



The Chawton Murder

Grace Howarth

Part I

Narrative of Adrian Baker. House Keeper in the service of Lord and Lady Mulberry.

The party gathered in the drawing room on Friday evening last, in time for Dr. Philip Tumble to begin the evening's entertainment. I had ordered William to circulate the dessert wine for the final time before I helped Lucy to collect the last of the silver. Dr. Tumble and Michael Dembitz were the last of the gentlemen to be seated at the grand gillow table. Major White took up his usual seat next to Lord Mulberry. Superintendent Coal, a pompous but no less familiar face to the table, was seated next to Lady Alice, Lord and Lady Mulberry's heiress. The party was completed by the late arrival of Lord and Lady Halcombe from Rotherfield Park, some three miles distant. Dr. Tumble, Lady Alice's suitor, commanded the party at once, cleared his throat with a conspicuous cough and raised his arms full length, to display the choice novel of the evening.

At that very moment Lucy startled the entire party with an extremely clumsy turn, sending the silver Claret jug crashing to the floor. Lucy's eyes met mine with a petrified stare, before she picked up the jug and hurried from the room. 'Limping Lucy' was a feisty character, and I was quite surprised how pale her face had turned over some accidentally spilt Claret. I do not know much of her past, but that she had been abandoned in London as a child. Lucy had made her own way in the world, but was tainted by promiscuity.

'Are we all comfortable? Yes. Then I will continue.'

'...You must know,' said Estella, condescending to me as a brilliant and beautiful woman might, 'that I have no heart...'

Dr. Tumble was a relatively new member of the Chawton Weekend party. I don't like to speculate, but it was common knowledge that he was what Lord Halcombe would consider 'new money'. By profession a zoologist, Dr. Tumble had inherited his wealth from his Uncle, who was a prominent figure in the 'Boodle Gang' of New York. He had recently been widowed when he arrived in Chawton from the Americas. Only last week I heard him tell Dembitz how his 'heart had been ripped from his chest when his late wife had died by Lyme disease'. Of course Lady Alice softened his temperament; she was captivated by Dr. Tumble, especially his fondness for animals.

Dr. Tumble had continued reading.

....'Oh! I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot in, I have no doubt,' said Estella, 'and of course, if it ceased to beat I should cease to be...'

Part II

I was awoken at about six o'clock on the morning proceeding the party. I stirred for a moment, believing that I had roused from a bad dream, until once more I heard the stifled cries of a woman in the parlour beneath my chamber. I rushed out of bed where I was met in the corridor by Michael Dembitz.

‘What the dickens!’

‘Where is Coal, surely he must have heard those penetrating screams?’ exclaimed Dembitz.

Mr. Dembitz and I descended the stairs by oil lamp, in order to seek out the Superintendent before following the screams.

‘Coal, Coal are you in there, wake up man, there’s some terrible business going off in the parlour!’

‘Who is it? What screams? I can’t get out because the door is stuck!’

Perceiving that Coal was indeed stuck inside his room, and quite unaware of events outside it, Dembitz and I barged the door several times before releasing the room’s captive.

‘Hurry, hurry there is not a moment to spare,’ I cried as we dashed through passages intersecting the East Wing.

We reached the parlour, but moments too late. The rose stained wooden floor was lit ominously by the rising sun, and we beheld the sight of the mutilated body of Lucy Yolland.

Part III

Report in the Chawton Post, August 11th 1890.

‘At ten minutes past six yesterday morning the body of Lucy Yolland, a housemaid, was found in the parlour of Chawton House. The body was discovered by Superintendent Coal, who immediately staged a murder enquiry into the victim’s death.

In his statement Coal revealed that the victim was found on her back with her night gown torn away. A post-mortem revealed that an internal organ is missing from the body of the victim. Dr. Smith identified a rash on the victim’s left wrist as a symptom of syphilis. Dr. Smith believes that the criminal must have imperfect medical experience, for Lucy’s wounds were neat, but not the work of a surgeon.

Superintendent Coal intends to progress the investigation by further questioning the Chawton servants.’

Part IV

Narrative of Michael Dembitz, Jewish Bank Manager at Chawton Bank.

What a queer business, I had thought as I put down the Chawton Post. I had been sitting in the Morning Room with Dr. Tumble, turning the matter over and over in my mind. He was quite subdued like the rest of the party; had simply taken up his novel from the night before. I was about to pick up the paper again when my eyes glimpsed a terribly red mark on Tumble’s wrist. I was going to ask him about it when I realised I had seen a similar rash on the body of Lucy Yolland. I excused myself, and went into the library to be alone. It didn’t make sense, why should Lucy and Tumble share that rash?

