how James steps outside the model of the traditional detective story to demonstrate the contaminating effects of murder. James bends Auden's traditional model by writing detective novels with disordered love as a motive and villains with whom her readers often find sympathy. Her villains are often imbued with a desire to love, justify, reconcile, and avenge, yet their attempts to perform righteously are distorted, and evil results.

Literary critics who write about James often use words like "moral complexities" and "psychological perplexities" to discuss the themes and values about which James is writing. They also compare her to Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and other great writers of the golden age of detective fiction. Yet rarely do critics write about the religious nature of her novels. Despite the comparison between James and Sayers, a theologian herself, critics rarely deal with the theological interests that James maintains and provokes through her detective novels. Instead, these theological matters that James writes about are usually called moral, social, or psychological issues. In turn, they are typically written about in religiously-disinterested manner.

Despite her critics' frequent failure to acknowledge the theological nature of her novels, James persists in bringing relics, vestiges and representations of the Christian faith into her novels. This dissertation will show how setting, character, the Detective Adam Dalgliesh, and the motive for murder, all elements of James's novels, suggest that Christianity is always present. Because of her realistic representation of

life, James provokes theologically reflective thoughts with her novels. In her collection of essays entitled, *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor discusses the tension between the writer's faith and her or his fictional works. "It is when the individual's faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life; and when there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost."<sup>6</sup> James is not afraid of the honest representations, and her novels demonstrate her ability to present life as it truly is. While she is influenced by the golden age of detective fiction, especially in her earlier novels, James moves away from the traditional model of the golden age as her writing develops. Her later novels demonstrate the influence of other literary genres, including the gothic, hardboiled, police procedural, and Victorian novel. James incorporates characteristics from each of these genres while telling a story that is strongly character-based and plot-based.

Through her detective fiction, James is able to remark more concisely about Christianity, faith, evil, and suffering than many theologians are. "More than any of her rivals, she has made the detective novel an instrument of serious moral and psychological discernment. Over and over again, she provides eloquent descriptions of outward scenes that reflect inward realities, offering her readers wisdom that is at once assuring and disturbing."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), 151.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph C. Wood, "Murder, She Wrote," *Books and Culture* 10.2 (March-April 2004): 13.

## Chapter One

### A Brief Introduction to Detective Fiction

#### 1.1 Overview

From the earliest creation of the detective story, it has been a gripping literary genre. Yet critics and readers alike have often asked, “What is the appeal of the detective story and how do we define it?” The appeal resides in the fundamental game at the heart of the detective story. The reader and the author engage in a game that opens with a crime and closes with a solution. The reader is invited to enter into a fabricated world where moral and judicial codes are evaluated and the reader assigns the final verdict of guilt.

Typically, detective fiction is formulaic and the formula contributes to the genre’s success. Writers depend on a literary formula that provides them with a means of creating a successful story that will satisfy their audience and their publisher. Writers should be able “to maintain a complex intellectual suspense centering on the possibility that a dangerous criminal might remain at large or that innocent people might be convicted of that crime. They sustain uncertainty until the final revelation, yet at the same time assure us that the detective...will eventually reach the solution.”<sup>8</sup> The reader’s past experiences with the genre’s formula demands a kind of expectation in whatever new stories the genre delivers. If authors follow the formula, then they increase the reader’s understanding of the novel as well as their enjoyment.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John G. Cawelti, “The Study of Literary Formulas,” *Detective Fiction*, edited by Robin Winks (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980): 126.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.



When a reader develops an affinity for detective fiction, he or she enters into a cycle with the first mystery. There is a kind of satisfaction accomplished by the completion of that first story that will only lead the reader to the next novel. This addiction to detective fiction is a contributing factor in its popularity. Crime fiction editor Martin A. Kayman writes that “the detective’s solution [brings] full narrative satisfaction...as to stimulate an appetite for another, similar story.”<sup>10</sup>

A detective story may be a classic mystery, a crime story, a thriller, a police procedural, or a suspense novel. But at its core, it is a mystery presented in literary form that compels the reader, from the moment he or she opens the book, to seek what action comes next and why. Critics and readers attempt to distinguish between various types of detective fiction, but the core of the story is the same: a mystery must present a crime that is intended to “arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end.”<sup>11</sup>

Detective fiction is written in different literary styles, including the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle and the full-length novels of Agatha Christie and P.D. James. Some detective stories are puzzles to solve (a “whodunit”) that are often written for the simple pleasure of reading and vicariously solving crimes. Novelists of the golden age of detective fiction are known for these “cosy” stories.<sup>12</sup> Detective stories from other genres may present more disturbing plots. Novels from the hard-boiled genre, the anti-detective genre, and additional modern manifestations of the detective story involve more complex and psychologically compelling themes. Often, the author of the non-traditional detective

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<sup>10</sup> Martin A. Kayman, “The Short Story from Poe to Chesterton,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Knox, *The Best English Detective Stories of 1928* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), 9.

<sup>12</sup> A “cosy” or “cozy” mystery refers to a type of story that was popularized during the golden age. It typically takes place in a small, country village and may employ a lighthearted or comedic tone. The focus of the story is to entice the reader with clues to help him or her solve the mystery rather than terrifying him or her with excessive violence and horror.

novel offers a social commentary through his or her story. Ruth Rendell, Ian Rankin, and Sue Grafton author these types of novels. Their novels may deal with the complexities of human nature, the motivating factors that lead one human to commit violent crimes against another, and the consequences of those violent crimes. Nevertheless, despite the differences within the genre, all detective fiction must answer three simple questions—“Who did it? Why did he do it? How did he do it?”<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2 Theories of Detective Fiction

The most basic element of the detective story is that there is central mystery introduced at the beginning of the story. Clues about the mystery are included throughout the story, and the mystery is solved at the end of the story, either by a detective figure or by the reader. While crime may not be necessary to the detective novel, most readers expect it. Fans and critics of detective fiction customarily demand that the story includes a detective and a murder. Murder is typically the crime of choice for mystery writers. Jacques Barzun, in his essay “Detection and the Literary Art,” claims that, “The reason why murder animates most detective storytelling is that the gravity of the deed gives assured momentum. Crime, moreover, makes plausible the concealment that arouses curiosity.”<sup>14</sup> If authors include murder as the central mystery in their stories, they compel readers to embrace the mystery as a kind of pursuit of justice on behalf of the victim. We will examine the motives for murder, both from a literary perspective as well as from a theological one, in the fifth chapter of this dissertation. While murder may not be a necessary element for a

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<sup>13</sup> Knox, 19

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Barzun, “Detection and the Literary Art,” in *Detective Fiction*, ed. Robin Winks (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), 145.

detective novel, most authors agree that crime is. The following sections suggest two theories of detective fiction that allow authors to maintain consistency within the genre.

### 1.2.1 Rules of Detective Fiction

“Detective fiction is one of the most criticized sub-genres of the novel ‘proper,’ and any study of detective fiction must entail an evaluation of the effectiveness of the concept of genre,” claims literary critic Stacy Gillis.<sup>15</sup> However, despite the criticism that detective fiction receives, it manages to survive and succeed. Perhaps the establishment of a set of rules for the genre aids its endurance. Numerous writers and literary critics have established their own set of rules for mystery writers to follow. For most readers, it is an author’s adherence to the rules of the detective genre that provides structure which ultimately leads to the story’s appeal. Tzvetan Todorov acknowledges the importance of rule-following in evaluating the historical development of the detective fiction genre, explaining that “a work was judged poor if it did not sufficiently obey the rules of its genre.”<sup>16</sup>

Ronald Knox, a Catholic priest who wrote mystery novels during the early half of the twentieth century, established a set of ten rules which he expects mystery writers to follow in order to write a fair detective story. The “Ten Commandments,” or “Decalogue,” are as follows:

1. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.

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<sup>15</sup> Stacy Gillis, “Introduction: The Devil Himself,” in *The Devil Himself: Villainy in Detective Fiction and Film*, ed. Stacy Gillis and Philippa Gates (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 2001), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 42

2. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
4. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
5. No Chinaman must figure in the story.
6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
7. The detective must not himself commit the crime.
8. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.
9. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.<sup>17</sup>

Declaring this list far from exhaustive, Knox suggests that these rules keep the mystery story from becoming a stereotype. Although these obviously lighthearted rules are often broken (even by Knox himself), they provide a framework by which “the game” of the detective story can be played fairly between the author and the reader.<sup>18</sup> Other celebrated mystery writers, such as Agatha Christie, have been able to break the rules and succeed without losing the loyalty of their audience. Christie’s “The Mousetrap,” which is London’s longest running play, is an example of the lasting popularity of a mystery that breaks the rules.

Gillis continues her analysis of detective fiction, claiming that literature demands a social contract between the writers and the readers.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps detective fiction would be more easily definable for Gillis if writers would comply with their social contract and follow the rules mandated by their genre. But, they fail to do so and often, the pleasure that readers gain from reading a novel arises from the surprise at discovering a broken rule.

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<sup>17</sup> Knox, 12-16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>19</sup> Gillis, 2.

Although it is nearly impossible to enforce Knox's ten commandments of detective fiction, the Detection Club in Britain, founded in London in 1928 (the same year that Knox wrote his Decalogue), asked its members to swear an oath to keep their literary detectives from solving crimes based on "Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or the Act of God."<sup>20</sup> Theology would thus seem to have been pushed to the sidelines of detective fiction.

### 1.2.2 The Detective: Hero of Detective Fiction

Many influential writers have contributed to the development of the detective novel and the formalization of the detective literary genre. Most do so by creating a memorable and distinct detective figure. The detective as the literary hero became a recurrent theme which increased its popularity and aided in identifying what type of literature could be classified as detective fiction. The first formal appearance of the detective occurred during the gothic literary era and is generally credited to Edgar Allan Poe. In his story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe introduces readers to C. Auguste Dupin, the first detective to appear in fiction. Although Poe's literary detective was partially inspired by real-life figures, the most notable being Eugène François Vidocq (a French detective),<sup>21</sup> Poe did not give Dupin the official title of detective. Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie formalized many of the rules of detective fiction and many of the characterizations of the detectives with their characters, Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot.

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<sup>20</sup> Julian Symons, *Mortal Consequences: A History from the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ian Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven: The Detective Fiction in English Fiction from Godwin to Doyle*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 45, 51.

Fans of detective fiction will note that the earliest literary detective heroes are almost exclusively male. Although there may be varying discrepancies in the detective's level of professionalism, there is hardly a doubt about his gender. One obvious reason for this is that authors who typically feature male detectives want to portray a realistic character. Whether he is a professional, such as P.D. James's Adam Dalgliesh; an amateur, such as Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste Dupin; or even a private eye, such as Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade; it is rare that a professional woman would have been granted the opportunity to pursue a career in detection until recently.

Several female mystery writers have introduced female detectives with varying degrees of success. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple was featured in her first full-length novel, *The Murder in the Vicarage*, in 1930. Although Miss Marple has a sharp mind and is well educated, she is not a professional detective. Instead, she solves her cases based on her intuition, observation, and understanding of human nature (all characteristics of a stereotypical feminine ideal). Although Miss Marple's sleuthing techniques contradict the Detective Club's mandate, Christie found success with her female detective. P.D. James also wrote about a female detective and hers is actually a professional. Cordelia Gray, first introduced to readers in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, was published in 1972 during the height of the second wave of the feminist movement. Cordelia inherits an investigation agency and, although she is not fully trained, pursues a career as a private detective. In her two novels that feature Cordelia, James addresses the challenges that a young, single, attractive woman faces when she enters into the (man's) world of crime and detection. Sue Grafton is example of an American writer who has significantly contributed to the mystery genre with her Kinsey Milhone novels. Kinsey is also a private detective who operates in Southern California in the 1980's. She, like Cordelia, is a misfit. Not only is she a

woman trying to succeed in a man's profession, but the characteristics that make her a good detective, such as curiosity, stubbornness, and inquisitiveness, are stereotyped as negative and unattractive qualities for a woman to possess. Therefore, the female detective can either be an attractive woman who is unsuccessful at her job or she can succeed at her job and be unappealing to men. In this way, we can see the detective genre being shaped by extra-literary or ideological forces—in this particular case, feminism. Although the model of the male detective in mystery stories is still the most popular, readers have seen a gradual increase in the number of stories that feature female detectives, either as the hero or as the sidekick, perhaps due to the rise in women pursuing careers in law enforcement.

The role of the detective has become central to the modern detective novel. Literary critics as well as detective fiction writers are fascinated with the role that the detective plays, especially in his or her pursuit of justice and how he or she attains a confession. In this respect, the detective can be compared to a priest. P.D. James's detective Adam Dalgliesh is examined as a pre-eminent model for the detective priest in the fourth chapter of this dissertation. The theories involving the development of the detective, especially the detective-priest or the secular-priest detective, will be developed further in that chapter.

### **1.3 Literary, Historical, and Religious Influences on Detective Fiction**

#### **1.3.1 *Caleb Williams*: An Early Literary Influence**

*Caleb Williams*, a novel written by William Godwin in 1794, is considered one of the precursors to the detective fiction genre. *Caleb Williams* is not a classic of

detective fiction, but Caleb's role as a detecting hero and the themes of truth, justice, and punishment make it relevant for consideration in this dissertation.

The central mystery of the novel involves Caleb and Falkland, the squire whom he serves and suspects is a murderer. Provoked by his curiosity, Caleb detects and learns that Falkland is guilty. Despite Falkland's guilt and Caleb's innocence, Godwin writes ambivalently about the actions of his hero. Is Caleb even the hero of the story?<sup>22</sup> He is called a spy, which is a transgression of social etiquette against his model employer<sup>23</sup> (who may be a model in every way except that he is a murderer). Because of his curiosity, Caleb suffers the end of his innocence, a new awareness of evil, a wrongful imprisonment, the loss of his job, and the betrayal of his employer.

Whereas the traditional detective is characterized by pragmatism and ingenuity, these characteristics do not describe Caleb until he has already been wrongfully imprisoned as a result of his detection.<sup>24</sup> Caleb is a tragic hero who fights against an unjust system. Ian Ousby, a literary critic in the detective genre, claims that Godwin wrote *Caleb Williams* as "propaganda on behalf of the poor and exploited, and in particular to expose the injustice of the legal system."<sup>25</sup> If Godwin's intent was to promote a type of idealism shrouded in anarchy,<sup>26</sup> this sets him apart from many other detective novelists. Caleb is not on the side of the law, while usually detective hero is. Typically a detective, either a professional, amateur, or private, participates in the justice system by pursuing a criminal. The hardboiled genre is the exception. In the hard-boiled novel, that detective may step outside the boundaries of the law to accomplish his (or her) task, but with the goal of getting the criminal into the justice system as the intended result of his (or her) actions. This difference raises

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<sup>22</sup> Ousby, 38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Ousby, 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> P.D. James, *Talking about Detective Fiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 19



questions about the relationship between the detective genre and the wider society in which it was produced. It also allows the reader to explore the power that the novel has to influence social changes within the justice system.

### **1.3.2 Establishment of the Formal Police Force: An Early Historical Influence**

Historical events have widely influenced the development of the detective fiction genre. The most important of these may be the establishment of a police force. France was the first country formally to establish a police force in the eighteenth century. The United Kingdom and the United States soon followed France's lead with the establishment of their own formal police forces. In 1828, the Metropolitan Police was established in the United Kingdom, which was followed by the establishment of the Detective Police force in London in 1842. The Detective Police were a select group of eight men who focused on crimes of particular intrigue and danger. In 1856, the London police model spread throughout all of Great Britain. Meanwhile, the United States was developing its own police force with the establishment of the day and night police, an arrangement which was formalized in New York in 1843.

Because France was the first to establish a formal police force, the detectives who served in France gained a certain notoriety. One of the most famous is Eugène François Vidocq, who served as the chief of police, or the Sûreté, France's security brigade. Serving as the head of the police in France from either 1811 or 1812 until 1827, Vidocq was a legendary figure. He served in the army, deserted the army, was imprisoned, was an informer while still in prison, and then was a detective. Vidocq's

colorful history demonstrates how the early detectives were often outsiders who had the ability to operate on both sides of the law.

During his years of service in France, Vidocq became something of a mythical figure. He wrote an account of his experiences, entitled *Mémoires*. His memoirs and his life were the inspiration for many detectives from fiction, including Honoré de Balzac's Vautrin,<sup>27</sup> Emile Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq,<sup>28</sup> and Edgar Allen Poe's C. August Dupin. He even inspired the hardboiled detective writer Raymond Chandler, whose novels dealt with the idea that the detective operated in a precarious balance between crime and justice.<sup>29</sup> Stacy Gillis credits Vidocq's *Mémoires* as being a significant literary contribution to the development of detective fiction. The popularity of the detective novel increased with a movement away from the villain as hero and to the detective as hero.<sup>30</sup>

The police force of the United Kingdom inspired its own breed of detective heroes. Jonathan Whicher was one of the original eight detectives to serve with London's detective police force in 1842. In 1860, he became involved with a murder case at Road Hill House, which was influential in changing attitudes that people had towards detectives, the pursuit of justice, and the sanctity of the home. Prior to the investigation, the detectives were viewed as "figures of mystery and glamour, the surreptitious, all-seeing little gods of London."<sup>31</sup> In her book *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher: A Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective*, Kate

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<sup>27</sup> Vautrin is a character from Balzac's *Comédie humaine* series. He is an escaped convict and a criminal mastermind who is fleeing the police. The literary character Vautrin's true name is Jacques Collin and he was inspired by Eugène François Vidocq. Vautrin appears in three novels by Balzac including *Le Père Gourot* (as Vautrin), *Illusions Perdues* and *Splendeurs et Misères de Courtisanes* (as Abbé Carlos Herrera). He serves as an example of the "villain as hero." Greater details about Vidocq's influence on crime novelists can be found in Julian Symons' *Mortal Consequences*, 23-27.

<sup>28</sup> Ousby, 51

<sup>29</sup> Gavin Lambert, "The Dangerous Edge," in *Detective Fiction*, ed. Robin Winks (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), 50.

<sup>30</sup> Gillis, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher: A Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective* (New York: Walker Company, 2008), XX.

Summerscale writes about the murder of Saville Kent, the three-year-old son of a prosperous factory inspector, who was found on his family's property with his throat slit. While no one wanted to believe that a family member was responsible for his death, Detective Whicher knew that Constance, the boy's disturbed sixteen-year-old sister, was guilty. However, Detective Whicher was working in England during a time when wealthy families were above the accusations of the young detective force. The detective went from being a trusted ally to being an intrusive presence whose accusations, even if they were true, were not welcome. His investigation disrupted the privacy of the upper-class family and threatened to expose corruption, crime, and murder. Detective Whicher's involvement in the Road Hill House case brought him both fame and disgrace. The Saville Kent murder was one of the most sensational and publicized murder cases of its time. Whicher's failure to convict the Saville's murderer threatened to undo the public's confidence in the police force, but his notoriety also turned the detective into a type of infamous hero. Summerscale claims the Road Hill murder case and Detective Whicher's involvement with it inspired the detective fiction of the 1860s.

The most notable detective story of that time is Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, which is loosely based on the Road Hill House murder case. In *The Moonstone*, the crime is changed from murder into theft but the elements of the cases are similar. Other fiction that was inspired by the Road Hill House murder case includes Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.<sup>32</sup> Summerscale continues by crediting Whicher and his fellow

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<sup>32</sup> Summerscale, XI

detective, Charley Field, for being the inspiration for Charles Dickens' Inspector Bucket, the literary detective from *Bleak House*.<sup>33</sup>

P.D. James credits the Road Hill House murder case with inspiring novelists even into the twentieth century, citing Francis King's novel, *Act of Darkness*, as evidence.<sup>34</sup> James acknowledges the influence that true crime has on the development of the detective genre by stating that:

It seems now that all the participants in the tragedy and the general public were enacting in advance and in real life the storyline of detective novels which were to become common in the interwar years: the isolated rural community, the respectable and prosperous setting and the brilliant detective called in from outside to solve the crime when the local police are baffled.<sup>35</sup>

However, in her literary analysis on the detective novel, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, P.D. James is cautious to give too much credit to the Road Hill House murder for the development of the detective fiction. No matter how the Road Hill House murder affected literary development, it is evident from the number of authors that either wrote about or were inspired by the case that its influence was immense, especially on the golden age of detective fiction. Not only were real-life detectives influencing the development of the detective genre, but true crime was also influencing the genre. As horrific and sensational crime stories were widely publicized, people wanted to believe that crime would not go unsolved nor unpunished. Cases like the Road Hill House murder, which went unsolved and left the criminal unpunished for five years, led to a loss of public confidence in the judicial system. Detective stories, on the other hand, brought satisfaction to readers because a crime mystery that remained true to the rules of the genre never failed to execute justice properly on behalf of the innocent.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>34</sup> James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*. 25

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 26.

### 1.3.3 Susanna: An Early Religious Influence

While the evidence for literary and historical influences on detective fiction may be obvious, a case should be made for religious influences as well. The core of the detective story resides in the central mystery and the revelation of that mystery. A mystery delights its reader by keeping a secret and only revealing the hidden things at the most opportune time in order to heighten the reader's pleasure as well as release him or her from terror. The Apocrypha, a name meaning "hidden things," suggests that this collection of non-canonical books has its own mysteries to reveal. A case can be made for the book of Susanna as a detective story and Daniel as the first detective in literature.

Susanna, a righteous and beautiful woman, is unjustly accused of adultery by two elders. They falsely accuse her of adultery when she denies their attention. Susanna is sentenced to death for her crime. Daniel, a young man, had no way of knowing that Susanna was innocent and the elders were guilty, but God stirred up the holy spirit within him. In response, he declares that he wants no part of the unjust dealings (verse 45-46). Daniel then carries out a trial that reveals the deception of the two elders. Consequently, the two elders are sentenced to death (verse 61).

Because the Susanna/Daniel account addresses issues of corruption within the Israelite community, it is atypical for Jewish wisdom literature. The criminal elders, whose misdeeds will result in the death of an innocent woman, are from Daniel's own religious and social community. He risks his position by challenging those who surpass him in age and status. He risks alienating his community by pursuing justice on behalf of the estranged and disgraced woman. Yet Daniel is provoked to seek justice and truth because his allegiance is to God and not to the elders or even to his

society. And what is Susanna's role? She is the innocent victim who is called to resist oppression from within her own community.<sup>36</sup> She did not ask Daniel for support but asked God. God delivered help through a mediator, Daniel, who plays the role of a detective-priest. His duty is to serve God, but in doing so, he delivers justice to the oppressed.

Although the Susanna story can be called the first detective story, it obviously differs from the classic detective fiction of the golden age. In the classic or golden age novel, the detective typically restores middle-class society to its comfortable and Garden of Eden-like state. Daniel pursues redemption and vindication for Susanna, but at a cost. His religious community is now disrupted, because its elders are found to be liars and manipulators.

In his book, *Murder Most Fair*, Michael Cohen asserts that:

Daniel demonstrates that it is not corroborative but collusive testimony, and he does so by a technique that owes nothing to a metaphysical help or to absolute monarchical power: he institutes the now standard police procedure of interrogating the witnesses separately.<sup>37</sup>

Cohen believes that the significance of the Susanna/Daniel story does not reside only in the religious implications of the story or in Daniel's pursuit of justice for the oppressed. Instead, Daniel's clever investigative techniques are what leave a lasting impression on the detective literary genre. Dorothy Sayers agrees. Because of Daniel's method of eliciting the truth from the witnesses by confrontation, she credits the Susanna/Daniel account with establishing the police procedural or the *roman*

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Smith-Christopher, "The Additions to Daniel," vol. 12 in *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 175.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Cohen, *Murder Most Fair: The Appeal of Mystery Fiction* (London: Associated University Press, 2000), 56.

*policier*.<sup>38</sup> The significance of the Daniel story reverberates through detective fiction and into true crime even today.

## 1.4 Genres of Detective Fiction

### 1.4.1 Gothic Literature

Detective fiction can trace many of its roots and influences to the gothic genre. Themes such as mystery, crime, and death, which are common themes in detective fiction, are integral elements in the gothic genre. Generally speaking, literature from the gothic genre is characterized by a fascination with horror, death, and madness, the goal of which was often to inspire terror. Notable authors of this genre include Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Edgar Allen Poe. Gothic literature began in 1764 with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Ann Radcliffe made significant contributions with her first gothic novel, *The Mysteries of Udolfo*, in 1796.

Edgar Allan Poe is also a contributor to the gothic genre, and his writing made a significant impact on detective fiction. An American who began writing in the Romantic Movement, Poe's best-known stories and poems are gothic. His works demonstrate a fascination with being buried alive, death, insanity, and crime. Credit is usually given to Poe for creating the first detective story—"The Murders in the Rue Morgue," written in 1841. This short story features the detective, C. Auguste Dupin. Dupin, who makes an appearance twice more in the short stories "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" and "The Purloined Letter." Poe coined the term "ratiocination" to

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<sup>38</sup> Dorothy Sayers, "Introduction: Detection and Mystery," in *The Omnibus of Crime*, ed. Dorothy Sayers (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 10.

describe the style of reasoning and intuition used by his detective. Dupin solved crimes with analysis, reason, inference and scientific method. His style and technique inspired Doyle's Sherlock Holmes as well as Christie's Hercule Poirot.<sup>39</sup>

In the late 1880s the popularity of gothic literature returned, and this era is often called the "gothic revival." The stories of this era are characterized by a fascination with the unknown, monsters, ghosts, curses, etc. Writers who contributed to the gothic revival of the 1880s include Robert Louis Stevenson who wrote *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as well as Oscar Wilde with *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, Henry James with *A Turn of the Screw*, and Bram Stoker with *Dracula*. While these novels are not mysteries in a formal sense, they do share in certain characteristics of the mystery genre and often feature a hero whose challenge is to uncover a central mystery.

#### **1.4.2 Victorian Literature and Beyond**

Whilst credit usually goes to Edgar Allen Poe for creating the first detective story, T.S. Eliot claims that it should belong to Wilkie Collins for writing "the first, the longest, and the best" of the modern English detective story.<sup>40</sup> *The Moonstone*, written by Collins in 1868, is given this honor for the careful consideration with which the novel deals with the crime (a stolen diamond), the clues, the characters and suspects, and the varied points of view from which the story is told.

Charles Dickens is another noteworthy author who wrote during the Victorian era. He contributed several novels to the development of the detective fiction genre including *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Bleak House*, and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. *Martin*

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<sup>39</sup> Ousby, 145 and James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, 33

<sup>40</sup> P.D. James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*. 20



*Chuzzlewit*, published in 1843-1844, is Dickens's first novel where he portrays a serious and sustained detective character.<sup>41</sup> Detective Nadgett, a sinister character, is employed by a loan and life insurance company. Dickens' portrayal of Nadgett demonstrates how detectives were still viewed with suspicion and mistrust. However, Dickens' attitude toward the professional detective changed during the years between his publication of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Bleak House*. When *Bleak House* was published in 1853, Dickens now had a detective hero, Inspector Bucket, who successfully investigates crimes throughout the novel.

Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens were significant authors who contributed to the detective genre and wrote within the Victorian literary period, characterized by Queen Victoria's rule during 1837-1901. The novels of the Victorian era overlapped with significant literature that was being written in the Gothic fiction genre. While Ann Radcliffe, Edgar Allan Poe, and Mary Shelley were contributing to the tomes of gothic literature, Dickens and Collins were writing Victorian detective stories. In the Victorian novel, truth and justice persevere against injustice. These Victorian ideals continued into the golden age of detective fiction during the 1920s to the 1940s.

Toward the end of the Victorian Era, Great Britain saw the development of one of its greatest detective heroes, Sherlock Holmes. With Doyle's publication of the Sherlock Holmes series "detective fiction became for the first time an indubitably popular and repeatable genre format."<sup>42</sup> With the publication in 1892 of his first Sherlock Holmes story, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Doyle created a character that would serve as the model detective for both literature and cinema for more than a century.

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<sup>41</sup> Ousby, 83.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Priestman, "Introduction: Crime Fiction and Detective Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

G.K. Chesterton, a faithful fan and defender of detective fiction, decided to try his hand at writing his own short stories. In just over twenty-four years, Chesterton published fifty-two Father Brown stories. *The Innocence of Father Brown*, his first volume, was published in 1911. The durability of Chesterton's short stories, which feature an unassuming Catholic priest as the detective hero, demonstrates the popularity of Chesterton, his priest-detective, and the short story. Chesterton utilized a serial literary form with his Father Brown stories, which brings a sense of completion and satisfaction to the reader whilst triggering the desire for another adventure with the familiar detective hero.<sup>43</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle used the same serial formula with his famous detective series, although he found the unceasing expectation for more Sherlock Holmes stories too demanding and eventually killed off his legendary detective.

