

# THE POWERS OF THE NOVEL: CRIME IN FICTION

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**GRESHAM**  
COLLEGE

## *Thirteen*

Within the half hour Briony would commit her crime. Conscious that she was sharing the night expanse with a maniac, she kept close to the shadowed walls of the house at first, and ducked low beneath the sills whenever she passed in front of a lighted window. She knew he would be heading off down the main drive because that was the way her sister had gone with Leon.

Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (2001)



## A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red and black plaid coat and a black bag, is seen from behind, reaching for a book on a tall wooden bookshelf. The shelf is labeled 'A-Z by author' and 'Crime'. She is reaching for a book titled 'A Simple Act of Violence' by R.J. Ellory. The shelf is filled with books, including titles like 'The Sun and Shadow', 'A Simple Act of Violence', 'The Hollow Man', and 'The Burning Wire'. The background is a dark wall with more bookshelves.

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red and black plaid coat and a black bag, is seen from behind, reaching for a book on a high shelf. The bookshelf is filled with books, organized by author. The top shelf is labeled 'A-Z by author' and the second shelf is labeled 'Crime'. The woman is standing in front of a large bookshelf in a library. The books are organized by author, with visible titles including 'The Sun and Shadow' by Edwardson, 'A Simple Act of Violence' by R.J. Ellory, 'The Black Rose' by Gerriotsen, 'The Hollow Man' by John Harvey, and 'The Burning Wire' by Jeffery Deaver.

My True Name is so well known in the Records, or Registers at Newgate, and in the Old-Bailey, and there are some things of such Consequence still depending there, relating to my particular Conduct, that it is not be expected I should set my Name, or the Account of my Family to this Work; perhaps, after my Death, it may be better known, at present it would not be proper, no, not tho' a general Pardon should be issued, even without Exceptions and reserve of Persons or Crimes.

It is enough to tell you, that as some of my worst Comrades, who are out of the Way of doing me Harm, having gone out of the World by the Steps and the String, as I often expected to go, knew me by the name of Moll Flanders; so you may give me leave to speak of myself under that name till I dare own who I have been, as well as who I am.

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722)



And now I began to say my Prayers, which I had scarce done before since my last Husband's death, or from a little while after; and truly I may well call it saying my Prayers, for I was in such a Confusion, and had such Horror upon my Mind, that though I cried, and repeated several times the ordinary Expression of "Lord, have mercy upon me!" I never brought myself to any Sense of my being a miserable Sinner, as indeed I was, and of confessing my Sins to God, and begging Pardon for the sake of Jesus Christ. I was overwhelmed with the Sense of my Condition, being tried for my Life, and being sure to be condemned, and then I was as sure to be executed, and on this account I cried out all night, "Lord, what will become of me? Lord! what shall I do? Lord! I shall be hanged! Lord, have Mercy upon me!" and the like.

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722)

We must not, however, omit one circumstance, as it serves to shew the most admirable conservation of character in our hero to his last moment, which was, that, whilst the ordinary was busy in his ejaculations, Wild, in the midst of the shower of stones, &c., which played upon him, applied his hands to the parson's pocket, and emptied it of his bottle-screw, which he carried out of the world in his hand.

The ordinary being now descended from the cart, Wild had just opportunity to cast his eyes around the crowd, and to give them a hearty curse, when immediately the horses moved on, and with universal applause our hero swung out of this world.

Henry Fielding, *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743)





He turned over the leaves. Carelessly at first; but, lighting on a passage which attracted his attention, he soon became intent upon the volume. It was a history of the lives and trials of great criminals; and the pages were soiled and thumbbed with use. Here, he read of dreadful crimes that made the blood run cold; of secret murders that had been committed by the lonely wayside; of bodies hidden from the eye of man in deep pits and wells: which would not keep them down, deep as they were, but had yielded them up at last, after many years, and so maddened the murderers with the sight, that in their horror they had confessed their guilt, and yelled for the gibbet to end their agony. Here, too, he read of men who, lying in their beds at dead of night, had been tempted (so they said) and led on, by their own bad thoughts, to such dreadful bloodshed as it made the flesh creep, and the limbs quail, to think of.

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), Ch. XX





*Engraved by R. Page from a Painting by H. Smith.*

SARAH MALCOLM.

*Published by J. Robins & Co. London, June 1. 1824.*

THE  
**NEWGATE CALENDAR;**

COMPRISING  
INTERESTING MEMOIRS  
OF  
THE MOST NOTORIOUS CHARACTERS  
WHO HAVE BEEN CONVICTED OF OUTRAGES ON  
*The Laws of England*  
SINCE THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY;  
WITH  
OCCASIONAL ANECDOTES AND OBSERVATIONS,  
SPEECHES, CONFESSIONS, AND LAST EXCLAMATIONS OF SUFFERERS.

BY  
ANDREW KNAPP AND WILLIAM BALDWIN,  
ATTORNEYS AT LAW.



*View of Newgate.*

VOL. I.

London:  
J. ROBINS AND CO. IVY LANE, PATERNOSTER ROW.  
1824.

‘Jonathan Wild shall find it’s not easy to detain me. As sure as he’s now living I’ll pay him a visit in the Old Bailey before morning. And then I’ll pay off old scores. It’s almost worthwhile being sent to prison to have the pleasure of escaping. I shall now be able to test my skill.’

