

Unit 7: Cherchez La Femme: The Role of Gender in Mystery Fiction

In this unit, you will:

- Read P.D. James, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*.
- Post draft of Essay 3 to class and to me.
- Complete several group and discussion board posts. See individual lessons.

Lesson 1: The Female Detective

Preview

Read P.D. James, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, Ch. 1–2, including author’s note.
Post to class on predictions.
Post to your group on humor.
Email revised Essay #2 to instructor.

What might be the differences in a mystery novel where the detective is a woman from the novels we’ve read so far? Will it make a difference at all?

Activity 1: Discussion Board Post: Predictions

Before we go further and before you read much of P.D. James’s book, write a prediction about what you think might alter with a female detective. How do they find clues? Solve the case? Talk about themselves to the reader? What kind of woman might she be? Post your predictions to the class and comment on one of the predictions you read.

Female detectives have become relatively common in mystery stories. Agatha Christie’s second great detective, Miss Marple, has solved crimes for almost as long as Monsieur Poirot. Miss Marple is a busybody, an elderly spinster living in a small English village who makes it her business to know about her neighbors. Knowing her small town well gives her great insight into human nature—the insight she uses to solve the murders she becomes involved in. V.I. Warshawski, Sara Paretsky’s detective, is a former policewoman who works as a private detective in the mean streets of Chicago. Sue Grafton’s alphabet mystery series (*A is for Alibi*, *B is for Burglar*, *C is for Corpse*, etc.), stars detective Kinsey Milhone, who settled claims for an insurance agency before going into the detecting business. Kay Scarpetta, the medical examiner in Richmond, Virginia is the intrepid detective in Patricia Cornwell’s mystery series.

These female detectives share some characteristics with their male counterparts. They are unmarried, for one thing, as are all of the male detectives we’ve read. Miss Marple is an exception to the edgy personality and feminist ideology they tend to exhibit in their dealings with criminals, the police, and victims alike. And in one way or another they battle the stereotypes about women that often make them be dismissed or ignored. In fact, Miss Marple uses those stereotypes to her advantage as she solves cases. Nobody pays attention to a little old lady sitting in a drawing room and knitting.

The detective we’ll read this week becomes a detective almost by accident in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. P.D. James is perhaps the preeminent mystery writer writing today (or at least I think she is). Her detective, Adam Dalgleish, has been captured in PBS mini series productions of her novels. But in this novel, where Dalgleish is introduced, James focuses on the female detective who solves the crime.

Consider why a writer might choose a female, rather than a male, detective. If the writer is female herself, she might feel comfortable with a portrayal of a woman lead character. But many female writers, Christie and James included, write most often using male detectives. The male

detective usually has some sort of institutional power that female detectives either don't have or must overcome obstacles to achieve. So part of the plot in many stories featuring women as detectives involve the detective's struggle to achieve recognition or respect. We'll see if that's the case in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. Of course, given the title of this novel, you might already expect something like that to occur.

As you begin the novel, look first at the author's note. What strikes you about it? It seems to be a standard disclaimer: the personages in the novel are all fictitious, the scenes in the city of Cambridge are made up, etc. Is this statement designed to protect against lawsuits? Why would a writer make such a claim? Notice the word in the first line, *unpleasant*, and consider the tone the author strikes. It strikes the reader as both humorous and slightly derogatory. Is P.D. James compelled to write crime novels even though they're distasteful?

James's mention of Oxbridge, as a fictional English university city, is a reference to Dorothy Sayer's Lord Peter Wimsey mystery novels set in a thinly disguised Cambridge. James suggests that such disguise only confuses readers and does nothing to hide real places.

In fact, James seems to argue that fact and fiction, while not the same, blend in the creation of the novel. If there isn't a real Sir Ronald Callender, there are people who are like him. The characters, the situations, and the motivations are real enough, she appears to tell us, even if the actual events aren't. The literary term for this kind of true-to-life characterization is **verisimilitude**, another useful word to know when you're thinking about how realistic the portrayals of characters and events are in the novels we've read.

Activity 2: Group Post: Narrator's Use of Humor

After reading the first chapter, write to your group about the use of humor in the voice of the narrator. Do you find it in the comments of the narrator, the descriptions of characters? Do you see it at all? You might consider that slightly ironic, humorous voice you heard in the author's note as you look for it in the beginning of the novel.

