P.D. JAMES’S THE SKULL BENEATH THE SKIN: A MELODRAMA WITHOUT A CHARACTER?
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The Skull Beneath the Skin (1982) is the second and last of P.D. James’s novels featuring the young female detective Cordelia Gray. Gray’s first appearance in An Unsuitable Job for a Woman (1972) was hailed as an important turning point for detective fiction. While the first detective novels penned by women like Meta Fuller Victor and Anna Katharine Green appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century, detective fiction by and about women underwent a radical change in form in response to the feminist movement of the 1960s and early ’70s. The literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun (writing as Amanda Cross) was one of the pioneers of the modern feminist crime novel with her popular series of campus novels featuring the academic-turned-sleuth, Kate Fansler. However, P.D. James is often cited as a ‘founding mother’ of the genre because Cordelia Gray is regarded as the first female private detective.

It would seem that James originally intended Gray to be the central protagonist of a series, rather like her popular ‘Adam Dalgliesh’ novels. Dalgliesh appears briefly in An Unsuitable Job and is referred to as the object of Cordelia’s affections in The Skull Beneath the Skin. Cordelia, in turn, is mentioned in several Dalgliesh novels, including A Taste for Death and The Black Tower. P.D. James herself has noted that large numbers of her fans asked regularly about the prospects of Dalgliesh and Gray joining forces, either personally or professionally, and has spoken out publicly on several occasions to explain that this will not happen. Indeed, the critic Nicola Nixon goes so far as to suggest that James deliberately sabotaged Cordelia’s character development in The Skull Beneath the Skin so that readerly interest would re-focus itself on Dalgliesh.

The first Cordelia Gray novel was a huge success and readers clamoured for a sequel between 1972 and 1982. Nicola Nixon has suggested that readers demanding more of Cordelia were responding not so much to the character as drawn in An Unsuitable Job for a Woman, but rather the character she might develop into over time. Nixon argues:

The question of her potential reappearance was therefore perhaps less an expression of nostalgic fondness for a particular character than an anticipation of what she might have become in the context of specific feminist achievements. Such an anticipation did, of course, assume that the feminist promise articulated in An Unsuitable Job for a Woman would reach fruition in another, later novel. (Nixon, 32)

Curiously, though, the Cordelia Gray we meet in The Skull Beneath the Skin has not matured, but seems instead to have regressed. Sue Ellen Campbell encapsulates the feeling that somehow James has failed to deliver in The Skull Beneath the Skin when she describes the novel as ‘a retreat’ (Campbell, 25). Campbell suggests that it backs away from the detective genre as well as the strident feminism of An Unsuitable Job, while Nicola Nixon comments rather unfairly, ‘While so eagerly anticipated…the second Cordelia Gray novel sank like a rock, producing scarcely a ripple in reading-public opinion’ (Nixon, 32).

Part of the difficulty surrounding Cordelia Gray is that her character has been frozen in time. In the ‘Dalgliesh’ novels, James’s Scotland Yard detective is reinvented each time we meet him and while his character moves with the times, Dalgliesh scarcely seems to have aged physically since he first appeared in 1963. Like Dalgliesh, Cordelia Gray has not aged in the decade since An Unsuitable Job and she seems just as innocent and vulnerable, if not more so in The Skull Beneath the Skin. At the novel’s close, having failed to prevent several deaths, including that of the actress she has been employed to protect,
James depicts Cordelia withdrawing from the company of humans—particularly criminals—rejecting crime-fighting and focussing her attentions instead on lost pets:

She wasn't yet free of Courcy Island. Perhaps she never would be. But she had a job waiting for her. It was a job that needed doing, one that she was good at. She knew that it couldn't satisfy her forever but she didn't despise its simplicities, almost she welcomed them. Animals didn't torment themselves with the fear of death, or torment you with the horror of their dying. They didn't burden you with their psychological problems. They didn't surround themselves with possessions, nor live in the past. They didn't scream with pain because of the loss of love. They didn't expect you to die for them. They didn't try to murder you (James, 378)

For many readers this is a disappointing end for a promising protagonist. James is certainly capable of creating vibrant, progressive females characters, as is evidenced through Inspector Kate Miskin in the ‘Dalgliesh’ books—a fine detective who is frequently shown to be superior to her male colleagues and who has worked hard to transcend her working-class origins. A key question is therefore why is Kate Miskin able to succeed as a character, while Cordelia Gray seems to fall short? Katherine Gregory Klein offers a partial answer when she comments:

