

P. D. James and the Complexity of Human Evil

“We must love one another or die” –Auden, “September 1, 1939”

Though the practice of evil continues unabated, references to it have become problematic or even ridiculous. When President Bush referred to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the “Axis of Evil” in his State of the Union address in 2002, his use of the term ‘evil’ was greeted with ill-disguised embarrassment by much of that union. While churches that preach hell and devils may continue to employ ‘evil’ as a recognized and definable concept, most ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ churches and denominations agree with P. D. James’s many characters who find ‘evil’ indefinable. Unlike her characters, James has a clear idea of human evil, and as an extremely accomplished detective novelist, explores in depth the ‘devices and desires’ of the human heart that lead to such evil. While there is undoubtedly a continuum of views of evil,¹ I will differentiate three in this paper: according to the Therapeutic view of evil: people are not evil, but rather are sick or confused or (in an older version) overcome by their passions, due to pressures from society, and what they require is not reform but therapy. Against this we can contrast the Fundamentalist view: people are inherently depraved, doing evil for the sake of evil,

¹ We can usefully distinguish at least six distinct views of evil from a moral standpoint, while different classifications could be made based instead on the ontology of evil that would only partially overlap. So, for example, a moral classification could focus on how closely the evil is identified with the actor. At the far extreme we have views such as that ably propounded by Phillip Cole in *The Myth of Evil*, which argues that evil is an unhelpful myth springing from fear and inadequacy, and that we should cease to use the category at all as it applies to human beings. Next would be those who propound ‘Situationist’ ethics, according to which evil actions are sufficiently explained by our circumstances, and so we must manipulate circumstances rather than characters to eliminate evil, because anyone in certain circumstances will commit evil. The classical tests here are the Stanley Milgram trials; cf. John M. Doris’s *Lack of Character* for a description of Situationist ethics. Third might be the slightly confused category in which many moderate Baptists find themselves, believing that people still have some say over the situation, but that the evil choices that we make are largely explained by our raising, our society, and other external pressures. Later in this paper, I suggest that all three of these tend to collapse into the extreme rejection of evil in the interests of coherence. The middle path is Augustinianism, I will suggest, which holds that people are evil, but that this is not and cannot be a basic fact of who they are, since evil is ultimately no more than a twisting of what is good in them, especially their love. On the Fundamentalist side there are at least two distinct views as well, including the slightly confused view generally held in Southern Baptist churches that sees people (generally *other* people) and especially demons as inherently evil, but also holds that only God is absolute, and that he is entirely good. The extreme view on this side, of course, is Manichaeism: Evil is an absolute principle eternally opposed to the goodness of God. Again, I suggest that the Fundamentalist view, in this simplistic form, tends to collapse into simple Manichaeism to have a consistent and coherent view.

and in desperate need of reconstitution and reform. P. D. James presents a more complex view, one that is essentially Augustinian in its focus on the dangers and necessity of love, according to which human beings are indeed evil, but are never simply demons, failing and succeeding through their all-too-human love.

*The Fundamentalist View of Evil: "The error bred in the bone"*²

Intuitively, evil describes a morally wrong action that is deliberate,³ or a circumstance characterized by such an action or actions, or a person who does such an action or actions; in this paper we will focus on the last of these. This raises as many questions as it answers, of course, but it does limit the field: we do not tend to call incidental wrong actions (accidentally running someone over) evil, nor do we tend to call actions evil when there are sufficient mitigating circumstances (the action was done "in the heat of the moment" as a "crime of passion," or the agent could not foresee the consequences adequately due to the circumstances or her own failings – someone is not evil if she has severe personal failings or acts out of stupidity).⁴ James consistently portrays actions this way: what was willingly chosen is decidedly more evil, more demonstrative of the actor's character, than what is 'fallen into.'⁵

² The quotes at the beginning of each section are from Auden's "September 1, 1939," a poem that James quotes in *The Lighthouse* and which we will discuss more later.

³ By which I mean willfully chosen and known to be wrong. To quote Scott Moore quoting Tolkien, "There be dragons here," and I will make little attempt to clear all of them up, though I will address the final irrationality of evil later and will briefly discuss in that context whether it makes sense to say that anyone chooses evil *as* evil (as opposed to the ancient/medieval thesis that everyone chooses under the aspect of the good).

⁴ Another proviso is called for: while we may not consider someone evil if an action is sufficiently rushed or accidental, his reaction to what has happened may show him to be evil. Two examples from P.D. James would include the murderer from *A Certain Justice*, who kills almost on accident but then coldly and unfeelingly covers up the crime, and the man who flees from the bonfire in *Murder Room*, who judges himself harshly in the light of his reaction (364). This second example, especially, demonstrates the extent to which we need to be careful applying the term to a person: all things considered, this man is surely not evil (his reaction after he hits Tully is telling here, after all, as Dalgliesh points out), but he correctly judges that his willingness to protect himself at the expense of others through willful blindness to what is occurring is evil.

⁵ Archdeacon Crampton, in *Death in Holy Orders*, found his wife in a coma from an overdose on aspirin and alcohol and left her to die. He discovered later that she would have died regardless, but his wishing her dead, while not prosecutable, is a much worse evil, one highlighted in a remarkable dinner scene at which a spiteful student who knows these circumstances reads the famous scene from Trollope in which the son wishes the father dead (cf. Ralph Wood, "A Case for P. D. James as a Christian Novelist," 10).

Are people ever actually evil, or do we all act under sufficient mitigating circumstances, i.e. the psychological and emotional problems we inherit from parents and society? Are we evil, or do we simply make bad choices? Here we have the crux of the disagreement that I wish to explore. On the Fundamentalist view, people are evil, either all of them or a sizable and worrying majority, and when they do evil actions this is because “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts [is] only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5, NRSV). We choose evil willingly and knowingly, and what is needed is some combination of greater rationality, or the grace of God, or greater will power.

That such a view is ultimately too simplistic James demonstrates through her rich psychological explorations of those who commit the archetypal human evil: murder.⁶ To put the point simply, James demonstrates through her convincing descriptions of evil people that their desires are not simply for evil, but for others’ good, or for their own peace and comfort, or a strong pathetic reaction against inhibiting love, and that their desires are not all that different from our own. This demonstrates that the simplistic Fundamentalist view of evil cannot be quite right; we must complicate the picture.