Chesterton was dedicated to demonstrating the connection between theology and mystery fiction and his essays about these subjects aid in the elevation of this genre to one of respectability among theologians and literary critics. Chesterton's influence is felt on Christian writers today, including those of detective fiction, such as P.D. James. We will explore how James allows her Christianity to permeate and influence her writing as we examine her detective fiction in later chapters of this dissertation.

### **1.4.3 The Golden Age**

The golden age of crime fiction refers to the era when some of the most popular and influential stories of the detective genre were written—namely, the period

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<sup>43</sup> Kayman, 43.

between the two world wars and generally includes novels published between 1918 and 1930. However, some critics include E.C. Bentley's novel, *Trent's Last Case*, published in 1913 in the golden age. During the golden age, novels, instead of short stories, became the main form of detective fiction. Notable writers of the golden age include Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, and Ellery Queen.

Stephen Knight, in his essay "The Golden Age," collects an informal list of characteristics to describe a golden age story. We must begin with a collection of multiple suspects. The central crime is murder. The setting of the crime must be enclosed and is typically a secluded country house. The story is socially enclosed and the central characters are rarely lower class. The victim must be a man or woman of social importance; however, he or she should not be mourned. The detective, usually a man and often an amateur, detects rationally rather than by action or intuition. Evidence is mostly circumstantial. The writing style is plain. There should be a range of suspects, all who appear capable of the crime and are equipped with a motive. Romance is rare. However, when it does occur, it may occur between two suspects or between the detective and a suspect. The criminal is usually revealed at the end of the story. The last defining characteristic of the golden age novel is that the reader is challenged to defeat the detective by uncovering the culprit before he does.<sup>44</sup> The amassing of clues led to the puzzle or game-like aspect of the golden age novel.

As authors write their novels, characteristics and rules develop. Critics and writers establish formulas and rules that detective writers of the golden age must follow. Agatha Christie, a notorious rule-maker and rule-breaker, is perhaps the most recognized golden age novelist. She published her first book, *The Mysterious Affair*

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen Knight, "The Golden Age," in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 79.

*at Styles*, in 1920, and wrote eighty books of detective fiction during her lifetime. Her novels define the golden age genre—she keeps her story simple and sticks to a basic formula of puzzle-solving with very little psychological analysis. Her characters are often flat and functional; the victims provide a body for the mystery to be centered around, and the cast of characters provides a collection of suspects. Despite her formulaic structuring, she maintained a faithful audience. Her novels have been turned into plays, movies, and television programs.

Christie created two detectives who were featured throughout her novels, although the two characters never met. Detective Hercule Poirot is introduced in Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. He is featured in thirty-three novels and fifty-three short stories. Miss Marple, her second detective, was introduced in the short story, "The Tuesday Night Club," and featured in the novel, *Murder at the Vicarage*, which was published in 1930.

Though this dissertation is primarily focused on the writing of P.D. James, it is important to note similarities between these two authors. Both British women had very little formal education, yet they were gifted in mathematics. Both were encouraged by their family to pursue a writing career. Both women suffered traumatic marriages, and, although Christie divorced, James did not. The motives for murder in Christie's novels are generally money, fear of exposure, and sexual jealousy.<sup>45</sup> While James acknowledges all of these motives for murder in her novels, her favorite motive for murder is disordered love. This subject and the theological implications that James strives to address with her detective fiction will be examined in later chapters. P.D. James is not an author of the golden age, although many of her

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<sup>45</sup> Knight, 82.

novels bear the influence of this period. We will also explore the influence of the golden age and other literary genres on James in later chapters of this dissertation.

Dorothy Sayers is another female author from the golden age who contributed to the detective fiction genre. Like James and Chesterton, she is also concerned with theological matters. In addition to detective fiction, she also wrote plays, novels, poems, Christian apologetics, and translated Dante. She brought a level of respectability to the detective genre with her Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels. She wrote thirteen full-length Wimsey novels and several short story collections. Although her unfortunate financial circumstances may have motivated her to write detective fiction (a popular literary form which she believed would help to pay the bills), her novels stand up to critical acclaim. In *Talking about Detective Fiction*, P.D. James says that:

*Gaudy Night* is one of the most successful marriages of the puzzle with the novel of social realism and serious purpose. It tells me, as a writer of today, that it is possible to construct a credible and enthralling mystery and marry it successfully to a theme of psychological subtlety, and this is perhaps the most important of Dorothy L. Sayers's legacies to writers and readers.<sup>46</sup>

#### **1.4.4 The Hardboiled Novel**

As the 'golden age' drew to an end, detective fiction became less formulaic. In the 1920s, detective genre in the United States was becoming more popular and establishing its own rules, formulas, and characteristics; thus the "hardboiled detective story" was developed. If the classic British mystery novel is concerned with "bringing order out of disorder...restoring the mythical village...to prelapsarian tranquility" as well as reconciliation and social healing, then the hardboiled novelists

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<sup>46</sup> James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, 112

were exploring the social upheavals of the 1920s, including lawlessness, prohibition, corruption, power, and violence.<sup>47</sup>

Excessive and unmerited violence, numerous dead bodies, mobsters (who were often associated with prohibition), love and hate, and ‘private eyes’ who work outside the law characterize the earliest hardboiled stories. The detectives of the hardboiled novels were typically socially marginalized, cynical, and hard-working detectives who did not hesitate to break the law to accomplish their job. They rarely fell in love nor were they successful at love. Typically, if a female suspect was involved in a case, the detective would not hesitate to sacrifice her if she was guilty (or if she was the femme fatale).

In hardboiled detective stories, the plot focuses less on the mystery of the crime and more on the investigation and action sequences. The crime to be solved becomes “increasingly amorphous and keeps spreading in new directions.”<sup>48</sup> Because of the convoluted nature of the crime, the investigator spends much of the novel determining what his or her investigation is actually about.

Dashiell Hammett’s novel, *The Maltese Falcon*, which was published in 1930, is an early example of the hardboiled genre. Sam Spade, Hammett’s detective hero/anti-hero, pursues his partner’s killer, who is the thief of a valuable artifact. Because he is a private detective, he is motivated by money. Yet his loyalty to his work and the value of truth and justice are worth more to him than money. While the classical detective delights in solving the mystery and accepts the reward for his work, the hardboiled detective disdains the reward and, philosopher Slavoj Zizek claims,

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<sup>47</sup> James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, 82

<sup>48</sup> Heta Pyrhönen, *Mayhem and Murder: Narrative and Moral Problems in the Detective Story* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 22.

“solves his cases with the personal commitment of somebody fulfilling an ethical commitment, although this commitment is often hidden under a mask of cynicism.”<sup>49</sup>

The hardboiled detective fiction, which started as a literary genre, became popular for film. Directors found the fast-paced action and dramatic heroes of the hardboiled novels easier to portray on screen than the puzzle-like processes of the golden age novels that had preceded them. Raymond Chandler is another influential author from the hardboiled detective genre. His first novel, *The Big Sleep*, was published in 1939. Typically, readers of the hardboiled detective novels enjoy the suspenseful investigations portrayed. Hardboiled novels “evoke a more emotional form of reader participation than does the ‘whodunit.’”<sup>50</sup> Whereas classic detective novels focus more on the puzzle of who committed the crime, the hardboiled novels portray investigation into society’s moral decay which result in violent crime. The reader is forced to participate in this investigation along with the detective.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Detective fiction has increasingly become a reflection of society’s conscience. If we are to examine the popular fiction of each genre, we can learn about the concerns of each era. The early villainy fiction, which glorified the anti-hero, is a statement against the establishment and structure of society. The gothic era, obsessed with death, the afterlife, and the terror of the unknown, demonstrates humanity’s concern with science and reason. The Victorian era reveals society’s movement towards restoring moral order. With the novels of the golden age, we witness a desire to return to an age of innocence before war revealed our vulnerability. However, the

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<sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 60.

<sup>50</sup> Pyrhönen, 22.

hardboiled novels once again reveal our unsettled society that is discontent with rules and structure. All of these genres and the characteristic theories of detective fiction that typify each of them demonstrate that detective fiction is a reflection of society's greatest concerns. Yet the detective story is able to take the fears of a society and turn them into a compelling story of entertainment.

Because the core of detective fiction is about a society's greatest concerns, we must examine the theological elements of the mystery. Even mystery novelists who do not espouse religious ideologies still address theological issues in their novels. Truth, justice, crime, retribution, death, and the afterlife are all theological concerns no matter what the author's or the reader's religious bent may be.

Perhaps because detective novels attempt to address theological concerns without sermonizing, they are able to reach a wide audience. Detective fiction addresses one common concern that is central to all humans no matter what their religious affiliation may be—death. In his introduction to *Murder Most Fair*, author Michael Cohen suggests that mysteries appeal to readers because they allow us first to face and then to conquer our greatest fear—the fear of death. Citing Robin Winks' book, *Modus Operandi*, in support of his proposal, Cohen suggests that we read mysteries because they evoke and then quiet our deepest fears.<sup>51</sup> Mysteries “acknowledge that death exists by showing us a murder, but they also find its immediate cause in the murderer, and by eliminating that one deadly agent, they seem to eliminate the threat of death itself. The identification and elimination of the murderer is a kind of return to innocence.”<sup>52</sup> Cohen draws from W.H. Auden's essay, “The Guilty Vicarage,” to support this argument. There, Auden claims that after the

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<sup>51</sup> Cohen, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



murder mystery is solved, the community can be restored to a Garden of Eden-type of innocence.<sup>53</sup>

Auden reflects that the typical reader is not attracted to the elements of crime, bloodshed, and violence that are portrayed in the detective stories but to the justice that is finally achieved. Justice occurs in the final chapter when the detective finally solves the crime, the perpetrator is revealed, and the reader has assurance that the crime will be suitably punished. The detective story brings an awareness of that sin when crime is committed. No longer can the community's secret sin remain buried. However, it is beyond the community's capability to bring the sins to the surface and to expel them. Instead, this act must be done by a blameless outsider. Enter in the detective. Sanctification is a "magic formula," claims Auden, made possible by the "miraculous intervention of a genius from outside who revolves by giving knowledge of guilt."<sup>54</sup> Julian Symons suggests that Auden's essay "is written from a specifically Christian point of view."<sup>55</sup> We will explore Auden's Christian perspective as well as the role of the detective in the fifth chapter.

Like Auden, G. K. Chesterton was also a fan of detective fiction and wrote in defense of it. Chesterton "was among the first writers to realize that [detective fiction] could be a vehicle for exploring and exposing the condition of society, and for saying something true about human nature."<sup>56</sup> Chesterton understands the connection between theology and detective fiction, and detective fiction can be a tool by which he exposes the brokenness of society. Even in its broken, crime-filled, evil-doing ways, society can still be patched. This is why Father Brown exists. He comes to the rescue like a bumbling, unassuming, dumpling of a man. Yet he has powers beyond

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<sup>53</sup> W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 157.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Symons, 8.

<sup>56</sup> James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, 46.

belief. “His detecting is a holy calling.... His is a theological task to explode mysteries and expose deceptions.”<sup>57</sup> In this manner, Father Brown becomes the ideal example of the detective-priest, which we shall examine further in chapter four.

Chesterton believes that “the first essential value of the detective story lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life.”<sup>58</sup> The writer acknowledges this “poetry of modern life” by bringing life into the form of a thrilling story that concludes with a satisfying finale where the truth is revealed, justice is served, and the criminal is no longer a danger to society. Because real life is not this satisfying, the discovery of truth and justice is found in the writing and reading of detective novels.<sup>59</sup>

As the genre of the detective novel progresses, so do the theories that address and critique this genre. Theorizing about detective fiction is attributed not only to the critics who write about the novels, but to the authors themselves, who continue to create new rules which the detective writers follow. Throughout this dissertation, I will examine how the history and the theories of detective fiction have influenced P.D. James. James, who has been publishing books since 1962, has participated in the development of the theories of detective fiction with her writing career that has spanned nearly fifty years.

P.D. James is known for her examination of the moral and social intricacies that plague society. She is often described as a psychological crime writer for the manner in which she portrays the complex psyches of her characters. However,

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<sup>57</sup> William David Spencer, *Mysterium and Mystery: The Clerical Crime Novel* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989), 95.

<sup>58</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1922), 158

<sup>59</sup> In “A Defense of Detective Stories,” Chesterton writes, “We may dream, perhaps, that it might be possible to have another and higher romance of London, that men's souls have stranger adventures than their bodies, and that it would be harder and more exciting to hunt their virtues than to hunt their crimes. But since our great authors (with the admirable exception of Stevenson) decline to write of that thrilling mood and moment when the eyes of the great city, like the eyes of a cat, begin to flame in the dark, we must give fair credit to the popular literature which, amid a babble of pedantry and preciosity, declines to regard the present as prosaic or the common as commonplace.” 160.

James is not only concerned with writing about the social and psychological problems of society. She is interested in the theological issues that are rooted in society's problems, and her interest is rooted in her Christian faith. The social and psychological problems of society become religious concerns for James. If, at first glance, detective fiction does not seem theological, it becomes theological when the reader engages with the moral, ethical, and sociological issues that the writer presents with his or her novel. On the surface, James may appear to be concerned with other matters, such as entertaining her readers with a terrifying, perplexing novel, but the result provokes a deeply religious response. She uses her literary and historical narrative of detective fiction to portray her deep theological concern.

## Chapter Two

### Religious Settings: Haunted by the Spirit

#### 2.1 Overview

The novels of P.D. James are haunted by traces of Christianity. The spiritual world is rarely the dominant focus but, in some sense, is always at hand. It is present in the background of the characters' lives such as a church passed each day where bells ring or in the ruins of an abbey standing on the outskirts of town. These are the traces of the sacred life that exist at the edges of the worldly narrative. This is not to suggest that the spiritual life is not also an undercurrent theme in her novels. On the contrary, characters walk into those churches and those churches function as the centerpieces of their lives. However, more often than not, the relationship is a 'weak' presence in James's fictional worlds; that is to say, it is a tangential, shadowy, or fallen presence, which is nonetheless kept in view. James recognizes that Christianity can play both a minor and dominate role in the lives of people, and she writes in a way that captures these divergent possibilities within her novels. She entices her readers into exploring how the Christian realm intersects with the secular domain through the most bizarre or mundane circumstances. In this chapter, I will concentrate on these less prominent or less orthodox allusions to Christianity and will explore the significance of James's use of traces and remnants of religious imagery in her novels' overridingly secular settings.

James reveals that the setting often dictates the plot of her stories. Concerning the importance of setting, the author states:

The setting is tremendously important to me because my books start with a setting. The original inspiration comes from the setting.... I think it's very important that the reader knows enough about the setting to be able to feel that he or she is there in that place. The setting really is the first thing that worries me about a novel.... I think it influences the character, influences plot and sets the whole atmosphere of the novel.<sup>60</sup>

The detail and concern attended to in describing setting is apparent from reading the first chapter of most of her novels. The author understands the power she has to capture her reader's imagination with her descriptions of an old theological college, clinging to the edge of a slowly degrading cliff, or her portrayal of the fens, haunted by ancient superstitions and modern murders. Elements such as these reflect the horror of the gothic sublime. James's power resides in her ability to suggest the impending danger of death and suffering.

Settings provide James with the ideal opportunity to utilize elements of the gothic sublime because they suggest peril without the outright threat. For example, an abandoned church may suggest the absence or even the presence of God, but it still suggests *something* about God. James's earliest novels, including *Cover Her Face* and *A Mind to Murder*, often use religious settings in an unobtrusive manner. In these novels, Christianity is never a dominant theme nor is a Christian setting the prevailing milieu. Yet James manages to unsettle the secularity of her readers with brief glimpses into the sacred realm. She arouses thought, not by preaching or presenting an inescapable Christian perspective, but by allowing her readers to encounter passing or partial imitations of the sacred life experienced in the simple motions of quotidian world.

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<sup>60</sup> James, Interview.

## 2.2 Overview of Religious Elements in the Novels' Settings

*Cover Her Face* is James's first Adam Dalgliesh novel. The influences of the golden age are evident in the country manor house, a closed set of suspects, and an outsider detective who enters the community to solve the murder. Although it is entertaining as a "whodunit," *Cover Her Face* is a weaker production compared to her later novels. In regards to a Christian setting, one is glimpsed only briefly. The annual St. Cedd's Church fête, held every year at the Martingale Estate, is a catalyst for a series of events that lead to family strife and murder. Tensions exist between the vicar, Mr. Hinks, the fête committee, and the townspeople who disagree about the purpose of this fête. The setting is not used as an occasion for theological reflection nor does it impinge upon the plot in any significant way. Indeed, the very significance of the ecclesial world is called into question by the narrative. Nevertheless, a religious world is kept in view by the setting of the annual fête.

The second novel in the Dalgliesh series, *A Mind to Murder*, does not display the same stereotypical elements of the golden age novel. James has moved out of the country manor house and into a psychological hospital. Her range of suspects includes the upper class as well as the working poor. More violence and blood are portrayed. The neat method of death by poison, selected for the first novel and popular among golden age detective novels, has been traded in for a pick to the brain. Not only does James's second novel portray a stronger sense of horror, but it also has a stronger scene of Christian symbolism, which once again is not the dominant focus but does reveal something about the novel's protagonist. On the fourteenth anniversary of his wife's death, Dalgliesh enters a nameless Catholic church and

lights a candle. Dalgliesh, a non-practicing Anglican, ritualistically returns to a Catholic church, a church of his wife's faith, year after year, to light this candle out of "a habit which he could not break even if he wished."<sup>61</sup> This is, of course, in many ways a minor occurrence in the narrative and, as we shall see, is something about which Dalgliesh feels very ambivalent. However, this ambivalence is revealing, and the episode illustrates how the claims of Christianity have a persisting significance in spite of a character's apparent indifference or avowed disbelief.

James claims that she has not made her detective a Christian, yet she purposely and continuously brings him into Christian settings. *Unnatural Causes*, the third in the Dalgliesh series, is not a straightforward religious novel; however, James suggests the detective's spiritual development with another scene in a church. In the previous novel, the only Christian location in which Dalgliesh appeared was a nameless Catholic church; in this case he visits Blythburgh Church, an Anglican church where he has purposely stopped to consider an engagement to his girlfriend. Dalgliesh's visit to this church furthers James's suggestion of the detective's involvement in the religious life. Although he is not wholly committed to participation in the Christian faith, he is still partially involved with church life by activities such as visiting churches.

The fifth novel in the Dalgliesh series, *The Black Tower*, is situated at Toynton Grange, nursing home for the disabled. Though it is not a religious institution, this Victorian-styled home is depicted in church-like terms. James describes the religious symbols including stained glass, burning incense, and monastic cloaks, but hints that something imitative and insincere persists about this place. *The Black Tower*

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<sup>61</sup> P.D. James, *A Mind to Murder* (London: Sphere Books Limited, 1987), 157.

incorporates elements of the gothic novel with its gloomy nursing home (a promise of impending death), a looming tower, and ominous cliffs.

*Death of an Expert Witness*, a novel which centrally occurs at a scientific laboratory, still keeps the religious faintly in view. A chapel resides on the laboratory grounds, suggesting the clash between science and religion. Once a religious gathering place, the chapel has been deconsecrated as well as become the meeting place for the love affairs between three characters. These affairs eventually lead to a murder, and one body is discovered in the chapel itself. James manages to suggest something about the relevance of the Anglican Church as well as the struggle between religious devotion and apathy by keeping a religious setting always in view in this novel that cleverly uses the gothic sublime.

*A Taste for Death* opens with the discovery of two men, their throats cut, found in the vestry of St. Matthew's Church. One was a homeless man and the other, Paul Berowne, was a former Minister of State. Berowne had been visiting the church, seeking guidance regarding family and career troubles. Nevertheless the church becomes the location for his violent death. *A Taste for Death* is not a clear-cut religious novel, yet the central action occurs at a church. Therefore, the Christian setting has profound effects on the characters and plot. Like many of James's gothic horror novels, scenes of violence and death occur at religious places, like they do in *A Taste for Death*.

As we can see from the foregoing examples and despite her personal faith, James does not feel bound to use religious settings in an affirming manner to show spiritual growth or to say positive things about the church. In fact, her use of Christian symbolism can be biting, critical, and starkly reflective of the atheistic and materialistic world in which we live. Her eighth Dalgliesh mystery, *Devices and*



*Desires*, with a subtle reference to religious setting, (an old church diminished by a nuclear power plant), suggests a bizarre motive for murder that continues in this vein. This novel is one of James's most gothic for she includes several other decaying or unused religious locations, including a ruined Benedictine abbey, which, like the old church, stands in contrast to the power plant. The Old Rectory, inhabited by the former curate, as well as the Martyr's Cottage, inhabited by murderer, are examples of formerly religious places that are now simply homes.

*A Certain Justice*, James's ninth Dalgliesh novel, is a story of revenge and the extreme measures to which people will go to seek justice for crimes perpetrated against their loved ones. James introduces a church into the narrative when her character, Janet Carpenter, attempts revenge and chooses St. James Church as the meeting place between herself and her co-conspirator. Carpenter's motives change, however, and the church moves from a place of conspiracy and revenge to a place of confession, forgiveness, and redemption.

*Death in Holy Orders*, James's eleventh and one of her most overtly religious detective novels, is set at St. Anselm's Theological College. Although it is a training school for Anglican priests, it also serves as the location for several murders. The school faces the threat of closure as its physical structure slowly crumbles into the East Anglian seacoast. The decaying seminary, with its suggestion of the impending destruction of the church, is reminiscent of the gothic novel. Symbols of Christianity within this seminary are significant to the story, including the valuable painting of "Doom," the "Madonna and Child" altar piece, and the silver chalices and paten. The protection of these sacred valuables contributes to the apparent fear of burglary, which results in the church being locked at night and creates tension among the priests. James keeps Christianity always present by setting her novel at the seminary,

yet she manages to balance this with a story of violence and murder, thereby creating apt tension between the sacred and the secular.

In *The Private Patient*, as one last example, we find a manor serving as a hospital that remains almost exclusively exempt from Christian setting with the exception of a stone chapel that sits on the edge of the manor. It is at this sacred place where Marcus Westhall, a spiritually-seeking agnostic, meditates but feels the failure of his attempts to pray. He returns to the chapel near the conclusion of the novel and finds the body of his sister Candace, dead by self-inflicted wounds, blood covering the altar. James creates a violent and graphic tension concerning the purpose that the church can serve for her characters. For one man, it is his refuge. But for his sister, it is where she will commit her final, despairing act of suicide. Although neither of these characters call themselves Christians, the church is a place they cannot ignore.

### **2.3 Analysis of Religious Settings**

Almost every Dalgliesh novel James has written incorporates a Christian setting in some manner. For her characters, there are no clearly defined lines between the sacred and the secular realms—each must be considered in light of the other. To write a novel without some spiritual symbolism is, for James, a false representation of the world. James claims, “It seems to me that I’m not really dealing with complete people if I ignore this [spiritual] aspect of them.”<sup>62</sup> Reality must be expressed through the novel; religious (or anti-religious) representation is a necessary part of that reality. This section will examine how James uses Christian settings to guide her readers into an understanding of how the secular and sacred worlds collide.

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<sup>62</sup> James, Interview.

Religion persistently appears within the settings of the novels. Christianity is present in the churches people attend as a place for religious solace and comfort. However, Christianity is present in the detective novels even when James vaguely references it or omits it entirely. This is no accidental oversight. Examples of this subtle omission of religion are demonstrated most evidently with patterns such as churches that have been misused or abused to expose hypocrisy and violence, churches that are no longer used for religious purposes, and the declining presence of the Anglican Church. We will examine these patterns to explore how the author saturates religious settings with Christianity.

### **2.3.1 Religious Settings Provide Solace and Spiritual Guidance**

Despite the author's deep Christian resolutions, she does not attempt to convert or preach to her readers. James always leaves the religious as a suggestion, that church can be something favorable as well as something disturbing is especially evident through her use of settings. A theme in favor of Christianity, where the church offers a place of solace and spiritual guidance, is evident throughout several novels, including *A Certain Justice* and *A Mind to Murder*.

Janet Carpenter, a sympathetic victim from *A Certain Justice*, is only peripherally featured. The most important clues regarding her murder, however, are revealed in the church that Janet inadvertently entered and where she found redemption. Initially, Janet intends to use St. James's Church as the location for planning revenge. However, the church becomes a place of spiritual re-birth as Carpenter begins a relationship with the priest and finds redemption and peace.

In *A Mind to Murder*, it is Dalgliesh who seeks peace in a church. The detective takes a break from his investigation and enters a Roman Catholic Church. Fourteen years have passed since his wife and son died, and he is compelled to light a candle in their memory on this anniversary. At the church, he encounters Fredrica Saxon, who is a doctor at the clinic he is investigating and also a suspect in his case. During their conversation, Dalgliesh grows envious of the peace that Fredrica has found.<sup>63</sup> However, he realizes that her spiritual contentment comes at a great price. Relationships have been sacrificed, and at the end of their affair, Fredrica's lover returned to his neurotic and suicidal wife. Fredrica, in turn, finds her peace by serving the church in a convent dedicated to disabled children.<sup>64</sup>

This portrayal of an intimate exchange between two people begins in a church. This place is significant to the spiritual growth of both characters. At the church, Fredrica finds faith and directs her life to serving God. She becomes empowered by her faith. For Dalgliesh, the church is where he participates in rituals but has not yet found the faith to believe that they will change his life. Therefore, he leaves the church feeling agitated by the different encounters with the sacred that he and Fredrica both experience.

Both of the examples of church settings presented in *A Certain Justice* and *A Mind to Murder* are minor incidences within the novels. What we can see from these examples is how James keeps the religious subtly in view through her portrayal of the church as a place for contemplation and redemption. The church settings do not dominate in either novel, yet the presence of religious is still suggested. Janet Carpenter, Fredrica Saxon, and Adam Dalgliesh visit churches because they seek guidance and comfort that only a church can provide for them. Both Carpenter and

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<sup>63</sup> *A Mind to Murder* 165.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

Dalgliesh are attached to religious paraphernalia in spite of their loss of religious belief. However, differences in their experiences exist as well. In *A Certain Justice*, Carpenter initially visited the church without spiritual motives. Yet, James demonstrates that as Carpenter continued to visit St. James, she becomes redeemed and saved through her experiences at the church. In *A Mind to Murder*, James portrays how Saxon's life changes through her participation in church life. She allows Dalgliesh to remain an unconvinced participator in the rituals of the church but not yet the redemption found in Christ.

### **2.3.2 Religious Settings Expose Hypocrisy and Violence**

James is adept at converting churches and chapels into hospitals, nursing homes, and concert halls, and then turning these locations into places of mystery and murder. Several of her novels feature gothic and Victorian buildings that have been converted from their original use or are crumbling from disuse. The author subtly suggests that if you pervert the intended purpose of a building, particularly a sacred one, consequences will follow:

In a mystery novel where situations and relationships are not always what they appear to be, a setting that likewise is not what it appears to be becomes an appropriate site for murder. The converted setting also reflects the fluid change that undermines the stability of society with the old inexorably making way for the new.<sup>65</sup>

Twisting the most ordinary settings into something sinister allows James to use any setting effectively.<sup>66</sup> James is not doing this to illuminate something about

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<sup>65</sup> Richard B. Gidez, *P.D. James* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 26.

<sup>66</sup> Bernard Benstock, "The Clinical World of P.D. James," *Twentieth Century Women Novelists*, ed. Thomas F. Staley (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982), 105.

the church, but to expose her world. By creating murder scenes in religious places, James reveals the corruption of society that is hidden behind its doors.

James explores the dangers of religious hypocrisy in *The Black Tower*, where a pseudo-Christian aura lingers in the Toynton Grange Nursing Home. The establishment of a religious institution that is not entirely convinced of its Christianity allows a confused state of religiosity to persist. Wilfred Anstey, the founder of Toynton Grange, was miraculously cured from a physical ailment and out of gratitude to God for his recovered health, he established this home for the disabled. The Grange was originally established as a Christian nursing home, which explains why an Anglican priest resides there.