I recalled Dr. Tumble’s words: ‘my wife died of Lyme disease’. I had known Tumble for many years and had become convinced that Ella Tumble had died from syphilis; that ‘Lyme disease’ was in fact a cover story to hide his wife’s infidelity. I recalled that ‘Lucy’s wounds were neat but not the work of a surgeon’ and it all so suddenly fell into place; Lucy had been cut open by an amateur, a zoologist pretending to be a surgeon!

Part V

Extract from Dr. Tumble’s statement to Superintendent Coal

So the game is up, interfering Dembitz has put his pointy nose in it.

It is as he suspected, my wife died by syphilis. Ella claimed to have been unhappy, and had taken up several lovers in the final years of our marriage. I despised her, and any whore who came to remind me of her.

I started reading *Great Expectations* and realised that the world is full of Estellas; seducing men, chewing them up venomously before spitting them right out again. So when the dinner party came, and Lucy dropped that blasted Claret jug, I knew she had seen my rash. But that wasn't all, Lucy's face told me she knew my condition too well; she too was infected by syphilis. Lucy had been a whore before she had been a maid and I knew it, so I decided I would steal her heart, just like Ella had stolen mine.

There is no use trying to hang me, for my condition grows stronger, and I expect I will be gone before the year is up.

'The Chawton Murder' Analysis

In my detective story I adopt several features of *The Moonstone* in order to develop the theme of Class within the conventions of the Detective Fiction genre. I invoke the country setting of *The Moonstone*, and stage the murder of Lucy Yolland at a country estate in Hampshire. I therefore build on ideas presented in *The Moonstone*, which challenge the nineteenth century view that crime was contained within the urban world. Through the 'Jack the Ripper' style murder of Lucy Yolland, and the spread of syphilis, I shift the threat of prostitution, vice and crime from an urban landscape and reposition it within the affluent community of Hampshire. The story's action is centred within 'the private world of English families',¹ and the murder of Lucy is an 'inside job'.² However, the location of Lucy's murder is a complicating feature of the plot, which is important to my wider exploration of Class. Chawton House was famously inherited by Edward Austen in 1809, and is therefore symbolic of English tradition and the social class system.³ However, Chawton's literary-historical past recalls the world of Jane's Austen's novels, where social hierarchy is surely challenged. I present this tension in my own story by disputing the containment of criminality within the lower classes. This is achieved through the characterisation of marginalised figures, and the use of *Great Expectations* as a frame narrative. My story is modelled on *The Moonstone*, and adopts a narrative framework in order to build on its central exploration of the class system. *The Moonstone* incorporates *Robinson Crusoe* in order to enhance its own treatment of issues surrounding imperialism. 'The Chawton Murder' is framed by *Great Expectations*, owing to the centrality of crime within the novel, and its disturbing representation of the class system. *The Moonstone* is a complicated example of detective fiction, for it features elements of the wider genre, whilst it does not correspond with the mainstream detective story model. My narrative emulates this idea for it too is symptomatic of the detective fiction genre, whilst it problematises features of the prototypical detective story.

Collins opens *The Moonstone* up to post-colonial readings by invoking *Robinson Crusoe* as a frame narrative. This device creates a parallel between the imperialist world of *Defoe's novel*, and the events of *The Moonstone*. The novel's treatment of *Robinson Crusoe* further problematises the narrative reliability of Gabriel Betteredge, a character who is ignorant of Great Britain's imperial culpability. This idea is presented in the narrative of Ezra Jennings, when Betteredge suggests that 'there are great allowances to be made for a man who has not read *Robinson Crusoe*, since he was a child' (p. 479). However, Betteredge's point of view is immediately called into question by Franklin Blake who perceives *Robinson Crusoe* as Betteredge's 'favourite delusion' (p. 479). *Great Expectations* operates on a similar plane to *Robinson Crusoe* in *The Moonstone*; calling into question the world view presented by Dr. Tumble, as well as that of wider society. On a simplistic level Dr. Tumble,

¹ W. Collins, *The Moonstone* (Broadview literary texts: 1999), p. 15

All further references to this text will be included within the main body of the essay as page numbers.

² S. Farmer, ed., *The Moonstone*, p. 31

³ Edward Austen inherited Chawton House in 1809 from Thomas and Catherine Knight.

who shares the name of 'Philip Pirrip' by no coincidence, murders Lucy Yolland owing to her history as a prostitute. Lucy reminds Tumble of his late wife Ella, due to her medical condition, and strikes up an illusory connection between Ella and Lucy, and the fictional character Estella. This idea is realised at the end of the story when the reader discovers that the murderer is no less than the man who had portentously projected the words of Estella, 'I have a heart to be stabbed in',⁴ the night before the murder. Tumble is thus a criminal in keeping with the rules of the detective story according to S.S Van Dine who stipulates that 'the motives for all crimes in detective stories should be personal'.⁵

Great Expectations functions as more than a plot device in 'The Chawton Murder', and is particularly important to my representation of class transgressions and the restoration of order. In 'The Chawton Murder' there are a number of characters who present a threat to the harmony of the Chawton Community, as well as the primacy of the Chawton aristocracy. Dr. Tumble and Michael Dembitz are not the least of those characters. In Adrian Baker's narrative, he distinguishes Tumble's wealth as 'new money' and presents him as something of an outsider figure. As Lady's Alice's intended husband, Tumble is a threat to aristocratic society long before he has committed the murder of Lucy Yolland.

