The Criminal Short Guide

The Criminal by James Thompson

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

In The Criminal, Thompson allows no single character to act as protagonist.

Each character takes a turn presenting his or her viewpoint in first person, one chapter at a time. The book opens with narration by Allen Talbert, whose teen-aged son has been accused of raping and murdering a neighbor girl.

Talbert reveals a mediocre intellect, at best, as he alternates between reminiscence over the good old days when his son worshiped him and long diatribes against his boss. Stuck in an unpromising position selling ceramic tile, Talbert dreams, along with his wife Martha, of escaping the town and its condemnation of his family. They realize escape is impossible, because they have taken a second mortgage on their home to pay for Bobby's attorney bills. Talbert's struggle with ethics takes place on the job, where conditions are bad and growing worse. Of his work he says, "So you have to cut corners if you want to stay in business. You use cheaper materials and you push the men as hard as they'll be pushed, and whenever the union will let you get away with it you sneak in apprentices instead of using journeymen." He has not a clue as to why his son might have engaged in illicit relations with his one-time close friend's daughter.

Martha Talbert might best be described as a "dim light." Her domestic concerns and the responsibility for physically caring for her son and husband overwhelm her. A good Christian woman, she tries to please the men in her life, but understands neither. She often finds herself nervous in their presence, once commenting "I don't remember what I said, but it was probably something silly. I felt like a balloon, all swelled up and getting bigger and bigger every moment. I thought I was going to explode." On her way to speak with Bobby's teacher, she stops to chat with her neighbor, the mother of the girl who will die that very day.

They at first verbally snipe at one another, then lapse into a gossip fest causing Martha to arrive an hour late for the parent-teacher conference. Selfcentered and self-absorbed, Martha scolds the teacher for not wanting to sacrifice her lunch time in order to meet with Martha. Martha lies to cover her son's multiple absences at school.

When she later meets with Bobby, her naivety leads her to believe his story that the blood on his pants appeared when he cut himself climbing through barbed wire fence. Unable to be honest with anyone, most especially herself, Martha adopts her husband's attitudes as her own, living in a state of selfimposed ignorance.

Bobby Talbert, a good-hearted but unmotivated teen who rarely attends school, reflects his mother's ignorance.

His condition seems more tolerable to the reader, however, simply because it remains the product of untried youth.

The reader understands his being seduced by his neighbor, but remains unsure as to whether he commits murder. Bobby stands as victim from the book's opening, simultaneously condemned, yet revered, by his parents.

He becomes the pawn in the newspaper power game and admits, under duress applied by the local district attorney, to the crime. When his own attorney questions him, he claims innocence.

Bobby remains near amoral, doing whatever he is told to do. He comments, "It was funny how you could feel one way a couple minutes before, and then just the opposite now," and as he is contemplating his treatment at the hands of the attorneys, "You know how it is, something you're kind of afraid of but you can't do anything about, so you try to act like it isn't there." The most inactive character in the book, Bobby ironically finds himself the focus of attentions, wanted and unwanted, by almost every citizen of the town.

Donald Skysmith remains one of the more interesting characters, because his ethical conflicts center on choices which offer a lose/lose situation. As the manager of the newsroom, he must do what the boss, called the Captain, demands, no matter how badly he wants to follow his own instincts. With a wife at home dying of cancer, he can think of little else, and the readers becomes privy, through flashbacks, to touching scenes, including a tragic abortion, from his early days with his wife. Like Talbert, Skysmith cannot afford to lose his job, and he must follow the Captain's command to assign a reporter to create as sensational a story as possible about Bobby Talbert. Knowing the story will be written without regard for the truth, Skysmith chafes beneath the pressure to assign it. But assign it he does, breaching a personal code of ethics which stands in the way of survival. A one time Pulitzer prize winner and Guggenheim fellow, Skysmith has been caught in a professional downward spiral for some time. With the eventual death of his wife, he stands as the only character who seems to gain any sense of satisfaction, by his finally telling the Captain what he thinks of him.

Bill Willis, the newspaper reporter, rebels against Skysmith's assignment, not only because he feels it is unethical, but because he does not respect Skysmith. Willis views the newsroom manager as one who has never had to work as a reporter, is instead a college graduate who "lucked" into a Pulitzer, and was assigned to run a newsroom.

A crusty old newsman who will not be dictated to by anyone, Willis collects the story requested by Skysmith, but he makes it even "dirtier" than the Captain had wanted. By interviewing neighbors and the parents of the victim as well as the Talberts, he is able to draw remarks from them which they never intended to make. He hopes the paper will sink beneath the declamations of the public, who will be outraged by the ethical breach in trying Bobby Talbert in the newspaper before he ever reaches court. Willis clues the D.A. in to what is happening with the story, causing the D.A. to grill Bobby into a contrived confession. Willis tries to excuse his actions by saying, "The dirt was there, and I'd dug for it. Dug pretty hard. But I hadn't put a gun to anyone's head. I'd simply talked and let them talk, spilling out the dirt that was in them."