Upon entering the Grange, a strange impression is made:

The hall smelt oddly; not with the usual institutional smell of bodies, food and furniture polish overlaid with antiseptic, but sweeter and strangely exotic as if someone had been burning incense. The hall was as dimly lit as a church. An impression reinforced by the two front windows of Pre-Raphaelite stained glass one on each side of the main door. To the left was the expulsion from Eden, to the right was the sacrifice of Isaac.<sup>67</sup>

When Dalgliesh enters the Grange, he immediately senses something insincere about the Christian art and relics. The stained glass windows are gaudy, the furniture is unnatural. Gidez maintains a more pessimistic view of the religious setting at the Grange, “Hope of eternal bliss in a loving God must be dashed anytime one passes through the main hall of a home dominated by its stained glass windows depicting a vindictive Old Testament God expelling Adam and Eve from Paradise and demanding that Abraham sacrifice Isaac.”<sup>68</sup> James does not state these perceptions outright but hints at the artificiality by her use of similes.

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<sup>67</sup> P.D. James *The Black Tower* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 52

<sup>68</sup> Gidez, 75

When Dalglish meets Wilfred Anstey, his “first thought was that he looked like a bit-player acting with practiced conviction the part of an ascetic bishop. The brown monk’s habit suited him so well that it was impossible to imagine him in any other garb.”<sup>69</sup> James’s continued use of simile in this opening description of the Grange and its founder establishes a theme of things playing the part of something else or appearing to be something on the surface that they are incapable of being to their core. “Religion is often subverted for nefarious purposes,” claims Gidez. There is no scarcity of examples:

The pilgrimages to Lourdes are a convenient front for a drug operation. The Black Tower, built as a refuge to await the Second Coming, entombs Wilfred’s ancestor and almost becomes a funeral pyre. It is also where Wilfred retreats not to meditate but to pore over his cache of pornography. Julius wears a monk’s robe when he murders Grace. Father Baddeley is murdered as he prepares to hear confession.<sup>70</sup>

*The Black Tower* is reminiscent of a gothic horror novel in many ways. Standing on the grounds of the Grange is a crumbling Victorian tower. This gothic symbol serves as a reminder of the horrific history when the previous owner, a religious fanatic, locked himself in the tower as he awaited the second coming. Anyone who visits the tower is reminded of the gruesome death of the first Wilfred Anstey who secretly sealed himself in the tower and starved himself to death. Even the novel’s title, named after this edifice of despair and death, pays homage to the gothic genre. There is a plaque outside the tower that memorializes the first Antsey’s death. Although it is written in Latin, Dalglish understands it is about original sin and the certainty of death. To the priest, Father Baddeley, the tower is the place where he said prayers and sprinkled holy water. To the younger Wilfred Anstey,

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 75.

however, it is a place of secret sin and hypocrisy. The tower is also the location where fire nearly kills Dalgliesh and a Grange resident. Danger, secrets, death, and the cycle of horror that surround the black tower characterize it as a gothic.

Despite the distortion of good things that turn into that which is evil and perverse, James is able to demonstrate something righteous. The contaminating effects of murder are still evident, for numerous characters are killed. However, in chapter two, particularly in the study on Father Baddeley, we will see how James redeems the Grange.

In *Death of an Expert Witness*, James again utilizes characteristics from the gothic novel. A shocking scene of brutality is portrayed when a body is discovered, strung up in a chapel. Like most gothic novelists, James intent is to terrify her readers. The scene leading up to the discovery of the body in the chapel is filled with anticipation and horror as an innocent young woman runs through the grounds of her scientific lab, terrified.

The chapel is very much a physical building, but the sacred purpose for which it was built is lost. When first mentioned to the reader, the chapel is introduced as an interesting piece of architecture; however, it is more of a burden than an asset to Hoggatt's Lab. The director is researching the possibility of turning over the chapel to the Historical Society. The deconsecrated chapel is used for community concerts and gatherings. Through their investigation, the detectives learn that it serves a more worldly purpose—a meeting place for lovers. Complications from the affairs lead to murder and eventually, a second victim, attempting to blackmail the murderer, is found hanging in the chapel. Hardly anyone who enters the chapel regards it as a sacred place. There are only two scenes in this novel where James allows her characters to use the chapel for its original sacred purpose. The first is when Brenda



Pridmore, the young woman who discovered the murdered body in the chapel, flees the grounds of the scientific laboratory, certain that she is being pursued by the killer. In the following scene, Brenda runs through the darkness of the new science laboratory and stumbles towards the light of the chapel:

Before her the black bulk of the half-completed Laboratory loomed like some prehistoric monument, its great slabs blood stained with ancient sacrifices, rearing upwards towards the implacable gods. As she hesitated, the clouds parted like ponderous hands to unveil the full moon frail and transparent as a Communion wafer. Gazing at it she could almost taste the remembered transitory dough, melting against the roof of her mouth.<sup>71</sup>

Brenda finds her way out of the lab and sprints toward the Wren chapel. It stands, “gleaming through the autumn branches... lit from within, beckoning and holy, shining like a picture on a Christmas card. She ran towards it, palms outstretched, as hundreds of her forebears in the dark fens rushed to their altars for sanctuary.”<sup>72</sup> When Brenda reaches the sanctuary of the chapel, she is horrified to discover a dead body strung up from a hook on the wall. The comparison of the church and the scientific laboratory is a nod to the early gothic novels where the hero operated in a careful balance between knowledge of science and the mystery of God. Brenda reminds us of a heroine out of a Radcliffe novel, like Emily from *The Mysteries of Udolfo*. Brenda evens faints when she finally arrives at the chapel. However, this is not a simple gothic story about the horror of the unknown or even a story about scientific advancement and its power to destroy us. Instead, it is a story that explores the complexities of human relationships played out among a scientific community where humans have been taught to believe that they can master all knowledge through the power of science.

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<sup>71</sup> P.D. James *Death of an Expert Witness* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 291.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 293-95.

By twisting the sacredness of the chapel into something that is, at first, simply non-religious, then into something scandalous, and finally into something undeniably evil, James demonstrates her power to represent both good and evil with the same religious setting. The shocking discovery of the body in the church might lead readers to believe that James is suggesting that God is absent and cannot save us. Her novels about science and detection might be construed to suggest that only the forensic scientists and the detectives hold the power to discover the source of evil and to stop murderers.

In a novel whose setting is primarily focused on science, James still leaves room for the mystery of the divine. She does so with the entrance of Dalgliesh. The detective slowly and reverently enters the chapel. He absorbs the feel, sights, and smells of the place. “Even the smell was the same, a scholastic smell, cold austere, only faintly ecclesiastical.”<sup>73</sup> During his stroll around the chapel, he is struck by its ascetic simplicity, yet he is always searching for clues as well. Dalgliesh never stops being a policeman, even in the face of human suffering.<sup>74</sup> It is in these moments that he has the power to become both detective and priest.

The chapel is not a place that inspires religious sentiment, especially after the deconsecrating and the discovery of the dead body. Yet for the detective, something religious lingers. His stroll through the chapel forces him to remember churches past and present, and Dalgliesh connects this place to his own spirituality.<sup>75</sup> Dalgliesh stops to read the Book of Common Prayer, but in doing so, uncovers clues that lead

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<sup>73</sup> *Death of an Expert Witness* 299-300.

<sup>74</sup> P.D. James, *Devices and Desires* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 185.

<sup>75</sup> James describes Dalgliesh’s entrance into the chapel: “He began to explore the chapel. He walked softly, yet his feet fell with portentous heaviness on the marbled floor. Slowly, he paced between two rows of splendidly carved stalls towards the altar. In design and furnishings, the building reminded him of his college chapel. Even the smell was the same, a scholastic smell, cold austere, only faintly ecclesiastical. Now that the altar had been denuded of all its furnishings, except the two candlesticks, the chapel looked purely secular, unconsecrated. Perhaps it always had. Its formal classicalism rejected emotionalism. It enshrined man, not God; reason, not mystery.” *Death of an Expert Witness* 299-300.

him to the murderer. His discovery of clues during his spiritual meditation in the chapel demonstrates that for James's detective, his religious life can never be separated from his secular life. Even when Dalgliesh attempts to do something religious, something corrupt is revealed. James consistently keeps this tension between the sacred and the evil evident throughout the narrative in the chapel.

*A Taste for Death*, set in St. Matthew's church, opens violently with the murder of two men in the church vestry. Both men spent the night in the church. Harry, the derelict, often slept on the church porch but had been invited inside by the other victim, Sir Paul Berowne. Berowne, who had spent the night at St. Matthew's one week earlier, returned to the church after having had "some kind of religious quasi-mystical experience here in this room. He may have been hoping to recapture it. He'd arranged with the parish priest to stay the night here."<sup>76</sup> The priest speculates that Berowne may have received stigmata in the church though he is unable or unwilling to confirm his vision of this supernatural experience.

James weaves elements of the sacred with the brutally violent throughout *A Taste for Death*. There is a continuous conflict between the comfort the church is supposed to offer to its people and the violence two men found there. "Whatever had happened to [Berowne] on that first night in St. Matthew's vestry had led him, the next day, to change the whole direction of his life. Had it also led him to his death?"<sup>77</sup> Detective Dalgliesh also feels this conflict between good and evil that is present at St. Matthew's:

Dalgliesh was grateful for these minutes of quiet contemplation. The scent of incense seemed to have intensified, but it smelled to him overlaid with a sickly, more sinister smell, and the silence wasn't absolute... Soon, he knew, the bodies would be neatly parceled in plastic sheeting. The scene of crime

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<sup>76</sup> P.D. James, *A Taste for Death* (London: Guild Publishing, 1986), 74.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

exhibits, packed and tagged, would be carried to the police car... At the foot of the statue of the Virgin and the Child stood a wrought-iron candleholder bearing its triple row of clotted sockets, the tip of burnt wick deep in their rims of wax. On impulse he felt in his pocket for a tenpenny piece and dropped it in the box.<sup>78</sup>

James constantly combines elements of violence with the sacred. In choosing the detective novel as her medium, she is able to portray the brutality of human relationships. Yet she continuously brings in scenes of Christianity to her novels to show that God is present in or despite of the violence. God is not absent from her characters' lives and, even in a church where two men's throats are slit, God's presence remains.

*Death in Holy Orders*, James's eleventh novel, is set in a seminary on the East Anglian Shore. St. Anselm's Theological College is a training school for Anglican priests as well as the scene of several murders that bring Detective Adam Dalgliesh to St. Anselm's. On the surface, St. Anselm's is suffering. The buildings are deteriorating and will have slipped into the ocean in thirty years. But deeper problems exist. Tensions exist between the priests, and eventually murder occurs. James attributes several causes for the tension at the seminary, including disagreements regarding how their valuable religious art should be displayed. Two priceless paintings are displayed in the chapel and have resulted in it being locked at night. This distresses several priests who feel locking that the church detracts from its sacredness. Incidentally, an unconsecrated oratory has been placed in the main building to offer a place for prayer when the church is closed. The students and priests have been forced to accept an inferior alternative to their church for the sake of protecting the art. James suggests this materialism leads to hypocrisy which will be followed by violence. She continuously brings her reader back to this tension

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 75.

between the protection of material goods and how this detracts from the church's purpose as a place for prayer and worship. The church has become a type of museum for the religious relics.

It is more than just the artwork and the locked church doors that disturb the people associated with St. Anselm's. This school that is "too small, too remote, too expensive and too elitist"<sup>79</sup> is bound to close. What purpose does a strict, old-fashioned theological college serve in an age where people value open-mindedness, money, and success? The school is losing students and funding, and the buildings are slowly slipping into the ocean. The world it is training students to serve views it as outdated and obsolete. A father of one of the students brazenly disapproves of his son's decision for theological education, stating:

The C of E will be defunct in twenty years if the present decline continues. Or it'll be an eccentric sect concerned with maintaining old superstitions and ancient churches—that is if the State hasn't taken them over as national monuments. People might want the illusion of spirituality... But they've stopped believing in heaven and they're not afraid of hell, and they won't start going to church.<sup>80</sup>

Sir Treeve's opinion regarding the irrelevancy of the church represents the opinion held by much of James's Great Britain. The author acknowledges that her church is in decline. Regarding this diminish, James states, "That college will not be there in thirty years and that in itself is symbolic. I am talking about the Church of England itself. Not necessarily the Christian faith, but one particular branch of it."<sup>81</sup>

Despite James's sentiments regarding the disappearance of the church, the novel does not portray such a dismal future for the Church of England as inevitable. James takes her reader to St. Anselm's where students are trained for the priesthood

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<sup>79</sup> P.D. James *Death in Holy Orders* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 141.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>81</sup> James, Interview.

and people still believe that they are serving a true God and are a part of a church that moves in this world. The church is never portrayed as a faultless place since murders occur and secret sins are uncovered. Yet, in spite of its corruption, most characters in the church are sincere and good. James depicts the majority of her characters in *Death in Holy Orders* as men and women of faith who want to teach, learn, and serve God and his people. *Death in Holy Orders* is a narrative that explores how the spiritual life is experienced. James sees no need to separate a religious novel from a secular novel, just as she doesn't see any need to separate a story of spiritual growth from her mystery detection—these stories are intertwined. Murder, theft, and sin occur in the same place as grace, love, and forgiveness. This broken place is the world that God came into—it is impossible to separate it or to claim that Christianity does not belong in a mystery novel or crime in a Christian narrative.

In almost every one of her detective novels, James uses religious settings to provoke her readers into considering the relationship between the secular and the sacred. James maintains an understanding of the relationship between the religious and the non-religious worlds and explores this through the violence portrayed in her mysteries. Often, the churches are presented as places of refuge as well as the locations of brutal murders. The common theme shared by the locations in this section is that these churches and religious places exist but their purpose has been distorted. The church is always present and is the common background for the narrative, whether it is central (*A Taste for Death* and *Death in Holy Orders*) or peripheral (*The Black Tower* and *Death of an Expert Witness*).

### 2.3.3 Religious Settings Present but Lack Christian Purposes

Numerous novels include subtle Christian references through setting. James slips in these references by mentioning the ruins of ancient abbeys, old church parsonages, or empty church sanctuaries. Often, the places mentioned in this shadowed manner hint at an out-dated or irrelevant religion.

*Death of an Expert Witness* includes James's most obvious example of a church that fails to be used for religious purpose. Subsequently, it is where a murder occurs. Even in *Death of an Expert Witness*, another religious place is present: the Rectory where Kerrison, the murderer, lives. He inherited the house from his father and it has no religious significance to him. In fact, the only person living there who seems to reflect any religion at all is the housekeeper, Miss Willard. Her dingy apartment is brightened only by the presence of a single religious artifact:

On a wall shelf to the right of the door was a small woodcarving of an armless Madonna with a laughing Child perched on her shoulder... Dalglish thought it was probably a copy, and a good one, of a mediaeval museum piece. Its gentle beauty emphasized the tawdriness of the room, yet dignified it, seeming to say that there was more than one kind of human loneliness, human pain, and that the same mercy embraced them all.<sup>82</sup>

James is capable of mixing beauty and spirituality with the messiness and worldliness that her characters encounter. Although the Rectory holds no spiritual power for Kerrison, a respected doctor with an elevated position in society, it does for Miss Willard, a housekeeper who is portrayed as a foolish and flimsy woman. Yet she is the one who acknowledges the spiritual power of the place with her simple Madonna and Child. Although Miss Willard only appears in a few scenes, she is one of the most captivating characters. Willard is the only character to possess any personal

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<sup>82</sup> *Death of an Expert Witness* 255.

religious relics. When Dalgliesh sees her woodcarving, this Madonna and Child impresses him with more beauty and intimacy than he found when he visited the chapel. The fact that religious relics are only found in the room of this “toothily coy” housekeeper, surrounded by “perverse femininity,”<sup>83</sup> only furthers the contrast between the sacred and the secular. Dalgliesh notices a few photographs on the mantelshelf of a “cassocked clergyman and his wife...standing side by side but oddly dissociated outside a variety of rather dull churches.”<sup>84</sup> By acknowledging a few photographs on Willard’s wall, James draws attention to the fact that she, just like Dalgliesh, is the child of a priest.

*Devices and Desires* is another novel where James presents the Rectory as a religiously significant place that has been robbed of its spiritual power. Alex and Alice Mair inhabit the rectory, and it is Alice who is the murderer. This is the second murderer who inhabits a rectory in one of James’s novels. This pattern demonstrates that simply because a character lives in a religiously relevant place, that place does not necessarily hold religious relevance for that character.

By offering details that draw attention to religious settings, these two representations, as well as countless other examples throughout her novels, demonstrate how the Christian life is always kept in view. These two minor characters and the settings in which they live represent something about their own attitudes towards the Christian life as well as the attitudes of their community towards the church. “James takes as much care with her minor characters as she does with her major ones,” claims Gidez. “Even those characters who appear in a scene or two have obvious personalities and character traits that make them believable.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Gidez, 128.



James does not deny that there are numerous examples of settings and characters within those settings who corrupt and defile the church. Sometimes, these are subtle—such as Rectory being occupied by a murderer like Alice Mair in *Devices and Desires*. Yet at other times, there are affirmative examples of religious devotion, such as Miss Willard’s Madonna and Child. This simple piece of art can, for some readers, be nothing more than a decoration. But for others, it is a representation of the miracle of Christ becoming a man. Mementos of faith like this may conflict with the corrupt and violent world which surrounds them, yet they serve as reminders that God is still present in the world as James envisions it.

#### **2.3.4 James’s Commentary on the Decline of Anglicanism in Britain**

James is able to suggest the presence of religion without overtly writing about it. It is as if by presenting a church but ignoring its religious value, James is able to comment upon the religious state of her world through her novels. For example, in *Cover Her Face*, the central action occurs at the church fête. This annual celebration began as a religious festival but has become an exclusive, social event. The vicar struggles to rectify the changing role of the church within his community. “...Once a year Mr. Hinks faced certain unpalatable facts about his church. He worried about its exclusiveness, its negative impact on the seething fringe of Chadfleet New Town, the suspicion that it was more of a social than a spiritual force in the village life. Once, he had suggested that the fête should close as well as open with a prayer and a hymn,” but no one supported “this startling innovation”<sup>86</sup> except the murderer herself, a woman struggling to return her community to an Eden-like state that she believes it

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<sup>86</sup> P.D. James, *Cover Her Face* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 21.

once possessed. The church, an establishment that once united people and created community, has become divisive with a weak and ineffective minister leading it.

*Unnatural Causes* is a novel whose primary setting occurs in a writers' community. This novel takes on a light-hearted tone and even mocks the classic detective novel. Dalgliesh is visiting his aunt who lives in a kind of writer's sanctuary. Throughout the novel, James subtly mocks and teases all of the writers including the detective novelist, (by killing them off one by one). *Unnatural Causes* occurs in a predominantly secular culture, and the only presence of a religious setting is evident in church remnants. James only casually refers to these ruins of an age long past when church life dominated society. As Dalgliesh takes a solitary walk along the beach one evening, he reflects upon how easy it is for local legends to grow out of noise one hears from the "faint bells of long drowned churches, St. Leonard's, St. John's, St. Peter's and All Saints clanging their dirges for the souls of dead men."<sup>87</sup> These churches "long drowned" offer further examples of the gothic sublime. James introduced a foreboding gloom and mystery with the gothic setting. Ruined churches serve as reminders of an age when religion once dominated the lives of men and women. As ravages of time destroyed the physical reminders of the age of church, emptiness remains. Dalgliesh still senses the void left by these churches, and their presence is felt, but in a ghostly sense. The churches mentioned are "long-drowned" edifices that stand in for the "souls of dead men."

Church ruins are present again in James's eighth Dalgliesh novel, *Devices and Desires*. James portrays religious settings in the shadows of a community faced with the clash between faith and reason. Again, the gothic setting is set during the collision between science and religion throughout this novel. A new nuclear power

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<sup>87</sup> P.D. James *Unnatural Causes* (London: Sphere Books, 1973), 108.

plant has been built opposite a ruined church, and the killer reflects on this contrast between the church and science:

Even on the darkest night, by the light which the sea seemed mysteriously to absorb and reflect, he could make out the splendid fifteenth-century west tower of Happisburgh Church, that embittered symbol of man's precarious defenses against this most dangerous of seas. And it was a symbol of more than that. The tower must have been the last sight of land for hundreds of drowning mariners in peace and war... Built in an age of faith, the tower had stood as a symbol of that final unquenchable hope that even the sea would yield up her dead and that their God was God of the waters as he was of the land. But now mariners could see, dwarfing the tower, the huge rectangular bulk of the Larksoken Power Station. For those who sought symbols in inanimate objects its message was both simple and expedient, that man, by his own intelligence and his own efforts, could understand and master his world, could make his transitory life more agreeable, more comfortable, more free of pain.<sup>88</sup>

The contrast between the nuclear power plant and the fifteenth-century church represents the timeless struggle between the church and the world of science. The killer considers the clash between humanity's trust that God is in control of the natural world and humanity's attempt to be the source of its own power. The nuclear power plant is a blunt representation of that latter attempt—scientists working to create a source of all the power and efficiency that humanity will need.

The power plant inspires different reactions in numerous characters in *Devices and Desires*. For the serial killer, the "Whistler," the power plant inspires anger at a world that struggles to exist without dependency upon God. The Whistler reacts against this world by committing random acts of murder to demonstrate his anger and hopelessness. This man therefore rationalizes that it is his duty to enact justice on his community. Due to estrangement, isolation, and despair, the Whistler takes away his own life. The Whistler is an unusual perpetrator for James to portray. He is the only

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<sup>88</sup> *Devices and Desires* 67.

serial killer that James writes about in her Dalgliesh novels. Serial killers are more common in hardboiled detective fiction, which typically does not characterize James's fiction. However, his role in *Devices and Desires* represents the meaningless horror and inescapable violence that all humanity may suffer. James ends his life with a suicide thereby enacting her form of justice, which is less common in the hardboiled genre and more typical of James's consequential endings.

The other religious settings in the novel share a connection that they were once holy places but are now being used for unsacred purposes. The former Benedictine abbey is now ruins on the beach, frequented by vagrants. Two houses in town hold religious significance—the Old Rectory and the Martyr's Cottage, named after the Protestant martyr Agnes Poley who was burned at Ipswich. A plaque with Ecclesiastes 3:15 and information about the martyr is embedded next to the door of the cottage. Dalgliesh returns to the cottage in the final, climactic scene of the novel. Alice Mair, the current owner of the cottage and the murderer, has set herself on fire to escape capture and prosecution. The way in which Alice commits suicide hints at James's use of dark irony. Although she could not bear to be arrested and persecuted, Alice now suffers hell-fire and divine judgment through her death. Dalgliesh enters her home and finds:

The long body [was] as rigid as an effigy.... But her face was yet untouched and the eyes seemed to gaze at him with such an intensity of half-crazed endurance that there flashed into his mind unbidden the image of Agnes Poley so that the blazing tables and chairs were the crackling faggots of her agonizing martyrdom, and he smelled above the acrid smoke the dreadful stink of burning flesh.<sup>89</sup>

Dalgliesh drags the body of Alice from her cottage but he is unable to save her life. Meg Dennison, Alice's friend, later moves out of the Old Rectory and into the

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<sup>89</sup> *Devices and Desires* 493.

Martyr's Cottage. When Dalgliesh questions her about this decision, she responds, "If there are ghosts at Martyr's Cottage, they will be friendly spirits."<sup>90</sup> The only active, religious experience that a character experiences in a church setting occurs when Dalgliesh scatters the ashes of his dead aunt in a churchyard. Even this experience, though it brings him to a church and allows him to participate in a Christian ritual of sorts, is one of death and mourning.

In *The Private Patient*, James's most recent novel, a chapel sits on the edge of the manor. This setting reminds the reader of *Death of an Expert Witness* and other novels where a church is present, but its power appears to be diminished. Even the manner in which James portrays the lighting suggests spiritual dullness. It is an ancient place without electricity. Boxes full of candle stubs are used for lighting. A stone slab offers uncomfortable seating for visitors. Marcus Westhall frequents this chapel for prayers and meditation, but as an agnostic, he believes that God neither hears nor responds to his prayers. He enviously watches Lettie, the lone Christian character, traveling to church every Sunday and he even finds her in the chapel on occasion. But simply being in a religious place is not enough to make him a religious man. Marcus wants to be filled with the spiritual power that will equip him to actually do *something*. Ultimately, the chapel fails Marcus as it never provides him with the strength to leave his lucrative surgeon's position to become a doctor in Africa. Nor does it give him the strength to end the homosexual relationship for which he suffers guilt. Instead, the chapel is the place where Marcus finds his sister's body, dead by suicide, laid out upon the concrete slabs as though it were a sacrifice upon an altar. James offers neither comfort nor peace in her chapel in *The Private Patient*. No consoling priest makes an appearance to assure the characters that things

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 503.

will be all right. There is no explanation for the evil that occurs in the holy place and in the characters' lives.

## 2.4 Conclusion

With her diverse portrayals of the church throughout her detective novels, James does everything with religious setting short of ignoring it. She keeps the religious a constant presence, sometimes as a subtle suggestion in the background and sometimes as the predominant setting for her novel. Her portrayals of the church range from violent to obsolete to hopeful to redeeming.

The undiscerning audience may read the numerous examples of James's religious settings and assume that James is attesting to the lack of power of the church. Erlene Hubly states:

For the church, in James's novels, is an ineffectual force, and serves only as a setting for ominous events. James's is a world in which science has replaced religion, a world in which the best of men, such as Adam, turn to science rather than to religion to solve the riddles of mankind. There is no place for religion, always an intangible; the problems are too insistent, too real, too ever-present.<sup>91</sup>

But critics such as Hubly miss the power of James's subtlety. She does not portray murders in churches and illicit affairs in chapels to say that God is absent from those places, but to say that God is present. God does not leave when violence occurs, especially when it occurs in a holy place. James steps into the pain of the violence and isolation and horror to write her mysteries that bring together the presence of the divine with the presence of evil. The divine is often represented by her Christian settings while evil is represented by crime and violence. Sometimes

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<sup>91</sup> Erlene Hubly, "Adam Dalgliesh: Byronic Hero," *Clues* 3 (Fall/Winter 1982): 46.

those settings seem ineffectual, outdated, even decaying, yet they are still present in each novel.

With the presence of the church, hope of a “perfect love” is also present. James knows that the church is not perfect, but as a Christian, she participates in the system that gives power to the Church and hopes in its movement toward perfection. This perfect love opposes “disordered love,”<sup>92</sup> which serves as a common motive for murder in many of her novels. To attempt to take away the power of Christianity by deconsecrating a church or to pervert its presence by committing murder in a chapel is an attempt to destroy the symbol of hope. Yet James intentionally creates these incidences within her novels. It is not because she fails to believe in the power and hope of the church. Instead, James wants her novels to reflect the world in which she lives. In James’s London, churches are deconsecrated and turned into night-clubs. A place that once served for worship and communion now serves to make money and promote sexuality. James goes even farther. She actually brings the corruption and evil into the churches. Murder, blackmail, and revenge occur in her churches. When questioned as to why she would bring this evil inside her church, James responds:

You have the opposition of goodness and evil in a place that is good.... A body in the church is somehow much more dreadful and disgraceful.... So the bodies from *A Taste for Death* are found in a church, and this is *particularly* awful. If they were found in a sex club in SoHo or somewhere seedy in the city, it would not have the same importance.<sup>93</sup>

By portraying the evil of the world both in and outside of the church, James is able to identify the evil and therefore to take away its power. She contrasts her stories of violence and death in church with stories of redemption and hope. These stories

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<sup>92</sup> Further attention will be given to “disordered love” as an explanation for James’s murders in Chapter Four.

<sup>93</sup> James, Interview.

become more powerful by contrast and therefore James's authority to speak of the church becomes more relevant.



## Chapter Three

### Characters Within, Outside, and Unrelated to Christianity

#### Provoke Theological Thought

#### 3.1 Overview

In her novels, James portrays, in a wholly unflinching manner, the problematic reality of the spiritual life as experienced by her characters. It is because of her unbiased presentation of the church that Christianity, with its grace and power to reconcile as well as its abuses and misuses, is depicted. The characters in her novels are representations of the full range of responses to and realizations of the Christian life – however vague and complex these may be.

James creates realistic characters who are “much more human, less-stereotyped, much more alive—until they get murdered—than that of her famous predecessors.”<sup>94</sup> Her ability to create these psychologically believable characters is a quality for which she is renowned.<sup>95</sup> Although James is a product of the golden age of detective fiction and influenced by its most prolific novelists, especially Agatha Christie, one characteristic that separates her from many writers of that that age is the manner in which she writes characters. For Christie, characters were often constructed to serve a simple literary purpose. Murder victims are in the story to provide a body to be discovered on the drawing room floor. The reader should not feel too much sympathy for them nor too much hatred for their murderers. Instead,

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<sup>94</sup> L.E. Bottiger, “Unsuitable Reading?” *British Medical Journal* 291 (December 21, 1985): 1803.

