A t the outset it should be stated, that writing also includes viewing. This article is a follow-up from my last article for *mETaphor* that dealt with an overview of crime fiction and was largely inspired by the work of John Scragg and Stephen Knight, both of whom are leading thinkers in crime fiction.

What is becoming clear to a lot of secondary teachers, and experienced markers of Extension 1 English, is that students do not know their self-selected texts as well as they know their prescribed texts and, to add salt to injury, they are not familiar with the zone of their particular elective; in this case crime fiction.

Crime fiction is the genre of fiction that deals with crimes, their detection, criminals, and their motives. Most - though not all - crime novels share a common structure. First there is the crime, usually a murder; then there is the investigation; and finally the outcome or judgment, often in the shape of the criminal’s arrest or death. Crime is usually distinguished from mainstream fiction and other genres such as science fiction or historical fiction, but boundaries can be, and indeed are, blurred. The genre’s flexibility is perhaps one reason for its wide and enduring appeal and means different things to different people at different times. Unlike some literary fiction, the crime novel retains many of the time-honoured techniques of fiction such as character, theme, narrative, tension, etc. There is now such a huge variety within the genre, that it also has several sub-genres, including detective fiction (including the classic whodunit), legal thriller, courtroom drama, hard-boiled fiction, Police Procedurals, Private Eye, Suspense, Thrillers and any other sub-genre in which a committed crime is the leading motivator of the plot.

Jonathan Culler, in *Literary Theory*, suggests, “for readers, genres are sets of conventions and expectations: knowing whether we are reading a detective story, or a romance, a lyric poem or a tragedy, we are on the lookout for different things and make assumptions about what will be significant. Reading a detective story, we look for clues in a way we don’t when we are reading a tragedy”.

No matter what particular definition of crime fiction you follow it is essential to acknowledge that an examination of genre depends primarily on expectations. Through reading a number of related texts the responder expects certain things to happen:

- the commitment of a crime
- the quest to apprehend the culprit
- the punishment of those responsible for the particular crime

Suspense and the playing out of the chase for the apprehension of the criminal is at the core of the genre and the way a particular composer presents this essential scenario will give the particular text its value and worth. Some of the texts within the genre follow a particular subgenre and some are an amalgamation of styles and conventions. Even contemporary texts can vary markedly. For example, James Ellory in *L.A. Confidential* works well in the *noir* hard-boiled tradition whereas Paul Auster in his *New York Trilogy*, owes more to postmodernism as a way of thinking than he does to crime fiction as a genre.

Some people view the genre of crime fiction as the contemporary version of a morality tale, claiming that the genre encapsulates the values and ethics of the particular time. In this way, the crime committed disturbs the working order of society and makes everyone feel anxious and unsafe. The crime itself can be seen as transgressive and threatening, often associated with a myriad of ills in our world. So therefore, the attraction of the genre is the restoration of the status quo in society and the reassurance it can bestow upon the readers/viewers.

Every genre relies upon a set of unspoken rules between the ‘writer’ and the ‘reader’. As part of this, most writers rely on a set of understandings which are a given. For example, at the most generic level, the person committing the crime is an unsavoury character who acts out of a selfish motive. When this set of ‘unspoken’ rules is broken in some way, it can alienate the reader, or in some cases, when the breaking of the rules, is carried out in an inventive way, it can delight and amuse. Some of the criticism of the genre essentially entails a denouncement of some of the tendencies of the genre such as the use of stock scenarios and narrative shortcuts and the use of archetypes such as a *femme fatale*.

What is essential is, that the reader needs to know enough about the zone of the genre to be able to recognise when a writer is being inventive and not merely derivative. Furthermore, the reader needs to know that the way conventions and traditions are reworked and broken is what will result in the creation of a new ‘art’work.

**The essential characteristics of crime fiction**

Some readers will find the use of all of these conventions cliched if used without any change, but we must note that these have evolved over the years and are generally considered to be essential in the genre. These can include:
I. A crime must be committed that in some way threatens the social stability of the society. The crime must be disturbing enough to arouse the curiosity of the reader/audience and in turn, the people responsible for this crime must be discovered and apprehended. In the attempt of uncovering the people responsible for the crime, the detective(s) must undergo a number of tests involving danger, hardship and potential harm before he/she can triumph.

II. Suspense is a crucial element of the genre and this must be generated by the narrative exposition.

III. The construction of the main detective who can contradictorily access most institutions through his/her contacts and who is presented as somewhat of a misfit; someone who lives on the periphery of the society he/she knows so well. Often there is a direct collocation between the detective and the reader, something that gives the genre, a lot of its engagement. The detective, who may or may not be a professional, is responsible for solving the crime, commenting on the ethics of times and restoring order in society. Most detectives are also the narrators in mainly contemporary novels.

IV. The depiction of a believable setting is an essential element in crime fiction. Each crime fiction text can be seen as an embodiment of the values and attitudes of its time. For this to happen, the writer must authentically portray a physical landscape and provide believable motivation for the characters who inhabit this landscape. Some sub-genres of crime fiction, such as the hard-boiled fiction as well as the genteel whodunit, made famous by Agatha Christie, turn the setting into an indispensable character.

In order to know the zone well students needs to explore and/or sample the following ten areas of the genre.

I. The Progenitor of the genre.

A short story by Edgar Allen Poe, e.g. The Murders in the Rue Morgue or The Case of the Purloined Letter.

The importance of Edgar Allen Poe in crime writing cannot be underestimated. An American author who chose to set his stories in Paris, this facilitated the creation of the loner detective (the one who does not quite belong to the soceity he lives in) who manages to solve crimes methodically and with imaginative intellectual prowess. In all the stories, C. August Dupain manages to solve each crime and assist in the apprehension of the culprit when the police could not. This was the first time in the history of crime writing that the apprehension of criminals eluded the police but was made possible by a civilian. Even though Dupin is suave and savvy, a pillar of society, and a paragon of masculine virtue, he is not the narrator of the story, which is another interesting ploy that has been appropriated by Poe's successors, namely Arthur Connan Doyle. Despite Poe's relish for the gothic genre and the supernatural, his detective, Dupain, dismisses any fantastical solutions to the crime at hand and relies solely on reason.

