

Example 2

This extract from a post modern text contains traditional crime writing elements which are given a surprising angle. This extract, which we are told comes from the early part of Hill's novel, focuses on a murder trial. Attention in this passage is on the build up to the not guilty verdict which is given at the end. The placement of a trial in older crime writing texts is usually towards the end of a narrative, for example Fagin's Trial in *Oliver Twist*. By placing this trial at the start of her novel, Hill is clearly suggesting that there will be repercussions and readers are invited to speculate on what will happen next. Perhaps Alan Keyes is indeed not guilty and the rest of the novel will focus on the tracking down of the true murderer or perhaps Keyes is guilty and Hill has created this 'miscarriage of justice' to give her villain scope to commit further crimes. The fact that the two court reporters think Keyes is guilty perhaps will persuade readers that the second option is the more plausible.

The scene in the courtroom is focalised through the court reporter, Charlie Vogt which is interesting as in doing this Hill creates a kind of detachment through her partial replication of a journalistic style. Using Charlie as the focaliser is an interesting narrative choice as although Charlie seems assured, knowledgeable and sensible (leading us to believe Keyes will be found guilty), he is wrong in his presumptions. In this extract, though, we are not given his reaction to the verdict though we can speculate on his frustration and anger. In having a fallible narrator of sorts, Hill is able to build up uncertainty and increase tension in the extract. The focalisation through Charlie also keeps us away from the accused. A third person narrator could take us directly into Keyes' thoughts but Charlie pays little attention to Keyes who is in the dock with his police minder and does not speculate on what he might be feeling and thinking. Hill seems to want to keep us away from Keyes' reactions in a direct way. In choosing to present him through Charlie rather than direct third person authorial narration, Hill can create mystery around her 'criminal'. Is he actually guilty or not?

The trial itself is an important element in the crime writing genre. Trials are often satisfying narrative ingredients because readers like to see criminals caught and punished by the due processes of the law. The genre is essentially moralistic and generally reflects a moral and stable social and political world. Trials are associated with another crime element - that of punishment. Again, readers like to see criminals, especially murderers, get their just desserts. The fact that Keyes is found not guilty here could be seen as disturbing, as if the world is upside down, though we will expect that the murderer will not get away finally - crime novels rarely allow for this, even those written this century. The inclusion of trials in crime writing texts also gives writers the opportunity to create tension and engage their readers in the judicial process. We become part of the law abiding establishment on the side of right. In this extract, Hill begins by describing the packed courtroom and there is a clear sense of excitement and anticipation. Ironically there is the suggestion that trials are rather literary affairs - Charlie Vogt thinks this trial is better than any book or film. Here Hill is using the post modern technique of metafiction, drawing attention to her own artifice. In the first half of the extract, Hill describes the packed courtroom and the participants: the court is overflowing, Charlie and Rod are anxious, 'poised like greyhounds in the slips', Keyes is standing with his eyes down, and the lawyers are shuffling papers. The tension is then heightened with the first use of direct speech: 'All rise'. Hill does not attribute this speech, perhaps because she expects readers to be familiar with the legal context of the court, and she creates the

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immediacy of a real courtroom drama. She creates further tension through delaying the jury's verdict by focusing again on Charlie's thoughts. He thinks about the jury and other people in the court. And then the final part of the extract is almost like a play script with quick fire dialogue and stage directions:

'Is this verdict unanimous?'

'Yes.'

'On the third count, do you find the accused guilty or not guilty?'

His honour Judge Palmer was sitting very straight, hands out of sight, expression unreadable.

'Not guilty.'

Although it is likely that Hill gives the reactions of Charlie and Keyes after this extract, at the point where this ends there is a sense of numbness. The fact that the judge has to call order suggests that there is general disquiet and surprise. Some readers, having been led by Charlie's thoughts could also be surprised though it is more likely that because this trial is at the beginning of the novel we will have expected the unexpected. Twists and turns are of course another element of the crime writing genre.

Crime writing often focuses on the pursuit of the criminal and unusually here the criminal has already been pursued and caught. What Hill sets up though is that there must be a further pursuit. If Keyes is the murderer though there is certainly a mystery about him. Although Charlie is unreliable he does draw our attention to Keyes' hands and there is something sinister in the description: 'Normal hands. Nothing ugly, nothing out of the ordinary. Not a strangler's hands...' Hill's use of minor sentences here and repetition is significant. The heavy use of the negative is somehow more of an affirmative. The fact that Charlie finds it difficult to look at him also suggests that there is something menacing about this crime villain. It is important too to consider what Hill reveals of the crime victims. We are told the names of two of the victims - Sarah Pearce and Carrie Gage - but there are no further details other than they were elderly women and that there was also a third victim. Because the victims are just names and because there is no detail here of the crimes - apart from the fact they were strangled - there is little opportunity to sympathise with them as victims. This is perhaps unusual. Certainly it is easy to sympathise with Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and with the duchess and Porphyria in Browning's poems. Interestingly in these crime texts as in this extract, the criminal is male and the victims are female. What could also be seen as unusual is the way Hill, through Charlie, presents one of the jury members as victim. By using a sequence of questions Charlie focuses on her look of desperation, her fear - the trauma of having to do jury service. In other ways this extract is linked more typically to the crime writing genre in the way it reflects social norms. The victims of murder here are women and the aggressor it seems is a man; in the real world violent crimes are more likely committed by men on women, perhaps because they have the physical power to do so. The extract is also grounded in the real twenty first century world in

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its having court officials and members of the jury who are female. Hill clearly wants her fiction to represent the real world perhaps why she incorporates real world criminals (Hindley and Brady) into her narrative. She wants her readers to believe that events here could be true - another element of crime writing.