In view of Gray’s obvious intelligence, powers of observation, and deductive sense, it is difficult to understand why she never really seems like a modern detective. Insofar as the usual detective script is concerned, she is too young, too sweet and sincere, too unsure of her ability. On the one hand, she seems to lack the cynicism or experience which seems necessary to understand crime and evil; yet she lies directly and knowingly to the police in both novels to defend her ethical code. She seems a combination of experienced naïveté and innocent worldliness. (Gregory Klein, 155)

Klein's assessment of Cordelia's youth and vulnerability is an important one. Cordelia is only twenty-two and, like so many of P.D. James's characters, she is an orphan. Having been raised in a convent, forgoing her place at Cambridge in order to join her father and his band of communist revolutionaries, she lacks both confidence and experience. However, I would contend that Cordelia is also hampered by the world she is forced to inhabit. Kate Miskin is an effective character because she exists in a series of realist novels and in a world that bears some resemblance to reality as we know it. The world of The Skull Beneath the Skin is rather more extraordinary, drawing upon the somewhat outmoded conventions of the ‘locked room’ and 'country house' mysteries of the 1920s and 1930s. James also presents the reader with a rather implausible society of hierarchy and privilege in which old servants remain loyal in spite of the most horrendous betrayals.

Lee Horsley has commented that The Skull Beneath the Skin is regarded as having back-tracked considerably, moving towards conservatism in a Thatcher-era betrayal of James's feminist credentials (Horsley, 254), while Nicola Nixon notes that 'James's clever and independent heroine of the seventies simply did not translate well into the sociopolitical climate of the eighties' (Nixon, 32). Nixon continues to highlight the importance of the Victorian in The Skull Beneath the Skin, picking up on Sally Munt's suggestion that the novel constitutes a type of parody of the ambitions of ’70s feminists, signalling her attempts to back away from the women's movement. The 1980s in Britain were certainly marked by a revival of interest in the Victorian encompassing everything from furniture to the deer-stalker hats made popular by the ‘Past Times’ shops. The cultural critic Raphael Samuel has written extensively about the way in which Margaret Thatcher ‘annexed’ Victorian values to her political message, suggesting that she was tapping into a broader climate of nostalgia for and interest in the nineteenth century. P.D. James certainly has an ongoing interest in the Victorians and her use of nineteenth-century texts and objects in the second Cordelia Gray novel is worthy of further attention. However, I would argue that she does not follow Thatcher in presenting the nineteenth century as an era of rigid morality and family values. James's vision of the Victorian in this novel is associated with entrapment and deceit.

The Skull Beneath the Skin is filled with Victoriana and while the central plot revolves around a performance of John Webster’s revenge tragedy, The Duchess of Malfi, the play is to be performed in Victorian costume and many of the props used by the actors are nineteenth-century artefacts. When Clarissa Lisle is murdered by her step-son, she is discovered with a marble copy of a baby's arm, purportedly a sculpture of a limb belonging to one of Queen Victoria’s children. Cordelia first sees the limb at the end of a tour of her host, Ambrose Gorringe's collection of nineteenth-century crime memorabilia. She perceives the marble as, ‘an unpleasant object, sentimental and morbid, useless and undecorative’ (James, 85). Her comments here reflect a disdain for the Victorian that pervades the novel. James presents nineteenth-century décor as gaudy and rather vulgar and focuses on the negative aspects not only of Victorian aesthetics, but also of the period as a whole. Gorringe's display of the grotesque, disembodied arm is
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The culmination of an unpleasant survey of knick-knacks from the 1851 Great Exhibition and Victorian art more generally. The sheer accumulation of things is almost stifling for Cordelia and the reader too is overwhelmed by James’s description of Victorian excess. The narrator comments, ‘Everything that she most disliked in Victorian high art was here, the strained eroticism, the careful naturalism which had nothing to do with nature, the vapid anecdotal pictures and the debased religiosity’ (James, 82). The collection becomes increasingly sinister, as Cordelia moves from paintings by Sickert and Whistler to a ghastly ‘Chamber of Horrors’ displaying Victorian gallows literature and Staffordshire pottery figurines of condemned murderers.