As we've seen in other novels, the names of characters often are important. In this novel, there are a lot of literary references. As you read, note some of them: the suicide note, the discussions among the university students, and Cordelia's name. If you've read Shakespeare's *King Lear*, you know the reference. Cordelia is one of Lear's three daughters, the only one who remains faithful to him throughout the play, even though he doesn't recognize it. You might look up Lear's Cordelia to see if you find other connections between James's character and the Shakespearean tragic heroine.

In our next lesson, we'll talk more particularly about the use of the female detective and how Cordelia makes a different kind of sleuth than others we've read. But here as you're reading the first chapters, pay attention to the kinds of issues we've learned are important to the telling of the mystery tale.

- What's important about the setting? Would you call it a stock setting? (Go back to look at the definition of stock setting if you've forgotten.)

- What's important about the way James chooses to begin? How does the early suicide contribute to our suspicions and our thinking about the main character?
- Where do you find clues about conflicts that might lead you to suspect motives and characters? Miss Leaming and Lunn, Ronald Callender and Miss Leaming, Sophie and her brother Hugo, and others. You might write some of these down for yourself to trace your growing suspicions about the crime and the criminal.

Lesson 1 Assignments

If you have not already done so, please make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

- Author's note, Ch. 1–2, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*

Activity 1: Discussion Board Post: Predictions

Before we go further and before you read much of P.D. James's book, write a prediction about what you think might alter with a female detective. How do they find clues? Solve the case? Talk about themselves to the reader? What kind of woman might she be? Post your predictions to the class and comment on one of the predictions you read.

Activity 2: Group Post: Narrator's Use of Humor

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Activity 3: Email to Instructor: Final Draft of Essay #2

Email your revised Essay #2 to me.

Lesson 2: The Gender Question

Preview

Read James, Ch. 3–4.
Read Griffith, Ch. 7, pp. 146–150 on gender criticism.
Post to class on Cordelia as detective.
Journal post to me on feminist criticism.
Post to group on climax of book.
Post to group on quiz.

The title for this unit, *Cherche La Femme* (*Look for the woman* in French), actually refers to mysteries. A woman is always at the bottom of the mystery, and if you look for the woman in the case, you’ve got a chance to solve it. It’s an old saying, but it plays on a belief about women as the ones responsible for the corruption and troubles of men. (And that notion, of course, takes us back to Adam and Eve in their post-lapsarian state. According to interpretations of the Genesis story, Eve is responsible for Adam’s fall, and thus the fall of all humans.)

Lots of mysteries turn on the “look for the woman” idea. One famous example is *The Maltese Falcon*, a great mystery by Dashiell Hammet that I wish we had time to read. The woman in the case—beautiful, mysterious, compelling—holds the key to the crime, and the detective, Sam Spade, must uncover her secret before he can solve it. You might think of movies you’ve seen where the woman holds the secret, is the criminal, or spurs the criminal to commit the crime. *Body Heat*, *Chinatown*, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and many other fairly recent classic mysteries have the woman at the heart of the murder.

So when the detective is a woman herself, *cherche la femme* becomes something significantly different. There’s a new relationship established between detective and suspects, especially if some of the suspects are women. We begin to see that new relationship in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*.

By Chapter 3 in the novel, you’ve learned about the suicide of Bernie and the “suicide” of young Mark Callender. You don’t think it’s suicide. You might speculate on why that is, but the last line of Chapter 2 could be one reason: “The pathologist found the merest trace—a thin line only—of purple-red lipstick on his upper lip.” Sounds sinister. Sounds like the detective has to *cherchez la femme*.

You have also begun to get a pretty good idea about the character of Cordelia and the method she uses to go about solving her case—an inquiry into Mark’s death initiated by his father. By the time you read Chapter 3, where Cordelia becomes friends of a sort with the three friends of Mark’s, you know much about her character and her background. Chapter 3 ends with a chilling scene, and you might have been surprised at Cordelia’s rather calm reaction: she stays in the house, she finds her gun, she prepares for an intruder, she falls asleep.

Activity 1: Discussion Board Post: Cordelia as Female Detective

Post a comment to the class about Cordelia as the female detective. What challenges does she face as a woman? Find some places where interactions with other characters show the conflicts and prejudices Cordelia must overcome because she's female.

