

Hannibal Short Guide

Hannibal by Thomas Harris

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Characters

Thomas Harris's second novel, *Red Dragon* (1981), introduced readers to Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a fascinating, brilliant killer given to eating his victims. Hannibal, "the Cannibal," considered psychotic himself, provided psychological insight to help FBI agent Will Graham track down the Red Dragon serial killer. At the same time he betrayed Graham by giving the Red Dragon Graham's home address. Harris's third novel, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1987), expanded Hannibal Lecter into an even more interesting Janus-faced character who, while locked up in a maximum-security prison for the criminally insane, could still kill and at the same time aid the FBI in capturing a serial killer. This time, Lecter worked with Clarice Starling, a young agent still in training. Clarice emerged as worthy of Hannibal's otherwise generally bored and condescending attention: a woman of courage, discipline and compassion, unschooled in matters of culture and taste, but with the intellect and verve to keep him entertained.

In *Hannibal*, Dr. Lecter and Clarice return, and are shown to be more multidimensional as they soar toward a shared apotheosis.

Seven years have passed since Clarice captured and killed Jame Gumb, the serial killer of *The Silence of the Lambs*, with Hannibal Lecter's help. It is now the late nineties and the President of the United States is suffering through a sex scandal and a threatened impeachment. Clarice is thirty-two and her career as a sharpshooting special agent with the FBI in Washington, D.C., has come to a standstill, blocked by the enmity of her nemesis, Paul Krendler of the Department of Justice, and the jealousy and misogyny of her male superiors at the FBI.

Krendler is making Clarice the scapegoat for a drug raid gone wrong in which she killed five people (all of them criminals who were shooting at her and her fellow officers of the law). Krendler is able to do this because the press is exploiting the fact that one of them was a woman holding a baby and the FBI already has a bad image from the killings at Ruby Ridge and Waco.

Under the threat of investigation and suspension from her job, with no one in authority taking her part, Clarice is tormented by all of her old insecurities stemming from the poverty and abandonment of her childhood.

Dr. Lecter, who escaped from prison in *The Silence of the Lambs*, has been living in Brazil. While there, he had minor plastic surgery performed on his face and the sixth finger of his left hand removed. This accomplished, Lecter takes up a new life in Florence, Italy, as the Renaissance scholar Dr. Fell. He accepts a recently vacated position as museum curator of the Palazzo Capponi, a job he wins by sight-translating Medieval Latin and Italian texts. Never mind that Dr. Lecter quietly killed the previous curator to create the vacancy. He can now live the life of the consummate connoisseur and scholar, expressing his exquisite aestheticism and abilities. Dr. Lecter lives among the high ceilings and vast spaces of his apartment in the Palazzo Capponi, drinking fine wines, eating well, and playing classical selections on his clavier. His dark side is mostly



kept under wraps, although one more incidental death does take place when he disposes of an inept viola da gamba player from the Florence Chamber Orchestra. By the end of *Silence of the Lambs* he had killed a dozen people and eaten parts of many of them. Unconfined, he is much less active. He is presented as brilliant and entirely rational, albeit haunted by a dark childhood experience.

The most horrible character in *Hannibal* is Mason Verger. Verger has no redeeming qualities. In his youth he was a rapist of children whose inherited wealth kept him out of prison. Verger was nearly killed by Dr. Lecter who, as his psychotherapist, gave him acid and methamphetamine and convinced him to slice off parts of his own face, then broke his neck. Verger now lies paralyzed except for his head and neck and one crab-like hand. His body shrunken and his breathing dependent on a respirator, he is able to speak only through a set of electronic pipes. He is noseless, lipless, cheekless, and without an eyelid on his one eye. The grafted-on blood vessels of his face pulsate over his skull-like countenance. He is a monster in his physical appearance and in his utterly evil mind. He entertains himself by verbally tormenting small foster-care children and then drinking their tears in his martinis. He must rely on others to carry out his dirty work and is assisted by his majordomo, Cordell, a felon who helps Verger procure his child victims. Verger also relies on his bodybuilding lesbian sister, Margot, whom he sexually abused when they were children. He has inherited the family meatpacking business as well as his father's Maryland estate with its Stanford White-designed house and horse barns. He uses his wealth to buy privileged information and political favors. His consuming passion is revenge, the symbol of which is a huge mindless and voracious eel that swims endlessly in figure eights in a large tank.