Read the short story provided for you and answer the following:

1. What is the nature of the crime in this short story and how does it threaten the stability of the Parisian society of the time?
2. Identify the numerous suspects and write down the motivation for each one.
3. How does Dupain solve the actual crime?
4. Provide a character sketch for Dupain in terms of his personality, skills, beliefs and values.
5. Comment on the prevailing social ideals and values in this society.

II. The definitive Alpha detective.

Exemplified by Sherlock Holmes, whose stronghold over the genre has never waned. A close examination of a short story from The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes by A. Conan Doyle is essential. ‘The Adventure of The Sussex Vampire’ by Conan Doyle in The Complete Sherlock Holmes, Doubleday, 1927 is representative of his work.

Arthur Conan Doyle was a London physician who in 1890 created his famous alter ego, Sherlock Holmes, who has come to embody the detective genre and whose power is still evident in today's fiction. Moreover, Doyle is an important figure in the genre because he proved that crime writing can sell and generate a lot of profit for all involved. This is one of the practical reasons why the genre has endured. Holmes owes a great deal to Dupain, in terms of his dedication to the power of reason and his methodical nature. Like the earlier French detective, Holmes, lives in the upper echelons of society (in this case, Victorian), has a certain disregard for the lower classes (particularly their 'fancies' and their lack of faith in science and rational thinking) and has a very peculiar relationship with his off-sider, Dr Watson. This relationship has been scrutinised by many critics and readers alike, and would make an interesting subject for a possible Extension 2 project. What is of interest to crime fiction students, is how the narrator is able to reveal the action of the story, whilst making a commentary on it at the same time and revealing his
admiration for Holmes. Through Watson’s narration we realise that the world presented echoes the values of the Victorian time. If students read more than one story by Doyle they will realise how important a figure he is within the zone of crime writing, since his stories established what we have come to accept as the conventions of the detective genre.

‘The Adventure of The Sussex Vampire’ is typical of Conan’s body of work. Students can explore the complex relationship between the narrator (Dr Watson) and the meticulous and exacting Sherlock Holmes who has become one of the most iconic figures in the genre.

One of the most striking aspects of Sherlock Holmes is his unfailing confident demeanour. Students can look for examples of this in the story and explore a reason why he is always so self-assured and so cheerful.

Holmes is a familiar figure because he possesses some of the **uber-intelligence** of Dupain (made famous by the progenitor of the genre, Edgar Allan Poe). He is an ardent fan of science and the law and is not prone to fanciful notions, for example in this short story, vampires. As such he is a potent adjunct to the law and for this reason, he is the definitive detective, that all crime writers relate to, in some oblique or explicit manner.

According to the critic, Susan Rowland, he functions as a “licensed masculine other” and his methodical nature as well as penchant for isolation make him into a mysterious figure that can be seen as a saviour-hero.

Students can make notes of how Robert Ferguson (himself an alpha male) sees Holmes as saviour-hero in this short story.

The masculinity of the lead detective Sherlock Holmes is the most fascinating aspect of this short story. Students can look for evidence in the story of how he is represented as possessing:

- Power of reason
- Intelligence
- Objectivity
- Judiciousness
- Not afraid of action
- Meticulousness
- A degree of heroism

Even though Sherlock Holmes fervently believes in science and his methodology can be described as the science of deduction, he is an intriguing character because those aspects that can be seen as personality faults are exactly the things that humanise the character and have contributed to his endurance throughout the last hundred years or so. He is aloof, arrogant, eccentric, condescending even bohemian. In fact, well-known crime fiction critic Stephen Knight, has commented that his very exoticism is what gives his scientific skills a human veneer.

**Extension Activity:** Watch one of the main films, featuring Sherlock Holmes and explore this notion of his paradoxical nature.

### III. Bad Manors.

Reading of a short story featuring Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple by Agatha Christie is essential in order to gauge how the genre developed at a time of uncertainty and at a time when people were traumatised after WWI. For fans of Christie, her most important novel is *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The undisputed queen of crime fiction, Agatha Christie, was a prolific writer as well as a best-selling one. Since Stoppard’s hilarious parody, *The Real Inspector Hound*, is one of the prescribed HSC texts, it would remiss to not examine the legacy of the author, whose play, *The Mousetrap*, is the main text parodied by Stoppard.

The work of Agatha Christie is not as ‘comfortable’ as readers assume. True, her prose is accessible and entertaining without the complex syntax and allusions of other crime fiction writers but the values contained in her work are often paradoxical and far from ‘definitive’. On the one hand, Christie does not alienate her reading audience by challenging their core Edwardian Christian values. Crimes are seen as undesirable elements in her work and are often carried out by people who are outside the social milieu; outside the closed microcosm of her world. This has the benefit of reassuring the readers, that even though the threat to social order has been averted, there is a double comfort in knowing that the crime itself was not carried out by one of ‘their own kind’. However, the ‘creation’ of her detectives is a far cry from being conservative. The characters of Monsieur Poirot (the avuncular foreigner) and the charming spinster Miss Marple challenge the patriarchal notion of the detective as an action hero both physically and in their detecting methods. Both of them rely on methods which can be described as ‘feminine’ (including gossip); a far cry from the notion of masculine that preceded Christie (Poe, Doyle) and that which was to follow her (the world of the hard-boiled detective as described by Hammett and Chandler).

