



Contextualising Christian Symbolism in P.D. James' *The Lighthouse*

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Abstract

This paper argues that how *The Lighthouse* of P.D. James inspires her readers to think theologically. The manner that the reader responds to James' novel - rather than just how James writes it - must be examined in order to understand how her novel inspires theological reflection. This essay aims to prove that James contributes to a theological discussion through her detective fiction by analysing Christian symbolism that is represented in character, setting, and storyline. James' commentary on Christianity, faith, evil, and suffering in *The Lighthouse* is more succinct than that of many theologians. She has done more than any of her competitors to turn the detective fiction into a tool for serious moral and psychological analysis. She repeatedly offers her readers advice that is both reassuring and unsettling by eloquently describing external scenes that match inside truths. James keeps Christianity accessible by presenting a variety of religious sites. These religious settings occasionally offer a haven of comfort and spiritual direction. However, other times, the religious settings reveal the violence and hypocrisy within the church. James instead refers to moral, sociological, or psychological factors while discussing theological topics. They are then frequently written about in a nonreligious manner.

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P.D. James is the most prolific detective author of British literature. She has written sixteen novels over the course of a career spanning more than five decades, in addition to an autobiography, a Christian fable, a literary analysis, short tales, and a number of other non-fictional works. She is well known for being a confessing Anglican, but she never writes overtly Christian fiction. Her *The Children of Men* (1992), the only novel, is overtly religious. In spite of this, James' detective novels have hints of Christianity in the titles. A Christian theological doctrine is the subject of the novel, *Original Sin*. The phrase "Death in Holy Orders" combines a Christian sacramental ritual with a warning of impending violence. The term "Holy Orders" alludes to the system of ordination used in many Christian creeds, notably that of the Anglican Church. A line from *Book of Common Prayer* inspired the title of the novel, *Devices and Desires*. This may be less obvious as a Christian quotation to those who are not religious, but anyone who attends an Anglican church or reads the *Book of Common Prayer* would recognise the title. James suggests to her readers that her works will include religious topics by employing Christian terms in the titles.

James might attribute her initial interest in detective fiction to more commonplace impulses, but information about her biography shows that her Christian faith has a significant impact on why and how she produces detective fiction. Her ambition to investigate the causes of evil, to rehabilitate her fallen characters, to order disordered affections, and to pursue justice might be seen as a defining characteristic of her success as a novelist. It is impossible to deny the theological content of James' writing, despite the fact that literary criticism rarely discusses the religious content of James' novels. It is clear that James has a religious conscience from the titles of some of her novels to the Christian locations, characters, and themes included in several of her novels. Christian traces hint at the existence of the divine in her detective tales.

James concurs with the links made between the theologian and the author of detective fiction. Her subtlety is her talent, even though her mysteries don't explicitly include any religious aspects. James is aware that even a "silly police fiction" (59) like Robert Zaslovsky's "The Divine Detective in the Guilty Vicarage" can make profound statements about how God and mankind interact. As a result, it becomes a work of contemporary theology. James' detective fiction is replete with allusions to the Christian life. The sacred is made relevant through her various allusions to the Christian life and her descriptions of locales, characters, and storyline. James avoids creating overtly Christian narratives despite her open commitment to Christianity and general interest in theology. She opts to continue writing mystery fiction every year. James continued to write and publish detective

novels until the age of 88. Although the author has made it apparent that she does not intend to preach through her writing, her novels can't help but convey a Christian message to her readers.