The biblical archetype for this view of evil is the eating of the fruit: Adam and Eve knowingly break a clear commandment and so commit (the principal) evil from which all other evil flows. Literarily, the archetype is undoubtedly Milton’s Satan. In *Death in Holy Orders*, James presents us with a murderer who coldly and calculatingly murders so that his unacknowledged son can inherit a large sum of money and so be tempted away from the

⁶ Archetypal in mythic terms (Cain and Abel, Oedipus, etc.), but also in terms of the importance of death, which puts the victim forever beyond earthly reparation (cf. *Innocent Blood*, 178). Paul W. Kahn’s *Out of Eden*, which provides a readable and interesting account of evil, defines evil in terms of death: love attempts to transcend death, while evil is an attempt to defeat death by projecting it onto the ‘other’ (11). Many well-written pages later, I am still not precisely sure what this amounts to for Kahn, and it seems to me that his account ultimately falters on his basic inability to give any religious account of evil, even as he tries to mine religious accounts for a tenable view. Many of my thoughts about evil originate in his provocative discussion.

priesthood. In the course of a letter to Adam Dalgliesh, James's most common detective, the murderer, Gregory, confesses to the crime and notes that a small act of kindness on the part of another person ironically led to the murder. He comments, "*I have noticed before how often evil comes out of good. As a parson's son you are more competent than I am to address this theological conundrum.*"⁷ One of the priests at the theological college where the murder occurred later reads the confession and responds, "I have been told that murderers are invariably arrogant, but this is arrogance on the scale of Milton's Satan. 'Evil be thou my Good,'" and refers to this as a "tawdry self-justification."⁸ With this line James dismisses any simplistic view that murderers are merely evil characters along the lines of a Walt Disney villain or Milton's Satan, incapable of good and unproblematically characterized.

Gregory is, undoubtedly, evil. Even his justifications, such as they are, strike the reader as coldly contemptuous and arrogant: the western world is sinking into barbarity, and having striven his whole life to ignore it, he finally decided to grab a large chunk of the goods for his son. With utilitarian coldness he explains that none of the people he killed much cared or were worth much, so why not give his son a different chance? Gregory is not demonic, but pitiful, not egoistic, but frighteningly altruistic, willing to go to prison for ten years for the sake of this suddenly discovered son. Gregory is not committing evil for evil's sake; he is evil precisely because he chooses an unutterably horrific means to a reasonable end. His failing is one of moral vision as much as it is a failing of rational choice, and it is his past that shows him to be proud and deceived rather than purely evil.

⁷ *Death in Holy Orders*, 420. Italics in the original quoted letter. Cf. *Innocent Blood*, 109. I will, unfortunately, be giving away the plots (and specifically the who-dun-it) of most of the books that I discuss, since this is usually highly significant to understanding James's view of the murder involved. In my defense, unlike with most detective novels, knowing who committed the crime does little to deprive the novels of their worth, since James's writing and characterization carry the books even more than the plots.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 425.

In many ways *Death in Holy Orders* is about the past, about bereavement and remembrance, as Dalglish's childhood poem about the silent pain of "The Bereaved," discovered and read halfway through the novel, makes clear.⁹ Many of the characters are motivated or driven by ancient histories that work themselves out through the book: Margaret Munroe is haunted by the memory of her son killed in Northern Ireland; Father Martin by his one love, a soldier that he watched die in a Japanese war prison;¹⁰ Archdeacon Crampton by his own wife's death, which he passively allowed to happen; Gregory by his past love affair and marriage that determined the murder. Dalglish, too, is haunted throughout the work by the memories of earlier summers spent at this college, recollections that bookend the story; the novel is replete with history, even ancient history, and the murder only becomes explicable against this rich and ancient background. Each of these characters are involved in telling and recounting stories about their pasts, and the stories they tell are themselves important; the past is alive in our stories. The action of the novel starts when a powerful industrialist asks Dalglish to look further into the death of his son, questioning whether the story told at the inquest is complete, and asking him to retell this story. The stories that we tell about our past are an attempt to determine them and define who we are, but we do not always get to decide the story completely, and becoming too tied up in the past can lead to evil,¹¹ as it does for Gregory.

Similar points can be made about the murderers in *Devices and Desires* and *Original Sin*: from one perspective, these characters are clearly evil. Alice brutally kills and mutilates a woman her brother, Alex, has been sleeping with so that he can get a large promotion without

⁹ *Death in Holy Orders*, 74.

¹⁰ Father Martin, a former soldier, is perhaps named as a reference to St. Martin, a Roman soldier who was baptized as an adult and became a monk. The most famous stories about St. Martin emphasize his kindness, as when he cut his cloak in half to share with a beggar and dreamed that night that Christ wore half of his cloak; this is certainly fitting for the gentle and haunted Father Martin.

¹¹ An intriguing case in this connection is Archdeacon Crampton, whose inner dialogue we observe in his memory of his first wife, first giving the story as he would like it to be, and then telling us the truth of his complicity in her death (135-6).

encumbrance in *Devices*, while in *Original Sin* Dauntsey murders two siblings as revenge killings for their father's betrayal of Dauntsey's Jewish family to the Nazis. In both cases, the individual involved had done nothing to deserve such a horrible fate, and the murders seem startlingly evil, as do the murderers. Having confessed her crime to her gentle friend, Meg Dennison, Alice denies that she has done anything meaningfully unjust, arguing that her victim felt little pain and that she wanted her dead. Meg responds, "That seems to me so evil that it's beyond my understanding. Alice, what you did was a dreadful sin."¹² Alice laughs in return, a horrible, cold, utilitarian murderer. But it is James's careful filling in of her murderers' backgrounds and motives that humanizes them, both likable characters with strong and genuinely kind personalities.

Alice's backstory is a particularly poignant one: sexually abused by her father as a child, she and her brother witnessed an accident in which he cut himself badly while chopping down a tree. Rather than run for help, her brother gently forced her to wait until after their father bled to death, then they got help and lied about the sequence of events. Having laughed at Meg's accusation, Alice confesses that she has felt guilty her entire life: "If at the heart of your being you feel that you've no right even to exist, then one more cause of guilt hardly matters," later adding, "I owed Alex a death."¹³ This does little to mitigate the horror of her crime or our impression that this heinous act is evil, but certainly it makes it clear that she is no Miltonian Satan, embracing evil for its own sake. She is confused, blind, pitiable, and horrible in her coldness, her inability to understand the claims of humanity, and her economic approach to life, but she is not simply evil.¹⁴

¹² *Devices and Desires*, 413.

¹³ *Devices and Desires*, 415-6.

¹⁴ She drugged Meg, planning to kill her and then herself, but at the last allows her to leave, thus guaranteeing that the truth will be known about her crime. Though a murderer, she is unable to hurt her gentle friend.