The fourth activator of the plot is Rinaldo Pazzi, chief investigator of the Florence Questura. Pazzi is descended from the notorious Pazzi family, one of whom, in 1478, had been hanged out of the window of the Palazzo Vecchio, naked and disemboweled, for the murder of one of the Medicis and the attempted murder of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Chief Investigator Pazzi was at one time celebrated for capturing the serial killer "Il Mostro," but a successful appeal of the conviction resulted in his public humiliation and the scorn of his coworkers.

He is smart and tough and willing to sell his honor. His weak spot is his beautiful young and ever-needy wife, of whose affections he is never quite certain. He is a bit of a comical character and at one point is described as resembling the character Wile E. Coyote in the Roadrunner cartoons.

Barney, a muscular male nurse who took care of Dr. Lecter for six years in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, is mix of greed and principle. He serves as a connector between Clarice and Hannibal, and between Hannibal and Mason Verger. Barney has been selling Dr.

Lecter's prison papers and possessions left behind after his escape to accrue enough money to view every Vermeer painting in the world. His ambition has led him to Verger, who wishes to extract information regarding Hannibal from him. Barney is a bodybuilder



like Margot Verger; Barney and Margot share gym time and form an alliance of sorts. But when Margot asks Barney to help her kill her brother, he refuses.

Paul Krendler is a hyenalike villain who is jealous, vulgar, and not too bright. He uses his powerful position within the Department of Justice to step hard on Clarice, whom he hates, largely because she is a woman. Then Krendler takes up with Mason Verger and becomes totally enmeshed in evil. It is because of Krendler that Clarice becomes so discouraged about her chances of succeeding at her job. He has made her a scapegoat and she gives up being a team player and strikes out for justice independently.

Social Concerns

The pervasiveness of wickedness in its many forms in human life is an important concern of Thomas Harris in *Hannibal*.

Closely associated to this is the fascination that evil and violence hold for human beings. Present in the novel is the cerebral and entertaining savagery of Dr. Hannibal Lecter whose wickedness is swift, brilliant, and retributive. But the reader is also reminded of the violence of all past human history, well represented in revered works of art and literature, classical mythology and the Bible. Violence, it would seem, is the human heritage. When the reader first sees Dr.

Lecter in Florence, he is standing beside Donatello's bronze statue of Judith and Holofernes, "her sword forever raised to strike the drunken king . . . Holofernes gripped by the hair." Glowing in the moonlight over the Palazzo Vecchio are the marble statues depicting rape and murder and the reader is reminded that in this piazza the patriot monk Savonarola was burned to death after long days of physical torture.

Man's fascination with violence is emphasized when Dr. Lecter attends an Atrocious Torture Instruments exposition in Florence featuring twenty machines designed to inflict terrible pain on human victims.

Lecter is not there to see the instruments of torture but rather to watch the fascinated and leering faces of the viewing public. In Dr. Lecter's litany of violence in art and literature, he mentions that a theme in Dante's work is chewing: "Count Ugolino chewing on the back of the archbishop's head, Satan with his three faces chewing Judas, Brutus, and Cassius." There are other literary references to cannibalism and the eating of organs.



Techniques

By setting the story at first broadly in Washington, D.C., and its surround, then very narrowly in the heart of Florence, then back to northern Maryland and the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, and finally far away from all of these, Harris intensifies the sense of adventure and creates excitement. It is obvious that Harris is very familiar with all of these milieus. Washington, D.C., is the setting for bureaucratic machinations, drug raids, and kidnaping in Safeway parking lots. The Chesapeake Bay area is the perfect idyllic escape from these unpleasant aspects for Lecter, while still providing him with access to the art and theater of Washington and New York. In a twist on the usual, we are not treated to a romance in sunny Italy, but rather to dark intrigue and gut-grabbing violence, all set against a background of classical refinement and beauty.

And of course, a major city in South America is the ultimate escape, where if you have plenty of money and are as smart as Lecter and Clarice, you can live the perfect escapist life.