*“The Veiled Lady” by Agatha Christie.*

This is one of the many short stories penned by Agatha Christie featuring her famous Belgian-born detective Hercule Poirot. This whimsical and complex figure (at times infuriating due to his fastidiousness) is also the main detective in a number of her novels and has been brought to the small and large screens numerous times. Any study of the genre should include Christie because she embodies the
“Golden Age” of the genre and because her work is still widely read and seen today. Despite the fact that she could be called a “velvet enforcer of the status quo of society”, her creation of the many detectives she is famous for (such as Monsieur Poirot and Miss Marple) is quite subversive and, some claim, transgressive. More importantly, what is fascinating about Christie is the way she breaks down the way that masculinity and femininity have been traditionally represented in fiction. Traditionally, the dominant masculine culture has been represented as a fixed entity and anything that is not masculine, by default, has always been perceived as the ‘other’.

It is worth remembering, as noted by Susan Rowland, that historically, men and male culture have always produced and administered the law as well as occupying the professions associated with the law such as policemen, detectives, judges, prison wardens etc.

Most of the elements that make Christie into a pivotal figure in the genre are present in all her work and they are present in this short story as well. Some tasks for students could include:

1. Examine the name of the main detective in the short story, Hercule Poirot, and comment on the paradoxical status of his Christian name when combined with his French surname.

2. Conduct a quick research on the internet to view all the actors that have portrayed Poirot in the various Christie vehicles. What do all these characters have in common as far as appearances and mannerisms have in common?

Unlike, Holmes, Poirot is very anti-heroic and typical of the context of Agatha Christie. Both Alison Light and Gillo Plain have suggested that an element of anti-heroism operates through Poirot as a direct result of the consequences of WWII.

Three of the ways that Poirot interrogates the traditional notion of the detective are the fact that he is fastidious in his appearance, he genuinely likes and indulges in gossip and lastly, he has a meticulous eye for domestic details. These three traits (incidentally, usually associated with a feminine construct), far from being a disadvantage to him, are often essential in solving a crime.

3. Find evidence of these traits in “The Veiled Lady.”

4. Comment on the role that Captain Hastings plays in this short story.

IV. The Hard-boiled classic tradition.

Apart from the US, this sub-genre has been very popular in Australia and some commentators have suggested this is to do with Australia being seen as a frontier land, where patriarchy can rule supreme.

Long before Bruce Willis and the tough macho heroes of cinema, a duo of writers, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler captured the popular imagination with their creation of the hard-boiled fiction. The work of these two writers, has influenced the iconography of the genre and has given us many if its recognisable signs:

- the tough guy detective in the trenchcoat – the master of the quick wit
- the mean and dangerous streets of the urban city
- the dangerous and alluring femme fatale,
- the emblematic cigarette
- the metonym of the phallic gun that could restore personal and social order.

The hard-boiled genre is associated with the tough mean streets of Chicago and how a central, always male, hero is charged with the duty of restoring order in a society that was visibly corrupt and altruistic. The popularity of the genre, partly a result of its reliance on suspenseful narrative exposition, has transformed the detective into a mythic figure in the global psyche. Some would claim it is the contradictory status of the detective both as a romantic hero (due to his solitary life and way with the ladies) and his intrinsic misogyny (a result of the social and historical context) that has fascinated readers ever since. Certainly, the punishment of the transgressive female (often in the guise of the femme fatale) can reflect the paranoia of the era against any gains by women. Not surprisingly the noir cinema genre (a close cousin of the hard-boiled detectiove) became hugely popular in the US but more so in Europe after WWII, at a time of social upheaval. At this time, when the men were returning from war, the women who had been replacing them in the work arena, were very reluctant to return to their pre-war subservient ways. At any rate, the patriarchal values espoused by the hard-boiled writers has both been appropriated and challenged by more recent writers.


This novel extract is an ideal opportunity to explore the first person narrative which is one of the defining aspects of the genre, allowing the readers to cast themselves in the role of the detective. Scrupulous close reading is needed to discard the red herrings and to flag important details which are missed by the detective. The latter is difficult to achieve within the parameters of this narrative mode.

In the first paragraph of this chapter we are struck by the motif of decay. Students can list how this is achieved and suggest how this positions both the detective and the reader.

In the next paragraph we are introduced to the occupant of the house (we don’t learn her name until the third paragraph) in an escalating manner, “Slow steps shuffled and the door opened and I was looking into dimness at a blowsy woman who was
blowing her nose as she opened the door”. Students can discuss in groups what we do find out about this woman. They can then try to conduct a police sketch of what she looks like and finally suggest how the description of the woman connects stylistically to the description of the house in the opening paragraph.

Dialogue is used sparingly in this chapter, and throughout the book. However, it is one of the main ways of imparting information and of depicting characterisation.

“What facts do we obtain about Mike from the dialogue in this extract and what can you deduce about the characters of both the detective and Jessie?”

Chandler, like a lot of hard-boiled writers, is fond of using similes in his work. Find at least seven examples from this extract, explain them and speculate why he likes to use them so much. Students can also try to see if they can find some motif in the similes they have collected from this extract.

It is said that every text reflects the values and the spirit of its time. This is sometimes referred to as the zeitgeist. Crime fiction texts more so than others, as it tends to use the atmosphere of the times almost as a character in its own right. Consider the sentence from the extract and speculate about the context of the novel: “I held up the dead soldier and shook it. Then I threw it to one side and reached back on my hip for the pint of bond bourbon the Negro hotel clerk and I had barely tapped.” Can you find other instances in the extract that can assist you to support your hypotheses about the context of the work?

This chapter is essentially an interrogation scene between the detective and Jessie Florian where the former is trying to find information about Jessie’s husband, Mike, and particularly about Velma Valento. During the animated, sometimes flirtatious, sometimes pitiful interchange between the two, the upper-hand switches between the two characters. Students can draw a chart showing the peaks and lows of this spar between the two characters, explaining what has caused each one.