Tumble identifies himself with the character of Pip in *Great Expectations*, by extension of the resemblance he perceives between Estella and his late wife Ella. However, he recalls the character of Pip more subtly through his own transgression of the class-system. Tumble 'had inherited his wealth from his uncle, a prominent figure in the Boodle gang'. The Boodle Gang was a 'New York street gang during the mid-1800s, whose hijacking methods would later be used by criminals of the early twentieth century'.⁶ Doctor Tumble is then the recipient of a criminal benefactor, and his status in the English aristocracy is a sham. Tumble therefore reminds the reader of Pip, whose benefactor, Magwitch, is equally a criminal. By staging a comparison between Pip and Tumble, I challenge his status even before he is identified as the criminal. This device is one that I have adapted from *The Moonstone* which invokes *Robison Crusoe* in order to challenge the narrative authority of Gabriel Betteredge. *The Moonstone* does not question Betteredge's social status, however it is possible that through his initials, G. B., Collins posits more significant challenges to the 'world power' status of Great Britain, and her imperialistic world view.⁷

The restoration of order and the prospective death of Tumble in the final narrative establish yet another parallel between 'The Chawton Murder' and *Great Expectations*. The imminent death of Dr. Tumble prevents the fusion of his 'new money' with that of Lord and Lady Mulberry, so that the threat of class transgression is eliminated. The threat of syphilis to the Chawton community is also resolved by the murder of Lucy. Lucy had previously been a prostitute in London, and her position in service at Chawton House represents her transgression into the working class community. This transgression is resolved by her death, when she is removed from the Chawton community altogether. By eliminating all potential acts of transgression, and taking the lives of the transgressors, my narrative reinforces class boundaries, and restores order to the Chawton community. This restoration of order once more recalls *The Moonstone*, in which the criminal, Godfrey Ablewhite, is murdered and the central threat, the Indian Diamond, is removed from the world of the novel.

A further aspect of *The Moonstone* which I have featured in my story is the use of true crime. In 'The Chawton Murder', I draw heavily on the victims and the suspects associated with the Whitechapel Murders, as well as The Road-House Murder that is featured in *The Moonstone*. Collins invokes aspects of The Road-House Murder in his characterisation of

⁴ C. Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Bizarro Press: 2009), p. 187

⁵ S. S. Van Dine, 'Twenty Rules for writing Detective Stories' in *American Magazine* (Sept 1928)

⁶ 'Webster's Definitions' <<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definitions/boodle?cx=partner-pub-0939450753529744%3Av0qd01-tdlq&cof=FORID%3A9&ie=UTF-8&q=boodle&sa=Search#906>> [accessed 30/04/12]

⁷ Farmer, p. 25

Sergeant Cuff, who mirrors the actions of Inspector Whicher when he fails to recover a paint stained night gown, which he believed would implicate the criminal.

In 'The Chawton Murder', I use the Road-House murder to a similar effect. I highlight the ineptitude of my own inspecting officer, Superintendent Coal, by invoking 'an extraordinary occurrence' described in *The Somerset and Wilts Journal*.⁸ The 'occurrence' involves two police men who found themselves locked inside the crime scene that they were supposed to be safeguarding. In 'The Chawton Murder', this is re-enacted by Sergeant Coal, who is 'stuck' inside his room at the time of the crime. I have intentionally given Superintendent Coal a surname which calls to mind the raw material 'coal', in order to associate him with the mining industry, and members of the lower classes. Coal fails to fulfil his professional role as Superintendent, and occupies an inactive and unobtrusive position within the lower classes.

I have so far suggested that 'The Chawton Murder' is largely in keeping with *The Moonstone*, and its representation of the Victorian class system. However, by foregrounding a marginalised character from *The Moonstone*, my story makes subtle challenges to the class boundaries perpetuated by Collins. In *The Moonstone*, the death of Rosanna Spearman is symptomatic of the novel's secondary treatment of the lower classes. Rosanna Spearman is a central character to the mystery element of *The Moonstone*, and yet her own experiences in the novel are limited to the information she relays in her suicide letter:

It would be very disgraceful to me to tell you this, if I was a living woman when you read it. I shall be dead and gone, sir, when you find my letter. It is that which makes me bold...I may own the truth with the quicksand waiting to hide me when the words are written (p. 380).