The narrative of the action, which mostly follows a chronological sequence, albeit with some harking back to past events, is fairly straightforward and moves swiftly. There are also interspersed static scenes, designed to provide contrast as well as character development and access to the inner consciousness of Lecter and Clarice. These are scenes such as Clarice in her duplex, emotionally devastated, leaning against the clothes dryer for comfort; the airplane ride from Europe to the United States with Lecter packed in with a touring group, Lecter's trip to the toiletries shop in Florence, his complicated decanting of a bottle of Chateau Petrus on the shores of the Chesapeake, his playing of beautiful music on his clavier with the tabloid picture of Clarice on the music rack.

Harris plays with sentence structure, verb tense, and narrative voice. Phrases announce settings as though they were stage directions. The narrative viewpoint shifts, startling and pleasing readers with the change from the straight third-person narrative in the past tense, to the more intense present tense used for closely observed scenes conveying inner consciousness. Sometimes readers are drawn directly into the observations with the use of first-person plural narration. These varying points of view convey multiple consciousnesses and different speeds of action. Throughout the writing is permeated by a potent irony and an allure that constantly whets our appetites for more. The book is a thriller, filled with suspense, terror, and shock that entertains. But it also soars above the commonplace. The love story between the pure and courageous Clarice and the darkly brilliant Lecter is somehow, while a bit frightening and very unexpected, ultimately satisfying.

Themes

Revenge is the primary theme of *Hannibal*. The plot turns on the revenge motive of wealthy recluse Mason Verger, who seeks to avenge the fact that he now fits the words of the Christmas carol that children once sang outside his bedroom window: "How still we see thee lie." When he heard these words he realized that he must make Hannibal Lecter, the man who did this to him, suffer excruciatingly and for as long as possible.

Paul Krendler, a government official, also burns with the desire for revenge. His target is FBI agent Clarice Starling, who has outsmarted and outperformed him at every turn. Not content to scathe her with vulgar deprecations, he must also ruin her career and in the process possibly get her killed.

Chief Investigator Rinaldo Pazzi of the Florence police wants revenge for the humiliation he has suffered at the hands of his jealous coworkers who resented his success in capturing a serial killer known as "Il Mostro." He seeks his revenge with the capture of Hannibal Lecter so that he can use the reward money offered by Mason Verger to leave Italy and live in comfort in the United States.

Margot carries out her vengeance on Mason who raped and tortured her when they were children, and who has continued to torture other children. She provides him with a death symbolic of his crimes.

Revenge is not in Clarice's character, but Hannibal balances the scales of justice with a two-part scenario that begins with an exquisite dinner party and ends with a move to South America and a beautiful new life.

Memory is also a strong theme in *Hannibal*. When things become unpleasant for Lecter, he retires to his memory palace, a mental construct of a thousand beautiful rooms connected by miles of corridors. The rooms are filled with the world's most beautiful things and associated with these are hundreds of facts that Lecter needs to retain in his memory. However, there are dungeons at the bottom of the palace where bad memories lurk, threatening to surface when Lecter traverses the upper regions. It is in these dungeons that he encounters the memory of his family, killed in Lithuania in 1944 by army deserters. His beloved little sister, Mischa, was killed and eaten, foreshadowing Lecter's later aberrant behavior.

Clarice, too, is troubled by memories of her childhood—the poverty, the early death of her father who was shot while on nightmarshall duty. She subconsciously blames him for abandoning her and her mother, who then had to scrounge for a living.

Clarice has a belief that because she has failed in her career, people will think that her parents were "trailer camp tornado bait white trash." Lecter teaches her to correct her memories, to accept that the values her parents lived by are superior to the values of the people who are harassing her at work.



It is the vulnerability of Lecter and Clarice, rooted as they are in their haunting memories of the past, that connects them. Lecter seeks in Clarice a worthy woman who will give Mischa a place in the world, and the threat of this is that he wants Mischa to have Clarice's place. Clarice is his "warrior," righting wrongs with courage and skill.

For Clarice, Lecter represents understanding and eventually freedom from her vulnerability and pain.

Abandonment by God is another theme in Hannibal. For Lecter, the revelation of this came in 1944 after his family were all killed. He was "no longer bothered by any considerations of deity, other than to recognize how his own modest predations paled beside those of God, who is in irony matchless, and in wanton malice beyond measure." Mason Verger expresses his particular view of it: "God's choices in inflicting suffering are not satisfactory to us, nor are they understandable, unless innocence offends Him. Clearly He needs some help in directing the blind fury with which He flogs the earth." And Clarice and her old FBI boss Jack Crawford are like "medical missionaries, with little patience for theology, each concentrating hard on the one baby before them, knowing and not saying that God wouldn't do a goddamned thing to help. That for fifty thousand Ibo infant lives, He would not bother to send rain."

