

Skull Beneath the Skin

Skull can be interpreted as an investigation by PD James into the way a classical detective character, stereotypes, crime and setting would be affected by the introduction of modern-world issues and values. Essentially she has placed the manor-house setting within contemporary Britain, and migrated its inhabitants to Courcy Castle as a controlled experiment in sociology. In this way, James succeeded in providing yet another permutation of crime fiction; instead of following the typical trend of police procedurals, science crime or thrillers that were popular in her time and which completely discarded the features of classical crime fiction, she chose instead to tweak the conventions of the traditional sub-genre while raising the same issues that were being introduced in other stories. At the time of *Skull*'s release, the crime genre was saturated with forensic thrillers, spy adventures, and ultra-violent or feminist literature. This was a direct reply to the exponential rise in crime rates, anti-government sentiment, and the outdated values which classical fiction seemed to be purporting. *Skull* was a surprise in offering a return to the traditional style which became fresh once again due to lack of exposure, while still appealing to the moral fibre of modern society. The result of this experiment is a confirmation that the traditional style of writing (including its character and setting) is incongruous with the modern world and its values, and that the change in writing style that encapsulated contemporary crime fiction is justified.

- Centripetal structure ◊ there is one chapter for the description of each character, then eventual return to the development of the plot ◊ the clues and revelations about each character are placed strategically at the end of chapters to encourage the reader, as detective, to think about what they have been told
- Detached 3rd-person narrative ◊ stereotypical British reservation is encapsulated in the eloquence of the narrative, which tends to project a sense of emotional detachment, controlled expression ◊ we get a God's view of the fictional world, and have a condescending attitude towards it accordingly, like it is just a dollhouse in which our little characters play out mysteries
- Theme of the theatre reinforces the traditional setting ◊ reminds the responder of the contrived nature of the plot and setting ◊ kitsch and b-grade decorations like the macabre Victorian ornaments exaggerate it even further with the artificial horror ◊ all these characters are part of an act which the composer and responder are outside of
- during the early 20th Century, middle-class British fantasised about the days of Edwardian gentility, when everything was peaceful and simple ◊ the traditional crime fiction plot involves a peaceful utopia which is rudely broken by a shocking crime ◊ the detective uncovers the killer, and all is restored to its former glory because the rule of 'inevitable justice' applies ◊ it is expected that the criminals will be brought to justice ◊ however, in *Skull*, the setting is fairly unique in that a typical manor-house setting is presented within the larger British city, allowing a sense of perspective into the fictional world ◊ the outer world, where all the characters originate from, is shown to be less than perfect ◊ Cordelia's office is a reflection of her struggle to keep afloat in the real world: the lopsided plaque, and the fact that her office is well hidden

away from busy streets ◊ consequently the stage is set for a confrontation between the modern values which the main characters carry, and the entirely traditional world of Courcy Castle ◊ what we see throughout the story is the subverting of conventions, as the traditional world is forced to accept and adapt to the introduction of modern values and beliefs