James recalls her early enthusiasm for storytelling. Though they were always unreasonably thrilling and enigmatic, her initial stories did fascinate her younger siblings. James' interest in storytelling changed as she grew older for a different reason. In *Time to Be in Earnest*, James says that Detective fiction is

one way in which we can cope with violent death, fictionalize it, give it a recognizable shape and, at the end of the book, show that even the most intractable mystery is capable of solution, not by supernatural means or good fortune, but by human intelligence, human perseverance, and human courage. (17)

The thirteenth novel in the Adam Dalgliesh mystery series is *The Lighthouse*, published in 2005. The story centres on the Combe Island off the Cornish Coast. Visitors frequently come here to experience heaven or find relaxation, especially wealthy and influential white-collar workers. Because the root of *The Lighthouse* is historical, James has added a lovely bit of background information here. The Holcombe family is the coast's owner. They make the decision to use the Combe coast as a retreat for males, gentlemen who hold positions of authority, such as ministers, lawmakers, writers, members of the white-collar and privileged classes, etc. The Combe Island is run by a private trust and is referred to as "Combe House" by its family and staff. Restricted individuals have a significant part to play in this murder investigation. This excellent "country-house mystery" sheds light on a select group of visitors, including renowned author Nathan Oliver, his daughter Miranda Oliver, and his copyeditor Dennis Tremlett. Others were the Combe Island trust manager Rupert Maycroft, the Anglican clergyman Adrian Boyde, the scientist Dr. Mark Yelland, the boatman Jago Tamlyn, and the handyman Daniel Padgett.

The Lighthouse is located on Cornwall's Combe Island coast. It is an excellent blending of a coastal mystery with a psychological thriller. Famous author Nathan Oliver is brutally murdered in the lighthouse. It is an investigation on the psychology of closed communities. The story portrays lust and immoral relationships. Nathan Oliver's illegitimate kid is Daniel Padgett. He refused to accept his accountability and refused to introduce himself to the youngster. Daniel has so murdered his father and then hangs himself from the lighthouse.

In the novel, Adrian Boyde, a once ordained priest looking for serenity on a deserted island, is also killed and has his cope placed over him. Dalgliesh is prompted to think about the murder's religious meaning by this hint. Boyde was a priest once but left the ministry owing to drinking and perhaps a change of faith. He is attempting to reclaim his dignity, uncover his purpose in life, and rediscover his vocation. He starts off serving in the Church once more

while he is employed on Combe as an accountant. His murder ultimately results from this choice. Few people, even those who confess to Boyde and the murderer, who is afraid of what has been confessed to him, do consider Boyde to be a priest. Boyde does not reclaim his status as a priest until after his death. The cope that was supposed to be a gift marking his choice to return to the church is placed over his dead body and is splattered with his blood when he is found at a makeshift altar. Boyde's discovery in a symbolically religious arrangement does not directly implicate the murderer, but it does provide Dalglish with the proof he needs to track him down. Even if he did not respect Boyde in that capacity, the offender must have acknowledged Boyde's priestly standing.

Dalglish feels a connection to Boyde throughout the novel. Perhaps this is a result of their similar religious experiences, wherein both of them had strong religious convictions in the past but later lost them as a result of painful events. Dalglish experiences a "strange serenity" when questioning Boyde, which is unusual for him to experience when with a suspect. Here is a man I could have chatted to, one I would have liked, he reasoned (288). Dalglish is aware that Boyde was unable to perform the crime, but he might know who did. Their discussion goes on:

Dalglish looked at Boyde directly and asked bluntly, 'Father, do you know who killed Nathan Oliver?'

Addressing Boyde as a priest had been involuntary and the word surprised him even as he heard himself speak it. It took him some seconds to realize the significance of what seemed no more than a slip of the tongue. The effect on Boyde was immediate. He looked at Dalglish with pain-filled eyes which seemed to hold an entreaty. (289)

Dalglish is aware of the priest's need for privacy in the confessional, so he refrains from pressing Boyde for a response. Boyde, however, is brutally murdered in order to keep a secret that he discovered in the confessional, sharing Father Baddeley's fate.

We can't help but ponder what it means for a Christian novelist to write about the priest's slaying as we examine the characters in *The Lighthouse*. He is slain as a result of carrying out a calling-related activity. Why does James decide to depict him as one of her most fervently religious characters who dies violently? He works in a place where religion is nonexistent. Adrian Boyde, the priest, is a wasted man trying to find his dignity and meaning in a world that doesn't really require a priest. There is a spiritual presence even in a hospice for the terminally ill. An element of the supernatural persists on an island reserved for the wealthy and famous who seek

to get away from the stresses of everyday life. Each man had the option to choose his own salvation, but doing so would have meant denying his religion and, thus, his identity.