Clarice attributes this theme to Lecter when she says: "He thought what happened to me would ... disillusion me about the Bureau, and he enjoys seeing the destruction of faith, it's his favorite thing."

Adaptations

Harris's first novel, a straightforward thriller, was *Black Sunday* (1975). It was made into a movie of the same name and starred Bruce Dern and Robert Shaw. Dr.

Hannibal Lecter was introduced in Thomas Harris's second book *Red Dragon* (1981), in which the action revolved around the creepy serial killer Francis Dolarhyde who was working at "becoming" the Great Red Dragon mentioned in the book of Revelation and depicted in William Blake's painting "The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun." The movie *Manhunter* (1986) was a simplified version of the book that left out the brutal maiming of the hero, Will Graham, by Dolarhyde as well as the detailed account of Dolarhyde's childhood and his eating of the red dragon painting.

The Silence of the Lambs (1988) introduced Clarice Starling who becomes the chief tracker of Jame Gumb, a serial killer who wants to transform himself into a transsexual; Hannibal Lecter gives Clarice major clues to the identity of Gumb while still imprisoned. The book was made into a movie in 1991 with excellent portrayals by Anthony Hopkins as Lecter and by Jodie Foster as Clarice. The movie version was fairly faithful to the book except that Clarice as heroine is enhanced; there is less sifting of FBI evidence and more action than in the book.

Most of Harris's themes in *Hannibal* are present in the two preceding novels, but whereas evil is confined to the serial killers and it is only the readers who are fascinated with it, in *Hannibal* human history is presented as being steeped in evil. In a similar sidestep, in the first two books the childhoods of the serial killers Dolarhyde and Jame Gumb are presented as explanations of their pathology, whereas Lecter presents himself as having no causative past—he just is as he is. In *Hannibal* the monster has a past and it has made him do what he does. The most persistent theme in all three books is the perception of abandonment of humankind by an uncaring universe. In that regard serial killers seem to believe that because of God's failure to create for them what they need they must take on the role of God to correct things.



Key Questions

In Hannibal Harris examines themes of violence, revenge, abandonment, and memory through the characters of Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling.

1. What is it about the characters Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling that makes them so fascinating?
2. How has Lecter's character changed throughout the novel?
3. How has the relationship between Hannibal and Clarice changed throughout the novel?
4. Why do you think Harris uses a female character as the lead criminal in the opening scene?
5. What improbabilities or inconsistencies are there in the plot of Hannibal?
6. Does Lecter's propensity for Chateau d'Yquem, white truffles, and Bach's Goldberg Variations stereotype him?

How?

7. Many readers of Hannibal have objected to the ending. Do you agree? Does the ending diminish Clarice's character?
8. What is the nature of the psychological connection between Clarice and Lecter's dead sister Mischa?
9. How does Harris, if he does, make the violent acts in Hannibal less threatening to the reader?

Literary Precedents

The FBI's Behavioral Science Unit work in criminal profiling that is used to identify serial killers was featured prominently in *Red Dragon* and then again in *The Silence of the Lambs*. A nonfiction examination of how criminal profiling works was presented in the book *Mind Hunter* (1995) by John Douglas, who pioneered criminal profiling at the FBI. John Douglas is the model for Jack Crawford, a major character in both *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Jack Crawford and the Behavioral Science Unit, while still present, are less central to *Hannibal*.

The FBI's Behavioral Science Unit is also featured in Patricia Cornwell's popular Kay Scarpetta crime novels. Cornwell's novels are characterized by realistic and horrifying descriptions of crimes, as are those of Harris, but Harris's work elegantly transcends Cornwell's knowledge-based crime genre, adding greater literary and intellectual depth. P. D. James comes closer to Harris; she has extensive knowledge of medical forensics and writes with a sharp eye for cultural and intellectual idiosyncracies.

The story line of *Hannibal* has a precedent in the fable of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Like the Beast, Hannibal Lecter is redeemed, or so we are led to believe, by Clarice. As a rational, nonpsychotic personification of evil, Hannibal is prefigured by all satanic characters in fiction and in the Bible by Satan himself.



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