Dauntsey's story is equally disturbing, cast as it is against the backdrop of the Holocaust. A kind and gentle old man, Dauntsey had his Jewish wife and two children put in hiding by the French Resistance during the war, only to be betrayed by someone and sent to a concentration camp where they died. Having worked at a publishing house for decades, Dauntsey stumbles upon evidence that one of the owners of the house cold-bloodedly betrayed his family so that he could retain a proper reputation with the Nazis, allowing him to continue his vital Resistance work. This 'original sin' is now revenged as Dauntsey proceeds to kill the owner's two children. It is, again, the past that makes his action explicable and makes it impossible to see him as a simply 'evil' character.¹⁵ The Fundamentalist view of evil requires that we willingly, freely, and knowingly choose to commit evil for the sake of evil. While this makes it easy to excuse ourselves (certainly *I* am not like that, hence I am not evil), it is an unrealistic image of what any evil action is like, even the horror of murder. As James shows repeatedly in her novels, it is the past, and usually quite comprehensible reasons related to human fears and desires and the way that we were raised, that determine our ability to *see* our situation accurately and assess the correct action: to solve the murder, Dalgliesh almost always turns to the past, seeking to understand everything about the victim and suspects.¹⁶

The Fundamentalist view fails as well in pretending that it is simply those other people who are evil; rather, as James demonstrates, evil is a universal contagion, touching everyone. We see in *Original Sin*, for example, the extent to which the same passions of resentment and revenge that lead Dauntsey to commit three separate murders motivate much of the daily petty

¹⁵ One of Dalgliesh's two assistants is Jewish and is so torn by the discovery of Dauntsey's guilt that he tries to warn him to run, an action that throws away his career, but which Dalgliesh clearly understands: Dauntsey is a highly sympathetic murderer.

¹⁶ Dalgliesh states this as a principle repeatedly, and he is quoted most humorously in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, in which Cordelia Gray, a young private detective, incessantly quotes Dalgliesh's axioms as taught to her by the hopelessly inept Bernie Pryde, her now-dead partner who once worked for, and was fired by, Dalgliesh (e.g., 21).

cruelty of the workers in this common office setting.¹⁷ Murder, while the unique crime,¹⁸ is not committed by unique people in P. D. James's detective stories, but by people just like us, people with common fears and worries and loves and passions and pasts who are somehow presented with an overwhelming temptation, view this temptation as an open option, and act.¹⁹

Hannah Arendt famously posited a similar view of evil in her reflections on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, who was responsible for the 'final solution': the mass extermination of the Jews in concentration camps. Eichmann, Arendt noticed, was not some demon, but a pitiable bureaucrat who was simply good at following orders and making trains run on time, even trains filled with condemned, innocent people. To the extent that Eichmann considered what he was doing, all of his guilt was wasted on failing to do his duty properly. Arendt apparently concludes from this that people are never evil, at least in our present bureaucratic age,²⁰ but are simply cogs in a massive machine. Eichmann's evil is 'banal,' she claims, because he has ceased to think for himself at all. The mitigating circumstances are so great that it is impossible to see Eichmann as truly evil; he required not a hanging, we may conclude, but therapy.

The Therapeutic View of Evil: "Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return."

In the Therapeutic view of evil, we are left with the comforting conclusion that people are never truly evil, but simply confused or psychologically disturbed or irrational. Often, this

¹⁷ Cf. Ralph Wood, "A Case for P. D. James as a Christian Novelist," 9.

¹⁸ James does not support the assertion that murder is the unique crime, but she makes it several times (cf. *Murder Room*, 7). Perhaps it is the unique crime, at least in part, simply because of the response: nothing is private, and the investigation is limitless (cf. *Devices and Desires*, 85; *Original Sin*, 206, 210). James's admiration for Dorothy Sayers is generally known (cf. Wood's interview), and this is one point, at least, which she may have borrowed, though she certainly puts it in her own inimitable light with the sensitive consciences of Dalgliesh and Miskin (for Sayers making a similar point, cf. her *Clouds of Witness*, 86).

¹⁹ There are many places to look to see this view of the universality of human evil: cf. *Devices* 15, *Murder Room* 263, *Certain Justice* 291, etc. In a longer paper, it would be interesting to explore the extent to which Dalgliesh and his detectives contribute to this evil in a weaker sense: the murder investigation inevitably causes pain. Cf. *Taste for Death* 190, *Murder Room* 196, *Certain Justice* 161, *Holy Orders* 280, *Original Sin* 206, 210, *Devices* 85.

²⁰ In a footnote to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams suggests that evil used to be more interesting than good because it was rarer and more exciting, but that in an age where evil has become bureaucratized and unutterably banal, it is now the good which is more exciting. This suggests that in an earlier age evil may have existed, but now it is almost incomprehensible as a category.

seems to be James's own view. Perhaps her most patently evil character is Garry Ashe, the young man who brutally murders his aunt, then takes money to seduce and ruin an innocent young woman, and finally murders repeatedly to try to cover his tracks in *A Certain Justice*. Ashe is clearly a disturbing character, and even the thoroughly progressive Venetia Aldridge states that he is "dangerous. He may even be evil, whatever that word means."²¹ And yet James goes out of her way to demonstrate that Ashe has a skewed vision of the world formed by a childhood of abuse in a series of foster homes.²² When people try to care for him, he sees it as an invasion requiring violent response as self-protection, not as a chance to inflict evil willingly.²³ At the end, Octavia, his final (attempted) victim, continues to excuse him on the grounds that he never really had a chance, and Kate Miskin, Dalglish's long-time assistant, wants to protest, but holds herself back: "How did you apply logic," she asks herself, "to a psychopath, that convenient word devised to explain, categorize and define in statute law the unintelligible mystery of human evil?"²⁴

This is the liberal ('Moderate') response: we are defined by our upbringing, or our genes, or our culture, and do not freely commit crimes. Evil is nothing more than psychopathy, literally an illness of the mind, and no more to be blamed than a physical deformity. There may be 'evil' in the world or in certain actions, but people are not evil, they just make wrong choices, as I

²¹ *Certain Justice*, 51. A theme of *Certain Justice* is the inability to say what evil is, even as people call Ashe evil.

²² James does not seem to have a very high view of foster homes; any characters that spend time in foster care are severely damaged by the experience. As *Children of Men* and *Innocent Blood* demonstrate, James is deeply concerned about our loss of a correct model for conceiving, bearing, and raising children.

²³ Cf. *Certain Justice*, 343: "Suddenly there came over him a wash of self-pity. If only they would leave him alone. Nothing he'd ever done would have been necessary if only they'd left him alone."

