A Taste for Death Short Guide

A Taste for Death by P. D. James

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Characters

James is especially noted for the character delineation in her novels. Her detective character, Commander Adam Dalgliesh, who appears in other James novels, has been described by one critic as "a catalyst who allows people to show themselves." Here he is more intimately involved since the victim came to him before the murder to show him a poison pen letter. In fact, throughout the investigation, Dalgliesh occasionally betrays his personal connection to the victim. He remains the cool, dispassionate detective, however, who questions suspects calmly and objectively, with a maximum of consideration. He is also the clever investigator, who manages to see connections that escape others. He is respected by his associates, feared by suspects, and acknowledged by all as an expert in his field.

A Taste for Death presents Dalgliesh with a new associate, the young Kate Miskin. Having no family except for an aged grandmother who raised her, she is vaguely in search of her identity and is anxious to prove herself in a masculine world. When urged by her teachers to seek a profession more "socially significant," she replies that she could not "think of anything more basic than helping to make sure that people can walk safely in their own city." She has a mild infatuation with Dalgliesh, who feels the same toward her, but he shows extreme discretion in this regard. In the end she proves her valor and intelligence during an unexpected encounter with the murderer, thus gaining the respect of the reader, if not the police force.

The Berowne family is from the petty aristocracy, a departure from James's usual portrayal of the middle class.

Although they cling to their ancestral home, their wealth is not proportionate to their social claims. Lady Ursula, an eighty-two-year-old matron, who was attractive to men in her day, maintains a household with servants and schedules, and upholds the integrity of the family until the very end. Lady Barbara, Sir Paul's second wife and the widow of his brother, is, according to Lady Ursula, "third rate." Her beauty is her main asset, and she has used it to attract two husbands, as well as her current lover, Stephen Lampart.

Sir Paul Berowne, the victim, is a baronet, a Minister of the Crown, and a government minister with higher aspirations. He is a man who, according to his estranged daughter Sarah, "wanted to be good." The reader learns about him progressively as the police investigation reveals his past. One day, after a religious experience, he resigns his office, plans to sell his home, and requests to spend a night in St. Matthew's Church.

The murder investigation reveals that he had a mistress who was totally devoted to him, that he had enemies among his household, and that he was strangely linked to two other deaths, that of Theresa Nolan, one of his mother's nurses, and of Diana Travers, a member of the housekeeping staff. He is also linked to a derelict, Harry Mack, who is found dead beside him. In life, he aspired to truth and sincerity, but his death leaves many mysteries.

James introduces a range of suspects.

Father Barnes, the rector of St. Matthew's, is a poorly-clad, unimpressive priest, and an improbable spiritual advisor for Sir Paul. Miss Wharton, who brings flowers each day to the church and acts as caretaker, befriends the waif Darren. After accepting the kindness of the murderer, she almost brings destruction to little Darren, the abandoned child who must survive by his own resources.

Ivor Garrod, a self-styled revolutionary who seeks his own advantage; Stephen Lampart, an obstetrician who attains wealth and reputation in defiance of the law and who gains the beautiful Barbara Berowne as his mistress; and Massingham, a devoted but rather chauvinistic policeman, are all woven convincingly into the plot, united by a link to the murderer or the victim.

Social Concerns/Themes

In A Taste for Death, James portrays the conflict of a fatherless child with an alcoholic and promiscuous mother.

Young Darren, who accompanies the elderly Miss Wharton to St. Matthew's Church, seems to have some clue to a murder. Because of this, the policeman Massingham insists upon seeing his home, which is a wretched hovel in a poor section of the city. The mother is oblivious to the problems of her son, who collects stolen objects on which he manages to survive. Once saved by welfare, he is sickly, and was spared by the murderer. The problem of juvenile crime is delicately probed by James, who has had personal experience in dealing with young people and their social difficulties.

James's preoccupation with the issue of abortion is reflected in the spurious medical practices of Dr. Lampart, who has gained his popularity by violating the law and performing abortions when the parents are dissatisfied with the sex of the child. In addition, Theresa Nolan commits suicide after an abortion because of guilt. Her grandparents, traditional Irish Catholics, have mixed emotions: her grandfather condemns her as a sinner; her grandmother takes a more merciful and humanitarian attitude.

Although there is no resolution of the problem, the issue is important to this novel.

The women's issue, of relative unimportance in James's previous novels, acquires more prominence here, especially in the attitudes of Adam Dalgliesh's new assistant, Kate Miskin. She has chosen her present career to demonstrate her equality with males, and she occasionally resents Dalgliesh's air of masculine superiority. Barbara Berowne, on the other hand, described by her mother-in-law as "third rate," shows the traditional pride of the nobility, as well as the traditional view of woman-as-mother.