While they are not represented favourably, the Victorians are presented as a contrast to an even darker contemporary society, lacking in self-awareness and appearing self-satisfied in contrast with the nineteenth-century drive towards self-improvement. As the novel’s true villain, Ambrose Gorringe observes, ‘The Victorians may have got their money from the dark satanic mills but they had a passionate craving for beauty. It was their tragedy that, unlike us, they understood only too well how far they fell short of achieving it (James, 83). The characters in this novel are not a likeable group and James uses the restored Victorian theatre on Courcy Island to create a feeling of claustrophobia, leaving Cordelia almost stifled by the place and the people. The Victorian aesthetic makes several characters, including Cordelia, feel uneasy, and it is invoked to emphasize the vulgarity of those protagonists who are drawn to it. The demanding and hysterical Clarissa is so attracted to the Victorian that she transposes Webster’s play to the nineteenth century, while Ambrose is obsessed with Victorian criminals, particularly (and poignantly) murderers. Ivo Whittingham, one of the novel’s more insightful characters, highlights this fascination with the less pleasant elements of Victorianism when James’s narrator informs us:

He had known that the play was to be done in Victorian costume. The idea had seemed to him an eccentric, slightly ludicrous conceit. But he could see that it had its uses. The stage and the small auditorium fused into one claustrophobic cockpit of evil, the high-necked dresses and the bustles hinted at a sexuality which was the more lascivious because covert, overlaid with Victorian respectability (James, 93)

Ivo’s thoughts here emphasize concealment and deception, which, combined with the bloody terror of Webster’s play, creates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Cordelia is certainly the only ‘good’ character we encounter on the island and her Shakespearean name and the innocent love it represents is highly incongruous in this world of extortion, exploitation, quasi-incest and death.

Although it is laced with references to Victorian literature, The Skull Beneath the Skin engages with a number of different literary genres in its attempt to transcend the ‘pulp fiction’ label often attached to crime writing. Sally Munt has noted that

The Guardian described this novel as ‘baroque’… many other reviewers failed to see the essential tenor of the text, pastiche. This hideously macabre Victorian melodrama overlaid by gothic horror and the most enduring clichés of the detective genre gives the novel an aura of playful excess, in the humorously self-reflexive tradition of the early women detective writers (Munt, 23).

While the novel can be viewed as a type of Victorian melodrama, complete with an innocent, vulnerable heroine it also, as Munt suggests, reaches back to
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earlier crime writing, partly as a tribute and partly in parody. Sue Ellen Campbell has written extensively on the influence of Dorothy L. Sayers’ classic novel, Gaudy Night, arguing that in The Skull Beneath the Skin James deliberately distances herself from realist writing (and presumably also the political problems that accompany readerly expectations about what the first female private eye will do next) and takes refuge in the conventions of detective fiction. Munt has remarked on James’s extraordinary generic range, commenting that her works:

[O]bserve classic structures enriched with a novelistic emphasis on characterization, realism, literary allusion, and the employment of diverse points of view. The major generic themes are represented: alienation, death, retribution, and the effects of murder upon all concerned. James combines these with gothic motifs, claustrophobic atmospheres, and tortured alliances.

She is self-consciously aware of the form, as The Skull Beneath the Skin suggests (Munt, 23).

James’s novels are notable for the skill with which they are crafted and for the subtle ‘literariness’ of the writing. I would contend, moreover, that The Skull Beneath the Skin is James’s most self-consciously literary piece of work, with its references to Shakespeare, Ruskin, Webster, Dickens and a whole host of other writers. Furthermore, the world that James presents is more obviously artificial than in any of other works, including the dystopian, futuristic England of Children of Men (1992).

James is so committed to her retreat from the real that a number of her characters register the artifice of the world they inhabit. Ambrose Gorringe observes to Roma Lisle after Clarissa’s body has been discovered, ‘This is a story-book killing: a close circle of suspects, isolated scene-of-crime conveniently cut off from the mainland, known terminus a quo and terminus ad quem’ (James, 191), thus drawing attention to the formulaic nature of the crime. This self-conscious fictitiousness is reiterated by Grogan, the detective in charge of solving the case, when he ends his list of suspects by ironically commenting to his subordinate, ‘We musn’t forget the butler. I regard the butler as a gratuitous insult on the part of fate’ (James, 213). And finally, when Gorringe pronounces, ‘The butler did it. Even in fiction, so I’m led to believe, that solution is regarded as unsatisfactory’ (James, 302). In assembling this almost clichéd setting and cast of characters, James lures the reader into a false sense of security, trapping us through our over-familiarity with the detective genre and allowing us to believe that we can predict the case’s outcome. If this were the world of Dorothy L. Sayers, Adam Dalgliesh would—in the manner of Sayers’s gentleman detective, Lord Peter Wimsey—swoop in to solve the case and sweep Cordelia off her feet. As it is, Dalgliesh does nothing more than send a message to the effect that Cordelia is not capable of murder, but that she might wilfully deceive an investigator. James does not allow Cordelia a romantic ending, but instead shows her being subsumed by the mundane domestic world in her decision to revert to finding missing animals.