- economic and social tensions are factors in the behaviour of the characters ◊ Cordelia is under pressure to solve crimes and earn her share (as demonstrated by her willingness to accept cases involving lost kittens), so a failure would not only hurt her pride, but indicate that her business is not going to prosper ◊ compared to Marple, Poirot or Holmes, who were all financially secure and well regarded in society as famous detectives ◊ suffers from prejudices against her age and sex: "It had become increasingly irksome to be asked by her clients, disconcerted as much by her sex as by her youth, ' But I thought I would be seeing Mr Pryde' "
- class consciousness becomes a factor in crimes, due to increased attention paid towards the servants and their history ◊ usually devoted to their masters, now revealed that Munter' s father killed by Sir Ralston, a possible clue to tensions between them ◊ Tolly' s daughter indirectly murdered by Clarissa, reinforces rift between masters and servants ◊ Cordelia always conscious that she is a mere middle-class girl, so she never connects with the other characters, and in fact her blue-collar values jar with the actions of her clients
- traditionally, characters were simple and two-dimensional, each often representing a certain stereotype (star actress, American businessman, ex-soldier), so it wasn' t hard to classify them as good or evil ◊ since the criminal had no redeeming qualities whatsoever, the punishment meted out could be as cruel as the detective chooses ◊ however, with the addition of emotionally-developed characters and the variance of values amongst them, the definition of justice is significantly blurred and confused ◊ eg. Clarissa' s selfish behaviour that killed Vicky was beyond reproach. Her weak defense and arrogant self-righteousness: "They had no right...scaring people like that...I had two changes in the Third Act") ◊ makes us wonder whether she deserves some sort of punishment for her behaviour, and that perhaps she deserved to die ◊ Cordelia is forced to choose between justice and duty: "she felt she hardly cared whether Clarissa lived or died" ◊ and then the story of Simon' s relationship with Clarissa may also provide justification for the murder ◊ being sexually abused by her, is he justified in taking offensive action? ◊ similarly, did Simon deserve to die? Did Cordelia have to save him, or was his suicide an appropriate punishment for his actions? ◊ problem is that no one is completely bad or good ◊ Cordelia, as a traditional detective, struggles to make decisive decisions when faced with these dilemmas ◊ too morally upstanding, her inability to adapt to the situation and act accordingly makes her come off as a bit of a naïve rebel, thwarting her attempts to solve the case ◊ comes to show that a changing of the guard is necessary, and that the manor-house is no longer relevant to modern times ◊ the manor-house setting does not deal with the new issues well; in classical fiction, the setting complements the events that go on ◊ murders, thefts and robberies are oddly all in dramatic style, imitating the grandiose and rich nature of the environs ◊ in Skull, the theme of the theatre reminds the audience of what should be happening, but instead the violence and tension overwhelms the setting, so much so that it struggles to act as an environment

- the nature of the crime has been completely altered ◊ classical fiction tended to overlook the exact details of the murder, ensuring that the innocent victim retained some sort of dignity, and the puzzle-plot remained just that, instead of some horror novel ◊ Skull takes the modern line of description, clearly outlining the gory extent of Clarissa' s injuries, shattered bones and all◊ reflects the desensitisation of crime and violence which has occurred in the development of modern cities
- in keeping with the lack of character development, the detective was merely the reader' s assistant ◊ the mystery was supposed to be interactive, and the detective processed clues for the reader to decipher. Because the mystery required very little physical work (that was left to the police), the detectives were always comfortable, and well-off enough to sit beside a fireplace and ponder all day long ◊ while in Skull the clue/red herring placement still indicates a sense of interactivity, there is very little insight into Cordelia' s thought processes (compare with Poirot or Holmes, where the dialogue forces them to voice out their thoughts for the reader' s benefit), and consequently the book acts less as a traditional mystery
- the modern obsessive voyeurism (Big Brother, Jerry Springer, A Current Affair) has led to greater reader interest in the personal life of the detective, and while Skull does not spend time describing Cordelia' s childhood, she goes on a personal journey through the process of solving the crime, which allows an emotional bond to form between the reader and the detective ◊ Cordelia' s lack of self-esteem (combined from sexism, loss of mentor, financial problems) comes into question upon the revelation of the murderer ◊ she repeatedly asserts that Clarissa' s death was her fault, and she fails to solve the mystery because of her lack of confidence in her ability. It seems that Cordelia took this case just to try and prove herself