**Case Study: Humphrey Bogart as Marlowe in Howard Hawks’ The Big Sleep, United Pictures.**

The film “The Big Sleep”, directed by Howard Hawks, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, and based on a detective novel by Raymond Chandler, managed to transcend limitations of time and context, and has remained enduring throughout the decades, largely due to its successful facilitation of the active involvement of the audience in the deduction of the solution of the crime. The operational participation of the audience is largely due to the fact that the film fits into the crime fiction and film-noir genres that prevailed in America in the post WWII period. The distinct characteristics of crime fiction and the more ambiguous features of film noir encourage audience engagement. “The Big Sleep”, at the time of its publication, managed to adjust itself to the context of the time, (which was restrictive and conservative) and thus became a success. Its popularity has endured and it can still be accepted, appreciated and enjoyed in a contemporary context.

The genre of crime fiction has distinct features, which keep it a highly popular genre, perfectly exemplified by “The Big Sleep”. Crime fiction’s Golden Age began in 1920, when Agatha Christie published her first novel, and prevailed in popular British and American culture for several decades. The classic “whodunit” tale often sacrifices character development for the sake of ingenious plotting, while the ‘hard-boiled’ genre produces a violent and bloody plot, which makes little appeal to reason and logic, but rather, focusses on the character of the detective. Hard-boiled fiction traces its origins to short stories published in pulp magazines at the start of the twentieth century, and was appealing to the American audience as it translated the romanticism of the classic Western into a modern, urban setting. The plot of “The Big Sleep” is a classic hard-boiled detective story, as it focusses on the investigation of a crime, but the atmosphere and characterization take precedence over formal considerations of plot. This is due to the fact that the film was adapted from a novel, and due to cinematic considerations many significant scenes were discarded. The use of archetypes throughout the movie also supports active involvement of the audience. Philip Marlow, acted by Humphrey Bogart, is the visual epitome of a private detective, in fedora and trench coat, with a cigarette at the corner of his mouth. Marlowe uses the unique American vernacular of the time, which was sardonic and tough. Not much is revealed about his personal life, as shown by the design of his apartment, which is Spartan and devoid of luxury: his bed is orderly and single, the desk dominating the space, showing his life is dedicated to work. It is clear Marlowe is an outcast of society; that he has no links to family, friends, or colleagues. Marlowe is also a model of masculinity, as he is controlled, self-assured and sexually potent: women fall at his feet, but never distract him from his mission.

The other archetype is the infamous femme fatale, portrayed in this film by the two Sternwood daughters. They both attempt to seduce Marlowe and “they are both pretty, and pretty wild”. Their stigmatisation as a sexual predator is emphasised through highlighting their mouths with bright lipstick and for Carmen, through her habit of biting her thumb. Carmen is dressed in provocative clothes, and in the scene when she is found drugged she is wearing an oriental outfit, alluding to the concept of a nefarious opium den. This, incidentally, is a clever way for the film to echo some of the novel’s unsavoury subplot involving a pornographic ring. Vivian’s tailored outfits replete with broad shoulder pads, highlight her ‘unfeminine’ qualities, and hence show her to be a threat to the male protagonist. The femme fatale in the noir genre was seen as a threat since she was the antithesis of the hero, and in a broader scope, a threat to the whole social status quo. However, no femme fatale can weaken metaphor 87
the potent male hero of “The Big Sleep”. Throughout the film, the women are filmed at lower levels than him, and do not often occupy the entire frame; this is a way of belittling them. By the end of the film, both seductresses have been neutralised: Carmen is sent away, and Vivian admits she is in love with Marlowe and replies to his question, “What’s wrong with you?” with the submissive response: “Nothing you can’t fix.”

Film noir is difficult to define as a genre, as it covers such a broad scope, and it has been defined before as a style and a mood, lacking the clear conventions of a genre, however its few features facilitate for an active audience involvement. The narrative is told from the point of view of the detective, including many extended point of view shots from Marlowe’s outlook, for example the very first shot of the “Sternwood” door sign, as well as deep focus photography, such as in Marlowe’s numerous monologues. Vague representations of characters, such as in the murder scene of Harry Jones, when the characters are obscured behind a screen, reflect the narrative confusion and disorientation. Low key lighting suggests the sinister atmosphere, leaving many areas of the frame in the shade. Many characters are morally ambivalent, prime example being Vivian, as well as Agnes. Like other film noir pictures, “The Big Sleep” is located in a major city, in this case Los Angeles, and there is more than a suggestion of urban corruption. Geiger’s book store is a façade for an illegal porn industry, and Vivian spends much of her time at a gambling casino. The tarnished nature of morality is implied by the Sternwoods: the general possesses great wealth while many people struggle for money; Vivian and Carmen both commit illegal acts and use their money to avoid the outcomes. Representative of its genre, “The Big Sleep” is a social criticism, targeting the wealthy who obtained their power and money through corruption, and the poor who have no choice but to turn to crime. As such, film noir explores the existence of characters who live on the periphery of society, and who are alienated from the common people. The most important feature of film noir, which is predominant in crime fiction as well, that facilitates for active involvement of the audience, is the location of the audience, which is ideally supposed to become the detective. This is achieved through all the cinematic devices presented above, particularly the point of view shots.