²⁴ *Certain Justice*, 357. *Innocent Blood* explores the connections between our past and our present actions in some detail; it finally proved too large for what is already a bloated paper, and the conclusions are essentially the same: our past does much to explain who we have become, but it does not excuse what we choose to do. Cf. especially the letter from the murderess describing her murder, which she "told herself that she couldn't have prevented" (the self-awareness of that "she told herself" is slightly too incredible). Referring to her own violent childhood she writes, "The child had been murdered by the child she had once been" (214). James repeatedly returns to the idea of guilt and victimhood, and it would be easy to conclude that she believes that all blood is innocent, that no one is guilty; it would be closer to the truth to say that all blood is guilty, all actions the result of the 'devices and desires' or our disordered hearts. As we will see, however, the solution is as potentially universal as the problem.

recently heard a Baptist pastor say; people are not truly evil at all, they simply act, hence ‘the banality of evil.’ Ultimately, this is not a way of defining what it is for people to be evil, it is a way of denying that people are evil, at least in the strong sense that we are using in this paper. If people never choose the wrong except out of confusion or irrationality, then they are never free and hence never evil.²⁵

Religiously, the Therapeutic view is difficult, perhaps even untenable: if the problem is confusion rather than evil, then we require education rather than reformation, and revolution rather than salvation. The Therapeutic view of evil, just like the Fundamentalist view, also fails adequately to explain reality. While the Fundamentalist view tends to be psychologically simplistic, the Therapeutic view tends towards ontological simplicity: evil is a real thing in our experience, and redescribing it does not erase it. James’s characters frequently are reduced, usually against their own theories, to using the words ‘evil’ and ‘wicked’ to describe what they face. While James clearly has a sense of evil, her characters generally do not, and they use the term reluctantly, as if forced to it by the circumstances, while consistently claiming not to actually understand what it might mean. Cordelia Gray, the heroine of two novels, is suddenly faced with a murder where the murderer not only killed his son, but also attempted to make it look like an accident by dressing him up in women’s clothing, attempting to give the impression that he accidentally killed himself while engaging in some kinky sexual fantasy: “For the first time she was afraid. Evil existed—it hadn’t needed a convent education to convince her of that reality—and it had been present in this room. Something here had been stronger than

²⁵ The connection between evil and freedom is complex, and I am not yet sure what to make of it. The literature on evil seems to generally assume that belief in evil requires something like a belief in libertarian free will, but I rather doubt that this is the case; the Augustinian view of evil that we explore below does not seem to me to require libertarian freedom, but it certainly does require that we not be *determined* by our circumstances; if we have *no* choice, then we do not seem to be evil. Perhaps the most evil person, however, is one who *effectively* has no choice because she does not see anything but evil options and desires nothing but evil outcomes; such a person may still be technically free to do good, but she is not, perhaps, free in a libertarian sense.

wickedness, ruthlessness, cruelty or expedience. Evil.”²⁶ Evil exists, and it haunts the pages of James’s novels like an unwanted extra, lurking in the shadows of her moody atmospheres of fear.

Though James humanizes her murderers with the histories that she recounts, she refuses the easy conclusion that this somehow makes them less than evil. Murderers are not demons, they are people with recognizable motives and passions, but this does not excuse what they do or who they have become. Why, then, do we so often seek to excise the concept of evil? James drops several interesting hints that you must be religious (or have a religious viewpoint, as does Dalgliesh) to recognize and understand evil. In *A Certain Justice* we have a second character, this one Piers Tarrant, a detective, who denies that he knows what ‘evil’ means when it is applied to Ashe; the religious woman that he is interviewing turns her great eyes on him: “And you a police officer.”²⁷ More telling is an amazing scene near the end of *The Lighthouse* between Kate Miskin, Dalgliesh’s assistant, who had a difficult childhood to say the least, and her more privileged sergeant, Benton, who quotes a verse by Auden: “*Those to whom evil is done do evil in return.*”²⁸ Padgett, the murderer, is a bastard who never knew his father; raised in a miserable and Puritanical home as the unwanted guest of his aunt and uncle by an ineffectual mother, he resents the world and his place in it. Kate, self-referentially perhaps, reacts to the suggestion that Padgett’s miserable past somehow excuses his crime: “That’s a cop-out,” she protests, “Millions of children are illegitimate, ill-treated, resented, unwanted. They don’t all grow up to be killers.”

²⁶ *Unsuitable Job*, 172. Cf. also *The Lighthouse*, 223; *Murder Room*, 282. In her interview with Ralph Wood, James states: “There are certain people in life, though not too many, who are evil in a rather special sense” (2).

²⁷ *A Certain Justice*, 337. Cf. Sergeant Robbins, who shows up in several books, and who is (somewhat to the constant discomfort and amazement of his superiors) decided religious, making him somehow both “unshockable and idealistic” (*Original Sin*, 206). Robbins is never shocked by evil because he seems to expect it, and yet he continues to have a non-cynical view of the world and humanity; his colleagues can only guess that this is somehow because of his inexplicable faith in God and belief in original sin. Such a figure is amazingly reminiscent of Chesterton’s vision of the Christian in *Orthodoxy* who is accused of being at one time “too optimistic about the universe and too pessimistic about the world” (80). Chesterton also wrote, back in the beginning decade of the 1900s, of those who consider illness a disease, stating, “The fallacy of the whole thing is that evil is a matter of active choice whereas disease is not” (144).

²⁸ *The Lighthouse*, 320-1. Auden, “September 1, 1939.”

The next two pages are Kate's inner dialogue as she attempts to pity Padgett for his miserable existence, picturing just how fracturing and ugly it must have been, and comparing it to her own childhood. Benton interrupts her thoughts with a quiet reflection that perhaps no childhood is happy, and that it is just as well, then concludes darkly, "Most of us get more love than we deserve."²⁹ Ironically, Auden's poem concludes rather differently, stating later (as quoted at the top of this paper): "We must love one another or die," and ending on a personal note of hope. After another pause, Kate asks for the full quote about recurring evil, and responds more thoughtfully: "Not all of them. Not all the time. But they don't forget, and they do pay." The delightfully ambiguous repeated pronoun makes the point well: we do not get too much love, but too little and of the wrong kind, and when we fail to get such love, *everyone* pays, including the society, those who fail to love, and those who do not receive love.

James's complex characters remind us that while our past does much to shape us, and we can never fully escape it, it neither forces us to live a certain way, nor excuses the people that we become and the actions that we do. Others may be evil, because they can still choose their own actions, but they are not caricatures, and we must always seek to understand the past that has made them who they are. It is a complex view, and difficult to summarize simply, precisely because it refuses to take either extreme. The Fundamentalist view collapses into Manichaeism, with an evil that is equal and opposite to the good; the Therapeutic view ends by denying the existence of evil altogether. The difficulty is to find the shaky middle ground, and James attempts to occupy it by insisting that people are indeed evil, but this is neither so absolute, nor so free, of a choice as we—or her characters—would often like to believe.