<sup>95</sup> Richard B. Gidez comments about James’s characterization, stating, “In most detective fiction, characters exist on the level of the conventional and stereotyped and often find themselves sacrificed to the exigencies of plot. James’s characters, however, have identities apart from the murder in which they are involved; they are much more than just a complex of motives to murder. They have lives of their own. They are interesting as people; they have depth and personality. 127

we should be more interested in the *how* of the crime. Our job as readers is to solve the puzzle of the crime. James sets herself apart from other writers by demanding that her readers focus more on the *why* of the crime.

In asking *why*, James causes readers to explore deeper issues of guilt and responsibility. Heta Pyrhönen, in her literary analysis of crime writing, *Mayhem and murder: narrative and moral problems in the detective story*, asks the reader to question the difference between “who is guilty?” and “whodunit?”<sup>96</sup> The detective story allows us to question the difference between deeds that are morally wrong and ones that are legally wrong. James’s victims suffer for the morally wrong deeds that they commit. Yet the murderer, in an attempt to punish the moral misdeed, commits a legal misdeed. Which deed is worse? And if the criminal had not punished the moral perpetrator, would there have been consequences to his or her misdeed? Pyrhönen suggests that the author actually becomes the punisher because the author carries out the consequence—killing the moral perpetrator. The author assigns the guilt and punishment and the reader is allowed to carry out the punishment. The reader does so by completing the story.

James creates her characters to be as life-like as possible; therefore, they are as unpredictable as the people we encounter in life itself. The author, because of her inclination towards the spiritual life, recognizes that the spiritual element must not be ignored in literature. To do so is a denial of the way life is. To ignore the faith of a character is to disregard an important dimension of their creation. When asked why she depicts this religious component of her characters, the author responds, “I am fascinated by the spiritual aspect of people’s lives. I’m very interested in how much they believe or whether they believe at all and how much that influences their life. It

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<sup>96</sup> Pyrhönen, 18.

seems to me that I'm not really dealing with complete people if I ignore this aspect of them."<sup>97</sup>

It is for this reason that James creates characters who exist in all manner of relationships with the church. "A book which didn't have that religious dimension would seem to me curiously thin and empty of a vital part of human experience," she claims.<sup>98</sup> There are those within, those opposed, and those partially involved as well as those unconcerned who are still strangely drawn to the church by their circumstances or relationships.

### **3.2 Those Within**

James creates characters in her novels that are often stereotypical representations of Christian personas, such as a priest or a vicar. These characters often exemplify the typical or stereotypical qualities of a Christian by being self-sacrificing, penitent, and prayerful. However, James does not always write her characters within the Christian community as embodiments of Christ-like attributes; there are ones who fail church, society and individuals as well.

An examination of these characters within the church provokes the reader to embark upon a quest to understand James's purpose. Why does she write about religious people? The author claims that she does not aim to convert but instead intends to present the Christian story as it is experienced.<sup>99</sup> Her novels are a depiction of the world James herself experiences and then reflects through the mystery genre in order to entertain and to investigate central truths concerning humanity.

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<sup>97</sup> James, Interview.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

### 3.2.1 The Priests

James includes a priest or priest-like character in nearly every one of her detective novels. Dennis Porter claims that “one frequently encounters in James’s works evocations of the celebrants—priests, vicars, and nuns—and institutions of the religious life—churches, chapels, and convents.”<sup>100</sup> Her interest in the religious life and its celebrants leads her to write about numerous priests. Wilfred Anstey, the founder of the Toynton Grange nursing home in *The Black Tower*, plays the role of a religious leader in a non-traditional sense. James portrays him as a spiritually confused skeptic. He founded the nursing home out of religious conviction in response to what he believed was the miraculous healing of his disseminated sclerosis. However, running a home for the sick and dying has become too great a burden, and his faith is tested by the question, “Why did God heal me while he allows these others to suffer?” There is no answer to this mystery, and the injustice of God’s somewhat whimsical power to heal some and allow others to suffer leads Anstey to begin doubting his own faith. Deviating from his traditional Church of England, he incorporates the practices of other religions into his own spirituality. One resident has a particularly biting view of Anstey’s spirituality, telling Dalglish, “Wilfred picks up any scraps of philosophy, metaphysics and orthodox religion which takes his fancy to make his Technicolor dreamcoat... Here the poor dears don’t know whether they’re in a nursing home, a commune, a hotel, a monastery or a particularly dotty lunatic asylum.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Dennis Porter, “P.D. James,” *Mystery and Suspense Writers, The Literature of Crime, Detection and Espionage*, ed. Robin Winks, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1998), 556. Hereafter, shall be identified as Porter followed by page number.

<sup>101</sup> *The Black Tower* 114-115.

Despite Anstey's search for a satisfying religion, he cannot fully sever himself from his Christianity. Anstey made a covenant with God. By healing Anstey from his fatal disease, God has upheld his end. Thus far, Anstey maintains his part of the covenant as well by founding and serving in the nursing home. His devotion to the nursing home, despite the incredible financial and emotional burden it brings, demonstrates that Anstey still grasps an uncomfortable knowledge that God possibly does exist. Anstey remains at the nursing home and employs an Anglican priest as a formal gesture of affirmation to Christianity. Christian artifacts decorate the house and the staff wears monk's habits. The residents participate in annual pilgrimages to Lourdes with the hope that they too will be miraculously healed.

Hollowness remains, however, within these religious sentiments. James describes the entrance into Toynton Grange through the eyes of Dalglish with a hint of criticism. When Dalglish's first meets Anstey, the detective is skeptical of Anstey's authenticity. Noting the brown monk's habit, Dalglish thinks that "he looked like a bit-playing actor with practiced conviction the part of an ascetic bishop."<sup>102</sup> A clay bust designed by one of the residents reveals something of Anstey's appearance and personality:

The neck, elongated and sinewy, rose, tortoise-like from the folds of the hood... It was almost a parody and yet it had an extraordinary power. How, Dalglish wondered, had the sculptor managed to convey the sweetness and the obstinacy of that individual smile, to model compassion and yet reduce it to self-delusion, to show humility garbed in a monk's habit and yet convey an overriding impression of the puissance of evil.<sup>103</sup>

Dalglish is never able to describe explicitly what it is about Anstey that disturbs him, nor does James, in her typical fashion, reveal too quickly if he is a

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 86.

protagonist or an antagonist. She simply allows a sinister shadow to linger with this character and lets her readers to draw their own conclusions. Various clues about him are revealed, such as his collection of pornographic magazines carefully hidden in the same tower where he and the priest, Father Baddeley, meditate. The readers never know if they can trust Anstey. Neither do the residents.

James creates the spiritually confused Anstey to illustrate the realistic challenge of a person struggling with a crisis of faith. This character made a covenant with God in a moment of vulnerability. Now that he has been healed, he no longer wants to keep his part of the covenant. But if he breaks the covenant, he's terrified that his disease will return. Anstey keeps his commitment out of fear rather than love. Consequently, Anstey's relationship with God exists out of dread, not grace, and this cannot be sustained. Anstey is caught somewhere between genuine devotion, doubt, and absolute terror of God. This characterization allows the reader to sympathize with Anstey's desire to serve God by devoting his money and life to serving the physically disabled. Yet, the reader cannot help but grow frustrated by Anstey's inability to commit to one spiritual doctrine and lifestyle.

A shocking revelation occurs at the climax of the novel as the antagonist reveals to Dalglish that Anstey was never terminally ill. This twist in the plot probes a theological question: What is a miracle? Does the miraculous occur in what happens or in what results? If the result is what is miraculous, then it is fair to judge Anstey's circumstances as miraculous. He was a man who believed himself to be fatally ill. He is no longer ill and has given his life over to serving God and his people. The secondary becomes the primary in the case for the miraculous.

If we read the Gospel of John, the Gospel most recognized for its portrayal of the seven miracles of Christ, can we not see an account that supports our definition for

the miraculous? With the first miracle, turning water into wine, it is not only the wine that matters, but what results from this turning that is also important. Jesus could have performed any act to reveal himself but chose to use a wedding and six stone jars of water.<sup>104</sup> What mattered was that Jesus did something and that people believed.

With the character of Anstey, James explores the complexities of the human struggle for spiritual devotion. The residents believe that Anstey's religiosity is shallow and mock him. He encourages the staff to wear habits, but for comfort or for a religious purpose, we do not know. Whatever religious symbolism the habits do hold is corrupted when the garb is used during several crimes at the Grange. Even the pilgrimage to Lourdes, a holy place, is corrupted by a drug-smuggling scandal. James subtly manipulates her characters to cause the reader to wonder if Anstey's hypocrisy could be the root of the evil occurring at Toynton Grange. The Grange, established with Christian traditions but moving towards secularism, has the ability to incite distrust, anger, and hatred in its residents. Eventually, evil erupts and murder occurs.

Father Michael Baddeley serves as an example of a true priest from *The Black Tower*. Father Baddeley, the nursing home's unofficial chaplain and Dalglish's father's former curate, is viewed as an ineffectual old man by many at Toynton Grange. Within the first few chapters of the novel, he is dead, and Dalglish, through an unofficial investigation, determines that he was murdered. The detective suspects Julius Court, who was the last person to see Father Baddeley before his death. The priest invited Court to meet him and to make a confession. Instead of confessing, Court takes advantage of Baddeley's vulnerability and kills the one man who knows about his crimes. After Dalglish learns about the murder, he confronts Court. In a standoff between the two, Court brags that:

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<sup>104</sup> "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." John 2:11 (NRSV)

I said that I would tell him the truth, that I wanted to make my confession. He must have known in his heart that this was death, that I was only amusing myself. But he couldn't take the risk. If he refused to take me seriously, then all his life would have been a lie. He hesitated for just two seconds, then he put the stole round his neck.<sup>105</sup>

This scene from *The Black Tower* reveals James's ability to portray how the sacred is present in all things. Even Court, one of the most evil villains in James's literature because he does not even have the motive of disordered love or the justification of avenging a loved one to bring him sympathy,<sup>106</sup> still has an uncomfortable understanding of the sacred. Although he has no respect for the sacramental acts, he still understands them enough to use them to his advantage. Father Baddeley's actions, in response, reveal Christ's self-sacrificing love. He offers Court the opportunity to confess and be forgiven for his sins. When it is evident that this act of grace and redemption will be rejected, Baddeley offers Court his own body as the Eucharist.<sup>107</sup>

In this story, we can see how James subtly keeps a religious perspective in view, even when it fails wholly to convince those who espouse it or is rejected by the characters she has created. Court is outside of the church, yet his narrative causes the reader to think strongly of the Christ narrative. By telling the story of sacrifice for an undeserving villain, James uses her realistic characters—a traditional priest who has died in a Christ-like manner and a criminal who exists outside of the church—to draw her readers' reflections to spiritual matters. What does it mean to offer one's self,

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<sup>105</sup> *The Black Tower* 344.

<sup>106</sup> James, Interview; Ralph C. Wood, "Deep Mysteries," *Christian Century* (September 27-October 4, 2000): 961.

<sup>107</sup> Three of the four archangels' names are used as character names in James's novels, including Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael. James would not have chosen the name, Michael (which means "Who is like God?"), unintentionally. Instead, she gives this name to a character who embodies qualities of one "who is an intercessor... for the entire world" and who is "merciful and righteous." Duane F. Watson, "Michael," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 811.



even to the point of death, for the sake of possibly saving another? This is the question James explores in *The Black Tower*.

Father Baddeley is not the only priest to die during the sacred act of confessional. In *The Lighthouse*, Adrian Boyde, a former priest who seeks peace on a remote island, is also murdered with his cope draped over his body. This clue prompts Dalgliesh to consider the religious significance to the murder. Boyde once served as a priest, but left the church due to alcoholism and a possible loss of faith. He is struggling to regain his dignity, to find meaning in his life, and to rediscover his calling. It is while he is working on Combe as an accountant that he begins to serve in the priesthood again. This decision eventually leads to his murder. Not many people consider Boyde to be a priest—but a few do: those who confess to him and the murderer, who is fearful of what has been confessed to him. It is not until his murder that Boyde finally regains his identity as a priest. He is discovered at an improvised altar, the cope that was to be a gift celebrating his decision to return to the church is thrown over his dead body, stained with his blood.

The discovery of Boyde in a symbolically religious configuration is not forthrightly damning to the culprit, although it offers Dalgliesh the evidence needed to discover the murderer. The culprit must have viewed Boyde in his priestly role even if he did not hold reverence for him in that position.

Dalgliesh experiences a kinship with Boyde throughout the novel. Perhaps this is due to their shared religious experience (both were committed to their faith at one time but lost it due to traumatic circumstances). When he questions Boyde, “Dalgliesh felt a curious peace, or something that was very rare when he was in the company of a suspect. *Here, he thought, is a man I could have talked with, one I*

would have liked.”<sup>108</sup> Dalgliesh knows that Boyde could not have committed the murder, but may know the identity of the one who did. Their conversation continues:

[Dalgliesh] looked at Boyde directly and asked bluntly, ‘Father, do you know who killed Nathan Oliver?’

Addressing Boyde as a priest had been involuntary and the word surprised him even as he heard himself speak it. It took him some seconds to realize the significance of what seemed no more than a slip of the tongue. The effect on Boyde was immediate. He looked at Dalgliesh with pain-filled eyes which seemed to hold an entreaty.<sup>109</sup>

Dalgliesh does not press Boyde for an answer because he understands the confidentiality that the confessional holds for a priest. Boyde, however, must suffer the same fate as Father Baddeley and is brutally murdered to protect a secret that he learned in the confessional.

As we explore the characters in *The Black Tower* and *The Lighthouse*, we cannot help but wonder what it means for a Christian novelist to write about the murder of two priests. Both are killed as a result of performing a task that is a part of their calling. Why does James choose to portray two of her strongest religious characters with violent deaths? Both men serve in a religiously barren community. Father Baddeley is a priest in a nursing home that was founded on Christian principles but where the religious nature of its foundation has evaporated. The other priest, Adrian Boyde, is a wasted man struggling to regain his dignity and purpose in a secular place that sees little need for a priest.

Even in a home for the dying, there exists a presence of the divine. On an island dedicated to the rich and famous in need of an escape from the pressures of the outside world lingers an element of the divine. Each man could have made a decision

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<sup>108</sup> P.D. James, *The Lighthouse* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 288.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

to save himself but by doing so would have denied his faith and therefore his identity. James insists that she is not proselytizing with her novels. If she were, she would create priests who were perfect men and women which she obviously does not do. From these characters we can see how a hint of the divine is always present, not only in her stories, but in the world surrounding us.

Adrian Boyde is not the only priest that Dalgliesh encounters during his investigations from whom he needs to extract information that has possibly been revealed in confessional. Father Presteign, despite being a minor character in *A Certain Justice*, continues James's pattern of the ideal priest in the role of confessor. Fortunately, this one does not have to lose his life. Regrettably, Father Presteign's confessor, Janet Carpenter, loses hers. When Inspector Kate Miskin and Dalgliesh question the priest, they ask him if he can reveal what Janet had told him during her earlier visit. The priest responds that all he knows about Janet is protected under the seal of confessional. Dalgliesh accepts this information and makes no protest. As the son of a priest, he understands the relationship between priest and confessor, even after death. Kate, however, has no Christian upbringing and no understanding of the sacredness of confession. She contends that:

‘She can't care now whether you break faith with her. Wouldn't she want you to help? Wouldn't she want her murderer to be caught?’

Father Presteign said, ‘My child, it isn't Janet Carpenter I'd be breaking faith with.’<sup>110</sup>

What the priest and Dalgliesh both understand but what Kate cannot is that the priest's primary duty is to God. Father Presteign trusts that justice will be served, not only at the hands of the police, but divinely. His duty is to hear confession and to serve God and his people.

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<sup>110</sup> P.D. James, *A Certain Justice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 297.

In *Death in Holy Orders*, James portrays a broad spectrum of priestly characters. Each has a personality that James depicts sympathetically, tenderly, and even humorously. Raphael Arbuthnot is a young priest studying to take orders. He is first portrayed as an arrogant, charming, and beautiful man. Abandoned by his mother, never claimed by his father, and disowned by his grandfather for his illegitimate status, St. Anselm's Theological Seminary is the one place where he is at home and understands his purpose. If not for his illegitimate status, he would inherit the wealthy estate that owns St. Anselm's. In a letter of confession, Raphael's father admits that he committed the murders at the seminary to give his son his inheritance. Believing that his son's "God was chosen for him" since he had been "in the power of those priests since he was born," Gregory wanted to give his son a "choice of a more contemporary deity—money." Therefore, he proposes a test for Raphael. Burdened with his new wealth, "he will remain a rich man; time will show whether he remains a priest."<sup>111</sup>

At the denouement of the novel with the possession of his new fortune, Raphael is able to envision a life outside of the church for the first time. This is the life his father wants for him and murdered to make possible for him. However, Raphael chooses to pursue the priesthood.<sup>112</sup>

In the final scene of the novel, an exchange occurs between Father Martin and Raphael. Almost insecurely, Raphael asks the Father for reassurance that he has

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<sup>111</sup> *Death in Holy Orders*, 421.

<sup>112</sup> Raphael is an unusual and uncommon name in contemporary British society. James probably chose this name intentionally to suggest a reference either to the artist, Rafael (which would complement the physical beauty of the character). Or, she may have chosen the young priest's name to suggest a connection with the archangel, Raphael. His name is a play on words, meaning "God heals." The latter meaning for Raphael's name seems more appropriate since the priest had been abandoned by his family at birth, grew up at a seminary, and has now committed his life to the priesthood, despite the murders that his father committed for his sake. In spite of the evil conspiring against Raphael, it would appear that God has healed him. Translation of the name, "Raphael" taken from: Frederick W. Schmidt, "Raphael," *ABD* vol. 5, 621.

made the correct decision in choosing the priesthood instead of a life of leisure that his wealth would have allowed. Raphael begins by stating that:

‘I shan’t make a bad priest, Father.’

Father Martin, the least demonstrative of men, laid a hand briefly on his shoulder and said, ‘No, my son. I think you may make a good one.’<sup>113</sup>

Raphael’s temptation is great. Having been an orphan and dependant upon the church’s charity for most of his life, he now has the freedom to choose any future. In writing a novel that exposes some of the flaws of the church as well as its decline, James allows her readers to experience Raphael’s same temptation. She recognizes that not much is apparently attractive about the world of the church today. Her opinion is clearly that the Church of England (if not Christianity itself) is losing relevance and attractiveness.<sup>114</sup> What draw is there for a handsome, intelligent, wealthy young man to commit himself to the priesthood? Perhaps there is no other reason than simple devotion to God and a desire to serve him and the church. For James and for Raphael, this is reason enough.

### **3.2.2 Characters Who Move Towards Redemption**

In *A Certain Justice*, Janet Carpenter is provocative character because she is a woman who exists within the framework of Christianity yet she uses her understanding of her faith to enact “a certain kind of justice,” which is really revenge, on those who have hurt her. Due to the devastating death of her family, her faith has been destroyed. Yet there is a working back towards redemption at the end of her life that James explores in this novel. *A Certain Justice* considers how Carpenter attempts

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<sup>113</sup> *Death in Holy Orders* 429.

<sup>114</sup> James, Interview.

through revenge to right the wrongs done to her family. Although she believes that her pain will be appeased by enacting a complicated revenge scheme on the lawyer who saved her grand-daughter's killer from serving a prison sentence (only to set him free on the streets to rape and murder another young girl), Janet realizes that her revenge does not satisfy her.

Carpenter first intends to meet her co-conspirator in St. James's Church. The place, however, becomes something else for her. At the church, she meets Father Presteign and realizes that she can still find answers in the Christian life. Eventually, she forgives those who harmed her and becomes redeemed.

St. James's Church is significant to the spiritual healing of Carpenter. During her deliberations regarding her revenge scheme, the church is the place where she first realizes that she has not become completely numb to Christianity. Although she believed that she no longer held Christian convictions and that God had abandoned her, her encounter at the church demonstrates that she has not abandoned God.

The turning point for Carpenter occurs as she confesses, "I found, despite my loss of faith, that I had a reluctance to use a sacred building for a purpose I knew in my heart to be evil."<sup>115</sup> Carpenter claims that she had lost her faith yet in the same sentence she recognizes that something deeper "in her heart" compels her actions, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Carpenter's change of heart and naming of the evil that she had allowed to direct her actions demonstrates her willingness to let go of revenge and to seek reconciliation.

Carpenter goes even further than refusing to meet her co-conspirator in a church; she must confess to a priest. In her letter to Father Presteign, she admits, "That is why I came to you, Father, and made my confession. That had to be the first

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<sup>115</sup> *A Certain Justice* 325.

step. The second will be no easier. You have told me what I have to do and I shall do it, but in my own way. You said I must go at once to the police...I shall go to see her.”<sup>116</sup> Carpenter’s acknowledges that confession and penance are both necessary steps in working back towards her faith. Father Presteign counsels her to confess and to ask for forgiveness from the one she sinned against.

Janet Carpenter is both a complicated and sympathetic character. Ever since the murder of her grand-daughter and the subsequent suicide of her daughter-in-law, Janet has been unable to return to the Christian community in which she once functioned; however, she still lives with its system of rights and wrongs—sin and guilt as well as forgiveness and absolution, embedded within her. Her spirituality obviously determines much of her behavior. She believes in justice. The legal system has failed her; therefore, she will pursue her own form of justice. The theme of justice and how it is rightly and wrongly played out through the novels of James is a theme that we will explore further in the last chapter of this dissertation.

*A Taste for Death* introduces one of James’s most complex and fascinating characters, Paul Berowne. However, he is dead before the novel begins. All we know of him is filtered through other characters’ stories and recollections. Dalgliesh is able to deduce that Berowne had recently converted to Christianity. Dalgliesh must determine what factors have led to his brutal murder in St. Matthew’s Church.

James inundates her readers with Christian symbols, allusions, and references in *A Taste for Death*. Yet her portrayal of the church throughout the novel is complex. The ineffectual Father Barnes performs Mass to an empty sanctuary. Only one church member, Emily Wharton, who brings her young companion, Darren, with her, attends church each day to prepare the flowers. Paul Berowne is perhaps the

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 328.

most complex and saddest symbol of Christianity within the novel. Berowne is a powerful Member of Parliament plagued by political and financial scandals, the breakdown of his family, infidelities (his wife's and his own), threats of blackmail, and, of course, violence that ends with his death. Before his death, Berowne had allegedly experienced stigmata and converted to Christianity. Because of his conversion, his mother and wife reject and mock him. Also, because of the conversion, Berowne decides to end an affair with his mistress. This affair was his only loving and fulfilling relationship.

Paul Berowne's murder brings James's readers into the compelling world of the London church. A successful and powerful MP goes to an empty church to ponder life's complexities. Yet it is in that same church where Berowne also finds his death. We may believe that Berowne died finding the answers that he sought in the church. However, his death is a pointless one, and no solutions are offered that justify it when *A Taste for Death* concludes.

### **3.2.3 Characters Who Expose the Failure of the Church**

The church fails throughout many of James's novels. The author depicts this failure through murdered priests, empty Masses, and desecrated churches as well as through failed Christian characters. Why would a Christian novelist want to portray her own faith as a failure? If we explore examples of these failures as they are portrayed through characters, perhaps then we can answer this question.

James's first novel begins with a dinner party and a collection of several stock characters, including a country vicar, Bernard Hinks. This inept priest has the title but none of the skills needed to deal with the problems within his community. When we



first meet Hinks at a party, he is incapable of speaking about relevant social issues, such as the role of the church as it relates to unmarried mothers. Instead, he lets the other party guests, including the murderer, speak on his behalf.

Although Hinks is merely a peripheral character, it is evident from her first novel that James understands the role that a priest must play. Whether he is a positive or negative representation, he is still a representative of the church. For James, this presence of the church is what is important. A town without a church or a representative of that church is not a realistic community in James's opinion. Therefore, that person must be present in her stories, even if he is a peripheral, ineffectual man such as Hinks.

If the reader finds it difficult to believe that the murderer would consult the local vicar when she is ready to make her confession, James disagrees. To the author, it is natural that one would go to church and confess to a priest if one is from a traditional church up-bringing. Regarding church, James says, "It's a place where the naturally religious would go when they have problems to solve."<sup>117</sup> This understanding of church and its people explains the relationship that James creates between the murderer, Eleanor Maxie, and the vicar. The vicar plays his role as priest and does what is necessary—advises the guilty one that absolution is found only when she confesses her crime to the police.

The vicar appears a final time near the conclusion of the novel. "Mr. Hinks arrived from the vicarage, breathless and unsurprised, steeling himself to give advice and comfort but looking so desperately in need of them himself that Felix took him firmly by the arm and walked with him back to the vicarage."<sup>118</sup> In this humorous portrayal of Hinks, James manages to mock lightheartedly the incompetence of her

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<sup>117</sup> James, Interview.

<sup>118</sup> *Cover Her Face* 203.

priest as well as emphasize the failure of the church. Her novels don't always hold such a biting portrayal of the church, and her portrayals of the priests grow more convincing and sympathetic with her later stories.

Father Barnes is another example of an ineffectual priest found in James's novels. He is the priest of St. Matthew's, the church where two murdered bodies are discovered in the opening chapter of *A Taste for Death*. The reader quickly learns what kind of a priest he is through the various characters' responses to Barnes as well as his own failure to act when faced with a crisis.

When Emily Wharton, a church member, discovers the dead bodies in the church vestry, she sends for Barnes's help. But before he calls the police, the priest wants to view the bodies. He stands in a shocked, immovable silence. Emily is frustrated at his impotence, thinking:

How silly to think that he would bring his strength, would somehow make the horror bearable. He didn't even know what to do.... Poor Father Barnes, she thought, irritation dissolving into sentimentality. He's a failure like me, both failures.<sup>119</sup>

Barnes seems uncomfortably aware of his failure. His church stands empty at mass. He is avoided by neighbors in his transitional London neighborhood. "None of them ever knocked on Father Barnes's door. They saw, with watchful and expressionless eyes, his almost furtive comings and goings. But he was as much an anachronism at St. Matthew's Court as was the church he represented."<sup>120</sup> Barnes's vicarage and personal appearance are disheveled. He is a pushover to his congregation and his housekeeper. Most shameful, however, is Barnes's fear that his "diminishing store of faith"<sup>121</sup> will be discovered. Barnes knows that it is "this

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<sup>119</sup> *A Taste for Death* 22.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

essential lack [of faith] and not his general inadequacy which was at the core of ... [his community's] disdain.”<sup>122</sup>

When the murdered victim's mother, Lady Ursula, meets Father Barnes, she finds him an unintelligent and commonplace man:

He seemed to me a man who had long ago given up the expectation of influencing anyone. Perhaps he has lost his faith. Isn't that fashionable in the church today? But why should that distress him? The world is full of people who have lost faith.... It's a condition of faith that it gets lost from time to time, or at least mislaid. And why doesn't he get his cassock cleaned? It is a cassock, isn't it? There were what I assumed were egg stains on the right cuff and the front looked as if he's dribbled on it.<sup>123</sup>

Barnes visits Lady Ursula to be a representation of the church and of God to her and to offer some comfort. Even in this priestly task, he fails her. The only impression she takes away from their visit is that he has lost his faith and has an untidy appearance.

Despite the negative initial portrayals of Father Barnes, he is a character who gains power and capability as the story progresses. It is almost as if the murder empowers Barnes to take control of the church, to counter the evil that was executed there, and to work towards redemption. As Dalglish returns to the church throughout his investigations, he finds Barnes stronger in his ability to speak and act. He is a different man from the quivering, inept priest the detective first met.

Barnes's character demonstrates the potential of the church and its ability to grow and be relevant. Many of her characters' critiques of the church, including Emily Wharton's fear of its failure and Lady's Ursula's disparagement of the loss of faith, summarize Britain's assessment of the church. James, however, is able to counter these criticisms by first acknowledging them. James does not make apologies

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> *A Taste for Death* 335-36.

or excuses for Barnes's failures, yet she allows his character to grow. Barnes offers hope that the church can grow as well. Faced with crisis, it too can move past failure and shame to a place of grace, hope, and new life.

