

ENGLISH EXTENSION I

Crime Genre Essay: “Genre sets a framework of conventions. How useful is it to understand texts in terms of genre? Are texts more engaging when they conform to the conventions, or when they challenge and play with conventions?”

“Genres offer an important way of framing texts which assists comprehension. Genre knowledge orientates competent readers of the genre towards appropriate attitudes, assumptions and expectations about a text which are useful in making sense of it. Indeed, one way of defining genre is as a ‘set of expectations.’” (Neale, 1980) The crime fiction genre, which began during the Victorian Era, has adapted over time to fit societal expectations, changing as manner of engaging an audience. Victorian text *The Manor House Mystery* by J.S. Fletcher may be classified as an archetypal crime fiction text, conforming to conventions whilst *The Skull beneath the Skin* by P.D. James, *The Real Inspector Hound* by Tom Stoppard and *Capote* directed by Bennet Miller challenge and subvert conventions. The altering of conventions is an engaging element of modern crime fiction, and has somewhat, become a convention itself.

Genre, Roland Barthes argues, is “a set of constitutive conventions and codes, altering from age to age, but shared by a kind of implicit contract between writer and reader” thus meaning it is “ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world.” (Jane Feuer, 1992) The classification of literary works is shaped – and shapes – culture, attitude and societal influence. The crime fiction genre evolved following the Industrial Revolution when anxiety grew within the expanding cities about the frequency of criminal activity. The genre itself was a subversion of earlier crime writing which focused upon the criminal. This subversion, predominately formed by Poe and Doyle, explored a new concept and writing style – the mystery. Subversion was not necessary during this period as conventions needed to become pointedly defined before they could be successfully subverted. As society changes “each new text has the potential to influence changes or to create new sub-genres” (Dubrow, 1982) by conforming to, or subverting, conventions. The conventions of crime fiction are defined as a murder of an innocent victim, an isolated setting, a number of suspects with motives, red herrings, the sleuth, a murder weapon, a denouement and the restoration of order to a chaotic world. The subversion of some conventions has led to sub-genres such as ‘Hard-Boiled’ crime, ‘cosy’ writing and, more recently, psychological and forensic investigations.

The Victorian Era was responsible for the emergence of crime fiction and texts followed developing conventions in order to establish a genre with a “framework of conventions.” *The Manor Houses Mystery* by British author J.S. Fletcher (1863 – 1935) conforms to conventions. Set in “the Manor House, a quaint old mansion” the murder of the “much respected” Mr Septimus Walshawe is set in a small town of Flamstock. There is little insight into the detective himself, but the text focuses upon character opportunity and motive, rather than personality. Mr Walshawe’s death, which had “taken place under mysterious circumstances”, embodies many characters whom would later become stereotypes – the housekeeper, the heir to fortune, the authoritarian and the medical professional. Written later than Poe or Doyle’s first texts, *The Manor House Mystery* blatantly references conventions through dialogue “Motive! Motive” spoke the typecast, independent detective Mr Marshford. The duality of Walshawe is vital to solving the story, the clues carefully placed through the puzzle.

The text was engaging to audiences of the epoch, introducing a new manner of writing, appealing readers to solve the puzzle of who committed a crime. The restoration of order was important to texts at the time, ensuring and comforting the audience to the ideology that ‘crime doesn’t pay’ and justice shall prevail. This calmed the anxiety concerning the increasing rate and brutality of crime as a result of urbanisation during the period. Subversion and challenging of conventions was not able to be successfully executed at this time because the foundations of the genre were still to be established. For modern audience the text may be less engaging as it does not relate as closely to

modern society, however, it does address the fundamental themes of the human condition and greed. In its own context *The Manor House* would be more engaging than to a modern audience whom have come to expect subversion and challenge of conventions in crime writing.