The Big Sleep

Sleep is a hybrid of hard-boiled fiction and adventure/romance. While it is a movie that discarded the conventions of the traditional crime fiction genre, it is more important for its subverting of some conventions of the pulp fiction sub-genre, itself a recent development upon the classical genre at the time. The novel, written by Raymond Chandler, was a combination of two smaller stories, and was a straight out hard-boiled piece. In comparison, the movie's composition was altered to take the movie audience in consideration, a common studio practice. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall's casting in the two main roles was bound to promote discussion over the relationship between Marlowe and Vivian, because of the Bogart/Bacall marriage in real life. Also considered was the floundering career of Bacall, who had filmed a major flop and her performance in Sleep was of the same style. Consequently, the movie was rewritten and two distinct halves were formed; the first was the hard-boiled section, where Marlowe goes in search of Sean Reagan and consequently finds himself trying to fell a pornography ring from the bottom up. The second half involves Marlowe trying to finish the job and tying up loose ends in order for he and Vivian to escape safely. The climaxes are also altered so that the romantic strings build up and explode everytime Vivian and Marlowe kiss, reflecting the change in focus from hard-boiled to romance. Most noticeable is the amendment of the ending; instead of their parting of ways, as in the book, they hold each other as the police make their arrival at Geiger's house. However, the movie's best dialogue comes from the sexual tension between Bogart and Bacall (remember the horse-racing scene?), and arguably adds to the sexy and dark atmosphere of the film-noir style. The popularity of the movie at the time, and as a classic film of all time is testament to the suitability of romance in hard-boiled fiction.

- The setting is definitely hard-boiled/film noir ◊ crowded interiors, night clubs, dark alleys and the bare nature of the detective' s office, with plain tables and chairs◊ constant rain and fog create the voluptuous atmosphere of film noir, which also uses darkness and shadows to give all the characters a sinister side ◊ for example the scene where Harry Jones is killed by Canino, Marlowe is only able to see what is going on behind the frosted glass, adding to the mysteriousness ◊ this is emphasised by the ' confusing character' of Sleep' s narrative; although in reality the story is in chronological order, and there are no red herrings, the amount of action packed into the movie leaves the audience little time to understand what has happened before something else diverts their attention
- the Hays Production Code had meant that the darker sections of Chandler' s novel would have to be removed because of its blatant references to pornography, drugs, nudity and ' sexual perversion' (ie. homosexuality); so instead, Hawks was forced to get the same message across by manipulating the mise-en-scene – the most obvious example is the presentation of Geiger' s house; the oriental ornaments, beaded curtains, exotic antiques and key purse would have all been clear indicators to the audience of the time that Geiger was gay ◊ the representation of degenerate civilisation is characterised by the hothouse ("You are looking sir, at a very dull

survival of a very gaudy life"), with its exotic flowers and sweltering heat; and Geiger's house both are linked by Carmen, whom herself is a drug-addled nymphomaniac.

- centrifugal structure ◊ every clue leads to new questions, accumulating to the point where it seems the entire world was guilty of some crime ◊ Marlowe begins with disappearance of Shawn Regan, then Geiger, Brody, Mars, shockingly Carmen ◊ rung after rung on crime ladder ◊ can't trust anyone, not even family or friends ◊ consequently, atmosphere of movie is voluptuous, sprawling and lingering. In presenting scenes, pace is slow, constant fog mimicking confusion and deception that is in this world. The dark mood presented by regular rain, occurrence of events at night, shadow representation of the dangerous and unknown ◊ although Reagan's mystery solved, not important when even larger crime discovered ◊ traditionally, one major crime, subsequent crimes are as a result of initial crime ◊ In 'Sleep', interestingly larger conspiracies uncovered ◊ modern, chaotic world ◊ peace is not restored when detective solves crime ◊ corrupt, and sexually deviant ◊ no dignity or grace when women act as tough negotiators or saucy kittens ◊ traditionally, women, especially rich ones, were ladies, according to their rank and therefore training ◊ now femme fatales are there to entrap the hero, sexually aggressive but cunning ◊ the apparent impenetrability of the dialogue and plot means that the femme fatales could be a feature of the interpretation that Marlowe is a figure of male domination and power, which is subverted by the devious women
- in comparison with classical crime fiction, the personal is emphasised because of the invention of celebrity gossip, tabloids, fueled voyeurism within the audience ◊ the detective often has a dark past that would soil his purity as that hero ◊ however, not in 'Sleep', because it had to be modified so that he was a perfect hero (with attitude) in order to suit the studio practices ◊ yet Marlowe unconsciously tries to rid himself of responsibility (very unhero-like) of Carmen, the damsel in distress, by showing no interest in finding out what exactly Carmen is in trouble for; he interrupts Mars while he tries to explain what she's done; and his decision to send her to rehab seems to be more for the sake of pleasing Vivian ◊ Marlowe taking the law into his own hands is completely different to traditional detectives who were content sitting on a duvet on thinking about things ◊ he has no qualms about holding a gun and killing crims ◊ detective is smooth-talking, quick witted and cool ◊ a heroic character, from the beginning the film's focus is on his attractiveness; Vivian falls right into his arms, and the sexual tension between Marlowe and Vivian is palpable ("I like to come from behind"). Furthermore, the book shop lady, and the female taxi driver flirt with him, while he responds, obviously knowing that he's got them on a string and toying with them.
- morals are questioned a little in this film, although in hard-boiled fiction it tends to be questioned a lot, but once again the focus of romance dilutes the pulp-fiction side of the story ◊ near the end, Marlowe has to make a choice between justice, and saving the dignity of the Sternwood family ◊ he decides to incriminate the dead Eddie Mars with Reagan's murder instead of Carmen, caring more for Vivian and General Sternwood and reasoning that Mars deserved it anyway ◊ Marlowe is portrayed more like a traditional hero, instead of a man troubled with his own conscience