*Death in Holy Orders* is another novel that takes place predominately in a church setting, St. Anselm's Theological College, which allows for a fascinating array of priestly characters. Archdeacon Crampton is one of the most villainous, yet uncomfortably sympathetic, of characters. He is hated by all at St. Anselm's. The priests need a reassuring visit from their superior. What they receive is criticism and a cynical forecast for the seminary. Crampton declares, "The end is inevitable, you know that perfectly well. The Church of England is centralizing and rationalizing its theological training. Reform is long overdue. St. Anselm's is too small, too remote, too expensive and too elitist."<sup>124</sup>

Crampton is willing to criticize the church, seminary, and priests. Yet many of his actions are determined by a secret that plagues him with guilt. His first wife died by suicide, but Crampton believes that he could have prevented her death. Instead he allowed her to poison herself because she had become too great a burden for him. Moments before his own murder, Crampton finally accepts responsibility for his wife's death. He prays the Jesus Prayer, asks for forgiveness, and walks to the chapel.

Crampton receives grace at the end of his life. He is an arrogant man and would not accept responsibility for his wife's death. Yet his arrogance cost him, and he carried this burden of guilt with him. James operates within this same system that acknowledges that there is a difference between legal responsibility and moral

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<sup>124</sup> *Death in Holy Orders* 141.

responsibility.<sup>125</sup> For James and her characters, simply because a character might not be found guilty of a crime, this does not exempt him or her from accountability for the deed.

Father John from *Death in Holy Orders* is another priest whose actions say something about the failure of the church. John is a convicted child molester. St. Anselm's serves as his refuge, and he slinks around the seminary with an air of guilt and indebtedness. The curious quality about John, however, is that we do not know if he is actually guilty of any crime. The reader is led to believe that John is innocent and simply confessed to protect his young accusers from the pain of a difficult trial.

By leaving his guilt ambiguous, James leaves her readers in a troubling predicament. She presents a failure of the church—the priest-molestation scandal is a vivid scar on the church and here may be one of its offenders. Or, she may have created a scapegoat who has willingly accepted blame to protect the innocent from further harm. James does not cast her blame nor does she help her readers with the facts. Whether Father John is guilty or not, he still represents a failure of the church. If he is guilty, there is a failure to protect the innocent from those who were supposed to care for them. If John is innocent, then there is a failure that he has been robbed of his priestly role and lives in shame for an act that he did not commit.

### **3.2.4 Characters Who Are Vaguely Associated with the Church**

James's novels are littered with characters within the church who draw attention to spiritual matters, even if only vaguely. From Fredrica Saxon, who Dalgliesh encounters in the Catholic church in *A Mind to Murder*, to Detective

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<sup>125</sup> See the introduction to Pyrhönen's *Mayhem and Murder* for further discussion on the difference between legal and moral responsibility.

Rickards, who depends upon his traditional Christian upbringing and marriage for strength when a serial killer strikes in *Devices and Desires*, to Tally Clutton who prays without failing although she remains unconvinced that God can be moved by her simple act in *The Murder Room*, each of these characters is used by James to represent the presence of Christianity in the world she has created in her novels. Regarding these fringe characters, perhaps none captures the struggle and triumph of faith quite like Emily Wharton's character in *A Taste for Death*.

For Emily, church was her haven amidst the hell of London life. Upon the discovery of two dead bodies in St. Matthew's Church, that haven has been destroyed. The loss of the sacredness of her church weighs profoundly on Emily as she lay in bed at night, reading scripture. Even her favorite scripture passage on the parable of the lost lamb does not move her; the words have become meaningless. "Murder contaminates"<sup>126</sup> is a phrase that James can be found saying again and again. Even when one is unrelated to the deceased victim, murder still contaminates and creates other victims. While Wharton once found comfort in the profile of the church tower she saw out her bedroom window, now the outline of St. Matthews reminds her of gruesome discovery and her own isolation:

Sometimes it seemed to Miss Wharton, looking out into that eerie half-darkness, that London was built on coal and was perpetually smouldering, that Hell, unrecognized, was all around her. To the right, silhouetted against the hectic glow, was the campanile of St. Matthew's. Usually, it gave her comfort. Here was a place where she was known, valued for the small services she could give, kept busily occupied, solaced, shriven and at home. But now the thin, alien tower, stark against the ruddy sky was a symbol of horror and death... Nothing but emptiness and darkness and the smell of death, except in the Lady Chapel where the sanctuary light would still be gleaming. Was she to lose even this, she wondered? Was this what murder did to the innocent? Took away the people they loved, loaded their minds with terror, left them bereft and unfriended under a smouldering sky?<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> James, Interview.

<sup>127</sup> *A Taste for Death* 153.

Before the murders, St. Matthew's stood as an oasis against the violence and isolation of urban London where Emily feels lost.<sup>128</sup> The church that once served as her sanctuary and gave meaning to her life has now been desecrated.

Despite managing to cling to some semblance of her Christian devotion throughout the novel, Emily's crisis of faith finally occurs in the final chapter. As she enters the church building to perform her duties, she finds that "God wasn't there in that small recess behind the brass lamp. He wasn't any longer in the church. [He] had gone away."<sup>129</sup> Emily's despair appears to be a loss of faith and a bleak forecast for the church. However, her desperation moves towards hope:

Then she remembered what Father Collins had once said in a sermon when she first came to St. Matthew's: 'If you find that you can't pray, go on saying the words.' She knelt down on the hard floor, supporting herself with her hands grasping the iron grille and said the words with which she always began her private prayers: 'Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak but the word and my soul shall be healed.'<sup>130</sup>

Emily's prayer in the church vestry is an act of faith that concludes the novel. *A Taste for Death* opened with the discovery of two bodies in this room. The desecration of a holy place as well as all the other mysteries about God that Wharton was forced to face throughout the novel are reconciled in that final prayer. There may be no answers for Emily, just as James can offer no answers for her readers, but one may choose to believe and choose to have faith. This is the hope that James offers us through this novel.

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<sup>128</sup> Ralph Wood claims that James "has evoked the gritty density of the urban London landscape as well as the rural tranquility of coastal England. She is almost Dickensian in her creation of the atmosphere that evokes the character of the crimes." Ralph C. Wood, "Murder in the Vicarage," *First Things* (November 2006): 40.

<sup>129</sup> *A Taste for Death* 454.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.3 Those Outside

A collection of characters stands opposed to the church. Sometimes, these mockers and despisers are able to tell us more about the Christian life than any other group of characters in James's novels. Within the group of outsiders there are those who light-heartedly resist the religious. This collection of characters may never be violent towards Christians or Christianity, but through subtle criticism they make their opposition known. Ursula and Barbara Berowne from *A Taste for Death* are examples of this type of outsider. As family members to Paul Berowne, the man who converted to Christianity, both ridiculed his conversion. Ursula even goes so far as to mock Father Barnes, the priest who visits her to offer condolences for her dead son. Neither of these characters would commit violence against a Christian, yet their lack of understanding of or concern for Christianity is demonstrated as disdain.

A more extreme set of characters who oppose Christianity exists, however. These characters are outright hostile to the church. They will go as far as to perform violence against or even to kill those who are representatives of Christianity.

Hilary Robarts is a complicated character on the outside of the church, whose actions still lead readers towards spiritual thoughts. Although she is killed in the first half of *Devices and Desires*, the readers learn a great deal about her qualities through descriptions of her, mostly critical, by her contemporaries. Everyone who knew Robarts had a reason to dislike her. There is Jonathon Reeves who is humiliated by Robarts at work by her mockery of his Christian faith and Alex Mair who Robarts pressured to marry her once she was pregnant with his child.

Robarts feels no remorse for the suffering she causes others and is a fairly unsympathetic character. Yet, in typical James fashion, the author creates a scene of



redemption for this character moments before her death. On her evening swim, Robarts floats into the ocean and embraces a remarkable joy and peace. Robarts, an atheist, is unable to put this experience of ecstasy and serenity into spiritual terms. However, she recognizes that her life must change and decides:

That part of her life was coming to an end. Everything was possible. And then, for a moment, there came a deeper peace in which even none of this mattered. It was as if all the petty preoccupations of the flesh were washed away and she was a disembodied spirit, floating free, and could feel a gentle, undemanding sorrow for this earth-ground creature who could find only in an alien element this sweet but transitory peace.<sup>131</sup>

Robarts is not a Christian, yet this scene in the water imitates a baptismal scene. There is no Christian terminology to describe this experience, yet James sets up this scene to demonstrate an awareness of conversion. Robarts certainly does not have the Christian terminology to describe what is beginning within her, and she may not fully comprehend that a conversion is what she is experiencing. The dip under water, the resurfacing with new life, the awareness of the spirit are all too obvious symbols for the reader to ignore. It would seem that James is baptizing her character. Tragically, Robarts is murdered in the next chapter.

*Death of an Expert Witness* introduces several characters who oppose the church and whose actions against it actually demonstrate some of the church's strengths. Kerrison and Domenica are involved in affair. Spurred by jealousy and fury, Kerrison murders a fellow scientist, Lorrimer, who was a former lover of Domenica. Neither Kerrison nor Domenica is a Christian; yet the actions of both of these characters cause readers to reflect upon the Church and its power (or loss thereof) throughout the novel.

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<sup>131</sup> *Devices and Desires* 173-74.

From the moment the first body is discovered in the forensic laboratory, the reader is made aware that there is a religious element to the murder. Lorrimer, a Christian who worked in the lab, is found murdered in the lab. His body is discovered in a strange, religious distortion alongside two dummies. The dummies are posed in a “parody of benediction,” with the “look of a couple of painted deities. At their feet, a white-clad sacrificial victim, was the body.”<sup>132</sup> Kerrison mocks Lorrimer and his religious devotion. Even in death, he portrays him as an impotent sacrifice for a dumb deity. To Kerrison, Lorrimer’s life was wasted in devotion and, therefore, his death is a waste as well.

Domenica’s role in the desecration of Lorrimer was less physically violent, yet similarly destructive. Domenica and Lorrimer (as well as Domenica and Kerrison) carried on an affair in the chapel. For Lorrimer, this act was a desecration of a holy place from which he did not recover. For Domenica, this desecration is part of the enjoyment in her seduction.

James uses all three of these characters to bring her readers into an awareness of religion and the varying attitudes people can maintain towards it. By casually incorporating spirituality into the lives of these three characters in varying degrees of devotion, guilt, and wantonness, James is able to reflect realistically how religion is experienced and expressed through relationships and work tensions.

Numerous other examples of characters who oppose the church and Christians exist in the novels of James. There is Gabriel Dauntsey who quotes Old Testament scripture to justify his murders in *Original Sin*. In *Death in Holy Orders*, Gregory kills several priests simply to insure that his son will have an inheritance. Several

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 107.

other examples remain to be discussed, but we will further explore those who demonstrate a violent opposition to church in the fourth chapter.

### **3.4 Those Unrelated Who Still Provoke Theological Thought**

Finally, there is collection of characters unrelated to the church who still find themselves drawn to the spiritual. Because of some behavior, response, or narrative, their actions lead the reader to think about the Christian life. The characters themselves ponder religious thoughts because of a romantic relationship, a visit to a Christian landmark, or an encounter with a supernatural event that can only be explained in religious terms. Porter identifies these types of characters by their “nostalgia for faith.”<sup>133</sup> He claims that, “Such characters are sensitive to the moving power of spiritual values, to the ideas of order, harmony, beauty, and a life of service, but they rarely encounter them in the largely secularized world in which they live.”<sup>134</sup> These characters are on the fringes of Christianity and, although they are not in the church, they may hold some religious sympathies and may direct the reader’s thoughts toward Christianity.

Inspector Kate Miskin, first introduced in *A Taste for Death*, assists Adam Dalgliesh in his investigations throughout several novels. Miskin is an atheist who has replaced religious devotion with commitment to her profession. She commits herself to her work with a kind of religious zeal. Yet, her work with Dalgliesh seems to emphasize the void left by her atheism. Through her relationship with this vaguely religious man, she becomes aware of all that she has missed by her secular upbringing. Kate contemplates her lack of faith and decides, “I don’t seem to need a

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<sup>133</sup> Porter, 556.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

supernatural religion. . . . Nothing is more important to me than my job. But I can't make the law the basis for my personal morality. There has to be something more if I'm to live at ease with myself.”<sup>135</sup>

Kate is aware that there must be more than simply detecting in place of religious devotion. However, this seems to be the only replacement she can find for the religious life. When she experiences joy, she feels compelled to direct that towards some divine being. Celebrating the purchase of her first flat, “She was possessed by a need, almost physical in its intensity, to pray, to shout with a joy that was deeper than the joy she felt in her own physical well-being and achievements or even in the beauty of the physical world.”<sup>136</sup>

Although she feels some presence of the divine, or at least feels a void where praise for the divine would be directed, Kate is simply unable to believe. Kate cannot rectify the violence that she faces in her profession with her understanding of who she believes the Christian God is. Therefore, it is simpler to be devoted to her profession. In police work, she can always find answers through hard work. There is always a guilty party and one who must be held accountable for the wrongs committed in the world. For Kate, Christianity leaves too many mysteries unanswered.

Religion is also an excluding entity for Kate. It is often associated with the well-educated, wealthy, elitist British society by which she feels snubbed. When she is partnered with Piers, who studied theology at Oxford, she envies the opportunity he had for education. She also vaguely resents his religious connection with Dalgliesh. She attempts to hide her jealousy with questions. “She would occasionally say, ‘What use is theology? Tell me that. You chose to spend three years on it. I mean,

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<sup>135</sup> *A Taste for Death* 423

<sup>136</sup> P.D. James, *Original Sin* (London: Penguin, 1995), 152.

you must have felt you would gain something from it, something useful or important.”<sup>137</sup>

What Kate does not realize is that Piers Tarrant suffers from disbelief himself. Superficially, he appears to be a Christian. His theology degree assures that he can talk religion whenever he must. This is advantageous for his relationship with Dalgliesh, who is well-versed in Christian theology. Yet Piers’ religion is superficial. He chose his theology degree to ensure him a “better chance of a place at Oxford.”<sup>138</sup> All that he believes he gained from his degree is “a fascination with the complexity for the intellectual bastions which men could construct to withstand the tides of disbelief.”<sup>139</sup> His own unshakable disbelief remains, yet Piers does not regret his studies, for it gives him a means of understanding humanity and the way we choose to treat one another.

Piers, though he is initially presented as a somewhat superficial character, becomes a deeper character of faith in James’s most recent novel, *The Private Patient*. Piers and Kate began a relationship during *The Lighthouse*, although they suffered a break-up between that novel and this most recent one, due to Piers’ infidelity. At the end of *The Private Patient*, Kate receives an email from Piers, begging forgiveness for betraying her. He has committed to live a monastic lifestyle, in a monastery, for six months “to prove something to [himself]”—that “life is too precious and too short to...give up on love.”<sup>140</sup> Kate accepts his apology and asks him to return home for the Abbot.

Piers does not recognize the significance of his religious up-bringing and education until he is in a crisis. Prior to the loss of Kate, religion was something he

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<sup>137</sup> *Death in Holy Orders* 219.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> P.D. James, *The Private Patient* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 362.

could manipulate to improve his situation in life, such as getting into a prestigious school or impressing Dalglish. It is not until he learns to sacrifice something for the spiritual life that he actually experiences a conversion. Piers remains on the periphery of faith and agnosticism for several novels. However, Piers becomes a man of faith in *The Private Patient*, the same novel that Kate accepts her identity as a woman who can love and be vulnerable and not only be a detective.

Marcus Westhall, another character from *The Private Patient*, appears to be in a struggle of faith and purpose throughout the novel. He is incapable of leaving his lucrative and comfortable job as a plastic surgeon to travel to Africa and serve as a doctor, the one calling he knows that will bring him joy. He suffers from guilt concerning his homosexual relationship with his partner who pesters him to publicize their relationship to advance homosexual rights. The one place he goes for meditation and solace is the chapel on the grounds of the estate. However, Marcus feels that his prayers remain unanswered and grows envious of those around him who are able to experience that closeness to God, such as Lettie, the one Christian character in the novel. The chapel even becomes a place of violence as Marcus, fleeing there to pray, discovers his sister's dead body, dead by suicide.

Each of these characters demonstrates how those within the novels who are not Christian are still able to suggest something about the Christian life through their actions. In *Kate*, we read about a woman who tenderly feels the joys and sorrows of life. However, she does not know where to direct her praise when she experiences joy or where to direct her prayers of petition when she is in need. Piers maintains some theological context for his religious need and eventually finds his way back to the church. Marcus also knows where to go for spiritual formation, yet his prayers remain unanswered and the novel ends with him in despair. The wide range of

responses these characters face regarding faith demonstrates how James always keeps the Christian life present through her characters, be it in their neutral, positive, or negative responses to it.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Throughout all of these characterizations, James maintains her objective perspective. She never makes her agenda entirely apparent to the reader. The author makes plain, however, that she bears no intention to convert or preach through her novels. When questioned as to her motive in incorporating Christian characters and themes within her novels, James responds, “I’m not preaching; I’m not hoping that readers will come to religion. That is certainly not my aim, and the books are not written with that aim at all. These characters are people that I have created who I hope would be real, as good or real to my readers as they are real to me.”<sup>141</sup>

James is true to her word. She does not try to portray the religious characters as any more flawless than her other characters. Though many of them may be devout and honorable, such as the priests, Father Baddeley from *The Black Tower* or Father Presteign from *A Certain Justice*, there are several inept or cruel priests, such as Father Hinks from *Cover Her Face* or Archdeacon Crampton from *Death in Holy Orders*, who provide counterexamples. These priests serve as subtle reminders that simply because one is in religious leadership, he or she is not faultless by design.

Her novels are a representation of the world James herself experiences and then reflects through the mystery genre in order to entertain and to investigate central truths concerning humanity. These central truths of humanity involve the desire for

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<sup>141</sup> James, Interview.

people to connect with other human beings and their world. For many people, this includes religious considerations: whether there is a God and how he figures in one's life? James knows that this is an interest for many of her readers. Even non-Christians may be interested in considering how they fit into the world around them in relation to their maker. James recognizes the struggle shared by people and represents it in her novels by creating characters to represent people at different stages of the spiritual journey. James does this to provoke theological thought which crucially differs from having a theological agenda. James is therefore able to portray the Christian story through her characters without a sentimental, obvious retelling. She never spells out the Gospel story, but in her shadowy way, manages to keep the possibility of Christian faith in view for her readers.



## Chapter Four

### Adam Dalgliesh in Search of the Divine

#### 4.1 Overview

When she decided to create her fictional detective hero, James looked to the classic mystery writers for inspiration. From Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, she learned to “begin with a less egregiously bizarre character...to avoid involving myself in his emotional life, which [she] felt would be difficult successfully to incorporate into the structure of the classical detective story.”<sup>142</sup> However, it seems that James does involve herself in the emotional life of her detective because she cannot avoid bringing Dalgliesh’s spirituality into her novels. James describes her detective as a “reverent agnostic.”<sup>143</sup> One might assume that detective novels written by a Christian author which include Christian characters, settings, and narratives would include a Christian hero as well. This is not the case for P.D. James’s detective hero, Adam Dalgliesh. Dalgliesh must acknowledge the evil that humanity does to one another but cannot explain it, which is, perhaps, why he remains in his state of “reverent agnosticism.” Dennis Porter calls Dalgliesh “an apparent agnostic [who is] unhappy with his choice.”<sup>144</sup> In speaking about her detective’s spirituality, James acknowledges his religious ambiguity. When Dalgliesh participates in a religious service, he does so because “he is aware of that aspect of human experience and the sense of there is a reality beyond a physical reality of our world, that there is

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<sup>142</sup> James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, 152.

<sup>143</sup> James, Interview.

<sup>144</sup> Porter, 554.

something perhaps once unattainable and yet somehow we want to believe attainable.”<sup>145</sup>

The author says that she is often questioned about Dalgliesh’s religious life. She tries to remain faithful to the character as she originally conceived him. Recalling a conversation she had at Ely Cathedral, James was asked why she had not made Dalgliesh a Christian. The author responded:

Because he isn’t one. . .because the character is in my control. . . . In one sense I feel I could have made him a Christian or I could have made him become a Christian. But that isn’t how I see him. That, somehow, wouldn’t happen to him. And, even if I wanted it to happen to him, I would somehow feel I was doing an injustice, somehow being unfaithful to the character as I had created him.<sup>146</sup>

Although James claims that she purposely created an agnostic detective because it is “more interesting to have Dalgliesh as he is,”<sup>147</sup> it appears that she intentionally surrounds him with all things Christian. James draws her detective into the company of numerous religious characters, particularly priests. James has created a priest or priest-like character in each of her novels. Furthermore, Dalgliesh consistently encounters Christian settings, such as churches and seminaries where he must investigate various murders. Dalgliesh’s relationships with priests suggest that he portrays the role of a priest-detective. The clerical-detective is a role established in literature, beginning with Daniel from the book of Susanna, and popularized with novels like Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, Chesterton’s Father Brown series, and Ellis Peters’ Brother Cadfael novels.

Dalgliesh continues his priestly-detective role with his familiarity with Christian doctrine and participation in Anglican tradition. He reads or has memorized

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<sup>145</sup> James, Interview.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ralph C. Wood, “P.D. James On the Mystery of Iniquity” *Modern Age* 44.4 (Fall 2002): 353.

the Book of Common Prayer and Scripture (as evidenced in novels such as *Death of an Expert Witness* and *Devices and Desires*)<sup>148</sup> and participates in religious practices. James appears content to allow Adam Dalgliesh to remain a “reverent agnostic” throughout her novels that feature him. I, on the other hand, believe that there is sufficient evidence to prove that Dalgliesh moves away from a reverent agnosticism towards an active life of faith.

Adam Dalgliesh is the son of an Anglican priest. His Christian upbringing is often connected to his investigations through a church setting or character. His history and experience with the church allows him to actually play a priestly role as a detective. In many of the novels, it is as though he seeks a confession, although if it is a religious or a criminal one, it is unclear for perhaps they are the same.

His role as both a priest and a detective is often interconnected. In *Unnatural Causes*, Dalgliesh interrogates a suspect who tries to share a sense of camaraderie with him because their fathers were both priests. In *Death in Holy Orders*, Dalgliesh revisits a theological college where he spent many summers of his youth, interacting with priests. Because he was raised in the church, Dalgliesh feels comfortable in church settings and with church people. He knows the language to use when interviewing priests or nuns, unlike his partner, Kate Miskin, an agnostic who has no understanding of the Anglican life.

Dalgliesh was once a practicing Christian; however, he suffered the loss of his wife and child during childbirth, and he has never recovered from that tragedy. His family’s death is the one unforgivable or unjustifiable act that God allowed and therefore Dalgliesh can no longer believe in the God of his childhood faith. As the son of a priest, Dalgliesh had the opportunity to be exposed to issues of faith, love,

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<sup>148</sup> *Death of an Expert Witness* 308; *Devices and Desires* 177.

forgiveness, and justice from a young age. As a detective, he is still faced with these same issues. Now, he must consider religious matters in light of violent death and evil. Dalgliesh's loss of faith due to the death of his family is only increased by the measures of evil that he witnesses in his work.

Adam Dalgliesh is a man of reason who pursues facts. The faith that the Christian life requires seems to conflict with Dalgliesh's rationalizing, proof-demanding investigations. Also, he has difficulty reconciling the evils he witnesses through his detection with a just and benevolent God. Dalgliesh eventually realizes that there will be no proof, no facts, and no evidence that will undeniably convince him of Christianity, yet he can still make the decision to believe. Dalgliesh's unhappiness in the stagnancy of the agnostic life finally propels him to the sacred.

At first, Dalgliesh shares similarities with many of the detectives of the golden age in that he is a professional policeman who works for Scotland Yard. Many of his cases take place outside of London in small towns. However, as James's novels progress, so does Dalgliesh's character development. While he may be compared to the gentlemen detectives popularized by Christie and Sayers, he is a more complex character. His personal loss and his religious concern complicate him. However, it is not only Dalgliesh's religious development that sets him apart from other detectives of the classical detective fiction tradition. Bernard Benstock compares Dalgliesh to other detectives who are usually spotted "instantly by superficialities and mannerisms.... Interestingly enough, Adam Dalgliesh is almost unrecognizable *except* for his inner feelings."<sup>149</sup> Despite Dalgliesh's appearances throughout her novels, little is really known about his personal life, for his character is "fleshed out, as much by indirection

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<sup>149</sup> Benstock, 112.

as by description.”<sup>150</sup> He is independent, professional, competent, and possesses an incredible insight that enables him consistently to solve the crime placed before him. He is also “enigmatic and ambiguous,” and “no one particularly likes him, except his creator and presumably her readers. Those who have to work under his supervision usually harbor active dislike for his cold and reticent personality.”<sup>151</sup> Dalgliesh’s appeal is largely based on his “obvious intelligence,” as well as his “loneliness and his physical, emotional and spiritual need.”<sup>152</sup>

James presents contrasting representation of Dalgliesh, or at least his critics perceive him in differing manners. Some portrayals present a man who is difficult to work with, cold, and arrogant. He is even called a “Byronic hero” in that he is only capable of loving a reflection of himself.<sup>153</sup> Yet other portrayals of Dalgliesh present a humble and even vulnerable man. When praised for his part in “pursuing justice,” Dalgliesh modestly shrugs and claims that he is working “in the cause of truth.”<sup>154</sup> His modesty in describing both his skill in detection as well as the theological and moral implications of his profession reveals Dalgliesh’s reticence to fully embrace his calling. Nevertheless, Dalgliesh accepts the burden of his police work; whether he bears a religious obligation to solve the crimes before him or a professional one, Dalgliesh is the ideal detective “who can be trusted with the awesome power that is vested in a senior police detective because he is sufficiently introspective to be aware of temptations of power and the sinfulness of arrogance.”<sup>155</sup> It is this awareness of sin, evil, and the religious that concerns us for this chapter. In particular, the study of

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<sup>150</sup> Robin Winks, “Murder and Dying,” *New Republic* (July 31, 1976): 31.

<sup>151</sup> Benstock, 111.

<sup>152</sup> Porter, 554

<sup>153</sup> Hubly, 43.

<sup>154</sup> P.D. James, *The Murder Room* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 355.

<sup>155</sup> Porter, 553.

Dalglish's religious life is relevant to our examination of James's subtle use of religious elements within her novels.

James chronicles the spiritual journey of Dalglish by carefully revealing few personal details about the detective. Through the portrayal of his relationships with priests, his role as a priest-detective, his participation in the Christian life and Christian milieu, his love relationships, and his pursuit of justice, I shall demonstrate how Dalglish moves from his disbelief in God into a relationship with him.

#### **4.2 The Influence of Priests**

Priests are kept in constant view throughout the detective novels. Not only are they implicitly involved characters within her narratives, they are concerned with the spiritual development of Adam Dalglish. Dalglish's relationship with various priests throughout the fourteen detective novels demonstrates his comfort and willingness to be involved with the church life. As the son of an Anglican priest, Dalglish has direct access to a religious world from which many secular detectives may be excluded. While his investigations draw him into contact with the sacred, James reminds us how Dalglish's Christian upbringing enables him to interrogate priests and understand religious practices such as confession and communion while still maintaining a professional distance from the sacred.

James creates a mystery surrounding Dalglish's relationships with various priests through the manner in which she presents his association with them. Of the four significant priests that I will address in this chapter, three of them were associated with Dalglish in some way prior to his investigation. In some of the novels, James explains the nature of their relationship (such as *The Black Tower* or

*Death in Holy Orders*). In another, she leaves the nature of their relationship unexplained (*A Certain Justice*).<sup>156</sup>

*The Black Tower* is the first novel where a close relationship between Dalgliesh and a priest is revealed. What is unique about this priest, however, is that he is already dead before Dalgliesh reaches him. Father Michael Baddeley served as curate to Dalgliesh's father, an Anglican priest, thirty years prior to the novel's beginning. What we learn about Baddeley we learn through Dalgliesh's reflections and the stories recounted about him by the other characters. Dalgliesh remembers him as a "timid, ineffective, maddeningly inefficient, muddling in everything but the essentials, but never the less than his uncompromising self."<sup>157</sup>

But Father Baddeley was more than a bumbling priest. He became a spiritual mentor to Dalgliesh. Looking through Baddeley's diaries, Dalgliesh remembers a conversation the two shared when he was a boy. The inquisitive, young Dalgliesh questions the priest about what he records in his diary, asking the difference between an "ordinary diary" and a "spiritual" one. Baddeley responds, "This is the spiritual life; the ordinary things one does from hour to hour."<sup>158</sup> But the young Dalgliesh does not comprehend this difference, and while he "occasionally tried to visualize this mysterious other existence," he finally accepts that the spiritual life is a place where "he and the uninitiated had no access but into which Father Baddeley could retreat at will."<sup>159</sup> Dalgliesh was resigned to accept the mysteries of Christianity from an early age. The detective, a man of reason who is interested in the finite truth, feels excluded from the mysteries of faith. Despite Dalgliesh's ambiguity about his

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<sup>156</sup> Refer to Father Presteign in *A Certain Justice* 296-297.