The woman as detective is part of a larger issue of women in professions largely filled in the past by men. In the past few decades, women have taken on roles as policemen, judges, firefighters, doctors, engineers, and a host of other careers once reserved for males only. When women tried to enter those professions, they were greeted often by scorn and skepticism. They were sometimes actively punished by fellow workers and family for doing jobs thought unsuitable to a woman. Cordelia's position reflects some of that history. The events of this novel take place in the Sixties, a time of great turmoil and social change. As you read the last sections of the novel, see if you can find places where the references to these social changes are overt. One is Miss Markland's diatribe to Cornelia about people of "your generation."

WEBLINKS: To learn more about women and the workplace, check out the following websites:

Association of Women Professionals

<http://www.awoman.org/>

Why women miss career opportunities

<http://www.careerjournal.com/columnists/inthelead/20040204-inthelead.html>

NOW's information on women-friendly workplaces

<http://www.now.org/issues/wfw/index.html>

In the past thirty years or so, critics have begun to study the role gender plays in art. In the novel, the way women and men are portrayed, the jobs they fill, the themes they suggest, has become a big part of recent literary criticism. For a discussion of the various ways critics look at novels and write about them, read Griffith's Chapter 7.

Activity 2: Journal: Feminist Critique of *Unsuitable Job for a Woman*

Read Griffith, pp. 146–150 on Feminist and Gender criticism. Griffith gives a kind of brief history of feminist critique, but he doesn't really say how it works.

After you read Griffith's discussion, write a paragraph to me that attempts a feminist critique of a section of our novel. Remember that you'll be looking for the power relationships that demonstrate stereotypical attitudes toward and about women. (One example might be the way that Cordelia is continually guided by the words of Bernie and the elusive Super, the father presences that tell her how to do her job.)

Note: This journal entry might serve as a good beginning point for your essay #3, if you'd like to write about the role of women or about issues of power and gender in this novel or others. It's a good topic.

By the end of Chapter 4, we've reached the climactic moment of the novel, the moment of highest tension and action, where everything that comes afterward is inevitable. What do you think that moment is? There are still more action scenes to come, but if I'm right, they follow from this moment of revelation, and so they become part of the denouement of the plot.

Activity 3: Group Post: Climax and Why

Write to your group about what you think the climax is and why. If you haven't read the rest of the novel, make a prediction now about who the guilty party is and what happened to Mark Callender.

Before we leave this discussion of feminist critique and of the role of the female detective, I thought it might be fun to take a little quiz just to see how much you know about women and women's history. Check your answers and see how knowledgeable you are!

QUIZ: Take this quick quiz on women and women's history.

Activity 4: Group Post: Response to the Quiz

Did any of these answers surprise you? Did you get them all? Post to your group a reflection on your responses. Make up a question of your own and send it to your group to see if they can get it.

Next week: We'll finish the novel and prepare for our last work on portfolio and revisions.

Lesson 2 Assignments

If you have not already done so, please make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

- Read James, Ch. 3–4.
- Read Griffith, Ch. 7, pp. 146–150 on gender criticism.

Activity 1: Discussion Board Post: Cordelia as Female Detective

Post a comment to the class about Cordelia as the female detective. What challenges does she face as a woman? Find some places where interactions with other characters show the conflicts and prejudices Cordelia must overcome because she's female.

Activity 2: Journal: Feminist Critique of *Unsuitable Job for a Woman*

Read Griffith, pp. 146–150 on Feminist and Gender criticism. Griffith gives a kind of brief history of feminist critique, but he doesn't really say how it works.

After you read Griffith's discussion, write a paragraph to me that attempts a feminist critique of a section of our novel. Remember that you'll be looking for the power relationships that demonstrate stereotypical attitudes toward and about women. (One example might be the way that Cordelia is continually guided by the words of Bernie and the elusive Super, the father presences that tell her how to do her job.)

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Write to your group about what you think the climax is and why. If you haven't read the rest of the novel, make a prediction now about who the guilty party is and what happened to Mark Callender.

Activity 4: Group Post: Response to the Quiz

Did any of these answers surprise you? Did you get them all? Post to your group a reflection on your responses. Make up a question of your own and send it to your group to see if they can get it.