Film noir and “The Big Sleep” are still popular today mainly due to their ability of easily engaging the audience without necessarily being context dependent. It is undeniable that in the Golden Age of film noir, the context had a great influence over the popularity of this genre. A post-war audience, ruled by an atmosphere of disillusionment, confusion and paranoia, received the films. Despite the fact that “The Big Sleep” refers to the Great Depression era, it still reflects the general fragmentation of society and the desperate need for a tough hero to deal with the dangerous world of crime and corruption. There was a sense of dark foreboding, pessimism and moral uncertainty, which was depicted by the style and design of the films, particularly lighting and camera angles. Violence and sexuality had to be implied due to the Hays Code, (a censorship code on movies at the time) such as through oriental settings and costumes, or the implication of Marlowe lighting Vivian’s cigarette. The Hays Code was rather hypocritical given that crime and sexual promiscuity were an integral part of post-war America; consequently, these aspects of life had to be presented subtly. Audiences at the time were attracted to the honest and tough protagonist, who bravely faced the corrupt environment around him. Today’s audience has a much more sceptical and ironic view of film noir, as such movies have become almost a cliché. It is said, that in most films the audience enjoyment and engagement is derived from their identification with the characters, but according to Slavoj Zizek, American film noir is compelling because of a “kind of distance [that] is its very condition”. Instead, contemporary audiences take on the role of a “naïve” spectator who can easily accept the unreasonable plot on the screen, and thus can enjoy an exaggerated tale of murder, violence and sexuality. Despite the much more detached position, the location of the contemporary audience remains behind the detective’s back, attempting to help him. According to some, the image of Humphrey Bogart in “The Big Sleep” is the detective image that has been branded in the collective psyche, and this demonstrates that the modern attraction to classic film noir is very much derived from a sense of nostalgia towards traditional American values, which included disregard to class and belief in an equal opportunity to all. Part of this traditional portrayal also accounts for the lack of any African-Americans, Hispanic or Asian characters in the film. Furthermore, “The Big Sleep” created a hero archetype that has no short-comings or insecurities, an epitome of “Chandleresque” masculinity, who is a convincing leader to an audience, attempting to solve a murder mystery. Critical acclaim comes to film noir and “The Big Sleep” from what they reveal about America’s social, political, and ideological condition at a particular point in time.

V. The Aussies.

The study of an Australian text should be essential for all students. Choose a classic Australian novel such as one of the Cliff Hardy mysteries by Peter Corris or from more contemporary titles (any of the winners from the Ned Kelly Awards). Suggestions have been included in my previous article (published in Issue 1, 2007).

The following on The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender has been included to illustrate the depth of exploration that students need to exert with their self-selected material. Also, the Marele Day novel is easily available in most English book rooms.
An examination of themes

The following are the four predominant issues at the heart of Day's novel. Use these as starters and write 250 words on each one.

1. The search for meaning and truth beneath the many facades.
2. The position of women in the tough detective business.
3. The representation of city as a place of sin/corruption/evil and the outback as paradise.
4. The search for personal happiness and fulfilment in relationships, especially in its honest examination of complicated, complex and thoroughly modern relationships between men and women.

The novel is one of the most successful detective works published in Australia and yet, despite many attempts, it has never been made into a film. Make some character profiles for the major and minor characters in the book. After this, imagine you are a casting consultant and decide which well-known actors you would approach to play these roles in a film version of the novel. Money is not a consideration so do not feel constrained in casting big Hollywood names, should you feel they can approximate, or even adopt, a good Aussie accent!

The Form

The novel is structured in small units which detail Claudia's attempts to complete the investigation successfully. Most of the novel is narrated by the detective and as such the extracts can be seen as diary entries. This explains the shortness of the many sections. This type of narration and structure is typical of the detective genre. Each small extract is memorable and concerns itself with a specific event in Claudia's investigation. This episodic element of the novel's structure adds suspense and propels the narrative throughout. The structure also supports the movement of the novel and its scope generally, i.e. the focus of the novel remains the city of Sydney itself and Claudia's movements within the novel (Balmain, Taylor Square, Bondi, the city itself, North City, lower North Shore, Eastern Suburbs) act as a type of tourist guide for the reader who is not familiar with the city.

Throughout the novel we also have several extracts featured which are seemingly unrelated to the main plot. These are pages from Harry Lavender's autobiography and they are used to slow down the action and to let the reader keep one step ahead of the narrator/detective. The writing of the novel is both creative and imaginative. It constructs a tale of intrigue by involving most of Sydney's famous landmarks. It is actually Marele Day's approach to the detective genre which makes this work effective, and the appropriation and subversion of the detective thriller which allows the author to express her main concerns.

This is connected to approach and structure. The form of the novel follows a typical detective genre whereby the protagonist leads the reader from clue to clue, stepping over the many red herrings in order to solve a complex crime. As well as this, the novel has two narratives modes.

Although adopting the typical detective form, the novel manages to subvert this through its use of characterisation, setting and themes. Read through the following conventions of the genre and think for yourself how they are used by Marele Day.

1. The novel must have at least one detective and one criminal, and at least one victim (a corpse).
2. The culprit must not be a professional criminal, must not be the detective, must kill for personal reasons.
3. Love has no place in a detective novel, sex however does.
4. The culprit must have certain importance. In life must not be a butler or a chambermaid. In the book; must be one of the main characters.
5. Everything must be explained rationally; the fantastic is not allowed.
6. There is no place for descriptions nor for psychological analysis.
7. With regard to information about the story, the following relationship must be observed: author= criminal, reader= detective.
8. Banal situations and solutions must be avoided.

Having read these notes write a letter to Marele Day either congratulating her or admonishing her for her use of form in her novel.

Setting & Symbolism

The novel takes place in Sydney and throughout the narration the urban centre of Sydney is indirectly contrasted to the countryside which is presented in utopian tones. The choice of the detective genre itself relies on the urban settings for the collection of clues. Hence this particular pop genre structure proves successful in assisting Day's aim in physically mapping the city of Sydney. So naturally, Claudia becomes the perfect vehicle for showing off Sydney which needed to be put on our psychic map. Yet, unlike conventional tours, Claudia opens our eyes to other parts of the city that do not feature in tourist campaigns extolling the visual beauty of the city. In doing this, Day wishes to expose the corruption of the city as a direct contrast to rural areas (where incidentally, Claudia's children happily reside). Further explanation of this concept is left to the reader's moral inclination. At any rate on surface value, the visual descriptions allow the reader to undertake a journey as Claudia's "silent partner" from the container terminals near Glebe Island Bridge ("rows of containers, a giant's building..."
innocuous in their uniformity) to well-known graveyards.