<sup>157</sup> *The Black Tower* 6.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

Christian faith, his relationship with the priest and his familiarity with the Anglican sacraments enable him to solve the case in *The Black Tower*.

During his investigation into the death of Janet Carpenter in *A Certain Justice*, Dalgliesh encounters another priest, Father Presteign. James suggests that Dalgliesh was previously acquainted with Presteign, although she does not explain the details of their relationship. The implication of prior familiarity leads one to believe that Dalgliesh knows Father Presteign on the priest's professional terms.

An intriguing dynamic occurs between the three characters who are involved with the inquiry at the church. When Dalgliesh and Kate Miskin question Presteign, an unspoken understanding exists between the two men. Kate cannot comprehend the rules that govern confession and grows frustrated at Presteign's unwillingness to participate in their investigation. She asserts, "If that priest had told us on Sunday everything he knew, she'd still be alive." Dalgliesh, however, understands that Presteign's compliance would violate the sacredness of confession. Acknowledging the difference between the roles of detective and priests, Dalgliesh responds, "If we'd gone to interview her early Monday evening, she'd still be alive... We had a choice, Father Presteign didn't."<sup>160</sup> This is the second novel where James uses Dalgliesh's relationship with a priest or his familiarity with the church life and its practices to assist him in finding a killer.

Detective Dalgliesh's familiarity and comfort with Presteign demonstrates the ease with which the detective operates within the religious world. Although Dalgliesh claims that he no longer espouses Christianity, his actions do not confirm this claim. Would not a detective who is completely determined to find a killer and seek the truth in all cases question despite religious sacraments, including secrets held between the

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<sup>160</sup> *A Certain Justice* 331.



supposed sacredness of the confessional? Dalgliesh, though he cannot acknowledge if he believes in the religious life, still clings to some semblance of the sacred. His preference for the reverence for the sacraments over his persistence in learning truths that would determine a killer's identity prove that he values this religious world of which he was once a part. He is slowly working his way back to the church.

Father Martin, a priest introduced in *Death in Holy Orders*, is one of the most significant priests in Dalgliesh's life. When Dalgliesh is invited to investigate the case at St. Anselm's Theological Seminary, he remembers this priest who is intrinsically tied to the faith of his youth. It is no coincidence that Dalgliesh's reunion with Father Martin corresponds with the latter's return to faith. Through the relationships that Dalgliesh forms as well as his involvement with the spiritual life of the seminary community, the detective is able to participate in the life of the church. The nurture from the priests at St. Anselm's, especially Father Sebastian and Father Martin, aids in his spiritual rebirth as does the promise of his relationship with Emma Lavenham.

Father Martin is the first person in whom Dalgliesh has confided regarding his struggles to find love and to commit to marriage. Although the reader knows that his wife died during childbirth from previous novels and that he has struggled with his grief, he has never voiced his reasons for avoiding a relationship with another person in one of James's novels. Father Martin stands apart because he confronts Dalgliesh directly. Martin understands why Adam avoids what that would bring him a sense of completion—love and faith—but he wants Dalgliesh to welcome these things into his life. Martin will not let Dalgliesh leave his seminary without the opportunity for love, both romantic and divine. The priest understands the connection between Dalgliesh's need for romantic love and divine love. If he is willing to let go of the death of his

wife and love another, then he is willing to forgive God for the isolation resulting from his wife's death. Martin reminds Dalglish that, "We can't set aside love, nor should we wish to. Forgive me if I am being insensitive and impertinent, but grief can be an indulgence."<sup>161</sup> Martin understands that Dalglish has "existed figuratively bound to the grave, to the child and wife who died... years earlier."<sup>162</sup>

Martin also does not want Dalglish to leave St. Anselm's without a chance to experience redemption. Because of the nature of the relationship experienced between these two men, forged decades before, there is a vulnerability that Dalglish allows with Martin that he doesn't express with others.

For Dalglish and Emma, Father Martin is more than a priest; he is a symbol of the strength and the vulnerability of their relationship. Martin is present at the beginning of the relationship and is mentioned again during their engagement.<sup>163</sup> His character, as a representative presence of Christianity, holds out the possibility of redemption for Dalglish.<sup>164</sup> He has been with Dalglish since childhood, and knowing all of his history, still offers him the chance for grace and a new life.

Adrian Boyde is the lone priest figure in *The Lighthouse*. He is not a practicing priest for he is currently working as an accountant on Combe Island. Initially, Boyde left the priesthood to recover from alcoholism. While on the island, he is slowly returning to the priesthood by holding religious services and taking confessions. Boyde is significant to this chapter about Dalglish's faith because of

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<sup>161</sup> *Death in Holy Orders* 427.

<sup>162</sup> Richard L. Smyer, "P.D. James: Crime and the Human Condition," *Clues* 3 (Spring/Summer 1982), 55.

<sup>163</sup> *The Lighthouse* 465.

<sup>164</sup> James sets up this relationship between Adam and Emma with Father Martin as the significant mediator. The natural assumption is that the priest would be present in the latest novel of James, *The Private Patient*, to perform the wedding ceremony between Adam and Emma. Martin's presence would have offered significant hope and promise to the burgeoning relationship between the two. He represents strength, finality, and solidity between them. However, he is obviously missing. Curiously, not only is Martin absent but there is no priest to offer a homily at all. The absence of a priest at the wedding in *The Private Patient* seems a glaring omission for a couple who found one another at a seminary and who incorporate priests and other Christian ministers and symbols into their lives.

the similarities these two characters share concerning the religious life. As he questions Boyde, “Dalgliesh felt a curious peace, something that was very rare when he was in the company of a suspect. *Here, he thought, is a man I could have talked with, one I would have liked.*”<sup>165</sup>

Dalgliesh identifies with Boyde during his investigation in *The Lighthouse* because the suspect, like Dalgliesh, was once a man of faith. Boyde, “an Anglican priest, had resigned from his living, either because of a loss of faith or his alcoholism, or perhaps a mixture of both.”<sup>166</sup> Adrian is now working back towards faith and relearning his priestly tasks. He has started holding services on the island and receiving confessions. It is for this reason that he loses his life. But before he dies, his reconnection to faith allows the bond of friendship to grow between Dalgliesh and Boyde. The detective admires Boyde’s faith and his willingness to accept the mysterious and unknown. Dalgliesh’s lack of faith and dogged pursuit of truth appears to be the strongest deterrent to his own ability to whole-heartedly accept Christianity. Dalgliesh “quite often discovers aspects of himself in suspects, even in murderers.”<sup>167</sup>

Dalgliesh’s evident relationship to priests throughout James’s novels serves to demonstrate his nascent Christianity. As he develops relationships with these priests, Dalgliesh reconnects with the religion of his youth. His struggle between faith and disbelief is relieved by the nurturing relationships of the priests whom James introduces throughout her novels.

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<sup>165</sup> *The Lighthouse* 288.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>167</sup> Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 196.

### 4.3 Dalglish as Priest-Detective

“The detective hero...has survived and is still at the heart of the story, like a secular priest expert in the extraction of confession, whose final revelation of the truth confers a vicarious absolution on all but the guilty,” declares James.<sup>168</sup> Several authors prior to P.D. James have utilized the detective-priest in the detective fiction. G. K. Chesterton’s series, featuring Father Brown, presented an unassuming Catholic priest who solves crimes and offers absolution. Brother Cadfael, the star of Ellis Peter’s medieval English mystery series, is a monk who is also a detective. Umberto Eco tells the story Brother William of Baskerville, a fourteenth-century monk who is sent to an Italian abbey to investigate a case of heresy and ends up investigating a series of murders in his classic mystery, *The Name of the Rose*. The detective-priest is a popular character in fiction because authors are able to write about theological matter through their characters. The detective-priest must be a tool of God because he or she must free the victim from his or her oppressor by giving him or her voice after discovering the truth. Daniel Smith-Christopher explains how Daniel illustrates this model in the Susanna narrative when he revealed the truth of the elders’ deception. After the truth was revealed, Susanna was released from captivity.<sup>169</sup>

To illustrate the development of the priest into the detective, William David Spencer includes examples of detective-clerics from literature in his book, *Mysterium and Mystery*. He includes priests, such as Chesterton’s Father Brown, monks such as Ellis Peters’ Brother Cadfael, nuns such as H.H. Holmes Sister Ursula, and many more characters. These detective-priests (or detective-nuns, etc.) are prototypical in several ways. They are defenders of truth and pursuers of justice. They are not afraid

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<sup>168</sup> James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, 180.

<sup>169</sup> Smith-Christopher, 181.

to get involved in the messy crimes because they maintain a higher peace and a deeper knowledge of a world beyond the one in which they are solving crimes and serving. Because of their sense of being a part of something different, these priests are all misfits.

Adam Dalgliesh is like these detective-priests. He is also a misfit. Although he is a successful policeman, he often struggles with a desire to quit the force. He is romantically unattached for most of the novels. He is a poet who artistically expresses himself even while maintaining the tough exterior expected of him. What sets Dalgliesh apart from these heroes is that he is a priest-detective. Dalgliesh is not a monk or a priest who solves crimes as an outpouring of his role as a religious man. Instead, he is a detective who plays a priestly role while he performs his duties as a detective.

His duties first include seeking truth and being an instrument for truth. Second, he must accept the confession of the sinner. Third, he delivers justice by directing the guilty party to the judicial system. This requires an arrest and subsequent trial. The detective is the mediator between the justice system and the criminal. He is also the mediator between the justice system and the victim. After a crime has occurred, both the criminal and the victim become voiceless. The victim is dead, silenced by the crime committed against him. Therefore, the victim requires an advocate to speak on his behalf. The criminal has been silenced as well. The criminal voluntarily gave up her voice when she committed the crime of murder. Until the murderer confesses, she remains voiceless. The detective gives a voice to both the victim and the murderer by mediating on their behalf. The detective gives a voice to the victim by pursuing justice on behalf of the dead and demanding payment for the

crime. To the criminal, the detective gives a voice by providing an opportunity to confess the crime, thereby allowing the criminal to regain her voice.

In describing the role of the secular priest-detective, William David Spencer claims that:

As the literature of the mystery genre became a secularization of the concealing/revealing of the great mysterium, God as orderer and focal point of unity was replaced by secular society, priest displaced by police, and the sacred act of repentance and reconciliation displaced by indictment and punishment. The detective as secular priest now identified the person out of unity, the antisocial criminal, and exacted society's punishment.<sup>170</sup>

The detective plays the role of a mediator and redeemer. The detective has a Christ-like role. However, the detective is merely human and therefore his or her attempts to mediate and redeem will be mere reflections of those made by Christ. It is in this manner that the detective plays a priestly role. He must mirror the role of Christ by mediating for the innocent as well as the guilty. Because of the priests' and the detectives' imperfection, the final mediation will suffice but be flawed. Evidence lies in a dead victim who is only given a voice once he is dead and a murderer who is only given a voice once she confesses and then suffers the consequences of her crimes.

Dalglish is similar to the detective-priests of literature in that he often finds a sense of camaraderie within the church community. His relationship with priests and his ability to speak their language, read their books, and recite their prayers all dictate that although he may be an outsider to the world, he is an insider to the church. Dalglish views his detection as a calling. Just as priests are called to their ministry, Dalglish is called to his detection. He pursues his calling with passion, dedication, and self-sacrifice. He is willing to give up his life in the line of duty (*Unnatural*

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<sup>170</sup> Spencer, 10.

*Causes, The Black Tower, and Devices and Desires*). At times, Dalgliesh aches to leave the force but seems inexplicably tied to his profession. He is willing to pursue truth and justice, the foundational elements of detection, to the end even if it results in his own death.

Dalgliesh's ability to ascertain confessions also demonstrates his role as a priest-detective. The priest listens to the confessions of the sinners and then absolves them of guilt by instructing the sinner to perform certain ritualistic prayers, penances, or modifications of behavior. Typically, sinners seek out priests to make a confession. The sinner may seek out a detective to make a confession, although usually he has to persuade the culprit to do so. If the sinner is a Christian, then he or she already knows the consequences of his or her failure to make a confession. Yet in the context of a detective story, the detective must make the culprit aware of the consequences of the un-confessed crime. Dalgliesh receives the confessions of murderers and the penance that he prescribes is that the culprit suffers the consequences of his or her crimes.

In several ways, the seriousness about which Dalgliesh goes about his task of directing the guilty ones into the justice system sets him apart from many mystery novel detectives, especially the hardboiled genre detectives. Those detectives believe that it is their task to not only seek out truth, hear the confession, but also to punish the criminal in their manner of private justice. Dalgliesh does not carry out personal vendettas of justice. Instead, he always maintains personal integrity and stays within the justice system, trusting that the justice system will carry out the final and appropriate form of justice. In this way, he is similar to a priest who trusts God as the final judge who delivers justice.

#### 4.4 Dalgliesh's Participation in Christian Practices and Settings

Dalgliesh's relationship with Christianity is evidenced through his ongoing, although indirect, participation in the religious life. He expresses a kind of disinterested but ritualistic observation of religious traditions. This pattern is demonstrated in the previous section and we see similarities here: Dalgliesh wants to participate in the spiritual life through relationships and practices, although he will not do so wholeheartedly. Throughout the novels, however, Dalgliesh's involvement in the church becomes more personal. His interaction with the church life during his investigations often gives him access to the clues that enables him to solve crimes as well as reconnect him to the faith of his childhood.

One of the most distinctive characteristics we learn about Dalgliesh is his love of churches. Dalgliesh has a great regard for architecture, especially religious, and he visits British churches on his holiday. Dalgliesh's investigations bring him into churches as well. The novels *A Taste for Death*, *Death of an Expert Witness*, *Death in Holy Orders*, *The Lighthouse*, and *The Private Patient* each include a scene of Dalgliesh going into a church or a chapel for his investigation. Yet the detective never enters those sacred places as a detached spectator.

Adam Dalgliesh may distance himself from his Anglican upbringing as “a residual if not a practicing Christian,”<sup>171</sup> but he assumes the reverence required upon entering a sacred place. Typically, Dalgliesh will enter a church in silence, light a candle, or make an offering.<sup>172</sup> Despite his avowed agnosticism, Adam appears at ease in the Christian settings in which James places him. His comfort is suggested, for example, by the mention of a contribution discreetly placed in offering or his reading

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<sup>171</sup> Wood, “Presumed Guilty,” *Mars Hill Review* (Winter/Spring 1999), 141

<sup>172</sup> *A Mind to Murder* 157; *Devices and Desires* 177; *Death of an Expert Witness* 298; *A Taste for Death* 41.



of the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>173</sup> Each action acknowledges the sacredness of the place he has entered, even if he enters without religious intentions. He maintains an understanding for both the hallowedness of the place as well as the graveness of his responsibility. A murder committed in a church is “particularly awful,” James says, and Dalgliesh comprehends the severity of the task before him when he is called to solve a murder committed in a holy place.<sup>174</sup>

During our interview, James introduced the Larkin poem, “Church Going,” as a model for the manner in which Dalgliesh visits churches. Whilst it is possible to see a case for comparing Larkin’s church-goer to Adam in a few instances within James’s novels, I propose that the detective is actually more involved in and open to the religious life, whereas Larkin’s church-goer is merely an observer and settled in his disbelief.

In *A Taste for Death*, for example, Dalgliesh approaches St. Matthew’s Church in much of the same manner that the church-goer would. James says in our interview that Dalgliesh “begins by walking around it, saying hello to the church before [he goes] inside.”<sup>175</sup> Dalgliesh is compelled to move beyond a simple “hello” when he enters the church, however. His visit is a kind of anomalous blend between a tour of the church and a study of the crime scene:

Before he concentrated on the actual scene of the crime, Dalgliesh always liked to make a cursory survey of the surroundings to orientate himself... The exercise had its practical value, but he recognized that, in some obscure way, it fulfilled a psychological need, just as in boyhood he would explore a country church by first walking slowly round it before, with a frisson of awe and excitement, pushing open the door and beginning his planned progress of discovery to the central mystery.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> *Death of an Expert Witness* 308.

<sup>174</sup> James, Interview.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> *A Taste for Death* 41.

This passage exhibits Dalgliesh's sense of expectancy, even from a very young age. He recognizes the mystery of the sacred and enters the sacred places with an anticipation of an encounter with the divine. Dalgliesh still expects an encounter with "the central mystery," although if that mystery is divine, he has not yet decided. Still he remains open to the possibility. These "residues"<sup>177</sup> for his Christian heritage remain with Dalgliesh and lead him towards a reverence of and the search of the divine. It is as though Dalgliesh knows what should exist within a church and if that sacredness is missing, he feels the lack of it. When a murder occurs in a church, the sacrilege is obvious to James's church-goer. In *A Taste for Death* and *Death of an Expert Witness*, murders occur in a church. Dalgliesh experiences the presence of evil summoned by the blasphemous acts. He also feels the contaminating and isolating power that murder has. Both of these novels stress isolation and loneliness resulting from the murders. Even Dalgliesh "felt extraordinarily alone in the silence of the chapel, more alone because her body lay there."<sup>178</sup> His feeling of isolation continues even further when he picks up a Book of Common Prayer and reads, "For I am a stranger with thee: and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. O spare me a little, that I may recover my strength: before I go hence, and be no more seen."<sup>179</sup>

Despite his isolation and loneliness, even in churches where he investigates murders, Dalgliesh still participates to some extent in the Christian life. His expectancy of the mere mystery of church, God, and Christianity set him apart from Larkin's church-goer. Larkin's church-goer visits his churches with the expectancy that this place is already dead or will be dead soon. The church is like a museum that he is compelled to visit as a monument to a time passed. He gives an out-of-date coin in the offering box. He smells the browning flowers. He glances over the "brass and

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<sup>177</sup> Wood, "Presumed Guilty," 141.

<sup>178</sup> *Death of an Expert Witness* 298.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

stuff/Up at the holy end.” But these articles are meaningless to him as the irreverent use of the word “stuff” indicates. He reads scripture mockingly, hearing the echo of his words “snigger” back to him. And therefore, Larkin’s church-goer leaves the church much as he entered it:

...at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches will fall completely out of use...<sup>180</sup>

For Larkin, the matter has been decided. One never gets the sense that this experience will open up something new or give him any new expectations or experiences. Dalglish, however, is still open to suggestions that God may exist or that there may be some new experience of the divine that he is unaware of when he steps into a church. And, therefore, he walks into the churches expectantly, for he knows that he may encounter something supernatural.

In James’s second novel, *A Mind to Murder*, one of the most revealing scenes regarding Adam’s faith occurs. On the anniversary of his wife’s death, Dalglish visits a nameless Catholic church to light a candle. Although they did not share the same faith, he has ritualistically lit a candle for her in a Catholic church every year for the past fourteen years:

He had lit the first candle on the day she had died out of the need to formalize an intolerable grief and, perhaps, with a childish hope of somehow comforting her spirit.... He thought of this most private action in his detached and secretive life, not as superstition or piety, but as a habit which he could not now break even if he wished. He pushed his coin through the slot and held his candle’s wick to dying flame of a moist stump. It caught immediately and the flame grew bright and clear at once. He gazed through the flame for a moment feeling nothing, not even anger. Then he turned away.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Philip Larkin, “Church Going,” *The Less Deceived: poems* (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1960).

<sup>181</sup> *A Mind to Murder* 157.

The ritualistic behavior that Dalgliesh practices in *A Mind to Murder* is precariously balanced between faith and fetishism. As the son of an Anglican priest, Dalgliesh is familiar enough with church rituals to know the significance of lighting a candle for his dead wife. He makes his offering to somehow appease the bitterness that he still feels for his wife's death. He is not ready to forgive God for his loss, neither can he fully believe that God would allow such a loss, and therefore proclaims himself an agnostic. Yet, he is not a fully committed to his agnosticism. There is more evidence of his belief than he is willing to commit himself to. His readiness to step into the church, participate in a sacred act, and meditate in the silence and holiness of the place still keeps Dalgliesh within the sacred realm.

Even he himself claims this act is not superstition or piety, yet the fact that he has lit a candle for fourteen years and cannot stop shows that there is a level of devotion within this action. If it is fetishism, he recognizes that lighting the candle accomplishes nothing; but nevertheless, he must do this formalized act again and again. If lighting the candle is an act of faith, then Dalgliesh recognizes that all around him there is only material reality, yet he believes there is something more than what he sees. This scene in *A Mind to Murder* formalizes the tension that exists within Dalgliesh. His quest for the facts and evidence of his cases must be balanced against the faith that is required to acknowledge that some mysteries will always remain unsolved.

#### 4.5 Dalgliesh's Love Lost, Love Grasped

The love relationships are a subtlety in the novels of James. She is more concerned with portraying mystery and murder, yet she does incorporate some romance into the life of her hero, Detective Adam Dalgliesh. James admires Dalgliesh, and he even serves as a “convenient alter-ego”<sup>182</sup> at times. However, she also perceives him as “a very detached man, essentially a very lonely man in a lonely profession, one which brings him into contact with tragedies, with evil.”<sup>183</sup>

Adam Dalgliesh's relationship with women reflects the nature of his relationship with God. Parallels exist between his romantic and spiritual relationships, including his desire for isolation that he initially exhibits in the earlier novels, his gradual acknowledgment of his need for a loving relationship, to his eventual acceptance of that fulfilling relationship. As Dalgliesh attempts romance and fails, then attempts again and succeeds, this mirrors a model for his relationship with the divine. It is not until he secures a successful marital relationship with Emma Lavenham that he is finally able to forgive God for the loss of his wife, let go of his disbelief and bitterness, and trust God.

Dalgliesh's attitude towards women, as well as his own insecurity, is reflected in this passage from James's second novel, *A Mind to Murder*. The detective contemplates what a relationship with Deborah Riscoe would cost him:

If she accepted—for this or for any evening—his solitary life would be threatened. He knew this with complete certainty and the knowledge frightened him. Ever since the death of his wife in childbirth he had insulated himself carefully against pain; sex little more than an exercise in skill, a love

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<sup>182</sup> Porter, 554.

<sup>183</sup> Moira Davison Reynolds, *Women Authors of Detective Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, Inc., 2001), 88.

affair merely an emotional pavan, formalized, danced, according to the rules, committing one to nothing. But of course she wouldn't accept.<sup>184</sup>

Deborah does accept when Adam asks her out, but the romance is short-lived. Deborah ends the relationship with a cold letter, informing Dalgliesh that she is moving to America. The detective's response to the end is, "And why not?"<sup>185</sup> It is as if he expected abandonment from the beginning. "Thereafter Dalgliesh is condemned to his lonely vocation, a condition that had long been predetermined by his own state of mind in the earlier novels."<sup>186</sup> "Whereas his professional life is a great success—he is after all Commander Dalgliesh—his private life, if not a failure, remains dissatisfying, open-ended, unresolved."<sup>187</sup> In the earlier novels, Dalgliesh is marked by isolation, fear of commitment, and loneliness. His only interactions are through his police work: these provide a controlled framework within which he can move and interact with his community. Love, an uncontrolled force, presents too great a risk for Dalgliesh. His early life is defined by loss and suffering and so Dalgliesh is hesitant to engage in relationships that make him vulnerable. "Believing that all emotional involvements are painful, he has carefully insulated himself from others, engaging only in casual love affairs, committing himself to no one."<sup>188</sup>

It is not until *Death in Holy Orders* that James introduces a woman who is a proper match for the detective. Despite James's intentions to keep her detective unmarried, she admits that "occasionally the best-regulated characters can escape from the sensible and controlling hand of their author, to embark on their own love life."<sup>189</sup> Emma Lavenham, a Cambridge scholar, is teaching a class on the

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<sup>184</sup> *A Mind to Murder* 21-22.

<sup>185</sup> *Unnatural Causes* 217.

<sup>186</sup> Benstock, 113

<sup>187</sup> Porter, 554.

<sup>188</sup> Hubly, 42.

<sup>189</sup> Reynolds, 88.

metaphysical poets at St. Anselm's Theological College. She is young, intelligent, and beautiful. Furthermore, she is a woman of faith.

James seems to decide that Dalgliesh and Emma suit one another in spite of the challenges that consistently assail their relationship. Dalgliesh, despite his all-consuming job and excessively private nature, may have found his match in the selfless and generous Emma. James, in her realistic manner, does not allow the relationship to begin romantically or free from cares. To do so would be a denial of the true-to-life nature in which she attempts to create all of her characters and plots. Many factors inhibit the success of their relationship, including Dalgliesh's job and his unwillingness to sacrifice his privacy as well as Emma's fragile ego and her disbelief that a man could love her for anything beyond her beauty.

Emma's platonic friendship with the lesbian, Clara, also has potential to damage the burgeoning romance. Clara derides Emma for continuously returning to Dalgliesh after he cancels their meetings and fails to include her in his extremely private life. However, Emma's acceptance of Dalgliesh models for him unconditional love.

Eugenio Montale, in his introduction to the *Divine Comedy*, speaks of the "Donna Salutifera,"<sup>190</sup> a lady who heals and redeems. One could suggest that Emma serves as a "donna salutifera" for Dalgliesh—a kind of saving lady in the model of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.<sup>191</sup> Emma, like Dante's Beatrice, is a beautiful woman who leads him towards salvation. Emma becomes Dalgliesh's healer who mediates for his

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<sup>190</sup> Eugenio Montale, Introduction to *The Divine Comedy*, by Dante Alighieri (New York: Everyman's Library, 1995).

<sup>191</sup> A comparison between Emma and Beatrice was initially suggested to me in an interview by Dr. Ralph C. Wood in Waco, TX on September 5, 2008.

redemption. She is also his intermediary to God, following in a similar pattern as Dante on his spiritual journey of loss and redemption.<sup>192</sup>

While Dalgliesh is not on the same journey as Dante and it does not take the death of Emma to lead him to God, they share several similarities to their stories. Both experience the death of a loved one which sends them into darkness. Dante channels this darkness into a time of study. Dalgliesh, however, dedicates himself to his detection. He does not withdraw from society—he plunges into its most grisly and personal aspects all the while remaining an outsider. Being a detective allows him into the most intimate part of people’s lives. He can ask any question, enter any room of a house, probe any detail of a personal life. However, none can invade his privacy in return. Emma is the first person who threatens his privacy.

In an implicit way, the relationships are faint models for the relationship between Christ and humanity. The connection between theological love and romantic love, or *agape* and *eros*, provoke many considerations for James’s readers. No relationships are exempt from a theological examining. They are self-sacrificing, redemptive, painful, and may even cause the loss of life. The relationship between Dalgliesh and Emma is an example of this redeeming love. On her decision to allow Dalgliesh to finally fall in love and remarry, James admits that “presenting him as a widow was somewhat cowardly. But, I felt that in the detective novel you are coping with one great absolute, which is death. I am not sure that at the same time you can cope with another great absolute, which is love.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Montale, 18. “After Beatrice’s death, Dante suffered a period of inner darkness and distraction. Dante turned to academic pursuits and spent 30 months studying Boethius and Cicero, and he completed a reading of the classics and Thomist philosophy. It was after this time that Beatrice began the process of transhumanization, appearing to Dante in visions and leading him towards salvation. Beatrice has become the image of perfect beauty and the vessel for the journey towards salvation.”

<sup>193</sup> Reynolds, 88.



But Dalgliesh must be shown that life exists beyond his world of death, organized by clues, investigations, and solved murders. Love is the uncontrolled force entering into the controlled environment. Love exists outside ourselves and it is only because it is beyond our control and beyond our grasp that we can freely accept it. Philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Zizek offers an interesting explanation of the role of love when he examines it within the context of a Hitchcock film romance: it is “a kind of ‘miracle’ that explodes ‘out of nothing’ and renders possible the salvation of the Hitchcockian couple.”<sup>194</sup> Zizek’s description of love as an explosion that brings about salvation is apt. Love is offensive and painful, and it demands a sacrifice. Yet that sacrifice may result in salvation. Zizek continues by stating that “the subject can never fully dominate and manipulate the way he provokes transference in others; there is always something ‘magic’ about it.”<sup>195</sup> Until the lover is able to sacrifice the self and allow the magic to exist, he or she is not ready for love or for salvation. It is for these reasons that Dalgliesh’s romantic relationships are a precursor to his religious relationship with God.

In her novel, *Innocent Blood*, James asserts that, “It is only through learning to love that we find identity.”<sup>196</sup> Emma assists Dalgliesh in his journey towards identity and salvation by modeling for him that one must be willing to give up one’s self completely in order to enter into a relationship. Emma does this for Dalgliesh, and it is only then, when she symbolically agrees to return with him to his apartment in London (as opposed to him returning with her to her Cambridge flat), that the relationship between the two lovers is assured for the first time in the novels.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Zizek, 76.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>196</sup> P.D. James, *Innocent Blood* (London: Penguin, 1980), 313.

