



Question Three - Elective 2: Crime fiction

'The appeal of crime fiction is in its teasing-out of order from disorder'. This statement adeptly addresses the main reason for why the genre of crime fiction is so popular in today's society. The average person of today really has very little control over the world, and crime fiction consoles the reader that what is good and right, can triumph over what is evil.

This notion can be further explored through a study of genre in general and the sub-categories within the genre of crime fiction; the detective narrative, British mystery school and the courtroom drama. And is supplemented by several texts of this genre - Howard Hawks 1946 film 'The Big Sleep', P.D. James' 'Skull beneath the Skin', David



Cutersons novel, 'Snow falling on Cedars',
Nelson DeMille's 'Plum Island' and
Patricia Cornwell's 'Cruel and Unusual'.

Genre itself is a form or structure that applies to any piece of material called a text. It can be very general - such as film or book, and becomes progressively more specialised. For example, within the genre of book, there are many subgenres such as romance, drama and crime fiction. Then within each of these there are further divisions, such as within crime fiction there are three sub-categories of detective narrative, British mystery school and the courtroom drama. These generic genre categories are part of societies instinct to

bring order into a disordered world, through the use of ideological fields.

The sub-genre of the detective narrative has several features that distinguish it from the other subgenres within crime fiction. The protagonist is a tough man, they have connections to both the upper classes and the underworld of the meanstreets. They generally work in an urban environment, and have a set of personal morals, that are slightly different to everyone else. The detective works alone, as he has trouble with partners and has little respect for authority. A female fatale also is a common feature of the detective narrative, and she

both helps and hinders the detective.

The genre of the British mystery school, is possibly the eldest within crime fiction. It is commonly set in an isolated scene, such as an island, boat or train. The protagonist of the British mystery school is often an amateur, who is able to solve the crime through the use of pure reason and logic alone. This genre generally deals with a singular murder, ~~the~~ rather than a series of crimes which the detective narrative deals with. Due to technological innovations such as planes and telephones, and the internet, the British mystery school has had to evolve



order to maintain its validity in today's society, and has branched out into police procedurals, where the pure form of reason is still used. This adaptability to change with the audience has assisted with the enduring popularity of crime fiction.

The third commonly accepted sub-genre within crime fiction is that of the courtroom drama. This is sometimes considered to also be an extension of the British mystery school, as it has an isolated setting (the courtroom) evidence is introduced through the use of eye witnesses and a form of reason inevitably is used to solve the crime.



Howard Hawks 1946 film version of Raymond Chandler's 'The Big Sleep', fits the convention of the detective narrative. The detective, Phillip Marlowe is hired to sort out what appears to be a simple blackmail. As he delves deeper into the torrid past of the Sternwood family, he becomes embroiled in a series of crimes and cover-ups. Though repeatedly told to drop the case, Marlowe feels that it is his moral right to solve the case. His gradual teasing out of order from disorder, involves many different characters, and the entire storyline. Marlowe's jocular manner, as well as his good looks ~~and~~ would



have appealed to the audience of the time, regardless of the ^{storyline} genre. The detective narrative leaves the audiences of 'The Big Sleep' satisfied that good does still battle evil, and triumphs. Marlowe is a classic detective, he mixes with all socio economic classes, and deals with those of the mean streets. He was fired from the police force "due to insubordination", and the film does suffer slightly from the times in which it was made. It has a romantic, happy ending and has large sections and words changed in its adaptation from the novel. For example, General Sternwood refers to his orchids as rooty plants,



"flesh too much like that of men and the smell of corruption." Corruption replaced prostitutes due to censorship laws, which also result in Ceiger not being referred to as homosexual.

P. D. James' 'Skull Beneath the Skin' is, in many ways, a British mystery school text. The isolated setting of an island means that it is still valid though set in the 1980's. The protagonist is a woman, also a feature of adapting to society in order to remain valid in contemporary culture.

The storyline is classically of the British mystery school genre, as Ambrose, one of the characters says, "This is a storybook murder,

a close circle of suspects, an isolated location conveniently situated from the mainland? Despite this assumption that it fits perfectly into its genre, 'Skull Beneath the Skin' does not. The private investigator, hired to protect an address from poison pen letters, finds herself with a murdered employee. She breaks away from the genres tradition by leaving the island and conducting research and detective work, when the use of pure reason does not work. James realises her genre, and is able to make light of it within her text. Another of the characters states - "That's Lady Cottingham, the formidable

dowager. Ambrose better watch her. If she gets one foot onto the quay, she'll rush up here to give poor Clarrisa the once over, subject us all to the third degree and solve the crime before the police even get here". James' adaptability to the time of her writing, as well as the triumph of reason and order over wrong and disorder, maintains the popularity of crime fiction.

Cuterson's novel, 'Snow falling on cedars' perpetuates the courtroom drama novel. Cuterson's way of continuing the genre of crime fiction, is to make the crime just part of the story - not the central

focus point. 'Snow Falling on Cedars' takes place in a courtroom soon after WWII in a small island off the US coast. The men of this town are proud fishermen who brave all sorts of foul weather, and when one is murdered, Kabuo Miyamoto, a Japanese man, is accused. The town is divided into racial groups, and the 'detective' character is a newspaper man in love with the accused wife. The story focusses on the impact of the weather (a large snowstorm features), the war recently passed, and the cursed love of Mrs. Miyamoto, and Ishmael, the reporter, as much as the murder trial. This mix, along with a resolved,



happy ending, makes the enduring popularity of crime fiction plausible.

Nelson DeMille's 'Plum Island' is based on the conventions of the Detective narrative. John Corey, ~~an~~ a homicide detective who is on leave due to a recent gun wound, is drawn into the murder of two friends of the town in which he is resting. The local detective handling the case is young and inexperienced, and though Corey is not paid, he feels a need to participate in the investigation and "piss off as much government associations ~~as~~ at the same time". He sees himself as a knight in



Shining armour to the young detective, "I like to help beautiful damsels in distress, and though this one was not in distress, she was beautiful". Add to this a search for pirates treasure, the threat of a ^{possible} biological war, and the ultimate 'bad guy' who will kill anyone who gets in his way, and a love story, and the result is a new kind of crime fiction that works in the real world, and ~~also~~ ~~deals~~ deals with issues that plague today's society. These adaptations continue the popularity of the genre.

The appeal of crime fiction involves the teasing out of order from disorder,



and through the use of traditional genres within crime fiction, modern writers are able to write contemporary pieces that are popular in their time. The adaptability of Hawks, James, Guterson, Cornwell, Demille, have allowed good and order to continue to reign over disorder, and provide a sense of balance in today's society.