From the luxurious world of the Regent Hotel (“Above greenery dripping copiously from the mezzanine was a row of tables with black glass tops”) to the colourful streets of Bondi, (“We swung down the hill overlooking the black expanse on Bondi Beach and the lights twinkling on the foreshore”), the wealthy mansions of Clontarf (“The Villos villa was a white stucco Spanish style, one a seagull would have been proud of”), the insidious Monorail journey (“Passing under the Monorail was like walking under a ladder... The metal snake was now a part of the city”) and the sleazy game arcades opposite Hoyts in the city: “It was stifling hot and sterile, despite the bright flickers on the screen and the electronic nursery rhymes coming out of them”, p67. Through her journeys Claudia Valentine unveils Sydney from an insider’s perspective and yet endows it with a sense of the exotic that only outsiders usually perceive. A new way of examining ourselves, our city and the values and dominant ideology that confront us daily.

The Language of the novel

Read the following notes on language and then write a short essay (750 words) on how Day uses language in the novel to convey her intent:

- terse, succinct, brief sentences create suspense/retains reader’s attention
- plethora of figures of speech: hyperboles, similes, metaphors
- realistic dialogue
- Australian idiom
- wit (“one of the former and two of the latter. And the former is former.” - replying to a question regarding her marital status)
- quick repartee (“The crims don’t discriminate, they’ll blow away a woman on their trail just as readily as a man.”)
- sexually suggestive descriptions (“You’ll look like the kind of woman who would enjoy a glass of champagne at two in the morning.”)
- the ‘challenging’ syntax and colourful imagery used by Harry
- fast and relentless narration (“He could have blown me away at the container terminal... he could have blown me away in my sleep. But the worst that happened to me was being watched.”)
- cynical tone and prone to hyperboles (“as long as I didn’t start haemorrhaging from the eyeballs things would be all right.”)
- the intentional lack of personal pronouns in the opening section
- visual descriptions (“rows of containers, a giant’s building innocuous in their uniformity.”)

Narrative Style

The main narrative can be read as a voice-over, a type of narrative used in film. Its purpose is to inform the reader of what has happened/what is going to happen or to tell us what is going on inside the character’s head (particularly in the case of Harry Lavender). A limitation of this technique is that the reading of the story is terribly subjective.

Why are Harry’s extracts included?

Part of the success of this novel is the fact that Marele Day has managed to appropriate the traditionally-dominated genre of the hard-boiled detective whilst obeying all its rules. The culprit of the novel, like the culprits of similar books, is a major character who kills for personal sycophantic reasons. Love has no place in the detective novel but sex has. This is the case in TLACHL, where Claudia is too independent and far too cynical to fall in love but is not averse to carnal pleasures as her liaison with Steve Angell demonstrates. Like all detective novels, the crimes are explained rationally in this novel too, as there is no room for the fantastic and banal situations are to be avoided. However, what sets this detective apart from all the others within the genre is the way Day subverts the genre. Claudia is tougher than the toughest traditional male detective and not at all feminine. The attempt to soften this character throughout the novel is not a case of feminisation but of humanisation.

VI. Chicks with Guns

A modern crime novel, by e.g. Sara Paretsky, Patricia Cornwell, Kathy Reichs, Sue Grafton. Given the proliferation of writers who have used the genre for the purposes of subversion and the airing of particular paradigms and agendas, I would choose either a female writer from those mentioned above or one who has used the genre for a particular reason.


Janet Evanovich is one of the most popular crime writers and her detective, Stephanie Plum is a feminist icon. The protagonist and first person narrator of all six books, Stephanie Plum, is perfectly described in the words of her mentor, Ranger: “Nothing is ever simple with you. Men blow themselves up. Cars get flattened by garbage trucks. I’ve been in full-scale invasions that have been less harrowing than meeting you for coffee.” Stephanie, while not deadly herself, is a lethal disaster area to all those around her. Usually caught in ridiculous situations, seldom in control of either her own investigations or even her love life, she nonetheless gets to the bottom of each case, always by the
most circuitous of routes. The series of novels chart the slow growth in Stephanie's proficiency as a bounty hunter, along with the rapid fluctuations in her love life.

1. How is Stark Street described in this extract and how is this description built up piece by piece by the writer?

Evanovich writes in a knowing manner and relies on her readers’ knowledge to infer meaning as shown by this sentence, “My new Jersey heritage weighted heavy demanding I responded with a few demeaning comments of my own, but discretion being the better part of valour, I kept my mouth shut and hurried on by.”

2. What is the effect of the short sentences that dominate much of page 46?

Stephanie Plum admits on page 56 that this had been a “day filled with indignities”.

3. List all these indignities suffered by Ms Plum, and comment on how they are used to build up a character portrayal of the main detective.

4. What can you infer about the strata of society from the snapshot we see in this extract? How could you connect this with crime fiction? You can include the information one finds out about Stephanie Plum’s background in this extract in your response.

5. Stephanie Plum does not refer to herself as a PI or a detective in this extract but instead uses three amusing terms on three separate occasions. Find these and suggest why they are used instead of the more traditional terms.

Even though stylistically Evanovich is a literary heir of Hammett and Chandler, what is striking about her work is her humour, the insecurity of her narrator and the certain ‘knowingness’ evident in the narration.

6. Find example of these from the extract and perhaps make an overall comment about the context of the novel.

Stephanie Plum has a very ambivalent relationship with her gun, something she shares with P.D. James and a host of other female crime fiction writers.

7. What seems to be this relationship as expanded in this extract?

Not all female writers and female characters espouse this attitude of course.

8. Groups of students can research this further, relying on their reading and viewing of the genre to come up with a hypothesis.