Snow Falling on Cedars

Snow subverts the traditional crime fiction genre by using the crime to provide a basis for Guterson's larger argument about racism and how universal events like war can affect the common man. Essentially, *Snow* is a wartime courtroom romance drama, if it can be classified. Structurally, the trial surrounding Carl Heine's death acts as the 'trunk' from which the flashbacks of the characters are the 'branches', segueing into issues of racial intolerance, love, and post-traumatic stress. The novel also expands on the concept of 'crime' and 'criminal', choosing war, politics and insecurity as the novel's villains, and focusing on the generalities of war crimes, crimes of the heart and racist crimes, instead of the isolationist single murder-single murderer mindset of traditional crime fiction.

- San Piedro, a small township, is perfect as the traditional isolated setting; it contains a community of like-minded people, and is surrounded by nature. However, the richness of the figurative language that Guterson uses reflects the sense of nature, and the greater universe, overwhelming these small townsfolk. As we see later, the snow becomes an important metaphor for the destruction of the human spirit, covering everything up and freezing the soul. The seaside, cedar forest, and strawberry fields provide a synaesthetic imagery so powerful that it dominates the scene. In this way it is different from traditional crime fiction, where the characters are comfortable within their surrounds; being typically rich, powerful, and therefore fearless of nature; in *Snow*, the lives of the people are dictated by nature. The Japanese work in the fields according to the seasons, and the fishermen learn to survive the foggy sea. The flashbacks to battles in war also provide a sense of a world outside San Piedro, and emphasises its isolation, as the simple and innocent world before the intervention of WWII, which changed them forever.
- As stated before, the crimes in this book are not typical. Although the trial of Kabuo Miyamoto is the basis of the plot, the constant flashbacks reveal racist crimes, crimes of the heart, and war crimes. Firstly, with the Government's policies against aliens, preventing them from being anything other than the slaves of white landowners, and then the War Relocation Program, shipping the Japanese to the Manzanar Internment Camp, subjecting them to squalid conditions, and then the trial itself; his immediate arrest uncovers the paranoia of the townsfolk, intensified by the Pearl Harbour attack. Secondly, Hatsue's betrayal of Ishmael constitutes a major part of the book; her constant aloofness, and persistent reinforcement of racial differences ("They don't mix...it's not one ocean they're all different from each other...Why? Just because") sticks with him for a long time, and it is during the war that he decides to become aloof to everyone else, afraid of being hurt again. Thirdly, war crimes filled veterans with so much guilt that they could not assimilate back into San Piedro – Kabuo's realisation of the monstrous warrior within him, Carl's inability to save his fellow drowning men, Ishmael's decision to kill the dying German soldier – enforcing crimes against the human spirit. Society is the criminal, enforcing these traumatic events on the innocent victims