<sup>197</sup> *The Murder Room* 541.

The final scene in *The Private Patient* is vital to the salvation journey of Dalgliesh. When Dalgliesh and Emma commit to marriage, it symbolizes an end to the stumbling uncertainty that existed between them for four novels.<sup>198</sup> The wedding recognizes the end to another one of Dalgliesh's journeys: the search for fulfillment that he attempted to satisfy in his isolation and his work is now complete with his recognition that he must be in a relationship with Emma as well as with God.

#### 4.6 Dalgliesh's Rough Justice

Adam Dalgliesh works against the disorder of this world to pursue justice, truth, and order. He "is a fierce defender of the social code, feeling that rules, in a world of flux and chaos, are man's only hope."<sup>199</sup> However, he is limited in his ability to discover and halt the evil he discovers. Dennis Porter coins the term, "rough justice," to refer to the kind of justice Adam must accept for dissatisfying conclusions, such as when he lacks sufficient evidences to arrest the murderer and he or she ends up committing suicide.<sup>200</sup>

In the "golden-age," usually associated as the years before World War II, "detective fiction offers reassurance in being the promise of a rationally determined world. The reader is confident that the novel will work to offer a coherent solution tying up all loose ends: the detective is a kind of guarantee for the reader that narrative completion will ensue."<sup>201</sup> However, Robin Winks asserts that the "Gold-

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<sup>198</sup> If James writes another novel, she will have to explain how Dalgliesh reconciles the challenges of married life with his demanding occupation, similar to the Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane model proposed by Dorothy Sayers. For an article comparing the Sayers to James (especially how the two authors use the female detective heroine), see the article by SueEllen Campbell, "The Detective Heroine and the Death of Her Hero: Dorothy Sayers to P.D. James," *Modern Fiction Studies* 29, no. 3. (Autumn 1983): 497-521.

<sup>199</sup> Hubly, "Byronic Hero," 41.

<sup>200</sup> Porter, 545.

<sup>201</sup> Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 21.

age” has passed, and with it, so has much of our innocence. Detectives are more inclined to use violence as opposed to intellectual thought to solve crimes.<sup>202</sup> Susan Rowland believes that this new era brings with it cases of “brutalities far beyond the scope of any fictional hero to rectify.”<sup>203</sup> The detective is not a supernatural hero. He is limited in his abilities and knowledge. In the pursuit of justice, “what the anti-heroic... detective discovers is that the law is not a stable, infallible system for administering justice.”<sup>204</sup>

Dalgliesh must learn to operate within that fallible system to provide a satisfying form of justice. This challenges his spiritual journey because the ambiguity he must accept with “rough justice” does not always fit with his idea of Christian justice. Using a play on words for Dalgliesh’s Christian name, “Adam,”<sup>205</sup> Erlene Hubly suggests that, “Adam [is] the inheritor of the secular world.” With his inheritance, however, he also shares in the suffering of humankind.

Hubly continues with a comparison between Dalgliesh and his father. Adam fights death that destroys one’s world whereas his father, the priest, fought death on a theological level. “If [Dalgliesh] cannot stop death, he can at least catch and punish those who inflict it on others.”<sup>206</sup> We will explore these ideas of evil, justice, and imperfect justice further in the following chapter.

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<sup>202</sup> Robin W. Winks, introduction to *Detective Fiction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), 8.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>205</sup> Mark J. Fretz. “Adam” *ABD*, vol. 1, 62. “Adam,” taken from the Hebrew noun that denotes “human being” or “humankind.”

<sup>206</sup> Hubly, 41.

## 4.7 Conclusion

As we reflect on the character of Dalgliesh, we can see how he always keeps the religious subtly in view. Though James claims that he is a “reverent agnostic” in her earlier novels, Dalgliesh’s participation with the Christian life demonstrates his willingness to experience something of the divine mystery.

I assert that the defining characteristics of Dalgliesh (friend to priests, participator in the Christian life, lover, poet, and detective) aid him on his journey towards salvation. The dissatisfaction that Dalgliesh demonstrates with his agnostic life drives him toward a more fulfilling life, which is evidenced through his relationships with the church. His relationships with the priests and with Emma symbolize a commitment to a relationship with God. The manner in which Dalgliesh actively steps into the church, not as a disinterested bystander, but as a hopeful and expectant man, demonstrates his openness to faith. His attempts to seek justice in this world and to pursue it demonstrate his willingness to embrace the prophet Micah’s command for justice.

Dalgliesh’s spiritual awareness and sensitivity throughout the novels demonstrate his journey towards the mystery that he first encountered as a child. Although James would not explicitly express Dalgliesh’s decision to believe, she has infused her hero detective with “some of [her] own enthusiasm,”<sup>207</sup> therefore we can believe that his ability to believe is conceivable.

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<sup>207</sup> James, Interview

## Chapter Five

### Estrangement, Disordered Love and the Motives for Murder:

#### The Plots Explored

##### 5.1 Overview

The pursuit to justify and the desire to rectify the disengaging effects of estrangement obsess the villains of P.D. James. Her villains attempt to re-engage with community, family, and God through a pattern of disordered love which leads to further estrangement, violence, and ultimately death. “Who has not grappled with loneliness, been affronted by the terrible certainty of death, [or] harbored thoughts—however brief—of retribution?”<sup>208</sup> James takes these troubling concerns and writes about them through the compelling genre of detective fiction in a manner that engages and provokes religious consideration. Theology is not her primary concern, but residually and tangentially, theological matters are raised.

The world in which James was born and raised is at least partially responsible for her religious concerns. James grew up in England in an “ordered society in which virtue was regarded as normal, crime an aberration, and in which there was small sympathy for the criminal.”<sup>209</sup> It was a “cohesive world...united by a common belief in a religious and moral code based on the Judeo-Christian inheritance.”<sup>210</sup> This is the world of Agatha Christie and other writers of the golden age. Their detective novels portrayed a “cosy” society where justice and order, although it may be momentarily disrupted, is always restored by the last page.

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<sup>208</sup> Norma Siebenheller, *P.D. James* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981): ix.

<sup>209</sup> James, *Talking about Detective Fiction*, 79.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

The novels of the golden age may have represented an “exaggerated, romanticized, or idealized world”<sup>211</sup> that offered some escape from the outside world which was filled with its despair of war, economic failure, and instability. James is clearly influenced by golden age novels. She read Christie, Sayers, Allingham, and Marsh as well as others, and many of her novels bear the imprint of her predecessors in fiction. Yet James stands apart from these classic golden age novelists because she refuses to write the same type of escapist novel that will provide some kind of salve for her readers’ woes. Instead, her novels force her readers into the world’s pain, suffering, evil, and its aftermath.

James’s incorporation of Christian symbolism, Augustinian theology, and Anglican references delicately guide readers towards consideration for justice, grace, and mercy. Ultimately, these considerations suggest her awareness of Christ’s presence in the world. Theological contemplations and Christian allusions emerge when her motives for murder are exposed. James reveals the evil that exists within the hearts of her villains, but also the evil that is within other characters, even her victims. Rarely is one character responsible for the evil and suffering that occurs. A character has become estranged from family, society, and God and then decides that she has no option but to pursue her own form of justice. James’s novels are characterized by the gradual amassing of pain, guilt, estrangement, and desire for vengeance that occurs when one character is unable to bear the burden of despair any longer. That character turns to murder as a solution for his or her anger, misery, and vengeance.

James demonstrates an insight into human nature and its capacity for good and evil as well as its need for grace and mercy. She believes that no human is beyond the

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 80.

grace and mercy of God.<sup>212</sup> Her novels reflect her theological view of grace and salvation but also her view of sin, which is often depicted through her portrayals of disordered love, a motive for murder in many of her novels. Regardless of James's belief that disordered love results in sin, estrangement, and oftentimes murder, she remains sympathetic to her villains as well as to her victims. "James's insights into...fears and needs...[are] profound.... Her ability to create characters, even murderers, who can be pitied"<sup>213</sup> demonstrates her sympathy for the human condition of estrangement and suffering that we must endure due to separation from God.

If James's belief is that grace through Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, as she suggests in her interview, then she fails to demonstrate this means to salvation through her writing. Instead, she only portrays the failure of any character to get to the cross. James is more equipped to demonstrate sin by a character's turn away from Christ and a turn towards himself or herself as one way of salvation and justification. She does not show any villain's turn towards Jesus Christ, which would be the one possible means of justification that her faith would allow. The closest she comes is through her depiction of the detective, Dalgliesh, who stands in as a kind of redeemer and priest. Dalgliesh seeks justice on behalf of the victim and operates within the allowed system, not outside it as her vigilante villains do. But even Dalgliesh fails to be a satisfying redeemer, for he can only operate in the systemic justice system, not the divine one, and will never be able to provide perfect justice for the victims. This can only be extended by Jesus Christ and be accepted by the victim or the estranged one on behalf of the victim.

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<sup>212</sup> James, Interview.

<sup>213</sup> Elizabeth Blakesley Lindsay, "P.D. James," *Great Women Mystery Writers, Second Edition* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007): 124.

## 5.2 Disordered Love, Estrangement, and Sin

James is not a theologian, of course. However, doctrine such as original sin, the fall of humanity, and evil recurrently inform her fictional writing. They are boldly evident in her novels' titles and also present, although sometimes more subtly, throughout her plots. These themes are frequently linked to disordered love. In order to gain a better understanding of how these themes impact her writing and establish her motives for murder, it would be helpful to look at Augustine's understanding of disordered love. Augustine presented the idea of disordered love, or "cupiditas," in his *Confessions*.<sup>214</sup> He described it as a selfish love which is directed towards the self or wrongly directed towards others. David Naugle, in his book *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives*, claims that disordered love eventually leads to criminal behavior. He asserts that:

Crimes...will be necessary to get the thing or person we want. We may attack a human being or institution we perceive as a threat in order to protect what we already have and love. We may physically harm or even murder an enemy out of revenge...all for the sake of validating the self.... The disorder of crime...may seem necessary to get what we love in order to find peace and be happy.<sup>215</sup>

James' novels support Naugle's conclusion that disordered love can lead to disordered lives which can result in chaos, crime, and murder. She is fascinated by the effects of disordered love and the way in which it contaminates every aspect of

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<sup>214</sup> In *Confessions* and *The City of God*, Augustine discusses the struggle between the two wills. In book two and book eight of his *Confessions*, Augustine contrasts rightly ordered love with wrongly ordered love. Rightly ordered love, or "caritas," directs love towards God in a selfless way and gives us the desire to be like God. Love for God should always be first in the ordering. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. F. J. Sheed (London: Sheed & Ward, 1943), 27, 155; and St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. and ed. Marcus Dods (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1948).

<sup>215</sup> David Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008): 82.



community, family, faith, and religion. It is this kind of love that James finds a compelling subject for murder.

James not only regards disordered love as a theme for the tragic motives for violence and death within her stories but estrangement, isolation, and exclusion are also themes that resonant throughout her novels. Paul Tillich, the twentieth-century German-American theologian, writes about the demoralizing effects on the soul that estrangement causes. He declares that “man finds himself, together with his world, in existential estrangement, unbelief, hubris, and concupiscence.” This estrangement contradicts man’s essential being, which is intended for good, and drives him towards self-destruction.<sup>216</sup>

Tillich asserts that the self-destructive implications of humanity’s condition of estrangement result in personal guilt and tragedy. “Estrangement cannot replace sin.... Man’s predicament is estrangement, but his estrangement is sin. It is not a state of things, like the laws of nature, but a matter of both personal freedom and universal destiny.”<sup>217</sup> James is intrigued by the implications of humanity’s condition of estrangement and the sinful acts that ultimately result from it. What compels any human to commit murder? Given the same temptation, might we commit the same crime?<sup>218</sup>

In his book, *Theology and Culture*, Paul Tillich addresses the issue of morality. In the chapter, “Moralisms and Morality: Theonomous Ethics,” Tillich challenges readers to think about morals and morality from a theological perspective. “The moral imperative expresses itself in laws which are supposed to be just,” he claims. “Every system of moral commandments is, at the same time, the basis for the system of laws.... Justice, in Aristotle, is determined by proportionality. Everybody

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<sup>216</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957): 59-60.

<sup>217</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology II*, 46.

<sup>218</sup> James, Interview.

gets what he deserves according to quantitative measurements.” This is not true for Christianity. “Justice, in the Old Testament, is the activity of God toward the fulfillment of his promises. And justice, in the New Testament, is the unity of judgment and forgiveness. Justification by grace is the highest form of divine justice.... In other words: Justice is fulfilled in love.”<sup>219</sup>

Susan Rowland, in her chapter entitled “The Horror of Modernity and the Utopian Sublime: Gothic Villainy in P.D. James and Ruth Rendell,” from the book *The Devil Himself: Villainy in Detective Fiction and Film*, asserts that James writes reactionary Gothic novels which embody the horror of the secular modernity. To support her claim, Rowland states that societies “abandon the manifesting of moral order though traditional Christianity” because through this model, they are unable to secure justice. Rowland’s evidence for the failure of justice is the inability of the detective to re-solve past atrocities. She cites *Shroud for a Nightingale* as an example of how “gothic aesthetic form challenges the potential of the genre to heal social order. In *Shroud for a Nightingale*, Rowland claims that Dalgliesh acts as a “sign of the absence of God.”<sup>220</sup> However, I must oppose Rowland in this regard. It seems evident that that Dalgliesh acts as both the agent of grace and love. Both of these characteristics are ones that God extends to humanity through humanity. This is evident in the opportunity that Dalgliesh gives the murderer to confess and be forgiven.

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<sup>219</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959): 143-144.

<sup>220</sup> Susan Rowland, “The Horror of the Modernity and the Utopian Sublime: Gothic Villainy in P.D. James and Ruth Rendell,” in *The Devil Himself: Villainy in Detective Fiction and Film*, eds. by Stacy Gillis and Philippa Gates (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 2001): 135.

James has often been described as a writer deeply concerned with the morals and conditions of her society.<sup>221</sup> She is not, however, merely a secularly moralizing writer but accesses the deeper Christian morality that Tillich describes in *Theology for Culture*. Recognizing that we live in a “terribly fragmented and secularized social world,”<sup>222</sup> James understands that the satisfying justice that Tillich refers to is justification by grace. Regarding the confessing Christian author’s role in this “fragmented and secularized world,” Ralph Wood says:

This religious and political calamity has been compounded by the widespread belief that the natural order itself is the product of chance and perhaps of chaos. How can the novelist have moral and religious responsibilities in such a shattered world—a world having no immutable value system, [no] accepted view of the universe and man’s place in it, [no] set of ethical rules of conduct to which all right-minded people conform?<sup>223</sup>

James bears a responsibility as a writer. She accepts this burden when she began writing about the very issues that plague her society. By writing about disordered love, estrangement, and exclusion, James also becomes responsible for writing about the other side; that is grace, love, acceptance, and inclusion. James is quite capable of presenting the corrupting power and results of the evil that she portrays, but she fails to deliver a message of redemption with the same resolve. It is much easier to write about evil, James claims. She confesses “regretfully, that evil is much easier to depict than good... Goodness, by contrast, is enormously difficult to give vibrant fictional life. Precisely because it is quiet and undramatic... charity is hard to make artistically compelling.”<sup>224</sup> James’s aim is simple: to show evil and its

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<sup>221</sup> “James’s novels do not offer pleasing literary escapes into unreality. They wrestle, on the contrary, with the very largest moral and social questions: abortion, euthanasia, environmental destruction, terrorism, multiculturalism, homosexuality, etc.” Ralph C. Wood, “P.D. James and the Mystery of Iniquity,” 350.

<sup>222</sup> Wood, “Deep Mysteries,” 960.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Wood, “A Case for James,” 583.

contaminating effects.<sup>225</sup> However, the reader cannot help but wonder—does the author not bear some responsibility, as a public Christian figure and as one who writes novels that are of Christian significance, to show the other side of evil as well?

Despite her failure to adequately portray the solution to the problem of evil and estrangement, James remains a recognized Christian writer and public figure. She accepted an Order of the British Empire in 1983<sup>226</sup> and has received numerous honors and achievements in writing, civil service, government, professional health, and contributions to the arts. James has even been called “our greatest neo-Augustinian Theologian” by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.<sup>227</sup> Although this title is deserved due to her ability to adeptly speak and write about theological issues, particularly in novels like *The Children of Men*, James’s neo-Augustinian theology is usually expressed through her literary subtlety. Her ability to provoke Christian thought and to provide insight into the fallen and estranged nature of humanity demands a careful reading through a theological lens.

### **5.3 A Traditional Model of Detective Fiction Re-examined:**

#### **From W.H. Auden to P.D. James**

At first glance, James’s mysteries follow the format presented by W. H. Auden in his essay, “The Guilty Vicarage,” which outlines a classic detective novel.

<sup>228</sup> In “The Guilty Vicarage,” Auden discusses the innocent state of grace in which

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<sup>225</sup> “I can show evil. I do show evil.” James, Interview.

<sup>226</sup> Lindsay, 122.

<sup>227</sup> Rowan Williams, interview by Greg Garrett, England, March 10, 2008. Information about James from interview was sent to this author in an email on March 11, 2009.

<sup>228</sup> According to Auden, in the case of murder, no restitution can be made. Life cannot be returned and the victim is not able to forgive her perpetrator. Therefore, society plays an integral role on behalf of the injured one. “Murder is unique in that it abolishes the party it injures so that society has to take the place of the victim and on his behalf demand atonement or grant forgiveness; it is the one crime in which society has direct interest.” From Auden’s essay, “The Guilty Vicarage.”

society must be before the murder has occurred. Prior to the arrival of evil or sin in their community, all live in an Eden-like paradise. However, the murder exposes their fallen state. This is why a detective from the outside must enter the fallen paradise and restore it to its previous state of grace.

The murderer, Auden claims, is “the rebel who claims the right to be omnipotent. His pathos is his refusal to suffer.”<sup>229</sup> The bondage of the spirit to evil rules the murderer. His “demonic pride” appears in everything he does and must also be the motive for his murder. James agrees. But her presentation of this “demonic pride” is a more sympathetic rendering of evil, or what she would call “disordered love.” Ralph Wood’s article, “Murder in the Vicarage,” offers a more compassionate approach to James’s victims. “James creates characters who are not egregiously evil so much as desperately pitiable. They have not determined to wreak misery in sheer nihilistic perversity so much as to rectify past wrongs or to revenge festering resentments or to protect endangered loved ones. No one can live without loving, but loving the wrong thing at the wrong time or for the wrong reason produces most of the world’s wretchedness.”<sup>230</sup> This conclusion leads us to further examine disordered love as a motive for murder in the novels of James.

#### **5.4 Sin in the Detective Novel**

Paul Tillich’s treatment of estrangement throughout *Systematic Theology* offers insight into humankind’s inclination towards sin as well as its rupture from community and from God. James addresses estrangement within the plot of her novels. Isolation, abandonment, broken marriages, suicide, and murder are prevalent

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<sup>229</sup> Auden, “The Guilty Vicarage” 19.

<sup>230</sup> Wood, “Murder in the Vicarage,” 40.

themes. These themes lead readers to consider the collective suffering caused by estrangement and exclusion. All who suffers must endure (or fail to endure) estrangement from family, community, and God. Ultimately, this estrangement leads to attempts by her characters to restore what has been destroyed. These attempts at restoration blur the lines between villain and hero, a theme that we will explore further within this chapter.

Evil occurs when the love that first motivated her character to mend the estrangement becomes disordered. That disorder happens when love for another person, cause, or even one's self is prioritized over love for God. Evidence of this estrangement and ensuing disordered love commonly occurs in James's novels. From the child who is born as the result of a rape to the lover abandoned by his beloved, each character suffers the contaminating effects of sin and estrangement.

James's novels reveal her belief that God has given us the gift (and burden) of free will. Free will is demonstrated through acts of mercy and love as well as through acts of deception and evil. It is the latter that are more commonly represented within the detective novel

James's exploration into the moral complexities, psychological depths, and intricate relationships that dominate her characters' lives allow her novels to be considered for their theological value. "James... is arrestingly modern in her vision of evil. Most of her murderers are prompted by what Nietzsche called *ressentiment*—a bitter antipathy for the rough and tumble world, a deep-seated anger that it does not let us work our will upon it, and thus baleful determination to get revenge on those powerful souls who are not intimidated by life.... Rarely do James's villains murder for obvious and merely selfish reasons."<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 594.

In Trudy Bush's interview with James, she asks, "What makes this motive for murder...arising from disordered love—from the misguided attempt to protect or avenge someone one loves...so rich?" James responds:

It arises from something that in itself is good. Other motives for murder, such as selfishness, greed, lust, anger, and envy, are sins. The love and protection we feel for someone else is in itself good, but even that good, if taken to excess, can result in this terrible crime. What makes someone who is essentially good...cross that invisible line that divides the murderer from the rest of us? That's an interesting and complex puzzle.<sup>232</sup>

How can James call a character that crosses the line and becomes a murderer, "essentially good?" James sympathy for her villains is puzzling and complex. Yet perhaps she treats her murderers in the same manner as the Chesterton's character, Father Brown, did. In "The Secret of Flambeau," Father Brown describes how he is capable of imagining how each murder was planned and then implemented, which then allows him to solve the case. Conceivably James enacts the same scenarios with her murderers which allows her to sympathize with, although not excuse, her villains.

As a confessing Christian and member of the Anglican Church, James believes in original sin.<sup>233</sup> One of her novels bears this doctrine as its title. Yet her murderers have full knowledge of the crimes they commit. She never portrays a psychopath as a murderer. Every murderer eventually confesses his or her crime, either to Dalglish in person, in a letter, in a recording, or in a suicide note.

Almost every novel James has written incorporates disordered love as a motive in some way. Whether it is a misguided attempt to protect a son from marrying a woman who will destroy her family (as in James's first novel, *Cover Her Face*) or an effort to avenge the wrongful death of a loved one (such as James's most

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<sup>232</sup> Trudy Bush, "An Interview with P.D. James: Reasons for Writing," *Christian Century* (September 24-October 4, 2000): 963.

<sup>233</sup> "I tend to believe in original sin, and in the need for grace. We are all capable of criminal and dreadful behavior." Bush, 963.

recent novel, *The Private Patient*), each perpetrator endeavors to put right what he or she believes has been put wrong in his or her life. Unfortunately, James's perpetrators go about their vain attempt at justice in a disordered manner, usually resulting in murder. "...We find that the most heinous crimes are committed in the name of the highest good, especially the desire to give malefactors their due."<sup>234</sup>

A casual reading of James's novels might give the impression that she sympathizes with her murderers, even justifies their actions. When asked if murder is ever justified in her novels, the author responds,

No, I don't think there can be a justification.... I don't think there can be sympathy for the deed. I think there can be sympathy for the perpetrator, and empathy and understanding of the situation. A feeling that here is a human being who got caught up in something, either too strong for her or something which had its roots far back. A feeling of fear "but for the grace of God."<sup>235</sup>

James never creates simple situations; instead she presents richly drawn scenarios that typically include an intricate web of deception, injustice, and revenge (or an ideal to avenge) as well as the pursuit of justice:

Human lives are constituted by the complex totality of their acts, but that these acts are prompted by often-contradictory motives and that many actions result not so much from willful choice as from happy or unhappy circumstance. Far from being a Pelagian moralist who believes that we all get what we deserve, James reveals that human existence is a mysterious enmeshment of providence and freedom and grace and luck.<sup>236</sup>

James asserts that no justification for murder, even if there appears to be just cause, exists within her novels. She deliberately sets up a compelling narrative that allows her readers to consider the context of the crimes and if they would feel inclined to commit the same crimes that her fictional perpetrators commit.

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<sup>234</sup> Wood, "Presumed Guilty," 141.

<sup>235</sup> James, Interview.

<sup>236</sup> Wood, "A Case for James," 587.



## 5.5 Motive, Murder, and Consequence in James's Novels

### 5.5.1 To Avenge the Death of Loved Ones

Although the traditional motives for murder, such as greed, envy, anger, and wrath, are sometimes portrayed within James's novels, James is fascinated by a more dangerous motive: love. In an early novel, Dalgliesh learns that murders are often motivated by the best intentions—to protect and avenge the ones they love:

An experienced senior detective told Adam Dalgliesh when Adam was new to the CID, that all the motives for murder came under the letter L: love, lust, lucre and loathing. He added: 'They'll tell you, laddie, that the most dangerous emotion is hatred. Don't believe them. The most dangerous emotion is love.'<sup>237</sup>

In an interview with the author, James discussed the treacheries of love. "The most dangerous is love because people will do things for those they love which can be evil in themselves.... What I try to do...is to show the motive for the deed and that the motive is believable to the reader."<sup>238</sup>

To avenge the death of a loved one is a popular motive for James's murderers. Her plots challenge the typical detective narratives which depict a villain entering a pristine community to execute evil. Instead, in James's novels, the crime (usually murder) typically reveals deeper depravity within the community. Her villain makes a vain attempt to implement his or her own form of justice; it is an imperfect form of justice, however, and perverts the concept of justice itself. James is concerned with not only presenting what happens when a character attempts to avenge the lost loved

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<sup>237</sup> James, "Why Detection?"

<sup>238</sup> James, Interview.

one through the suspenseful narrative of a detective story, but she is interested in showing the psychological and spiritual effects of suffering and evil experienced by that character. The desire to avenge a wrongful death of a loved one is the motive for murder in *Original Sin*, *The Murder Room*, and *The Private Patient*.

In *Original Sin*, Gabriel Dauntsey attempts to avenge the death of his wife and children, killed during the Nazi occupation in France. Fifty years later, he enacts his revenge on the Etienne family, killing the children of patriarch Jean-Philippe, the man he holds responsible. Gabriel Dauntsey, Jewish by birth but atheist by creed, believes that justice is his responsibility. He excuses his murders, claiming, “Since there is no God there can be no divine justice. We have to make justice for ourselves and make it here on earth. It has taken me nearly fifty years but I have made my justice.”<sup>239</sup> To Dauntsey, God does not exist; therefore, he trusts only himself to impart justice in this unjust world.

His revenge, however, is futile when he learns that the two children he has killed are not Etienne’s actual descendants. Etienne, horrified that his adopted children have been killed to avenge a fifty year old vendetta, responds: “If you want to act like God, Gabriel, you should first ensure that you have the wisdom and knowledge of God.” In response, Dauntsey declares, “This is justice...not revenge.”<sup>240</sup> Dauntsey attempts to convince himself as much as his victim that his plan will restore order.

Apparently, Dauntsey is ashamed for his responsibility in his family’s murder. He left them in Nazi-occupied France while fleeing the country. In the end, he blames not only Etienne but himself. Dauntsey commits suicide in an attempt to punish himself for his role in the deaths. His suicide may also be an escape from the

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<sup>239</sup> *Original Sin* 544.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 545-46.

unsatisfying and failed attempt to justify his family's murders. When he realizes that he has failed to properly avenge their deaths and has murdered innocent people during his revenge, his guilt increases and he cannot continue to live.

*The Private Patient*, James's most recent novel, has a similar theme to *Original Sin*. A parent's failure to protect his or her child and murder enacted to avenge the death of a loved one are common plot elements in both of these novels. In *The Private Patient*, Candace Westhall gave birth to an illegitimate daughter and gave her up for adoption. Faced with profound guilt for her perceived abandonment of her child, she holds herself and society responsible for her daughter's failed life. Rhoda Gradwyn, an investigative journalist, uncovered and exposed plagiarism by Westhall's daughter, who was a promising young writer. Her academic failure ensues, and the young woman commits suicide. Westhall blames Gradwyn for her death and out of vengeance, murders her.

The murder does not expunge the emptiness, loss, and estrangement that Westhall suffers. Westhall's failure as a mother to protect her child contributes to her estrangement from society, family, and God. James demonstrates how Westhall's love for her daughter becomes disordered because avenging her daughter's death becomes her obsession; it is more important than preserving the relationships and protecting the lives around her. Her fixation with revenge allows her to embrace evil in the form of murder as a suitable embodiment of justice. What started as an attempt to carry out justice—that is, to justify her daughter's death—turns into something evil. Westhall kills Gradwyn, which she believes is justified because her concept of justice is disordered. Consequently, Westhall kills many others at the clinic where she works to hide her initial crime. Finally, she turns to suicide as a final escape from despair.