**Toxic Chock by Sara Paretsky, Chapter VII, “The Boys in the Back room”**

Sara Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski is one of the most important female figures in crime fiction because even though she employs most of the tricks of the hard-boiled trade, she is a fiercely independent woman who manages to get the job done, with little dependency on the patriarchy.

1. Look at the opening paragraph of this chapter and comment on their initial impression of V.I.

2. Comment on the narrative mode used by the novel as seen in this chapter. Particularly, how does the narrative voice echo other texts within the genre and how important is it for the main female detective to tell her own story and not to be mediated by any man in the telling of this story?

Throughout the novel, V.I. does not exhibit any maternal instincts and she is proud of her status as a single woman. Even though like most detectives, she relishes her independence and her status as a loner, she is a gregarious person who enjoys her sexuality. Her presentation as neither a transgressor or a deviant in society is a positive step in the depiction of women in the genre. In fact in her failure to be categorised easily, some critics have argued that V.I. is undermining the patriarchy itself.

3. Look for some evidence from this chapter to support the notion that V.I. values her independence and that she is a normal, healthy woman when it comes to issues of sexuality.

When she confronts the boys in the back room V.I. does not use her sexuality to manipulate them, even though, she is a very attractive woman.

4. Outline how she manages to get the information she needs from these two men.

Elsewhere in this book, V.I. describes herself as “the kid who could whip the neighbourhood”.

5. What evidence can be found in this chapter that she is capable of looking after herself?

In this novel, V.I. occupies a unique space. As a woman she has moved from the position of silence and mediation that was reserved for females in the traditional detective novel.

6. How is this achieved in this chapter?

7. Why do you think V.I. is seen to be working alone in this chapter? What might this say about her in dependency on the patriarchy. Why doesn’t she have a female offsider?

V.I. refuses to be a slave to housework, as seen elsewhere in this novel.

8. What evidence can be found in this chapter to support the notion that her decision to not do house chores (something typically aligned with a conventional maternal context) is a choice and not a position of ignorance?
VII. A crime feature film made in the last ten years.

Case Study: L. A. Confidential, directed by Curtis Hanson

According to novelist James Ellroy, “hard-boiled crime fiction, is the history of bad white men doing bad things in the name of authority.” In essence, this describes the book and the film of the same name. The film, in many ways is better than the novel because it has the grace to let the camera and the soundtrack do the talking instead of Ellroy’s relentless staccato narrative voice. The two texts share the same setting, the corrupt, violent decade of the 1950s, populated by corrupt policemen, trick-r-happy mobster, hookers, salacious journalists and a myriad of other undesirables.

The most remarkable aspect of the film is the casting of two Australian actors in the roles of the two ‘clean’ detectives (see the photograph above) which suggests that corruption is intrinsically connected with American justice.

1. Describe the opening frames of the film, particularly how these create an Edenic setting and tone.

2. The narrator of the film is Sid Hudgens (played by Danny DeVito) a journalist from a scandal sheet called ‘Hush Hush’ who announces that “there is trouble in paradise...” Provide some evidence from the film that would support the assertion that Sid is not a decorous character.

3. What is the function of the short vignettes and flashes of lurid black and white news photographs?

4. Cite one incident of police brutality as performed by the LAPD and suggest why this kind of behaviour was taking place and perhaps even tolerated by the police hierarchy.

5. What is the association between the celebrity detective named Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey) and Sid Hudgens?

6. What is the audience’s first impression of Lynn Bracken (Kim Basinger), and how could this collocate with a well-known film archetype?

7. Why would one describe the socialite named Pierce Patchett (David Strathairn) as enigmatic and sinister?

8. What actions performed by District Attorney Ellis Lowe (Ron Rifkin) can characterise him as corrupt?

9. Why is Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) so unpopular with the rest of his colleagues?

10. How can Bud White (Russell Crowe) be described as a complex and contradictory character?

11. What does the relationship between Bud and Lynn tell us about gender roles in that society?

12. What can account for Exley’s transformation in the film resulting in him being seen as the embodiment of moral force?

13. Comment on how the incident at the Nite Owl can echo most of the conventions of hard-boiled fiction.

14. Why do you think the incident with Lana Turner has been included?

15. Read Chapter Nineteen of the novel by Ellroy and examine the section of the film that it corresponds to. What do you think has been lost and gained in the transformation of the novel to the film medium?

Gosford Park directed by Robert Altman.

Gosford Park is a contemporary film that is part homage to the work of Agatha Christie and partly a gentle parody of the whodunit associated with the Golden-Age of crime fiction.

Set in Edwardian England, the film examines a shooting party given by the cantankerous and lecherous Sir William McCordle and scrutinises the inner workings of his manor, including the relationships between the upstairs and the downstairs staff. In fact, social dynamics are more important in this film than the crime itself. When he is murdered, everyone is a suspect but the case is not solved officially since the investigating constable is a buffoon.

Structurally the film is clever in that it allows the audience to see the privileged world of Gosford Park through the eyes and intuition of a newcomer, Mary MacEachran, the maid to Constance, the countess of Trentham (played with aplomb by Maggie Smith). Students can view the film at home and discuss these questions in pairs in class.
1. Why do you think William McCordle, the egotistical master of Gosford Park has invited this distinguished company for a weekend shooting party?

2. Mrs Wilson at one juncture in the film, states, "Didn't you hear me? I'm the perfect servant; I have no life." What do you think has made her say this?

3. The ugly eponymous Victorian pile in Gosford Park belongs to Sir William McCordle (Michael Gambon), a self-made millionaire, one of the hard-faced men who did well out of the war. What evidence is there to support this?

4. 'A handsome, heartless randy old sod,' one servant calls McCordle. Can you find some examples to support this view?