- The main detective, Ishmael, is not even interested in solving crime for the sake of a hobby – he is merely a journalist, searching for the truth behind Hatsue, and within himself. The solution of Carl Heine' s death only became a priority after Hatsue pleaded him to do something. The official detective, Art Moran, is ineffective, due to his racial bias and vindictive character: "he took pleasure in seeing [Whaley] suffer". This indicates that Guterson' s priority is not to solve the crime – from the beginning, the flashbacks present him, like all Japanese, as the victimised minority – but to reveal the sinister truths underneath the town' s innocent façade.
- The mystery surrounding Carl Heine' s death is not who did it but how these characters are related to each other, and whether Nels Gudmunsson would be able to acquit Kabuo – the portrayal of Japanese life as slaves in the flashbacks implies the trial was based on racist prejudice, emphasised by Horace Whaley' s remarks that a kendo master could have made the injuries on Carl' s head. Also there is the mystery of the heart– for the majority of the novel, Ishmael struggles to understand what Hatsue really felt inside; she always seemed to be hiding something from him; similarly, the jury failed to understand the man behind the stoic mask of Kabuo.
- The climax of the story does not come with the denouement, the final chapter when the events leading up to Carl' s death were explained; instead, it occurs when Ishmael and Hatsue finally confront each other after several false starts in the courtroom. This is where the emotional turmoil within himself, building from the day she sent him the letter of rejection, is resolved, and he no longer places her on a pedestal. It is from this resolution that Ishmael is then able to act as the detective, and solve the mystery of Carl' s death.

"Hard Time", Janet Evanovich

What makes the book distinctively contemporary is Stephanie' s smart-alec personality, and the dystopic nature of the setting. Plum' s best friend, Lula, was a prostitute who recently escaped Ramirez, a serial rapist. "She knew all about pimpmobiles ever since she' d been a ' ho". In Sloane St, the city' s dark side, drug dealers openly do their business on the streets, and in apartments, while the innocent tenants are forced to protect themselves. An example of this is the elderly lady, who creeps out of her flat, pulls out a 9mm handgun, and growls, "Bite me." The incongruence of the two images (elderly, tough-talk) serves as a wake-up call to the realities of this harsh world.

Plum, like the hard-boiled detective, is forced to fight not only the femme fatales, who flirt with her boyfriend Morelli and ruin her marriages, but also the homme fatales, like Ranger, who suspiciously gives her free luxury cars for the sake of her company. Her friends prophesise that his gifts are an upfront deposit for sex, and consequently, Plum is forced to be wary around the men that follow her, lest she fall into a trap.

However, this book combines contemporary hard-boiled fiction with comedy, the result being a piece that focuses on the entertainment value of crime fiction, much like the traditional genre, thereby subverting the typically serious, navel-gazing style of modern crime fiction. The plot is over the top, including gun-toting grannies, a law-flouting midget, and exploding cars. Meanwhile, a romantic subplot is also included, and in fact its drama overwhelms the spectacle of the crimes; in first-person narrative, bounty hunter Stephanie Plum spends as much time thinking about what she' s going to wear on her date with Morelli as she does mulling over the evidence from the murder case. This is emphasised by the fact that although the killer, Larry Schempsky, is caught and sent to jail, the book finishes open-ended; Plum is yet to choose between Joe Morelli and Ranger, the decision which is published in another book, so important is Plum' s personal life. This is a feature of some contemporary crime fiction; in the age of Jerry Springer and Big Brother, the audience has become one ravenously obsessed with the personal lives of the characters. The first person narrative offers the audience a way to know and feel everything that the detective feels.

"Dead Famous", Ben Elton

This book transplants the main features of traditional crime fiction into a very contemporary setting, demonstrating how the dynamics of culture, entertainment and interpersonal relationships have changed, while at the same time demonstrating that some of humankind' s vices are just as relevant today as they ever were, but manifested in different forms.