²⁹ P. D. James is one of those wonderful authors with whom looking up random details from her works almost always pays off. The poem as a whole is a good example; the quotes at the top of each section come from this intriguing poem. Titled "September 1, 1939," it is a meditation on the descent of Europe into war, and hence of the darkening of evil on the land.

James the Neo-Augustinian: "Of Eros and of dust"

At the end of Auden's poem, quoted in *The Lighthouse*, he writes of the Just who continue to flash out ironic points of light, just like the lighthouse in the book that stands for a fixed point, a denial of negation and relativity and nihilism and an embrace of love. "May I," the narrator of Auden's poem wishes, "composed like them/ Of Eros and of dust,/ Beleaguered by the same/ Negation and despair,/ Show an affirming flame."³⁰ Augustine, ever aware that he is dust ordered or disordered by love, resists the easy answers for evil in his long and convoluted discussion after stealing from the pear tree in *The Confessions*. His question is much the same as that of James's detectives: why do people commit a particular evil, what is their motive? Augustine begins by getting rid of the obvious answer: he does not steal the pears because he desires the pears (he has much better ones already), nor because he is hungry (he is not, nor does he eat the pears, but rather echoes the prodigal son by throwing them to pigs). He steals them, he says, out of love for the sin itself: "Behold, now let my heart tell you what it looked for there, that I should be evil without purpose and that there should be no cause for my evil but evil itself. Foul was the evil, and I loved it. I loved to go down to death."³¹ His first response is to give the traditional, and ultimately Manichean, answer: I sin because I desire evil for itself.

And yet, do we really sin simply to sin? "A man commits murder: why did he do so? He coveted his victim's wife or his property; or he wanted to rob him to get money to live on; or he feared to be deprived of some such thing by the other; or he had been injured and burned for revenge. Would anyone commit murder without reason and out of delight in murder itself? Who can believe such a thing?"³² We must, then, murder and commit other sins to gain the good, and we are simply confused as to how to get it; Augustine's second response suggests the

³⁰ Auden, "September 1, 1939."

³¹ *Confessions* 2.4.

³² *Confessions* 2.5.

Therapeutic account of evil: people are inherently good, and evil is nothing more than an ugly name for making a bad (and simply irrational) choice. That Augustine intends to both affirm and finally deny both simplistic accounts is fairly clear—he concludes this discussion with the negation: I stole for “no other reason but because it was unlawful”—but what he wishes to affirm about evil remains controversial.³³

I suggest that he has three main points in mind: evil is nothing, evil is the love of the lesser over the greater, and evil is *ultimately* irrational, though always done for comprehensible reasons. Regarding the first point, Augustine famously holds to a privation theory of evil, that evil is technically not a thing itself but a corruption of good things. Ontologically, then, it is not an independent entity, but it is a real thing; evil is in the category of such things as shadows and holes: they are real, but they cannot exist independently of the reality of which they are the privation.

Second, and most importantly for our discussion of evil in James’s novels, human beings sin when they love lesser things over greater things. It is this introduction of love, in addition to mere reason and appetites, that allows for the introduction of evil as a real thing while avoiding Manichaeism. “Sins are committed when, out of an immoderate liking for them, since they are the least goods, we desert the best and highest goods, which are you, O Lord our God, and your truth and your law.”³⁴ We sin out of love, but love gone awry, a love of things that cannot stand on their own as if they are our final telos. In stealing the pears, Augustine attempts to grasp liberty, and independence, and goodness, but in abandoning God’s law and turning his face away from a primary love of God, Augustine fails to achieve any of these, collapsing instead into pointless sin. All murder, Dalglish’s old sergeant told him, is done because of one of the L’s:

³³ *Confessions*, 2.6.

³⁴ *Confessions*, 2.5.

Love, Lust, Lucre, and Loathing (a list remarkably similar to Augustine's above). Though people will tell you that the most dangerous of these is loathing, he tells Dalgliesh, "Don't you believe it. The most dangerous is love."³⁵

Which leads us to the final point: all evil is *ultimately* irrational, though this does not mean that it is not rationally done. As we have seen, James carefully describes the backgrounds that explain, define, and motivate the evil of her murderers, but never suggests that these motivations in and of themselves excuse the murder nor make its perpetrator less than evil. Augustine, of course, posits that our loves must be properly ordered: we must love God most, our neighbor second, ourselves third, and all other things in order after that. To fail to love things properly is to sin, to degrade and corrupt our proper nature so that we become something less than fully human. A common metaphor here has us becoming like beasts, but Augustine never allowed the metaphor to twist the truth: the reality is that we can become much worse than the beasts because we are properly much better.

The analogies matter here. Therapeutically we view 'evil' people as simply ill or diseased, suggesting that evil is no more than a malfunctioning of properly good parts that require no more than healing. The Fundamentalist view is at home with the bestial metaphor, but tends towards confusing an analogy with reality, suggesting that the truly evil person (like the beast of prey, the noble blond beast) *is* evil by nature. But if the evil person simply is a beast, then we seem again to have lost the necessary aspect of will or love, the requirement that the person *choose* to act in an evil manner, and so we seem to have lost what is truly 'evil' yet again. Both views, at least pushed to the extremes of Manichaeism and Psychopathy, end by denying strong evil. It is this that Augustine is attempting to resist: we are designed to love and rest in God, and we are restless until we finally succeed in reaching the Sabbath rest only found in God.

³⁵ *Murder Room*, 11.

When we choose to seek our final rest in the ephemeral goods that surround us, we turn away from God and flee to a far country internally, becoming lands of waste to ourselves. And yet, by grace, it is always open to us to turn to God and allow him to flood us with proper love again. We are not bound to be evil, but yet we *all* are often evil, pouring out the immense love that God has placed within us onto the sands of material possessions, or onto the stones of prideful attainment, rather than becoming conduits returning God's love to the ocean of his Beauty and Goodness. Augustine's metaphors help us to articulate that complex middle ground between Fundamentalist and Therapeutic view of evil: yes, we do have the choice, but we all do evil unless God's grace enables us to love as we ought.

It is *ultimately* irrational to love anything other than God, because nothing else is actually beautiful or good, but in our own confusion and finitude we *see* other things as beautiful and good and love them as if they are God (or gods). James offers the same prognosis on evil and love: evil derives from disordered love, and yet only love can save us again. An interesting test case is *The Murder Room*, in which James explores the extent to which murder is definitive of its age. Conrad Ackroyd, a curious friend of Dalglish's, is working on the thesis that murder, "the unique crime, is a paradigm of its age," by which he means that key murders of any generation reflect all of the key facts of that era's historical situation.³⁶ The Murder Room, a room at the Dupayne Museum dedicated to the key murders of the interwar years, provides a series of cases for Ackroyd's consideration, cases which, unfortunately, begin to be reenacted in something like copycat murders around the museum.³⁷ The obvious question is, what do these murders say as

³⁶ *The Murder Room*, 7. As he puts it elsewhere on the page: "murder as social history, if you like."