James maintains that she is not evangelising through her novels. If she were to do so, she would produce priests who were ideal human beings, which is plainly not what she does. These characters demonstrate how the divine is ever-present, not only in her writings but also in the environment we live in. Dalglish comes across other priests during his investigations from whom he wants to elicit information that may have been given in confession. Adrian Boyde is not the only one. The only priest character in *The Lighthouse* is Adrian Boyde. He works as an accountant on Combe Island right now, thus he is not a priest in active ministry. Boyde initially resigned from the priesthood in order to combat his drinking. He is gradually resuming his priestly duties while on the island by leading religious services and hearing confessions. Due to the similarities between these two individuals' approaches to religion, Boyde is important to this chapter regarding Dalglish's beliefs. Dalglish sensed a weird calm as he interrogated Boyde, which was unusual for him to experience while with a suspect. Here is a man I could have chatted to, one I would have liked, he reasoned (288).

During his investigation in *The Lighthouse*, Dalglish feels a connection to Boyde since the suspect, like Dalglish, was once a devout guy. Boyde, "an Anglican priest, had resigned from his living, perhaps due to his drinking or a lack of faith, or perhaps a combination of both" (58). Adrian is currently regaining his religion and rediscovering his priestly duties. On the island, he has begun to conduct services and hear confessions. It is because of this that he perishes. But before he passes away, his return to religion enables Dalglish and Boyde's friendship to deepen. Boyde's faith and openness to the enigmatic and unknowable are qualities the investigator admires. The biggest obstacle to Dalglish's capacity to fully accept Christianity seems to be his lack of faith and relentless search for the truth. In *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, Susan Rowland observes that Dalglish "quite often discovers aspects of himself in suspects, even in murderers" (196).

The constant presence of Dalglish's connection to priests throughout James' works serves to highlight his developing Christianity. Dalglish re-connects with his childhood religion as he forges bonds with these clerics. The fostering connections of the priests James introduces in her novels help to ease his struggle between faith and scepticism. James considers creating detective fiction to be an expression of the triumph of good over evil. Her novels are not light mysteries where a body is propped up in a room to give the reader a riddle to solve. Instead, these are deftly written tales meant to illustrate the profoundly corrosive repercussions that murder has on every life it affects. No character will escape a murder in the novels undamaged. James does not, however,

limit her depiction of the effects of murder to its dreadful pollution. She usually gives the bad guy some sort of justice at the end of a novel. Dalglish normally brings about justice through an arrest, although it is also possible for the murderer to commit suicide or die in an accident. Only one villain never escapes capture or perishes at the end of a James novel.

Evil is by definition messy and chaotic. What is right and just is distorted by it. James starts the effort to defeat evil by naming it. Through simplification and subsequent neutralisation, evil loses its force. By writing about it in the detective genre, James names this evil and, in doing so, enters the confusion and distortion in search of order and justice. When she tackles these subjects through the detective genre, James thinks she has an excellent structure to remark on human suffering, the ability for good and evil within humanity, as well as the triumph of the good over evil. James subscribes to what might be called an incarnational aesthetic: She wants to render the world in all of the fullness and depth, with all of the complexity and horror that the triune God assumed in becoming flesh within a single “human life - not within humanity at large,” claims Ralph Wood in “A Case for P.D. James as a Christian Novelist.” Wood goes on to say that many of James’ Christian concerns remain unexplained, “just as Jesus was not manifestly the incarnate God. They are more prominent through subtly implied than explicit references” (586). James’ writings are so powerful because of the subtly implied meanings. This study aims to investigate her capacity to purposefully or unwittingly bring her readers’ attention to religious ideas. We discover infinite opportunities for the divine presence in the ordinary acts of daily life by looking at examples of setting, character, the personal life of Dalglish, and murder reasons as they relate to sin and alienation in the work of James.

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