Lesson 3: Do We Look for the Woman?

Preview

Complete *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*.
Read Griffith, Chapters 7 and 8.
Post drafts of Paper #3 to group and to me.
Post to class comments on murder (final subterfuge).

You are now working on your last paper for our class. Next week you'll be revising work and submitting a final portfolio to me for evaluation. As you get your essay ready to post to the group and to me, here are some issues to consider:

- Have you got a clear idea of your argument and do you state it clearly in the first part of your essay?
- Do you use quotes from the book or books effectively? Do you comment on those quotes and use them to help you develop your argument?
- Do you use examples and descriptions well?
- Can you hear your own voice as you look back at your work?
- Do you have an engaging title?
- Have you developed your essay well enough to write 3-5 pages?
- Do you like what you've written?

Use these questions to guide your revising before you send your paper to your group. Be sure that you've sent your paper by the end of this week so that group will have time to read and post comments and suggestions back to you.

Readers, remember to offer helpful comments and make suggestions that will add to interest, clarity, and development of ideas.

Activity 1: Group Post: Essay #3 Draft

Post your draft of the last essay to your group and to me. If you have questions or want specific suggestions, include questions with your draft. Group, please respond quickly to these essays so that writers can use your ideas as they revise for final portfolios next week.

Now you've reached the finale of the book, and now you know the murderer as well as the motives for murder. How do you feel about the murder and those motives? Does it strike you as realistic? Remember James's comment in the author's note about the reality within fiction, that although characters are fictional, real people like them do—or might—exist. Could there be a Ronald Callender? A Mark? A Miss Leaming?

As I read the ending, Ronald Callender seems to be a little too much of a monster to be true. And Miss Leaming perhaps a little too willing to give her life up and the life of her child to

Callender. But there are real life examples of just such monstrous behavior, of course. Miss Leaming, after all, defends the life of her child by her own desperate act. These issues are in fact what make James's novels so compelling. As mysteries, they fit the genre, but they are also complex, the lives of the characters within them complicated and flawed. These characters, at least the main ones, seem more round than flat. Do you agree?

Notice that the revelation of the murderer comes fairly early in the last section of the book, leaving lots of room for the conclusion. One reason for this may be the presence of Dalglish, the character we've heard about as the Super throughout the novel, and who now comes onto the scene. James makes Dalglish the center of her later mysteries, and his introduction here suggests that he'll be the detective we will travel with next.

The exchange between Dalglish and Cordelia at novel's end is interesting. You might consider what it reveals about them both—Cordelia smart enough to know she is caught; Dalglish smart enough to know he can't catch her.

You might also consider what the exchange reveals about women's roles as detectives. Cordelia has discovered the criminal through good detection, but she has used some irregular methods—becoming friends with suspects, skirting the truth, breaking the law—and these methods might call into question her role as the restorer of order.

Order is in fact restored but not by the law. It's Cordelia's own kind of justice that she uses in the final scenes. Why does she collaborate with Miss Leaming? Are there gender implications to her actions? Remember Miss Leaming's comment that she and Cordelia didn't need to fear they'd be caught:

“What is there to be frightened of? We shall be dealing only with men.”

Activity 2: Discussion Board Post: Final Subterfuge

Write a final comment to the class about this final subterfuge of Cordelia's and Miss Leaming's. Why do they become partners in crime? What do you think of Cordelia at the end?

I miss Cordelia. She appears, if I remember right, in only one other James novel. I'd like James to bring her back. (I'm hoping for another James mystery this year; it's been two years since her most recent, *The Murder Room*. She is 85 years old, so I'm hoping she's writing fast!)

Lesson 3 Assignments

If you have not already done so, please make sure you complete the following readings and activities.

Reading

- Complete *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*.
- Griffith, Chapters 7 and 8.

Activity 1: Group Post: Essay #3 Draft

Post your draft of last essay to your group and to me. If you have questions or want specific suggestions, include questions with your draft. Group, please respond quickly to these essays so that writers can use your ideas as they revise for final portfolios next week.

Activity 2: Discussion Board Post: Final Subterfuge

Write a final comment to the class about this final subterfuge of Cordelia's and Miss Leaming's. Why do they become partners in crime? What do you think of Cordelia at the end?