Each of these novels demonstrate how characters, motivated by love, attempt to do something proper (such as justify the death of a loved one), but instead do evil because their love is not rightly ordered.<sup>241</sup> An understanding of how disordered love leads to disordered justice which, in turn, leads to evil, offers evidence that any character pursuing justification by committing more evil will never find a satisfactory solution. Gabriel Dauntsey clings to an ideal of retributive justice, declaring, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,”<sup>242</sup> to defend his murders. However, his claim that “There is no God,” and then his use of Old Testament scripture to justify his crimes demonstrates that he does not know if he is truly justified in his actions. If Dauntsey believed in a biblical view of justice, he would accept that divine retribution will eventually occur. Although it may have been frustrating to see the one responsible for his family’s death go free, Dauntsey would have to be content with the Deuteronomic interpretation of justice instead.<sup>243</sup>

The significance of Gabriel Dauntsey’s name is not lost. “Gabriel” is one of the archangels from the books of Daniel in the Old Testament. The name means “God is my warrior.”<sup>244</sup> Hebraic tradition designates Gabriel with carrying out

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<sup>241</sup> *The Murder Room*, by P.D. James, is another novel that explores many of the complex themes involving family relationships. The villain, Muriel Godby, killed Neville Dupayne because she holds him responsible for her sister’s death. Godby believes that, as her sister’s psychologist, he failed her by allowing her to commit suicide. Godby takes retributive justice by taking Dupayne’s life. Godby, like many of James’s villains, shows no remorse for her crimes and is in denial for any of her own wrong-doing. Godby’s love for her sister and grief over her death leads her to seek justice on her behalf. In a subtle nod on Muriel Godby’s name, James suggests that Godby makes a god unto herself to play out God’s justice. When she believes that God has failed to act justly on her behalf, she will “be God” and act on his behalf, striking as she sees fit. I have set this book apart from the section on *Original Sin* and *The Private Patient* due to the way the villains end their life. Dauntsey and Westhall eventually take responsibility for their part in their family’s deaths and commit suicide. Godby, however, finds herself blameless and does not commit suicide.

<sup>242</sup> *Original Sin* 544.

<sup>243</sup> “Vengeance is mine.” Deuteronomy 32:35; followed by the New Testament letter from Paul, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’.... Do not be overcome by evil, but be overcome with good.” Romans 12:19, 21 (NVS)

<sup>244</sup> Carol A. Newsom, “Gabriel,” *ABD*, vol. II, 863.

various duties as designated by God;<sup>245</sup> this angel has also been called the “strong man of God.” In *Original Sin*, Gabriel Dauntsey envisions himself as a type of “strong man of God” as well, but instead of carrying out a just command from God, he pursues vigilante justice. He claims an Old Testament form of justice, *ex talionis*, to explain his actions. But as an atheist, he has put himself in the place of God because he does not feel that God will act on his behalf to carry out an appropriate form of justice.

Candace Westhall chooses the same kind of retributive vengeance to avenge the death of her daughter and to assuage her own guilt. She, like Dauntsey, does not stop at simply killing the one she believes is responsible for her daughter’s death but commits subsequent murders to escape discovery for her initial crime.

Dauntsey and Westhall both commit suicide at the end of the novels. Suicide is common in James’s novels and represents the chaotic end that characters settle for when they believe they have no other option. *Original Sin*, *The Private Patient*, *Innocent Blood*, *Devices and Desires*, and *Shroud for a Nightingale* all include suicides. The murderer in *Death in Holy Orders* attempts suicide but is prevented by Dalgliesh. James’s handling of suicide and the estranging effects it has on both individual and family is a common theme within her novels. Exploring the disempowering effects of suicide compels James to write multifaceted conclusions, for she is fascinated with the “psychological truth and the moral ambiguity of human action.”<sup>246</sup>

Richard Smyer recognizes this struggle between death and life that is represented within the detective novel. He comments that, “Traditionally, the

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid. “In the Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1-36) he is listed as ‘the one of the holy angels who is in charge of paradise and the dragons and the cherubim’ (20.2). He is commissioned to destroy the offspring of the rebellious angels and human women (10:9-10).”

<sup>246</sup> Patricia Craig, “An Interview with P. D. James,” *London Times Literary Supplement* (June 5, 1981): 642.

detective story has expressed society's will to continued existence. In apprehending the murderer, the sleuth symbolically cancels out the effects of the slaying, and the suspects, freed from the spell of potential guilt, can resume the process of normal life."<sup>247</sup> James's novels, however, contain an all-too uncomfortable blurring of these fine lines between life and death: "James' fictional world is itself a twilight world of the drugged, the aging and the dying."<sup>248</sup>

Suicide occurs as a common literary conclusion for James because she believes in justice. Suicide as a tolerable end for a murderer who does not get away with his crime is common for James's villains (*Shroud for a Nightingale*, *Devices and Desires*, *The Private Patient*, and attempted in *Death in Holy Orders*). This tidy ending often contradicts the untidy world that James works diligently to portray. Her novels display the gritty, contaminating effects of evil. Yet, too easily she kills off her murderer by suicide because justice must be served by the end of the novel. In a sense, James must eliminate her murderers to maintain her own sense of what is a proper form of justice. Because the murderers have made themselves complicit with crimes, even though they felt they were justified, they are not exempt from the author's idea of justice and must therefore suffer the consequences of their crimes—death.

Suicide is always an estranging and despairing final act. Paul Tillich claims that "despair is the state of inescapable conflict." However, James's characters who choose suicide decide to end their life do so because justice demands it, not because they feel that there is no alternative to the despair in which they currently exist. Tillich's prescription for suicide, "the pain of despair is the agony of being responsible for the loss of the meaning of one's existence and of being unable to

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<sup>247</sup> Smyer, 58.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

recover it,”<sup>249</sup> is not relevant to all of James’s murderers. Many are trying to escape punishment within the justice system or because their revenge failed. In suicide, “She has fate step in to achieve what Dalglish and the Law cannot accomplish.”<sup>250</sup>

James follows *ex talionis* by practicing “An eye for an eye,” or a body for a body. Yet her suicidal conclusions sometimes leave the reader feeling dissatisfied, for at times, they are not appropriate to the character’s nihilistic and vengeful attitude about life and death. It is as though the culprits give their lives to satisfy James’s view of justice which demands that blood must be shed on behalf of the innocent. Rarely do they kill themselves to actually assuage an inconsolable despair. Norma Siebenheller says of an earlier work of James that the suicide of a murderer balances the scales of justice, “but one can’t help thinking that the story would have been a better one had the scales been left somewhat awry.”<sup>251</sup>

### 5.5.2 Love Twisted Into Evil

The novels *Shroud for a Nightingale*, *Devices and Desires*, and *Death in Holy Orders* demonstrate how love for a family member begins as something good turns evil when it takes prominence over love for God. Each of these novels includes a murder being initially motivated by love, but resulting in much greater evil.

James’s novels intertwine good and evil, and the twisted relationship between the two is not always clear. *Shroud for a Nightingale* is a novel that exemplifies James’s use of invoking gothic horror. She does so by utilizing atrocities from the past as motives for murder. “Jamesian gothic villainy challenges the borders of the

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<sup>249</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* II, 75.

<sup>250</sup> Siebenheller, 35.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

detecting form to indict modern society,” claims Rowland.<sup>252</sup> It seems that everyone is indicted and found guilty in *Shroud for a Nightingale*, because all the characters attempt to heal past atrocities by committing further atrocities.

Intending to do righteousness, to seek justice, and to help others make reparations, Nurse Pearce, a strictly religious woman, interjects herself into the lives of other characters (who she has deemed evil) to help them atone for their sins. She goes about this pursuit of righteousness, however, by blackmail, extortion, threats, and guilt. Consequently, she is murdered by Ethel Brumfett. In spite of her sins, her punishment seems disproportionate to her crimes.

Ethel Brumfett kills Pearce and another nursing student in an attempt to protect her idol, Matron Mary Taylor, from devastating exposure of past criminal behavior. Brumfett is motivated by love for Taylor but demonstrates love in a perverted way. Taylor, in turn, murders Brumfett to protect her own criminal past. In *Shroud for a Nightingale*, it seems that one murder leads to another. Finally, the killings end with the suicide of Taylor, who writes, “I thought it might be possible for me to make some kind of useful life. It hasn’t been, and I haven’t the temperament to live with failure.”<sup>253</sup> Richard Smyer asserts that “from this tangle of relationships and conflicts, it is hard to derive support for an easy faith in the operation of an ethically satisfying system of retribution. Here questions of good and evil are, as the title indicates, shrouded in ambiguity.”<sup>254</sup>

In *Devices and Desires*, James continues her theme of devotion to family as a motivating factor for murder. Alice Mair kills Hilary Robarts to protect her brother, Alex, from blackmail and a forced marriage. When she confesses her crimes to Meg, Meg cannot comprehend why someone would murder in the name of justice and

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<sup>252</sup> Rowland, “The Horror of Modernity and the Utopian Sublime,” 138.

<sup>253</sup> P.D. James, *Shroud for a Nightingale* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 320.

<sup>254</sup> Smyer, 52.



responds, “But murder, how could it solve anything? It never has.”<sup>255</sup> Alice claims that her murder was justified and that turning herself in to the police is pointless. She rationalizes her murders, claiming, “It’s...satisfying to human vanity to imagine that you can avenge the innocent, restore the past, vindicate the right. But you can’t. The dead stay dead. All you can do is hurt the living in the name of justice or retribution or revenge.”<sup>256</sup>

Alice has twisted the idea of justice into something that only she gives and takes away. She leaves no room for divine retribution but intervenes on her brother’s behalf to take actions that are initially motivated by devotion to family, but ultimately become evil. When her plan to protect and promote her brother fails, she confesses to Meg. Meg, a Christian, says that she will pray for Alice. Although she is unyielding and unapologetic for her sins, Alice accepts Meg’s prayers with the stipulation that, “As long as you don’t expect me to repent. I’m not religious, as you know, and I don’t understand that word unless, as I suppose, it means regret that something we’ve done has turned out less well for us than we hoped.”<sup>257</sup> Alice, despite her inability to regret, still turns to suicide in the end. She cannot accept publicly confessing to her crime and receiving punishment from the justice system. Therefore, she takes control of her final judgment by making her own end.

In *Death in Holy Orders*, James writes about another character who is motivated by disordered love. Gregory kills four people to give his son “a choice of a more contemporary deity—money.”<sup>258</sup> Gregory rejects the God and lifestyle that was chosen for his son and wants to provide an alternative to the priesthood. His son Raphael chooses to serve God and pursue the priesthood, despite his wealth and his

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<sup>255</sup> *Devices and Desires* 485.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 486.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>258</sup> *Death in Holy Orders* 421.

uncertainty. When Gregory confesses his murders to Dalglish, he considers “how often evil comes out of good. As a parson’s son you are more competent than am I to address this theological conundrum.”<sup>259</sup> The murders in *Death in Holy Orders* are another demonstration of a murderer who feels justified by his own system of rights and wrongs. Because he operates outside of the Christian system of values and morality, Gregory believes that he will not be accountable for the evil that he has done in an attempt to serve his son. What he does not realize is that, while Gregory has amassed wealth that he believes is beneficial to Raphael, his son does not care about worldly possessions. Raphael is more concerned with the spiritual matters that Gregory violated in his attempt to win his son’s love.

This amalgamation between evil and good is commonly explored within James’s novels. The author claims that “love can be a great deal more lethal than hate...in an extraordinary way, good may or may not come out of evil, but paradoxically, evil much more often comes out of good.”<sup>260</sup> James explores this evil that results from the desire to do justice on behalf of a loved one. Her theological perspective leads her to an understanding that anytime love becomes disordered and concern for the loved one is greater than the love for God, sin will result.

## **5.6 Imperfect Justice in James’s Detective Novels**

Imperfect justice, or “rough justice,”<sup>261</sup> is the idea that the detective must be content to allow a villain to go free and trust that justice will find him or her, either later in this life or in the afterlife. It is the kind of justice that Dalglish has to accept in several of James’s novels. However, James is not content to allow rough justice to

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 420-21.

<sup>260</sup> Craig, “An Interview with P.D. James,” 642.

<sup>261</sup> The term, “rough justice,” is penned by Dennis Porter in “P.D. James,” 545.

occur very often. *A Certain Justice* is her only novel where a murderer goes free at the conclusion. This unresolved conclusion leaves the reader dissatisfied. When “Dalgliesh identifies the culprit but lacks sufficient evidence to convict him, [he leaves] both himself and the readers with perplexing questions: How not to despair at being privy to crimes that go unrequited and knowing evildoers who are not wrought with guilt, but who preen with conceit at having got off?”<sup>262</sup>

Unable to convict the lawyer, Desmond Ulrick, of the murders he clearly committed, Dalgliesh visits him in his chambers to determine his motive. Plagued by frustration that he cannot convict the murderer, Dalgliesh listens to Ulrick’s vain words about justice:

Console yourself with the thought that all human justice is necessarily imperfect and that it is better for a useful man to continue to be useful than to spend years in gaol.... You are used to success, of course. Failure, even partial failure, must be galling, but perhaps salutary. It is good for us to be reminded from time to time that our system of law is human and, therefore, fallible and that the most we can hope to achieve is a certain justice.<sup>263</sup>

Even an outsider, like Ulrick, understands that the system we have set up to seek justice on behalf of our victims is bound to fail.

Dalgliesh is not content to allow any villain to go free even if he or she goes unpunished by the justice system. Even Ulrick, reveling in his freedom from punishment from murder, laments to Dalgliesh over the suffering that he endures. Motivated by a desire to provide for the only two people he loves, his nephew and niece, he commits murder for financial gain. “I had no such defense,” he complains. “Obsessive love is the most appalling, the most destructive of all love’s tyrannies. It is also the most humiliating.”<sup>264</sup> Ulrick may have committed a murder beyond proof,

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<sup>262</sup> Wood, “A Case for James,” 594.

<sup>263</sup> *A Certain Justice* 390

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

but he suffers its destructive and humiliating consequences. James usually brings a more destructive and decisive end to her villains.

Dalgliesh, still struggling to reconcile his faith at this point in the novels' progression (*A Certain Justice* being the tenth in the series), cannot leave justice in divine hands. Solving murders is his ultimate concern. Dalgliesh has not yet moved to faith as the ultimate concern as expressed by Tillich. Therefore, he cannot leave crimes unsolved or unpunished. Dalgliesh is motivated to hunt and halt death, for death is his adversary:

Death...can suddenly and inexplicably destroy one's world, death becomes the enemy. Against such a reality Adam develops a number of defenses, chief among which is his job. If Adam's father, an Anglican minister, tried to fight death in a theological level, by denying its power, Adam, the inheritor of a secular world, fights it on another. Constantly encountering death in the murder cases, he tries to bring order out of chaos: if he cannot stop death he can at least catch and punish those who inflict it on others. His, then, is an endeavor which offers reassurance, which seems to restore order to an otherwise disorderly world.<sup>265</sup>

Dalgliesh continues his attempt to halt death by pursuing truth and achieving justice. In *Death of an Expert Witness*, Dalgliesh's attempts are interrupted when he encounters the destructive and estranging effects of sin. In this novel, James explores complex romantic relationships which eventually result in murder. These relationships support her claim that the most dangerous of the four Ls (love, lust, lucre, and loathing) is actually love.

Dalgliesh's encounter with the narcissist Domenica in *Death of an Expert Witness* reveals how little she believes that she can be implicated in any of the crimes. A man and woman have been murdered, and another man will go to jail for life. The murderer's children will be turned over to their neurotic and unstable mother for care.

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<sup>265</sup> Hubly, 41.

Domenica is the center of this jealousy and vengeance. Yet, she considers herself blameless because she did not actually kill anyone. When questioned about the death of Lorrimer, her former lover, Domenica flippantly responds, “I don’t feel responsible. Why should I? I’m not responsible. Even if he killed himself I shouldn’t feel that it was my fault. As it is, I don’t feel that death has anything to do with me.”<sup>266</sup> That some of the greatest evil done to others is done out of disregard appears to be James’s warning. Consequently, the damage done is irreparable. The evil-doers may not suffer the consequences, but those in the community will suffer, for evil always finds an outlet. Again, Dalgliesh must accept imperfect justice at the end of his investigation.

It is not only the murderer who is to blame for the evil in the community. There is a shared culpability and a communal sense of sin. The “blurring of lines ordinarily distinguishing the elements of detective fiction is also a reminder that murder is a form of dying and therefore an event embedded within the human condition.”<sup>267</sup> James blurs these lines to remind us of the “paradoxical human condition in which living and dying, order and destruction, go hand in hand.”<sup>268</sup> The effects of evil within the community are brutal, the results of the murder—contaminating. No one can escape without some share of the guilt, for the murders in James’s novel demonstrate that “at times crime is the manifestation of a penumbral evil that does not honor the boundary between innocence and guilt.”<sup>269</sup> If a man chooses to be turned over to his wickedness, that is the prerogative of his free will. It is only by grace that any are saved. “...In the deepest religious sense, we should all be presumed guilty.... We will commit our own egregious evils, the novel suggests,

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<sup>266</sup> *Death of an Expert Witness* 213.

<sup>267</sup> Smyer, 55.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

unless we are willing to accept, not a perfect, but only a certain kind—indeed a terribly imperfect kind—of justice.”<sup>270</sup>

The reason justice remains imperfect in James’s novels is that her characters do not leave room for the atonement that only comes through Jesus Christ on the cross. Each portrayal of an attempt at justice is a failed attempt because the characters believe that they will be able to justify the wrongs done to them or their loved ones through acts of revenge or violence. Murder, violence, and suicide are the means by which her characters look to justify. These acts of violence only increase the estrangement and exclusion which leads to further sin and further violence.

The German Protestant theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, writes about the liberation of a life lived in the Spirit. He is interested in the cycle of violence between the oppressor and the oppressed. In his book, *The Spirit of Life*, Moltmann writes:

An act of violence destroys life on both sides, but in different ways—on one hand through the evil committed, on the other through the suffering. The person who commits the act becomes inhumane and unjust, the victim is dehumanized and deprived of his or her rights. Because violence has these two sides, the road to freedom and justice has to begin with both: the liberation of the oppressed from the suffering of oppression requires the liberation of the oppressor from injustice of oppression. Otherwise there is no liberation and no justice that can create peace.<sup>271</sup>

Moltmann emphasizes that violence is a contaminating act. To achieve justice, oppression must end and the oppressed must be liberated. He recognizes that the oppressors also experience injustice and oppression—this is not only the victim’s condition. Moltmann, like James, recognizes that unless the cycle of violence and oppression ends, evil will continue and new victims will be made.

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<sup>270</sup> Wood, “Presumed Guilty,” 141.

<sup>271</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001): 132.

This same cycle of violence is portrayed within James's novels through acts of revenge. The first act of murder usually occurs as an attempt to justify some past wrong done to the murderer or her family. However, the murderer must commit subsequent murders to hide her initial crime. These acts have no justification. Therefore, the cycle of violence begins with that victim. Although James does not explicitly demonstrate the aftermath of these subsequent murders, she portrays their contaminating effects, at least presently, on the victims.

Miroslav Volf, a student of Jürgen Moltmann, also writes about the movement towards justice and inclusion. In his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf proposes the idea of “justice against justice.”<sup>272</sup> “Everyone who asks a philosopher today, ‘What is just?’ must reckon with the counter question, ‘Whose justice?’ ‘Which justice?’”<sup>273</sup> Volf recognizes justice looks different from every perspective; therefore, how are we able to deem, “What is just?”

Volf ultimately leads to reconciliation through the cross that is made possible through the grace of Jesus Christ. He demands the “will to embrace the other.”<sup>274</sup> Volf argues “that *the embrace itself*—full reconciliation—cannot take place until the truth has been said and justice done. There is an asymmetrical dialectic between the ‘grace’ of self donation and the ‘demand’ of truth and justice. Grace has primacy; even if the *will* to embrace is indiscriminate, the *embrace* itself is conditional.”<sup>275</sup> Volf works within a similar model as Tillich and his idea of estrangement. Tillich addresses humanity's condition of sin as “estrangement.” Volf, in turn, addresses humanity's sinful condition as exclusion, or the evil that works against “embrace” or inclusion, by writing:

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<sup>272</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996): 193-231.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>274</sup> Volf, 29.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

This practice of ‘embrace,’ with its concomitant struggle against deception, injustice, and violence, is intelligible only against the backdrop of a powerful, contagious, and destructive evil I call ‘exclusion’ and is for Christians possible only if, in the name of God’s crucified Messiah, we distance ourselves from ourselves, and our cultures to create a space for the other.”<sup>276</sup>

Where Tillich, Moltmann, Volf, and James meet is in agreement that estrangement, exclusion, and isolation lead to or become the sinful condition in which humanity suffers. The evil that results can only be resolved by grace (claims James), and freedom for the oppressor through the Spirit (claims Moltmann), through embrace (claims Volf), and through divine love (claims Tillich). Ultimately, these four conclude with the same resolution. Justification comes through salvation through grace in Christ alone.

## 5.7 Conclusion

P.D. James demonstrates that there are no simple solutions to murder in her novels. She engages her readers in a theological conversation with her mysteries, provoking such questions as, “Can murder in defense of family be just?” Or more simply, “Is murder ever justified?” She invites her readers to ponder questions of vengeance, revenge, violence, murder, righteousness, grace, and mercy.

James’s belief in grace contributes to her biblical understanding of atonement and mercy. Her characters are punished for or fail in their acts of vengeance; they have no understanding of atonement from a Biblical perspective, which is the perspective from which James is writing.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>277</sup> James writes, “The church of England is the one into which I was baptized, whose liturgy helped make me a writer, who sacraments have comforted and sustained me through a long life lived in tumultuous times, and it is this Church—Catholic and Reformed, tolerant, inclusive, flawed but



James writes about these failed attempts at atonement, usually with portrayals of violence and revenge. James's characters fail these distorted attempts at human atonement because they try to atone for their own sins without consideration for Christ's role. Jesus Christ, or the "New Being" as Paul Tillich calls him, atones for humanity by conquering the "existential estrangement" resulting from its sins.<sup>278</sup> "Atonement is always both a divine act and a human reaction. The divine act overcomes the estrangement between God and man in so far as it is a matter of human guilt. In atonement, human guilt is removed as a factor which separates man from God."<sup>279</sup>

Because her victims are often guilty of crimes and her murderers are frequently likable characters, James is accused of being sympathetic to the villain. Despite her sympathy for the villains, James believes in justice, both divine and systemic. After the murders have occurred, other horrible crimes are uncovered, including rape, murder, infanticide, and child-abandonment. With her morally complex narratives and religiously suggestive narratives, James provokes her readers to define what justice truly is.

Her mystery novels may be read as a parable of what occurs when we choose to impart our own form of vengeance within our community. "We can escape the consequences of our choices no more than we can shed our personal histories."<sup>280</sup> All suffer the contaminating effects of sin. James's villains, though they insist upon their atheism or lack of need for God and salvation, are still uncomfortably aware of his presence. There are numerous examples of her murderers referring to God, salvation, prayer, and the need for a redeemer. No one ever escapes from a murder unscathed,

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beautiful, and peculiarly English—in which I shall die." P.D. James, "As it Was in the Beginning," in *Why I am Still an Anglican*, ed. Caroline Chartres (London: Continuum, 2007): 25.

<sup>278</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology* II, 125.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>280</sup> Sybil Steinburg, "A Taste for Death," *Publishers Weekly* (5 September 1986): 90

even the most peripheral characters. “While probing into her characters’ motives and emotions, James suggests a view of crime and criminality as not simply the result of a particular psychic wound but the manifestation of a more enduring principle of evil...sounding through the human condition and affecting the legally guilty and innocent alike.”<sup>281</sup> James’s novels can be read as a morality play, as the author suggests,<sup>282</sup> or as a parable for what can happen in society when we deviate from a system of justice, mercy, and love.

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<sup>281</sup> Smyer, 50.

<sup>282</sup> James, Interview.

## Conclusion

The goal of the true mystery writer is to elevate her reader's thoughts to the central matters that concern the human spirit. While many mystery writers are content to entertain their readers with stories that provide an escape from the concerns of daily life, James prefers to write stories that force her readers to concern themselves with the great matters of human concern: suffering, sin, estrangement, justice, and reconciliation. And why can't these be matters of concern for the detective novelist? Even G. K. Chesterton believed that it was possible to combine an entertaining mystery story with great theological concerns. In his essays "A Defense of Detective Stories" and "The Divine Detective," he provides evidence of the theological significance of the detective genre. Robert Zaslovsky compliments the theological impact that Chesterton makes with his detective fiction, declaring:

Why is a work of modern theology less [i.e., why does it have to be less] to the soul, than a work of silly police fiction?" He set out in his mystery stories to demonstrate that silly police fiction can be a work of modern theology without being any the less a work of police fiction.<sup>283</sup>

James supports the connections between the theologian and the detective novelist. Even though her mysteries do not proclaim religious elements as obviously as some writers, such as Chesterton or Peters, James's subtlety is her gift. James understands that a "silly police fiction" can speak powerfully about the interaction between God and humanity, thereby becoming a work of modern theology.

Abundant references to the Christian life fill the detective fiction of P.D. James. With her varied references to the Christian life, the sacred becomes relevant

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<sup>283</sup> Robert Zaslovsky's "The Divine Detective in the Guilty Vicarage," *The Armchair Detective* 19, no.1 (Winter 1986): 59.

through her descriptions of settings, characters, and plot. Despite her public commitment to Christianity and overarching interest in theology, James refrains from writing outright Christian narratives. She chooses, instead, to write detective fiction year after year. Even in her eighty-eighth year of life, James published her seventeenth detective novel. The author has clearly stated that she has no intention of preaching through her writing, yet her novels cannot help but deliver some message of Christianity to her readers.

James remembers her initial interest in story-telling. She told her first stories to her younger siblings, and although they were “invariably improbably exciting and mysterious,”<sup>284</sup> they did entertain. As she matured, James became interested in story-telling for a different reason. Detective fiction is “one way in which we can cope with violent death, fictionalize it, give it a recognizable shape and, at the end of the book, show that even the most intractable mystery is capable of solution, not by supernatural means or good fortune, but by human intelligence, human perseverance, and human courage.”<sup>285</sup>

For James, writing detective fiction is writing about the triumph of the human spirit over evil. Her novels are not the shallow mysteries that merely prop up a dead body in a room to give her readers a puzzle to solve. Instead, they are intricately woven stories intended to demonstrate the deeply-contaminating effects that murder has on all the lives it touches. No character will walk away from one of the novels’ murders unscathed. Yet James does not end her novels by portraying only the wretched contamination that murder has caused. She usually concludes a novel with some form of justice for the villain. Justice is typically found with an arrest by Dalgliesh, but it may also be a suicide or an accidental death of the murderer. Only

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<sup>284</sup> James, “Why Detection?”

<sup>285</sup> James, *Time to Be in Earnest*, 17.

one of James's villains ever fails to be arrested or to die at the conclusion (this being Ulrick in the aptly-titled novel, *A Certain Justice*).

Evil, by its very nature, is chaotic and disorderly. It distorts what is just and righteous. James, by naming evil, begins the process to eliminate it. This simplifying and subsequently neutralizing of evil takes away its power. James names this evil by writing about it through the detective genre, and, in doing so, steps into the chaos and distortion to seek order and justice. James believes that she has an effective format to comment about human suffering, and the capacity for good and evil within humankind as well as the triumph of the good over evil, when she explores these topics through the detective genre. "It is precisely the limits of her genre that offer enormous possibilities for moral and religious discernment," claims Ralph Wood. "James subscribes to what might be called an incarnational aesthetic: She wants to render the world in all of the fullness and depth, with all of the complexity and horror, that the triune God assumed in becoming flesh within a single human life—not within humanity at large."<sup>286</sup> Wood suggests even further that, "Just as Jesus was not *obviously* the incarnate God, so do many of James's Christian concerns remain unstated. They are present more by subtle implication than by overt reference."<sup>287</sup> James's subtle implications are what make her novels so potent.

James's ability to draw her readers' attention, either intentionally or unintentionally, towards theological thoughts is what this dissertation has intended to explore. By examining examples of setting, character, the personal life of Detective Adam Dalgliesh, and motives for murder as they concern sin and estrangement in the novels of James, we see countless possibilities for the presence of the divine in the simple acts of everyday life.

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<sup>286</sup> Wood, "A Case for P.D. James as a Christian Novelist," 586.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

## **APPENDIX**

Jo Ann Sharkey's Interview with P.D. James

London, England  
19 November 2008

Owing to copyright restrictions, the electronic version of this thesis does not contain the text of this interview.

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