Although appearing to reasonably tradition, *The Skull beneath the Skin* by P.D. James is a hybrid crime fiction text that “metaphysically mocks the crime genre.” (Yager) *The Skull beneath the Skin* is an blatant example of how many modern texts both conform to, and subvert, conventions successfully to illustrate elements of society – the most apparent being the naivety of the ‘restoration of normality’ and how it remains disjointed from reality of society and crime. PD James shifts the simplistic structure of crime fiction, expanding it to present a new perspective of society. The sleuth, Cordelia Gray, is a young amateur with an “unsuitable job for a woman.” Despite her gender being considered unconventional, her sharp wit and independence portray elements of the classic detective. *The Skull beneath the Skin* entwines elements of other genres into its writing – gothic terror and cosy, most evident through the “England in miniature” Courcy Castle setting, which is filled with morbid relics in a Victorian manor house. James said that by using the “well-worn conventions of the mystery” and subverting or stretch them she is able to “say something to true about characters.”

In *Skull beneath the Skin* the traditional ‘innocent victim’ is subverted. Clarissa Lisle is shaped as an unpleasant, selfish, and egocentric victim which inevitably forces the audience to question whether her death was a tragedy, whilst killer Simon’s death seems more unjust.

This reversal comments upon what PD James saw in Western society at the time. During the 1980s the principle became that the individual was most important, the family becoming a dysfunctional unit and this is reflected through the unpleasant, disjointed character. James also portrays the theme that death is never justifiable, present through the death of Simon. The unresolved society at the end of the novel is common with other writing of the period, such as Cormack McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*. This unexpected conclusion in *Skull beneath the Skin* challenges audience’s assumptions about the genre, engaging them and referencing the real society rather than suspending disbelief in a ‘cosy,’ disjointed society. *Skull beneath The Skin* is not concerned with providing readers with a typecast ‘puzzle’ but instead confronting the “corrosive, destructive aspect of crime; the way it shatters the lives of all it touches.” (PD James)

The Real Inspector Hound by absurdist playwright Tom Stoppard is a melodramatic parody of popular British ‘cosy’ crime fiction - in particular *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie. The text plays with conventions, both subverting and conforming, to satirise traditional crime fiction writing. The play, however, may be best understood by those familiar with the genre to fully appreciate the humour, created through subverting and twisting archetypal traditions. *The Real Inspector Hound*, set in the “strangely inaccessible” Muldoon Manor, references the drawing room ‘cosy’ murder mysteries. The setting established by the over-exaggerated conversation by characters “the drawing room of Lady Muldoon’s country residence one morning in early spring.” Caricatured stereotypes of classic ‘cosy’ crime fiction create the cast of suspects; Cynthia wears “a cocktail dress,” her hair “formally coiffured” is an appropriation of the Femme Fatale often present in Hard-Boiled crime fiction. Major Magnus, the “crippled half brother of Lord Muldoon who turned up out of the blue from Canada” is a ridicule of the suspicious character with an unknown past, further illustrated by his oddly blunt dialogue “I think I’ll go and oil my gun” whilst Mrs Drudge’s name is play-on words referencing her occupation as housekeeper. Hound ridicules Christie’s detective in *The Mousetrap* whom arrives on skis, as Hound enters wearing “swamp boots” - which are inflated pontoons - and carrying a foghorn. Literary techniques used in the play alongside the conventions engage the audience. This is evident in the card game scene where innuendo and double entendre is used throughout “I hope you have not been cheating, Simon,” and “it doesn’t always pay to show your hand” to illustrate the layers of meaning imbued into the dialogue. The mirror and the merging of plays present themes concerning the duality and darkness of society despite entertaining manner that the play is formed.

Stoppard stated that “dislocation of an audience’s assumptions is an important part of what I like to write” and this ‘dislocation’ of assumptions occurs through the subversion of conventions. The expectations of crime fiction are subverted, satirised or hyperbolised in *The Real Inspector Hound* to create a humorous, enticing text. The extent of subversion may only be fully appreciated by those whom understand the genre, predominantly ‘cosy’ crime writing and in particular *The Mousetrap*. Although may still engage audience less familiar with ‘cosy’ writing, the playful use of cliché and mocking tone in *The Real Inspector Hound* closely references Golden Age writing and may be best appreciated through a thorough understanding of ‘cosy’ sub-genre conventions.

In modern texts, it is almost expected that the conventions are subverted, becoming somewhat a convention itself to subvert. This creates climax and thus, intrigues audiences to the text. Often the audience expect this subversion as a means of imbuing a cryptic message about an element of society the author wishes to comment upon.