³⁷ It might make Ackroyd's thesis clearer to give one of his examples: the Thompson-Bywaters case involves a beautiful and intelligent wife who writes a younger man enticing letters regretting that her husband is not dead, a state of affairs that the young man rather precipitously brings about; her letters condemn her in the courts, and she is executed as an accomplice. This murder is a paradigm of its age because the sexual mores were weak enough that women could work in the city in important positions, allowing her to meet the young man and begin an affair, but not yet modern where she would never have been trapped in such an unhappy marriage to begin with. Likewise, she

paradigms of our own age? For much of the book, the murders seem to suggest that our own age is one lacking in imagination, one in which murder itself becomes imitative and obsessed with the past.³⁸ While interesting in itself as a comment on our age, and perhaps quite true in some ways, the picture is slightly more complex than this. The murderer turns out to be the receptionist, a remarkably efficient woman named Muriel Godby, who was treated poorly for years until she fell under the spell of Caroline Dupayne, one of the owners of the Dupayne museum. Protected and appreciated by Caroline for the first time, Muriel becomes obsessed with her and willing to do anything for her, including murdering her brother when he threatens to close the museum.³⁹ Ackroyd's thesis is true, but only in the accidentals, the details of what people are involved and how.⁴⁰ The more essential truth is that murders tend to be the same across all ages, done for a few essential reasons: money, sex, revenge, and love remain, but the most dangerous of these is love.

The Murder Room is set against the backdrop of love: Dalgliesh has fallen in love with Emma, whom we first met in *Death in Holy Orders* when Father Martin told Dalgliesh that he could not set aside love, and in *Murder Room* he is quite in love with her, but unsure of whether she feels the same and unsure of how to move forward. Having captured Godby and solved the

would have been diagnosed as a 'fantasist' and let off by the jury, rather than damned by the jury's prudish condemnation of her affair with a younger man. Dalgliesh, in a nice moment of foreshadowing, suggests that he learned from this case as a young boy "that strong passions had to be subject to the will, that a completely self-absorbed love could be dangerous and the price too high to pay" (10).

³⁸ The question of obsession with the past arises a number of times; Neville Dupayne, the first victim, wants to close the museum that is run by his family because, as a psychiatrist, he considers the entire country to be overly obsessed with the past (of course, he himself is obsessed with his own past as the ignored son of a petulant and autocratic father). As in almost all of James's novels, it is the past that finally explains the present.

³⁹ Godby is a copy of the earlier Ethel Brumfett, who is obsessed with and murders for the more culpable Matron Mary Taylor in *Shroud for a Nightingale*. While James becomes a more polished writer, the main difference between her early and later works is the obviousness of some of the themes that I am discussing here. While her early works show the same motivations (the quote about the four L's shows up very early and repeatedly), it is only in later works that we have characters openly discussing such things as obsessive love, religious ecstasy, and human freedom. The early works are probably more realistic in this way, but the later ones become increasingly intriguing in their thematic structure and theological/ethical discussions.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Murder Room*, 257.

murders, Dalgliesh is speaking with Tally Clutton, the private and independent housekeeper at the museum. Discussing her own failures in love, her inability to allow others into her life, especially a young man named Ryan who lived with her briefly while looking for somewhere else to stay, she says she was afraid of loving him: “I mean human kindness, taking trouble about him, caring about him. Perhaps that’s the best kind of loving. We use the same word for such different things. Muriel loved Caroline, didn’t she? She killed for her. That must have been love.” Dalgliesh said gently, “perhaps that was an obsession, a dangerous kind of love.” “But all love is dangerous, isn’t it? I suppose I’ve been frightened of it, of the commitment of it all my life... You’re only half alive if you’re afraid to love.”⁴¹

This remarkable quote sums up what I want to discuss for the rest of this paper: evil as the danger inherent in love, what makes love so difficult and evil so seemingly inevitable, and what kind of love is required of us to overcome evil. The most dangerous kind of love, for James, is obsession; while she does little in her novels to *define* obsession, she provides enough examples that we can see what she means. Godby is obsessed with Caroline Dupayne because she is willing to do anything for her, even murder. She has come to see her own worth as defined by Caroline’s regard for her, and her purpose as making Caroline’s life better. Godby sees her purpose in life as loving another human being, and with her loves so radically disordered, she is willing to commit the most horrendous evils: she becomes evil through love.⁴²

The cold, dry killer of *A Certain Justice* is the same. Just as *The Murder Room* explores the paradigmatic and unique aspects of murder, so *A Certain Justice* captures the impossibility of perfection on earth. The title derives from the impossibility of perfection in our justice system,

⁴¹ *Murder Room*, 394.

⁴² Cf. Augustine’s love of the unnamed friend (*Confessions* 4.4). I will discuss this further below, but notice how simplistic it is to suggest that what is wrong with Godby is that she is lacking in ‘kindness’; as we saw with Dauntsey and Alice above, kindness is not the opposite of evil; it is not clear that Godby is not acting from something like ‘kindness’ in murdering for Caroline’s sake.

which in this case must allow a killer, Ullrick, to go free due to lack of evidence. Though this is a fairly constant theme throughout the work, it is not the only perfection that is sought and found to be impossible.⁴³ The most important failing at the center of the work is the difficulty of love. There are, uniquely for P. D. James, two killers in *A Certain Justice* – Ashe, whom we discussed earlier, and Ullrick – and both kill because of love.⁴⁴ Ullrick kills because of an obsessive love, and admits as much to Dalgliesh, asking him if he has ever experienced such a love, then describing it: “Obsessive love is the most appalling, the most destructive of all love’s tyrannies. It is also the most humiliating.”⁴⁵ He goes on to describe his love for his niece, a silly and rather capricious young woman who has always had him wrapped around her finger, as the cliché has it. While the murder itself was essentially an accident, Ullrick was driven to it by his love of his niece.⁴⁶ Obsessive love is love run amok, an opening up of our passions that makes us extremely vulnerable to the temptation to other vices, such as rage, pride, lust, and avarice. With his loves disordered, Ullrick did not have the necessary defenses when the only way to achieve his love’s desire was recognizably evil. Even more, he did not recognize that any defenses were possible, denying that we have any control over our actions to begin with.⁴⁷ Having surrendered himself

⁴³ Cf. *A Certain Justice*, 13, 17, 357, 363; cf. *Holy Orders*, 274. She also references the impossibility of goodness in general (231), and the impossibility of ever truly knowing others, a theme that we turn to below (cf. 149, 263).