The depiction of espionage movements and a possible connection with the IRA, reflect contemporary political concerns. But a Marxist revolutionary "cell," established by Ivor Garrod, is actually a vehicle for personal vengeance. Inspector Duxbury characterizes the Workers Revolutionary Campaign as "little more than a front," because "Garrod prefers to run his own show." A young woman, Diana Travers, who allegedly dies in an accidental drowning, was a sort of double agent for Garrod and for the Special Branch, and was used to spy on Berowne's political career as Minister of the Crown.

Religion always plays a major role in James's novels. Here, the murder takes place in a church sometime after the victim has had a "religious experience." This religious experience changes his entire life, and he is now prepared to sell the ancestral home, abandon his mistress, and resign his post in the government. James contrasts this unexplained conversion with the progressive de-Christianization evident in the members of the Church of England. Many of the major characters confess disbelief in traditional church doctrines and are mystified by Berowne's sudden change of heart.

James never fully explains Berowne's religious experience, leaving much of it shrouded in mystery.

Adaptations

A Taste for Death was presented on the television series "Mystery," which has featured many of James's works.

The interpretation was faithful to the novel, although it did not follow the same chronology. The novel begins with the murder, and the television performance, done in five parts, showed some events which were later uncovered during the investigation before presenting the murder. It is done convincingly with excellent actors.

Sister Irma M. Kashuba, S.S.J.

Literary Precedents

James's great talent is in her portrayal of characters. According to one critic: "The people in her books are anything but paper figures; all but the most peripheral are three-dimensional, their backgrounds finely drawn, and their actions the inevitable result of the interaction between their personalities and the circumstances that confront them." The same critic notes that James has continued to improve her characterization with each succeeding novel.

Although the criticism was written before this novel, it was indeed a good prediction, for the characters in A Taste for Death are even more complex and believable than those in previous novels. Adam Dalgliesh evolves with each novel, developing the maturity that comes with age and experience.

The mystery aficionado seeks a plausible plot that is not obvious until the very end and yet provides adequate clues to clarify events when the mystery is revealed. James moves quickly from one character or situation to another, holding the reader's interest, often giving false clues, but never false information.

One also finds a sense of place in James's novels. She describes her locales well, and the homes fit perfectly into the London landscape. Her interest in architecture leads her to describe buildings in detail: St. Matthew's with "the green copper cupola of the soaring campanile of Arthur Blomfield's extraordinary Romanesque basilica"; the Berowne home, 62 Campden Hill Square, "an urban oasis of greenery and Georgian elegance . . . one of the rare examples of Sir John Soane's domestic architecture . . . its neo-classical facade in Portland stone and brick dominated the terrace and the whole square, inalienably a part of them, yet looking almost arrogantly unique."

James's natural descriptions are also arresting. For example, in Holland Park "the beds had been richly patterned with the summer display of geraniums, fuschias, heliotropes and begonias. But now the time had come for the autumn stripping. Half the beds were already bare — expanses of soft loam littered with broken stems, petals like blobs of blood and a scatter of drying leaves."

James writes in the tradition of Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, and Margery Allingham. Siebenheller remarks that although these authors are all female, English, and mystery writers, James departs from that tradition. "Her concern is with reality, not make-believe. The worlds she creates are peopled with varied and interesting characters whose actions spring from believable motivations and whose reactions are true to their complex personalities. And her victims, as she has often remarked, are truly dead."

James claims Jane Austen as her favorite author. Her novels reflect the order, sanity, and gentility of Austen's world. Critics have compared her to Dickens and Balzac in her ability to create characters. In A Taste for Death, young Darren has overtones of Dickens's David Copperfield and Victor Hugo's Gavroche, and James's use of popular

language is accurate and true to life. Although she is normally more at home with the proper language of the English middle class, James shows great insight into other levels of society.

Related Titles

A Taste for Death, James's tenth novel, is her longest and most ambitious. Her large and varied cast of characters ranges in social class from poor waif to minister of the Crown. Characters also display a greater psychological scope, ranging from religious ecstasy to revolutionary zeal. In its range of issues, the novel seems less of an English period piece and more of a contemporary novel.

The character of Adam Dalgliesh has also matured. Dalgliesh is a rounded character who has grown older and wiser, as well as more compassionate and understanding, with each new novel.

A Taste for Death seems a much more modern novel than its predecessors.

James's themes are contemporary and portray the disintegration of society through broken marriages, extramarital affairs (and sexual infidelity. The characters obviously belong to the end of the twentieth century); those in previous novels often harkened back to the nineteenth century. James seems more attuned to current issues, more sensitive to feminism, and more overt in presenting related questions.

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