If the novel has a moral center, it must lie with the Jewish attorney hired to represent Bobby, I. "Kossie" Kossmeyer. The novel's most sympathetic and honest character, even Kossie finds himself making unethical choices. In order to save Bobby, he promises the D.A. a political favor, and he must engage in something very close to bribery to convince a black woman to testify that she saw Bobby on the day of the murder, providing an alibi for him. Many readers will identify with this man whose motives are sterling, although his methods remain tarnished.

Social Concerns

The major social concern in The Criminal remains the definition of criminal activity. Thompson looks at the ethics, or lack of ethics, in the American justice system as he examines the effects of popular opinion upon legal verdicts. He uses questions of justice to examine the shaping of popular opinion through the media, especially through newspaper journalism. The basic plot line of a teen-ager, Bobby, accused of raping and murdering his female teen-age neighbor, frames the broad questions of the concurrent respect for, and disregard of, ethics in the shaping of social consciousness.

Like many of Thompson's protagonists, Bobby Talbert is handed his destiny from an uncaring world. The novel becomes, according to one critic, "a study of collective guilt."

A journalist himself, Thompson seems fascinated by the cold removal from everyday life of journalists and newspaper owners who view the stories they tell as instruments to sharpen their competitive edge against other newspapers and journalists. This is often done with cruel disregard for the effects upon the subject of the reports.

Thompson's novel views three different levels of the newspaper professional strata: the owner, known only as the Captain, the newsroom manager, Skysmith, and the reporter-on-the-beat, Bill Willis. The reader is allowed enough insight into the personal lives of each of these three characters to lodge judgement regarding their respective moral fiber. The newspaper owner never makes an appearance; his disembodied voice via telephone is reminiscent of the unseen gods who make pronouncements from Mt. Olympus regarding human fate. Although he is not present in the newsroom, and thus cannot view the person on the other end of the telephone line, he seems to wield an other-worldly knowledge of the events and personalities he addresses. He offers his newsroom manager, Donald Skysmith, an ethical Catch-22. Skysmith, haunted by the grief he feels over his terminally-ill wife, carries on dual conversations with his boss, one aloud, and one mental, both of which the reader may "hear." Thus, the reader may choose either of Skysmith's reactions to his boss' unethical orders as acceptable.

The guilt or innocence of the accused becomes secondary to the guilt or innocence of the other characters as they each play a part in the boy's crime and its aftermath. No one character receives an excess of attention from Thompson, although Skysmith seems more in focus than the others.

Thompson invites the reader to participate in the machinations of the powerful against the powerless as a boy's innocence or guilt is tried in the media before it ever reaches a court room. Reporter Bill Willis asks the question serving as the novel's backbone: "What's our justification for tossing our last shred of ethics out the window?" Thompson's vivid presentation of the multitude of ethical choices his characters must make pressures the reader to assume the role of judge, deciding which character is the real "criminal." Woven in and out of his characterizations is an edge of antiSemitism, as a Jewish attorney is slighted for his ethnicity by the D.A.

Racism is also highlighted when the power to present evidence crucial to the acquittal of the accused ironically falls to an illiterate black family, themselves former victims of the (in)justice system.

Techniques

Thompson's techniques vary drastically from those of other detective and crime writers of his era. His novels are psychological studies, in which he delves into the darkest thoughts and passions of his characters. Even the "good" characters' motives come under reader scrutiny. Many of his novels lack a clear moral center, and readers find themselves asked to provide their own moral centers. He uses an unusual technique in telling this particular story, allowing each character to tell one or two chapters from his or her point of view. Thus, the novel is narrated in fourteen chapters by ten different voices. While William Faulkner made this technique famous in novels such as The Sound and the Fury (1929) and As I Lay Dying (1930), few writers have used it with success as Thompson does.

Thompson remains a master of understatement. In digesting this novel, which is both subtle and satirical, readers are left to draw their own conclusions regarding the rights and wrongs of the characters in The Criminal. The characters are human enough to be believable in all their machinations and errors, yet they seem wooden at times, acting as if in response to a wellknown stimulus designed to produce a known effect. The American justice system becomes a character itself, as its many angles and manipulations are revealed.

Thompson's attention to detail is legendary. Through the simplest movement or action of a character, he supplies vital information regarding the plot. His brief novels challenge reader attention; those not applying that attention may find themselves lost amidst the action.