The subversion of the crime fiction genre allows the audience to develop a greater understanding of society, crime and the human condition. *Capote* (2005), based off Truman Capote’s 1965 non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood* subverts the traditional perspective of crime fiction by reinterpreting elements of the genre. Set in the village of Holcomb, Kansas in 1959, the isolated setting “that other Kansans call ‘out there,’” portrays an American adaptation of villages present in Golden Age crime fiction, such as Agatha Christie’s *Miss Marple* series. Wide shots reveal the scene at the beginning of the film; the absence of sound is only cushioned by the wind rustling in the long grass. The bodies are shown, blood splattered fiercely on their walls, silence still prevails as photographs on a mantel piece introduce the victims – the affluent, distinguished Clutter Family. This silence and isolation is juxtaposed with a cut to the scene of the sleuth Truman Capote at a loud dinner party, surrounded by a number of people. Capote - a writer, already acclaimed for *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, travels to Holcomb to write about killings. Although an unconventional sleuth, Capote holds a number of the characteristics of the loner ‘hardboiled’ detective. He is egotistical “Truman is in love with Truman,” and an outsider in Holcomb. His sidekick, fellow writer Harper Lee, fills the faults of Truman as assistants conventionally did.

Dissimilar from traditions of the genre, *Capote* is not a ‘whodunit,’ instead an analysis of human psyche and motive of killer Perry Smith. The complexity of Perry Smith is presented as an important element of the film. A close-up of Perry, staring out his cell window, obviously in pain “do you have an aspirin – my legs...” introduces the character as a saddened “desperately lonely” man and this contrasted with his alternate personality “if you get too close I could kill you.” The film directly compares the lives of Perry and Truman; “it’s as if Perry and I grew up in the same house but one day he stood up and went out the back door while I went out the front.” Similarities are drawn between the two characters throughout the film, their parallel abandoned childhoods and their vastly differing adult lives. This reflects the “two worlds exist in this country – the quiet conservatives, and the life of those two men; the underbelly, the criminally violent – and those worlds converged that bloody night.” This subversion engages the audience to explore the notion of human psychology and what effects what humans become.

The perspective of the film to sympathise with Perry, similar to Simon in *The Skull beneath the Skin*, seeks to challenge the Western idea of justice when Perry is hanged. Traditional justice is presented “he ain’t got the right to kill himself. It’s the right of the people of the state, and that’s who I work for – the people,” reflecting the notion of justice during the late 1950s, and is further illustrated when placed in a twenty-first century context. This seemingly subversive concept of justice is instead a traditional ‘restoration of order.’ By both challenging and accepting convention it eludes to the outdated definition of justice, and the one-sided perspective of most crime writing. The voyeuristic film engages audience through both subverting and conforming to texts, manipulating traditional perspective and portraying the concerns of society.

“The critics have forecast the death of the classical detective story at every decade, but the form remains remarkably resilient. There are the attractions of a strong plot, a story with a beginning,

middle and an end. There is the challenge of a puzzle for those who like following clues. The detective story, like other forms of crime novel, provides vicarious excitement and danger. But there are other interesting psychological reasons. The classical detective story is rather like the modern morality play. It can provide catharsis, a means by which both writer and reader exorcise irrational feelings of anxiety or guilt. The basic moral premise, the sanctity of life, is also an attraction as is the solution of the plot at the end of the book. The classical detective story affirms our belief that we live in a rational and generally benevolent universe” (P.D. James)

Crime fiction may be best understood, and appreciated, through a thorough understanding of the genre and conventions. Through this expectations of the genre is created and thus, when subversion occurs, it engages audience and eludes them to particular concerns of society. In modern crime writing, it has become common to subvert conventions to emerge more appealing. The classic Victorian text *The Manor House Mystery* conformed to engage audience of its own time, whilst more recent texts *The Skull beneath the Skin*, *The Real Inspector Hound* and *Capote* subvert elements of the genre to engage modern audiences. The fluid nature of genre allows it to change over time to adapt to audience demands and author’s purpose. Through examining a range of texts it may be concluded that subversive texts engage modern audiences to a greater extent than traditional conventional crime writing.