⁴⁴ *A Certain Justice* is a rarity for James in that it breaks with several of her conventions. Usually James has one murderer who murders twice and is often caught while attempting to murder a third time, and Dalgliesh almost always ‘gets his man.’ *A Certain Justice* is one of only two works where the murderer is not convicted at the end, and the only one in which the murderer remains entirely free (the other is her early *Shroud for a Nightingale*; in this work the murderer later confesses and commits suicide). As a means of wrapping everything up, however, both of these works include a non-confession confession in which the murderer admits to what he or she did hypothetically, thereby remaining free while answering any residual questions the reader might have.

⁴⁵ *Certain Justice*, 361. Cf. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness*, 231ff. for a description of a similar obsessive love.

⁴⁶ The plot details are difficult to sum up quickly: basically, Venetia Aldridge, the victim, stumbled upon some damaging evidence that another lawyer, Ullrick’s niece’s husband, allowed a former jury to be bribed so that he could win his case. After her humiliation at the hands of Ashe, Aldridge plans to make this former indiscretion known, thus ruining the other lawyer’s career; Ullrick goes to convince her not to do so and kills her in a blind rage when she coldly and insultingly refuses.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Certain Justice*, 244: “Fault? That isn’t a word I use. It implies that we have control over our actions, which I believe to be largely illusory. You’re a policeman. You have to believe in free will.”

to obsessive love and its tyrannies, Ullrick has no desire to be free of them, which is perhaps the most damaging aspect of disordered love.

Ashe, the other killer in *A Certain Justice*, does not suffer from obsessive love, but from, perhaps, an obsession with love, desiring it and yet unable to bear it. To quote Auden's poem one final time, "For the error bred in the bone/ Of each woman and each man/ Craves what it cannot have, /Not universal love/ But to be loved alone."⁴⁸ A second failing of love that James points out is this inchoate craving for absolute, personal love, a love we both desire and fear. Ashe has convinced himself that he cannot love and only desires to be alone, and yet we see him act tenderly toward his intended victim, Venetia's daughter, Octavia. Octavia, like but also unlike Ashe, is "in love with love," desiring to be loved.⁴⁹ In a conversation with Kate Miskin at the novel's end, Octavia reveals her deep longing for love. In a thought process as revealing of her as it is of Octavia, Kate muses: "Love, always love. Perhaps that's what we're all looking for. And if we don't get it early enough we panic in case we never shall."⁵⁰ All of James's characters are driven by disordered love, whether of other people, as in these cases (as well as *Devices and Desires*), of reputation (*An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*), of material possessions (*Black Tower*), or of revenge (*Original Sin*). As in the case of Octavia, it is not only murderers who are driven by these motivations, but others as well, including the police officers who solve the crimes. What is it, then, that makes some commit murder while others restrain themselves from this evil, but perhaps not lesser evils, such as coldness?

A large part of James's answer is delightfully commonsensical: because of the particular character of the person involved. Tally, at the end of *Murder Room*, has begun to fall under

⁴⁸ Auden, "September 1, 1939."

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Confessions* 3.1.

⁵⁰ *Certain Justice*, 354. Padgett, in *The Lighthouse*, is a similar character to Octavia, but he is driven by his obsessive search for love to murder.

Caroline Dupayne's remarkable spell, but Dalgliesh opines that she will be less likely to be pushed by it to such extremes because she is confident in her own personality.⁵¹ Having a settled identity is the primary theme of *Innocent Blood*, and the novel explores in the depth the main character's search for an identity through family, sex, experiences, literature, and adventure, only to suggest at the end that "it is only through learning to love that we find identity."⁵² This is precisely what Dalgliesh has failed to do through most of James's novels: Ullrick perceptively suggests that Dalgliesh is protected from obsessive love by "the creative artist's splinter of ice in the heart."⁵³ There is, undoubtedly, some truth to this charge. A recurring theme in James's novels is the reclusiveness of the private Dalgliesh, an almost hermetical withdrawal from the world and from pain in his private apartment. Dalgliesh himself presents this as a major character flaw: by holding himself apart, he is using other people, both for his investigation and for his poetry, without committing himself.

At the beginning of *The Black Tower*, Dalgliesh is lying in bed after a long illness, deciding whether to continue as a detective or not: "In the last fifteen years he hadn't deliberately hurt a single human being. It struck him now that nothing more damning could be said about anyone."⁵⁴ James uses her protagonist as the foil for all of the obsessive love and obsessive seeking for love that appears in many of the murderers: his is a refusal of love, and this, too, is a disordering of love. Having lost his wife and child during childbirth, Dalgliesh has poured himself into his work and his poetry while deliberately shutting out all other relationships.⁵⁵

⁵¹ *Murder Room*, 396.

⁵² *Innocent Blood*, 390.

⁵³ *Certain Justice*, 361.

⁵⁴ *Black Tower*, 13.

⁵⁵ A much longer section could be written on Dalgliesh, but I will spare you all of the possible citations in such a short paper. For a few key sections where he discusses privacy and using people for art, cf. *Murder Room*, 391; *Holy Orders*, 197.

Fortunately, since James develops Dalglish's character through several books, readers can watch how he slowly overcomes this failing, and how others, too, can mirror this development.

In *Death in Holy Orders*, Father Martin advises Dalglish to give up his grief at his own loss and to cease to 'set aside' love. Faced with Father Martin's charge, Dalglish assures him that it isn't grief that holds him back from love, "It's egotism. Love of my privacy, reluctance to be hurt or to be responsible again for another's happiness."⁵⁶ Dalglish does go to walk with Emma on the beach, the liminal realm between the past on the firm coast and the fear and excitement of the boundless ocean, and a life-altering relationship begins. As we have seen, *Murder Room* is set against the background of Dalglish's decision on whether to continue his relationship with Emma; as we reach the end of the book, he writes her a letter asking her to marry him, and she agrees. This relationship continues in the background of *The Lighthouse*, in which he spends a great deal of time *thinking* about Emma and they finally set a date. In *The Private Patient* Dalglish is soon to be married.⁵⁷ It is only by breaking down his barriers of self-protection and moving toward a passionate love that Dalglish himself is able to order his loves correctly.

Dalglish is the most developed character, but this pattern is not unique. The most notable pattern, James seems to argue, is not what Gregory noted in *Holy Orders*, that evil comes from good, but how often good can come from evil. Meg Dennison echoes this pattern in *Devices and Desires*, finally finding the strength to begin to love again (a minor, unrequited crush on Dalglish) after losing her husband and career degradingly years before, while Frances finds the strength to resist evil and begin to love again at the end of *Original Sin*. It is in the face

⁵⁶ *Holy Orders*, 427.