Themes

In The Criminal, Thompson addresses issues of stereotyping, racism, antiSemitism, social conventions, courage and, most of all, the position of journalism in shaping the social consciousness. He does this by offering action allowing a look into the psyches of each of his characters. While the novel ostensibly focuses upon a murder case, this exists only as Thompson's excuse to place the public consciousness beneath a microscope. The book's newspaper reporter, Bill Willis, depends upon the public penchant for stereotyping to pull in a guilty verdict on Bobby Talbert before any evidence is even presented in a courtroom. Because Bobby is known as a slackard and a school truant, Willis is able to whip these common traits into a predisposition for murder after applying the right questions to receive the preconceived answers he desires from those who know Bobby. The novel pursues the idea of appearance being more important than reality; thus reality is shaped by the views of those who describe their perceptions of life.

Thompson also examines stereotyping as it applies to racism through the Jewish attorney and the black family who may provide the eye witness report that Bobby needs to be declared innocent. When the D.A. receives a letter declaiming the black family as "biggity and back-talky," the reader cannot miss the irony of their silence in the face of the defense's plea for them to testify in Bobby's behalf. It is revealed that the absent father/husband of the family was once jailed for accusing a white storekeeper of giving him false weight on his crops. He was later killed in an "escape attempt." Thompson makes his point regarding stereotypes, by depending upon the reader to recognize this set up from many other similar shameful incidents of racism in America.

All the stock characters of crime fiction are present in the novel, including a couple of minor characters who help the D.A. in handling the accused boy. They decide to tip off the boy's attorney that his client is undergoing a rigorous grilling by the D.A. The stereotypical "forced confession" scene is handled by Thompson with originality, as little of the D.A.'s words are actually heard. The reader is presented, instead, with the views of several characters who have obviously participated in this situation before. Each knows his part, and each expects a particular payoff of some kind. To these stooges, Bobby Talbert's situation is simply one more of which to take advantage in day-to-day dealings where ethics have been forgotten.

Much of the novel takes place in the newsroom or with employees of the newspaper. The reporter, while anything except sympathetic, gives a marvelous portrayal of the man out to get a story, not because he believes in fine reporting, but in order to settle a score with his supervisor. The end result is something resembling the truth, but consisting of the purest kind of slanted reporting. With no concern whatever for the accused boy, the paper runs a story laced with sensationalism, guaranteed to sell papers. Thompson emphasizes that truth becomes a pawn in the manipulations for control of the reporting world. Big figures require big stories, and Willis goes after the biggest, setting up his witnesses, even Bobby's own parents, to implicate Bobby in a crime which could cost him his life.

Everyone, it seems, accepts bribes, from money, to the promise of security, to public office. Even Bobby finds himself giving in to bribe's of food and comic books; for such fare he offers his life in trade, although he does not realize it. In Thompson's materialistic world, everything and everyone has its price. Thompson focuses his fury upon characters who have the luxury of being able to make a choice in life, and who purposely choose to propagate evil. Due to a lack of courage, or to indifference, people who might be able to make a difference to those around them do not. Rationalization abounds, as characters reflect varying degrees of self-awareness. This allows Thompson to investigate the degree of their involvement, whether active or passive, in Bobby's situation.

Key Questions

Those who enjoy discussing characters will have a field day with Thompson's works. The more of his novels one reads, the greater appreciation one develops for the gritty, unique characters which populate them. They offer fertile ground for comparison to one another as well as to popular characters from other crime fiction, such as Dashiell Hammett's "The Op" or Nick Charles. Thompson's noire approach, well appreciated by the French, some readers find fascinating, even if repulsive at times. The very magnetism of Thompson's short novels invites analysis by interested readers.

1. How would Thompson's novel have differed had he told the story using "normal" narrative technique, rather than allowing characters to present their viewpoints, using first person, in one or two chapters?

2. Does the novel suffer due to its lack of interaction among all the characters?

3. What is the purpose of Teddy, Skysmith's ill wife, in the novel?

4. Thompson remains purposely vague regarding the location of his novel. What are some locations you visualize as appropriate for The Criminal?

5. How does Thompson succeed or fail to call the reader's attention to the subjects of morality and ethics?

6. Consider the verse from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Act V, Scene i, with which Thompson prefaces his novel. Discuss its relationship to The Criminal.

7. What future do you predict for Bobby Talbert? Why?

8. What is the significance of Kossmeyer's Jewish heritage?

9. Explain why you do or do not see William Willis as a sympathetic character.

Literary Precedents

Thompson wrote at a time when his works could easily be compared to those of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. But while their use of detective and crime plots placed them in the same class, Thompson's emphasis upon the psychological over the physical sets him apart. What one critic terms an "anti-social" streak in Thompson renders his characterizations of psychotics and the maladjusted realistic and disturbing. This rare quality has appeared infrequently such as in the writing of Charles Bukowski.

Related Titles

The Criminal remains typical Thompson. All of his many novels contain similar emphasis upon the psychological. Due to the use of multiple points of view presented in chapter long blocks, this particular novel stands alone as representative of this type of narrative technique within Thompson's work.

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