Devices and Desires Short Guide

Devices and Desires by P. D. James

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Characters

James has the ability of bringing to life even the most peripheral of her characters, sometimes with only a few lines. In the beginning of the book, some early victims of the Whistler, the mysterious killer, are introduced and do not reappear, since no investigation is reported. One such example is Valerie Mitchell, a fifteen-year-old who missed her evening bus and is more afraid of her father's reproaches than of the killer. One can feel her fright and imagine her father's wrath in the brief incident preceding her death.

James's characters are normally a mix of good and evil, and even the murderer is someone who is guilty of only the one crime around which the story turns. In this book, however, James offers several characters that are largely positive. One such character is Theresa Blaney, the teen-age girl who cares for her motherless brother and sisters. She shields her father at any price and, despite her strict religious upbringing, is willing to lie to protect him from suspicion in the crime. With childlike simplicity she communes with her mother in the ruins of a medieval abbey and thus derives the strength to continue her difficult tasks. Meg Dennison is another positive character.

Widowed after a short but happy marriage and unjustly accused of racism in a London school, she comes to Larksoken to find peace and a little breathing space. She is a companion to the elderly Copleys, Mr. Copley having retired as vicar of the local church. She seeks companionship in Alice Mair, who in contrast seems to see life's darker side. Meg is not sure of her own religious beliefs but takes comfort in praying twice daily with the Copleys.

She is also slightly attracted to Adam Dalgliesh, and he to her.

Dalgliesh, the perennial hero of James's novels, is peripheral to the investigation but very much a part of the plot. He comes to Larksoken because of an inheritance received after the death of his aunt and hopes to spend a few quiet vacation days. Unfortunately, he stumbles upon the body of the murder victim, and ultimately it is he, instead of the delegated police investigators, who learns the truth.

Ever the competent detective, he is also a sensitive human being, still mourning the loss of his wife and child. People seem drawn to him with their confidences, even though this murder is not his case. Inspector Rickards, who resents him for a rebuke given years ago, still visits his home to discuss the investigation of the murder.

In contrast to these positive figures, the victim, Hilary Robarts, seems to have had few friends. She was the mistress of Alex Mair, the director of the nuclear power plant, and hoped desperately to marry him and have a child. If she could not have him willingly, she would not hesitate to use other means. People at the plant respected her intelligence and her capabilities, but no one really liked her; many had motives for killing her. Although arrogant, she was physically attractive. In fact, Miles Lessingham blames

her for Toby's suicide. Independent, she was not afraid of the danger of swimming alone at night. She chose to flaunt danger and thus became a victim.

The characters are so defined that all have a relationship to the murderer, and many to one another. The nuclear power plant is the center of the action, and most of the characters either work there or are linked to someone who does. Hilary, the victim, is connected to several — Alex, Miles Lessingham, Neil Pascoe, the Blaneys, to mention only a few. Alex Mair and his sister Alice are also central because of their dinner party, which is attended by Miles Lessingham, Hilary Robarts, Meg Dennison, and Adam Dalgliesh. The Whistler, a mysterious killer who is found dead himself, and whose technique inspires Hilary's murderer, is an eerie figure who looms large over the entire book.

Social Concerns/Themes

For James, the detective story is a twentieth-century morality play, and in her novels she deals with moral problems that confront society. Devices and Desires is set in the remote Norfolk headland called Larksoken, the site of a fictional nuclear power station. The threat of contamination from the station is ever-present, and one of the characters, Neil Pascoe, has mounted a one-man campaign, PANUP, against the dangers of nuclear power. His efforts do not have much success, but his arguments reflect many present-day concerns.

The question of terrorism enters into James's concerns. Carolyn Amphlett, the competent secretary, who does not wish to accompany Alex Mair to London, is in reality a member of a terrorist group. Her move to escape with Amy Camm is treated rather melodramatically, and the two perish in their attempt to outwit other terrorists. This treatment, criticized in many reviews, is nevertheless consistent with reality, since terrorist attacks are usually tinged with melodrama and often cause the death of innocent victims.

As in her previous novel, A Taste for Death (1986), James shows the deterioration of contemporary family life.

Alex Mair, the director of the power plant, has divorced his first wife and is further disappointed in a love affair with Hilary Robarts, the murder victim. His passionate but brief affair with Amy Camm brings no stability to his emotional life. The question of abortion is also presented through Hilary, whose possible child with Alex has been aborted. She regrets this action, for emotional rather than for moral reasons, and is anxious to marry him and have another child, which she feels he owes her.

In Devices and Desires, James explicitly refers to homosexuality, which in previous works has been handled implicitly. Miles Lessingham admits to sexual desires for the young Toby Gledhill, who prefers the seductive feminine charm of Hilary Robarts.

Carolyn Amphlett falsely claims a lesbian attachment to Amy Camm, which because of their subsequent disaster can never be disproved, and which leads to deep distress in Neil Pascoe and Jonathan Reeves. Homosexuality is treated without any judgement, but as a current social manifestation.