Cordelia’s position as the ‘heroine’ of The Skull Beneath the Skin is an odd one that further undermines the novel’s realism. Whereas in An Unsuitable Job for a Woman, Cordelia was very clearly the central protagonist, there are places where she almost disappears from the long-awaited sequel, partly because the evil characters appear so much more vividly than she does. P.D. James is well known for her dislike of focusing on a single character’s consciousness and in almost all of her novels her omniscient narrators present a range of viewpoints, including those of victims and murderers. The multiple perspective technique works to Cordelia’s detriment in The Skull Beneath the Skin, where her quiet goodness fades into the background and, as Sue Ellen Campbell puts it, ‘the detective heroine and her problems consequently lose their central place’ (Campbell, 25–26).

If we follow Nixon’s argument that James needed to distance herself from the pioneering feminist of the first novel, then this downplaying of Cordelia’s character makes perfect sense. Indeed, the opening scene in which Cordelia’s helper, Bevis, is shown hanging a brand new plaque, should alert us to the fact that Cordelia will be undermined in this novel. The scene is one of several in the work which refer back to An Unsuitable Job and which deliberately revise our impressions of Cordelia. In the first novel James shows an impressive, gleaming bronze plaque, juxtaposing Gray’s name with that of the mentor whose dead body she is about to discover, Bernie Pryde. However, in The Skull Beneath the Skin, Cordelia’s new plaque, asserting her independence and her position as sole proprietor of the agency, is mounted askew, rendering her and her business absurd from the outset.

As the novel progresses, Cordelia’s character is sacrificed to the plot and we see her miscalculating and making a number of grave mistakes. Although she solves part of the mystery through careful research, her failure to grasp the depth of the evil she is dealing with places her in danger and leads to the death of Simon Lessing, the young boy who has killed his stepmother in a frenzied rejection of her sexual overtures. Having established that Ambrose Gorringe had a motive to harm Clarissa, who has discovered that he has deceived the tax authorities, Cordelia returns to Courcy Island where she wastes
valuable time listening to Gorringe admit that he battered Clarissa’s corpse. When she eventually realizes that he has been distracting her, she races around the castle like the heroine of a gothic novel, flinging doors open in her quest for Simon. The only person she finds, Ivo Whittingham whom she had previously labelled a chivalrous ‘Mr. Knightley’ is by this point incapacitated by terminal cancer and is unable to provide any help. When she finally does find Simon she allows herself to be trapped by Gorringe along with him and while she is able to save herself, she is unable to rescue him. As well as displaying a lack of competence and judgement here, Cordelia also reveals herself to be extremely vulnerable. While her position as ingénue appeared charming in the first novel, she becomes so corrupt that this characteristic becomes a dangerous hindrance.

Cordelia’s escape from the Devil’s Kettle highlights her physical and emotional fragility and also invites the reader to look back once more to An Unsuitable Job for a Woman. In the first novel Cordelia is saved from drowning in a well because she has had the presence of mind to take possession of a belt belonging to the young man whose death she is investigating. She uses the belt to haul herself to the top of the well’s ladder and although she is eventually rescued, her efforts to free herself are tenacious. The belt becomes a type of talisman for her, but when she finds herself once again trapped and in danger of death by drowning in The Skull Beneath the Skin, she discovers that she has mislaid it—one of numerous mistakes that characterize her behaviour in the sequel. The belt ultimately does save her life because the man on whose boat she leaves it comes to return it to her just as she is about to succumb to a watery demise, but Cordelia is notable for her passivity in this scene. In An Unsuitable Job she experiences a brief vision of ‘Sister Perpetua’ a teacher from her convent and this memory sustains her in her bid to break free. She has a similar vision at the end of the later novel, but this time it is much more sustained and we see no sign of the fight for life we have come to expect in the final pages of a crime novel:

So this was what it was like to be born: the pressure, the thrusting, the wet darkness, the terror and the warm gush of blood. And then there was light...How strange that Sister should be shaking her head gently but firmly, that the coiffed whiteness should fade and that there should be only the moon, the stars and the wide sea. And then she knew who and where she was. The struggle still wasn’t over. She had to find the strength to fight this lassitude, this overwhelming happiness and peace. Death which had failed to seize her by force was creeping up on her by stealth (James, 367, ellipses mine).