⁵⁷ In the interests of full disclosure, I still haven't gotten to this final book at the time of writing, but this is what the dust cover says...

of disordered love, of evil, of pain, and of suffering, that James's characters find ordered love, and hope, and peace, and freedom.

Of course, another barrier to proper love is the difficulty of knowing people at all. The problem is compounded with private people like Adam Dalgliesh, but it certainly exists for everyone in James's novels as it does in life: our inability to ever fully know each other raises serious problems for love.⁵⁸ How can we love someone when we cannot know them at all? To do so is to open ourselves up to pain, and to make ourselves responsible for things we cannot understand or foresee. Love, at least now in this finite realm, cannot exist without faith and hope: faith in the beloved, and hope in an uncertain future. But how is such faith and hope possible without religion?

Religion plays an interesting role in James's works and deserves more than a brief paragraph at the end of a long paper. For Augustine, of course, it is nonsensical to suggest that anyone has their loves properly ordered until they love God above all else; James, naturally, does not seem to insist upon this point, but there is no doubt that her religious characters have a different texture than those with no belief at all. Often her most intriguing approach to religion is offered by the contrast between the religious figures, of which there seems to be at least one per work, Dalgliesh, who understands religion as the son of a rector but lost all faith at the death of his wife, and his assistant Kate, who grew up in a school where the only religion was antiracism and is thus unable to understand the texture of religious life at all.⁵⁹ One example will have to

⁵⁸ Cf. *Murder Room*, 71, 392; *Certain Justice*, 263 for this theme.

⁵⁹ The apparent theme of *A Taste for Death* is the reality or unreality of ecstatic religious experience. Berowne claims to have some sort of vision, and much of the rest of the action stems from this initial experience. In the end, his murderer claims that Berowne knew he was coming to kill him and allowed him to do so, making him an odder-than-usual Christ figure. While Berowne lives this experience, everyone else in the work finds it incomprehensible to a greater or lesser degree: his mother seems to find it embarrassing, the sort of thing that lower class people do, not good C of E folk (a common, ironic comment from James, cf. 100); Dalgliesh finds it deeply disturbing and challenging, but understands its roots; Father Barnes, the rector at St. Matthew's Church where the murder occurs, develops throughout the work from a priest that has more or less lost his faith, to one excited and challenged by the

suffice: at the end of Kate's conversation with Octavia in *A Certain Justice*, Octavia reveals that she intends to return to a convent where she was educated for a while. Kate thinks to herself, "You'll be offered love of a kind there, the love that Father Presteign deals in, and, if love is what you want more than anything, it's as well to look for it where you can be sure it won't let you down."⁶⁰ This is a stunningly ambiguous quotation. It appears to reference Augustine's contention that all love must ultimately be love of God, precisely because this is the only love that can never 'let you down,' but it is said with something like uncomprehending scorn by someone who considers such consolation to be too dearly bought.⁶¹ The suggestion seems to be that it would be best to not have to seek so greatly for love at all, but this, perhaps, depends on the type of love that one is looking for.⁶²

There is at least the suggestion, however, that while such a life might be rather bleak and barren, a life of practical and good old English common sense kindness and love might be as high as many people can reach. It is just such a life that Tally Clutton and Kate Miskin, for example, dedicate themselves to, and certainly these are two of James's most likeable characters.⁶³ It is unclear that such a view of love fits well with James's otherwise Augustinian emphasis on ordered loves. Is such a life of practical love ultimately possible without religion?

murder, to one who can finally embrace God's mysterious work and gently mirror Berowne's death at the end; finally, the two assistants provide an interesting contrast: Massingham, upper-class again, echoes Lady Berowne's sentiments, that this is somehow in bad taste for someone of the C of E ("That's the sort of thing you expect of characters in a Graham Greene novel," 289); Kate has no religion but antiracism, and finds religious talk incomprehensible, like someone who is tone deaf trying to listen to Mozart.

⁶⁰ *Certain Justice*, 355.

⁶¹ The theme of religion as a consolation is consistent as well, cf. especially *Taste for Death*, 299; *Certain Justice*, 358; and *Murder Room*, 263, where it is noted that the consolation of a false god is real consolation. This could be seen as a critique of religion, or just an honest assessment of its potential power in our lives.

⁶² I am all too aware of how inadequate this discussion is, especially when I read a masterful argument such as Ralph Wood's "A Case for P. D. James as a Christian Novelist," which powerfully urges the case that James should be seen in the tradition of great authors who see the world "from a Christian angle of vision." Woods makes several interesting points; the most apt to this paper is his observation that James carefully displays our current evil in a world devoid of the religious convictions that gave meaning and weight to earlier lives (cf. esp. 7-10).

⁶³ Cf. *Murder Room*, 63; *Certain Justice*, 273, 284; this theme shows up in her third book as well, *Unnatural Causes*, cf. esp. 129.

James does not answer this question in the Dalglish series, but we might suggest that her provocative *Children of Men* stands as a definitive ‘no’ to precisely this question. It is Luke, full of faith, who is able to engage in practical love and offer up his life for another,⁶⁴ while it is Theo who, having finally killed Xan, takes his ring and, in the chilling scene at the end, makes it clear that we are still somewhere east of Eden, new baby or not.⁶⁵ In *Innocent Blood*, the answer is equally definitive. While determining what to do, the main character notes that Christians would tell her to act lovingly, but suggests that this is not something she can simply will to do: “And He, that itinerant man/god, whom no one would have heard of if he had died sane and in his bed, would have had his answer too: “I have.””⁶⁶

We cannot be complete human beings, we conclude, without love, and yet it is love that leads so often to evil: obsessive, withdrawn, sought-for, disordered love makes us evil.⁶⁷ In presenting such a complex view of evil (one undoubtedly more complex than I have done full justice to here), James does much to avoid the pitfalls that we in Baptist life are too easily tempted toward: a simplistic view that pretends that evil is other, fully free, and (at the extreme) absolute, and the alternate simplistic view that allows all evil to be no more than confusion and illness. By offering instead a view of love as both our ultimate danger and our ultimate salvation, James offers, in narrative form, a realistic view of the role that evil plays in our everyday lives, as well as a suggestion of how we can move forward in faith, hope, and, of course, love.

⁶⁴ Speaking of practical love, it is the faith-full Luke alone who is able to impregnate a woman...

⁶⁵ The movie adaptation, unsurprisingly, excises all of this.

⁶⁶ *Innocent Blood*, 132.

⁶⁷ James is perhaps most obviously echoing another neo-Augustinian, C. S. Lewis, whose overarching argument in *The Four Loves* is that any love, if made into a god, becomes a demon.

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