The question of sexually abused children is presented rather delicately in the childhood of Alex and Alice Mair, who let their father die without calling for help. Alex tells his sister that their father "will never do that to you again." The incident is not mentioned, but the reader understands what is meant, and is able to put Alex's emotional instability and ambition, and Alice's apparent coldness and detachment into the context of childhood abuse.

Children's problems occupy a major role in this novel. Young Timmy, Amy's illegitimate child, represents his mother's principal desire for respectability and evokes a sensitive

response in Neil's apparently one-track mind, bent on destroying the nuclear power plant. Ryan Blaney's four motherless children are treated with great delicacy. Theresa is only fifteen yet she gives them a mother's care and forgives her father's excessive drinking.

Even the baby and the little twins come alive in a sensitive but not overly sentimental portrayal of the struggles of poverty and single-parent households.

Although the Blaneys are the object of concern for almost all of the headland, they are poorly treated by Hilary Robarts, the murder victim, who wants to take their home away from them. Ryan Blaney thus becomes a murder suspect, but it is interesting to see that even the murderer tries to give him an alibi, out of sympathy for four motherless children.

On a more positive side, the attachments of family life are quite evident in the novel. Police inspector Rickards is newly married and quite devoted to his wife who is expecting their first child. His mother-in-law, a domineering woman, insists that the baby be born near her. The young woman, Susie, eventually stands up for her rights and returns home. In contrast to her mother, she is content simply to be a wife and mother, without any career plans, an exception among women today, notes James. The Blaneys are also a close-knit family, who strongly miss their dead mother. Adam Dalgliesh frequently recalls his deceased wife and son with evident emotion.

As usual, James addresses religious issues. The title is taken from the general confession in The Book of Common Prayer. The devout Copleys contrast with the non-practicing, if not unbelieving villagers. Both Roman Catholic and Anglican faith is a presence throughout, and the general loss of religion in contemporary society is an obvious theme.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The characters in Devices and Desires are more contemporary and diverse than those in James's previous novels.

In general, adverse criticism of this novel hinges more on its plot than on its character, accusing James of combining too many different genres — the crime novel, the detective story, and the thriller. One critic fails to see any signifying pattern "amid the plot's chain reaction of false leads, dead ends, subverted logic, and clumsy comings and goings." Another writes: "Like the strangler, James goes immediately for the throat. But after grabbing the reader, she steadily loses her grip. The compelling, complex but straightforward mystery begins to disintegrate; tensions slacken . . .

James, usually a keen prober of the psyche and especially gifted at isolating homely detail, lets stylization bury her stylishness." Another critic, on the contrary, sees "an artfully constructed, beautifully written story of flesh and blood individuals in time and place."

This novel is a bit melodramatic, in its inclusion of the killings of the Whistler, which are related to the main plot only because of the "copy cat" nature of the murder. In fact, critics inclined to find fault with the novel recognize the parts dealing with the Whistler as some of the best scenes.

James's sense of place normally revealed through her descriptions of the Georgian architecture of London, is here focused "on an imaginary headland on the northeast coast of Norfolk." James warns her readers not to expect to recognize its topography, but she has nevertheless created a real landscape. Dalgliesh's trip to the headland reveals landmarks that are developed with the plot: He was driving now across the open headland towards the fringe of pine trees which bordered the North Sea. The only house to his left was the old Victorian rectory, a square, red-bricked building, incongruous behind its struggling hedge of rhododendron and laurel . . . to the north the broken arches and stumps of the ruined Benedictine abbey gleamed golden in the afternoon sun against the crinkled blue of the sea.

Ever interested in buildings, James presents Martyr's Cottage, "a substantial two- story, L-shaped house standing to the east of the track, with walls partly flint and partly rendered, enclosing at the rear a courtyard of York stone which gave an uninterrupted view over fifty yards of scrub to the grassy dunes and the sea."

Scudder's Cottage, the home of the Blaneys, is by contrast "small-windowed, picturesque under its tiled, dipping roof . . . fronted by a flowering wilderness which had once been a garden . . .

between grass almost knee-high bordered by a riot of unpruned roses."

Related Titles

A Taste for Death was described as James's most ambitious work. Devices and Desires is shorter, less complex, and more homogeneous, showing a basic middleclass structure. The issues however, if somewhat contrived, are very contemporary, such as the terrorist element. The family issues are convincing, since they spring from James's own experience. As in the preceding novel, James shows more sensitivity to women's issue, presenting contemporary women who are the equal of men.

Susie Rickards, who chose to abandon her career for marriage, is presented as an exception.

Dalgliesh has again matured since previous novels. He is more controlled, sympathetic, and understanding. Here he is looking for solitude but is disturbed by a murder he literally stumbles upon. He does however allow Investigator Rickards to develop his own case without interfering, although with his experience and intelligence, he is able to see elements unknown to his colleague.

Judith Crist finds this mystery of James's better than her best. She sees the richness of the classical novel, "a topical tale told in a taut time framework." T. J. Binyon states that "it is difficult to know quite what to think of Devices and Desires: it is more engrossing than the author's last novel, A Taste for Death, but equally disappointing."

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt remarks cryptically: "The show must go on, but there are only slight reasons to attend it." Though disappointed, these critics agree that, even if sometimes drawnout, this book has great merit in its portrayal of characters and issues.

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Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994