Before the novel begins, we are given basic information about each of the contestants in the ' House Arrest' competition, an imitation of the reality show "Big Brother". This merely consists of their occupations and star signs, immediately categorising them into stereotypes, a practice which, as we see later, forms the basis of the editing process.

The microcosm is no longer a manor house, but the ' House Arrest' house, and the third-person sense of ' God overlooking the little people' has been sustained by the fact that sixty cameras are placed everywhere in this house, providing no privacy whatsoever; twelve people are locked in an enclosure and forced to deal with each other while a murder is committed.

The detective, Inspector Coleridge, is a traditionalist; he struggles to understand how society could have degraded so much in his eyes; he spends the majority of the story complaining about young people and their ' junk culture' , berating their selfish desire for fame, and mindless voyeurism manifested in their obsession with ' House Arrest' . This is indicative of his emotional detachment from the world he is living in, much like the traditional detective. He also makes speeches on his thoughts at regular intervals, in the same way a Holmes or Poirot would when talking to their sidekicks.

*The process of solving the mystery also follows a traditional line; through a series of flashbacks, every day of the ' House Arrest' tapes were investigated, interspersed with the discussions amongst Coleridge and his students, Hooper and Trish; clever deductions about the relationships between each of the house members are made in the process, and then Coleridge reveals all in an exaggerated denouement scene involving a live televised speech in front of the entire world, going through each suspect and eliminating them all. How ' Dead Famous' subverts the genre is by presenting a cuprit who is outside the house – Geraldine Hennessy herself. Her motives are also indicative of a modern society; Hennessy, knowing that the popularity of House Arrest was waning after the forced eviction of token maniac Woggle the Anarchist, decided to stage a real murder in the house in order to revive the show' s interest. Her callous manipulative behaviour was revealed in the way she ordered the editors to create stereotypes out the the housemates: "She' s one of our designated hate figures!...She' ll look however we want her to look and be whatever we want her to be." A generation fed on Oprah and Anthony Robbins has created a new culture and language based on self-help jargon – "the electrical fields are f*****g about with me yin and yang" one of the examples. The general public has also become no more than a herd of voyeurs, willing to swallow whatever Peeing Tom Productions gives to them, as long as it' s got "T&A (Tits and Arses)". At various times throughout the novel, the narrator provides an insight into the public' s opinion, referring the tabloid headlines: "THEYALLDUNNIT!" and "SALLY' S THE ONE. JUST ASK HER MUM". What is more frightening however, is the fact that they ripped into the murder investigation with the same excitement as they did with the ' House Arrest" competition.*

"They Do It With Mirrors" by Agatha Christie

In the early 20th Century, a Britain suffering in the World Wars produced a middle-class fantasising about the days of Edwardian gentility, a time when things were comparatively simpler. It is from this dissatisfaction with life that Agatha Christie' s puzzleplot mysteries gained their popularity. The manor-house setting, and the elite upper-class characters fed the daydreams of a people wanting disposable literature to take their minds off reality for a

moment. This is why the plots of Christie novels tended to be so contrived and melodramatic; the mysteries were merely no more than puzzles and entertainment.

Although Miss Marple is the detective, she is no more than a 'plotfunction', designed to move the story along while the clues were being revealed to the reader for them to process and digest. She, along with the suspects, are simple and two-dimensional; we know little about Marple's personal life other than the fact that she has a nephew, and lives in peaceful St Mary Mead.

The weapons used are limited to drugs, a knife, a boulder and a gun; at the beginning of the book is a map of the Stonygates mansion, reinforcing the game-like feel of the story. The ubiquitous denouement scene involves theatre; in trying to explain her theory to Inspector Curry, he gets easily confused, another stereotype of the police force, who are supposed to be bumbling fools. Marple explains that the whole murder was faked, and refers to the stage doors and curtains nearby the crime scene. She assembles all the suspects together while explaining how she came to her conclusions, and in the final piece of theatre, the culprit, Lewis Serrocold, reveals himself to be the killer in an act of sportsmanship. Such is the contrived nature of the plot that all the characters seem to treat it like some sort of game.