The listless Cordelia James depicts in this scene is a far cry from the energetic young woman of the previous novel and her re-birth here signals a somewhat disappointing new beginning. She has to be dragged aboard her rescuer’s boat, suggesting that she has metamorphosed into the type of helpless, swooning heroine more suited to a Victorian novel. Sister Perpetua has to instruct her not to die, so weak has her grasp on life become and even when she has been saved, Cordelia can only think of what she fears will be the unending trauma to accompany Gorringe’s prosecution.

By the end of the novel Cordelia has come to question her suitability for the role of detective. Indeed, the reader is left wondering how she will fare against allegations from Ambrose that she is hysterical and delusional. She is, of course, not the first detective to face counter-accusations from the criminal she is seeking to apprehend, but in the concluding pages she becomes increasingly aware of her absence of a feeling of vocation. She reflects on her lack of empathy and insight on learning that Clarissa’s faithful and malign dresser Tolly is to live with the widow, Mrs. Munter:

Some words of Henry James fell into her mind. ‘Never believe that you know the last word about the human heart.’ But did she know even the first word, who called herself a detective? Wasn’t it one of the commonest of human vanities, this preoccupation with the motives, the compulsions, the fascinating inconsistencies of another personality? Perhaps, she thought, we all enjoy acting the detective, even with those we love; with them most of all. But she had accepted it as her job; she did it for money. She had never denied its fascination, but now, for the first time, it occurred to her that it might also be presumptuous. And never before had she felt so inadequate for the task, pitting her youth, her inexperience, her meagre store of received wisdom against the immense mysteriousness of the human heart (James, 317).

As the daughter of a revolutionary communist (whose shortcomings as a father are discussed in both of the ‘Cordelia Gray’ novels) it is fitting that Cordelia should come to regard herself as just another cog in the capitalist machinery. However, this epiphany is also accompanied by a crisis of confidence and her assessment that she is ‘presumptuous’ and ‘inadequate’ leaves her vulnerable in the extreme. Disappointingly but, perhaps, appropriately she backs away from criminal detection and in this scene James uses Cordelia to highlight the absurdity of
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a former convent schoolgirl inheriting and running a detective agency and indeed becoming a feminist icon. By stripping her of her confidence and reconfiguring her relationship to her job James relegates Cordelia to the realm of domestic trivialities, like missing cats, and ensures that readers will no longer wish to follow the exploits of her girl-detective. Maureen Reddy reflects the widespread dissatisfaction with Cordelia’s second appearance when she comments:

‘The brief, disappointing history of the Cordelia Gray series may explain why James is so seldom acknowledged as the creator of the first modern female private eye’ (Reddy, 196)

Our final glimpse of Cordelia stresses her frailty and her difference from the young woman who succeeds in deceiving the police at the end of An Unsuitable Job for a Woman. She determines to pit herself against Ambrose Gorringe and we are informed that ‘She would tell the truth; and she would survive. Nothing could touch her…it was as if Courcy Island and all that had happened during that fateful weekend was as unconcerned with her life, her future, her steadily beating heart as was the blue uncaring sea’ (James, 379). Yet these words ring hollow; the weekend has scarred Cordelia and has signalled an abrupt redirection of her career path.

P.D. James uses The Skull Beneath the Skin as a means of exploring her protagonist’s vulnerable femininity, deliberately stripping Cordelia of ambition and credibility. Her innocence renders her a liability in the world of hardened criminals and, lacking a faithful sidekick, her solitude makes her an easy target for the villain who, like Gorringe, might wish to make away with her. While the chief inspector in charge of investigating Clarissa’s murder suggests that Cordelia is ‘too bright for [her] own good (James, 338), the reality is that she is constantly surprised by criminals and, by her own admission, ill-prepared to solve the case. She knows almost nothing of police procedure (James, 253) and her transcendental purity leaves her conspicuous in her discomfort among the cast of suspects. She cannot look into other people’s souls, because she is unaware of the true degree of evil in the world. James, then, sets Cordelia up to fail in that fateful weekend was as unconcerned with her life, her future, her steadily beating heart as was the blue uncaring sea’ (James, 379). Yet these words ring hollow; the weekend has scarred Cordelia and has signalled an abrupt redirection of her career path.


References


1 Male detectives are, of course, often presented as vulnerable figures, as Raymond Chandler shows in his essay ‘The Simple Art of Murder’:

[D]own these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid...He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it (Chandler, in Haycraft, 237).

While for Chandler’s detectives ordinariness and honour are advantages in solving crimes, Cordelia is hindered by her integrity and almost implausible innocence. Interestingly, James seems to parody Chandler’s style in the closing pages, particularly when Cordelia reflects on the ‘job that needed doing’ (James, 378).