5. Why do you think Lady McCordle calls her husband "an aggressive vulgarian"?

6. What is the function of the two outsiders (the playwright Ivor Novello and the Hollywood producer Morris Weissman) in this shooting party?

7. Locate some of the whims displayed by the privileged guests. Do you think these 'whims and foibles' would have been viewed differently in Edwardian England?

8. Often, throughout the film, the camera is not fixed but rather follows the chaotic lives of the people downstairs. Why do you think this is?

9. How are the people downstairs exploited both economically and sexually? What seems to be their reaction to this? How different would contemporary mores view this?

10. Why are the visiting servants known only by the names of their masters and mistresses?

11. Outline the reasons many of the guests at Godford Park would have to wish to eliminate McCordle.

12. How is the incident involving the Bloody Mary used as a proleptic device?

13. Read the following interchange from the film and comment on the presentation of class.

Lady Sylvia McCordle: Where's that wretched Mabel.

Gosford Park boasts one of the most amazing British cast ever assembled!

Constance, Countess of Trentham: Has anyone checked her outfit? She's probably in black velvet with a feather in her hair.

Lavinia Meredith: She's in the morning room looking perfectly normal. Don't be such a snob aunt Constance.

Constance, Countess of Trentham: Me? I haven't a snobish bone in my body.

14. Read the following extract from the film transcript and comment on how the film manages to parody the classic whodunit.

Lady Sylvia McCordle: Tell us about the film you're going to make.

Morris Weissman: Oh, sure. It's called "Charlie Chan In London". It's a detective story.

Mabel Nesbitt: Set in London?

Morris Weissman: Well, not really. Most of it takes place at a shooting party in a country house. Sort of like this one, actually. Murder in the middle of the night, a lot of guests for the weekend, everyone's a suspect. You know, that sort of thing. Constance: How horrid. And who turns out to have done it?

Morris Weissman: Oh, I couldn't tell you that. It would spoil it for you.

Constance: Oh, but none of us will see it.

15. What can you infer about how the servants see their masters from the following interchange:

[talking about Lady Sylvia]

Mary Maceachran: What was her family like?

Elsie: What you'd expect: toffee-nosed and useless. Her father was the Earl of Carton, which sounds good except he didn't have a pot to piss in.

16. Can you find some examples of the vanity and meanness exhibited by the Countess of Trentham (Maggie Smith)?

17. How does the actual murder change the tone of the film?

18. How does the murder change the status quo for the characters involved?

19. Inspector Thompson has been described as obsequious. Do you think this is a justifiable accusation?
VIII. The Police Procedural.

Students can study a mini-series such as *Prime Suspect* or *Wire in the Blood*, or an important episode from a regular series such as *Law and Order SVU*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*.

**Veronica Mars - The Pilot Episode.**

Veronica Mars is a high-school student and part-time detective. Throughout Series 1, she has fought hard to find out who killed her best friend, Lily and to clear her father's reputation. The show is an amalgam of genre and its success is mainly due to this. Apart from the injection of wry/black humour the show works best as a contemporary drama and as an inversion of the hard-boiled detective genre. Gone are the many hallmarks of the genre. Instead a young ingenue replaces the archetypal Marlow character. However she is as good with the one liners as he was. Stylistically the show uses colour in a fascinating way to reflect many of the production values of the noir genre.

Students can scrutinise the following ten quotes from the series and discuss what they suggest/state about the leading character as well as what use the series makes of the crime fiction genre.

1. **Veronica Voiceover:** This is my school. If you go here, your parents are either millionaires, or your parents work for millionaires. Neptune, California: a town without a middle-class.

2. **Mrs. Murphy:** Congratulations, you're my volunteer. Pope. *An Essay on Man*. Epistle I.

**Veronica:** “Hope springs eternal in the human breast; Man never Is, but always To be blest: The soul, uneasy and confin’d from home, Rests and expatiates in a life to come.”

**Mrs. Murphy:** And what do you suppose Pope meant by that?

**Veronica:** Life’s a bitch until you die.

3. **Veronica Voiceover:** Duncan Kane. Son of software billionaire Jake Kane, he used to be my boyfriend. Then one day, with no warning, he ended things.

4. **Veronica Voiceover:** And let’s not forget Logan Echolls. His dad makes twenty million a picture. You probably own his action figure. Every school has an obligatory psychotic jackass. He’s ours.

5. **Weevil:** Sister, the only time I care what a woman has to say is, is when she’s riding my big old hog, but even then it’s not so much words, just a bunch of oohs and aahs, you know?

**Veronica:** So it’s big, huh?

**Weevil:** Legendary.

**Veronica:** Well, let’s see it. I mean, if it’s as big as you say, I’ll be your girlfriend. [gasp] We could go to prom together! What? What seems to be the problem? I’m on a schedule here, vato.

6. **Logan:** So does your...uh...does your dad still think that Lily’s father did this? That’s my girlfriend. Your friend. Duncan’s sister. Your dad is destroying the Kane family. What’s the matter with you people, huh? What’s the matter with you?

7. **Veronica Voiceover:** Quite a reputation I’ve got, huh. You wanna know how I lost my virginity? So do I.

8. **Keith:** No sack dinners tonight! Tonight, we eat like the lower middle-class to which we aspire.

9. **Wallace:** Oh no you don’t. You really think I’m gonna let you get away with that? That might play with the masses, but underneath that angry young woman shell, there’s a slightly less angry young woman who’s just dying to bake me something. You’re a marshmallow, Veronica Mars. A twinkie.

**Wallace:** I suddenly feel like I’m in a scene from *The Outsiders*.

10. **Veronica Voiceover:** Okay, it’s a long shot but I can’t help myself. I used to think I knew what tore our family apart. Now I’m sure I don’t. But I promise this: I will find out what really happened, and I will bring this family back together again. I’m sorry, is that mushy? Well, you know what they say: Veronica Mars, she’s a marshmallow.