Rosanna is therefore a marginalised character, whose death is overshadowed by the more important issue of the stolen diamond.

Lucy Yolland, is a minor character in *The Moonstone*, but occupies a central position within my own narrative. In *The Moonstone*, Lucy suggests that 'the day is not far off when the poor will rise against the rich' (p. 248). This idea is developed in my own narrative in the event of Lucy's death; her blood stains the parlour floor, and her memory is set to taint forever the world within Chawton House. Lucy Yolland is a character that I have adapted from the prostitutes murdered in Whitechapel in 1888; Lucy is a morally flawed character, and her murder is the consequence of her sexual transgressions. By extension, Dr Tumble, is characteristic of the White Chapel suspects. I have drawn particularly from the profile of Nathan Kaminsky, 'a great hater of women'⁹, who was allegedly driven by the symptoms of his syphilis. Kendell suggests that 'when the disease began to infect his brain [Kaminsky] started to take out his revenge on the local prostitutes, one of whom had probably infected him'.¹⁰ Lucy Yolland recalls Kaminskys' victims owing to her 'promiscuous' past. Lucy Yolland is then a conventional victim figure according to W.H Auden, who suggests that the victim must:

.....satisfy two contradictory requirements. He has to involve everyone in suspicion, which requires that he be a bad character, and he has to make everyone feel guilty, which requires that he be a good character.¹¹

⁸ Collins, Appendix B, p. 566

⁹ P. Begg, *Jack the Ripper: The Facts* (Robson Books: 2006), p. 345

¹⁰ C. Kendell, *Jack the Ripper: The Theories and the Facts* (Amberley: 2010), p. 78

¹¹ W. H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage' in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Twentieth Century Views: 1980), p. 19

Lucy corresponds with Auden's victim, for her history as a prostitute makes her a 'bad' character, whilst her murder in an upper class establishment raises the question of societal culpability. The class system is then incriminated by Lucy's death, particularly because she was murdered following her attempts to correct her sexual transgressions.

Michael Dembitz is a further character that I have loosely drawn from the Whitechapel Murders in order to comment on the representation of marginalised figures in the Detective Fiction genre. Dembitz is a 'pointy' nosed Jewish Bank Clerk, whose name is intended to recall Montague Druitt, a dubious suspect identified by Sir Melville Macnaghten in 1889.¹² However, Paul Begg and Collin Kendell, suggest that Druitt was merely a 'suitable scapegoat' for Scotland Yard and the Home Office,¹³ who made 'unsubstantiated allegations' against him.¹⁴ Dembitz is therefore a red-herring figure in my narrative, and is only suspicious according to his position as a Jewish character.

When Dembitz takes on the role of the detective in the fourth narrative, he recalls the characterisation of Ezra Jennings in *The Moonstone*. Ezra Jennings is vehemently suspected by Betteredge and Mr. Bruff before his experiment immensely progresses the case of the missing diamond.

Mr. Bruff's distrust looked at me plainly through Mr. Bruff's eyes. Being well used to this effect on strangers, I did not hesitate in saying what I wanted to say... (p. 484)

Dembitz and Jennings equally occupy minor roles in their wider narratives, and yet both characters play a seminal role in the resolution of the crime at the centre of those narratives. Through the characterisation of Dembitz, my story expands upon the marginalised detective figure advanced by *The Moonstone*, and further challenges the 'tradition of villainy',¹⁵ presented in Victorian fiction.

My short story is in keeping with the Detective Fiction genre by lending characters, and plot devices from *The Moonstone*, 'the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels'.¹⁶ My story is faithful to at least some of Van Dine's rules, for my culprit is 'a person who has played a more or less prominent part in the story'; and the violated body of Lucy Yolland fulfils the expectation of a corpse.¹⁷ However, the resemblance between my own story and *The Moonstone*, has less to do with the rules of the detective story, than with the wider exploration of a theme that extends beyond the Detective Fiction genre. Although T.S. Elliot identifies *The Moonstone* as a paradigm for the detective story writer, my own reading of the novel has led me to produce a short story which calls upon the conventions of Detective Fiction, in order to comment on a wider theme. My narrative invokes elements of *The Moonstone* in order to present a more disturbing evocation of the Victorian Class system than the detective fiction genre has done previously.

¹² Begg, p. 56

¹³ Kendell, p. 96

¹⁴ Begg, p. 330

¹⁵ L. Lane, 'Dickens' Archetypal Jew', *PMLA*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (March 1958), p. 94

¹⁶ T. S. Elliot, in *The Moonstone*, p. 10

¹⁷ Van Dine

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