William Harrison Ainsworth, *Jack Sheppard* (1839-40), Epoch the Third, Ch. IV



Jack Sheppard's library consisted of a few ragged and well-thumbed volumes abstracted from the tremendous chronicles bequeathed to the world by those Froissarts and Holinsheds of crime – the Ordinaries of Newgate.

William Harrison Ainsworth, *Jack Sheppard* (1839-40), Epoch the Second, Ch. VI

A highly popular murder had been committed, and Mr. Wopsle was imbrued in blood to the eyebrows. He gloated over every abhorrent adjective in the description, and identified himself with every witness at the Inquest. He faintly moaned, 'I am done for,' as the victim, and he barbarously bellowed, 'I'll serve you out,' as the murderer. He gave the medical testimony, in pointed imitation of our local practitioner; and he piped and shook, as the aged turnpike-keeper who had heard blows, to an extent so very paralytic as to suggest a doubt regarding the mental competency of that witness. The coroner, in Mr. Wopsle's hands, became Timon of Athens; the beadle, Coriolanus. He enjoyed himself thoroughly, and we all enjoyed ourselves, and were delightfully comfortable.

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1860-1), Ch. XVIII



Mr Wemmick and I parted at the office in Little Britain, where suppliants for Mr. Jaggers's notice were lingering about as usual, and I returned to my watch in the street of the coach-office, with some three hours on hand. I consumed the whole time in thinking how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime; that, in my childhood out on our lonely marshes on a winter evening, I should have first encountered it; that, it should have reappeared on two occasions, starting out like a stain that was faded but not gone; that, it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement.

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Ch. XXXII

Words cannot tell what a sense I had, at the same time, of the dreadful mystery that he was to me. When he fell asleep of an evening, with his knotted hands clenching the sides of the easy-chair, and his bald head tattooed with deep wrinkles falling forward on his breast, I would sit and look at him, wondering what he had done, and loading him with all the crimes in the Calendar, until the impulse was powerful on me to start up and fly from him.

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Ch. XL

He was not in the least touched, and said firmly,—

‘Before I make any reply to your proposition, Mr. Bulstrode, I must beg you to answer a question or two. Were you connected with the business by which that fortune you speak of was originally made?’

Mr. Bulstrode’s thought was, ‘Raffles has told him.’ How could he refuse to answer when he had volunteered what drew forth the question? He answered, ‘Yes.’

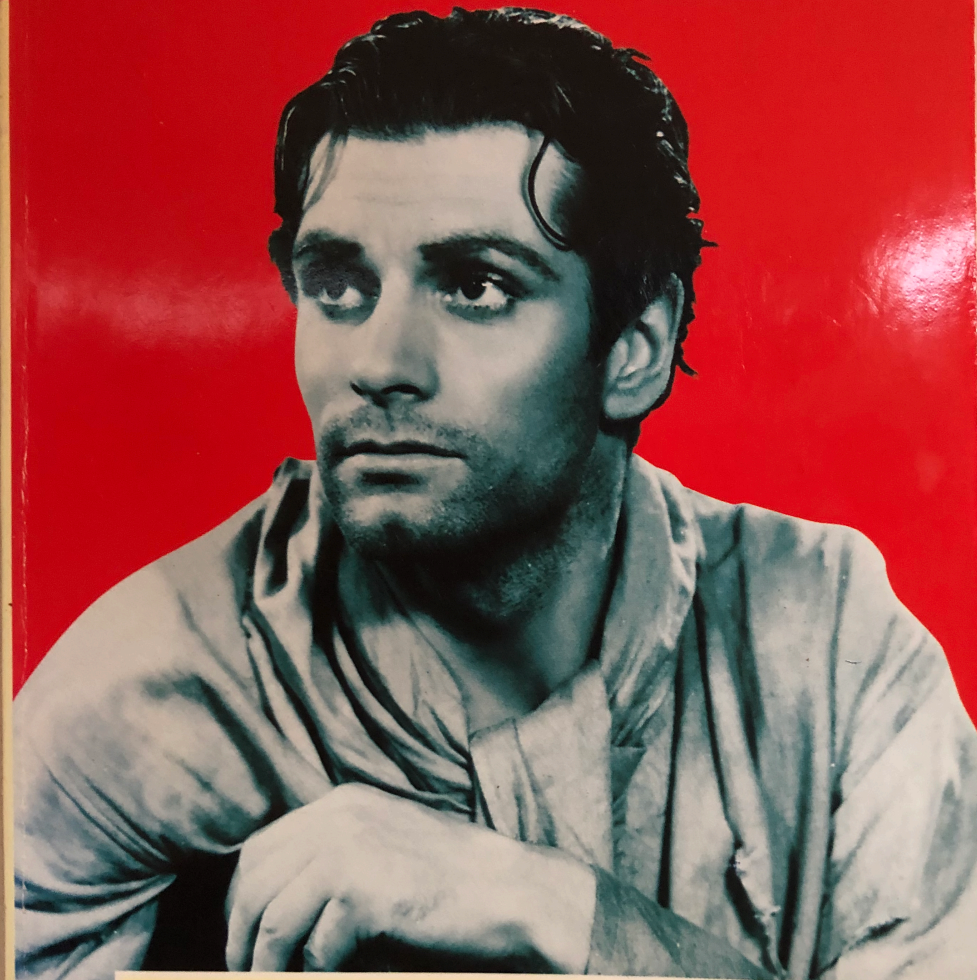
‘And was that business—or was it not—a thoroughly dishonorable one—nay, one that, if its nature had been made public, might have ranked those concerned in it with thieves and convicts?’

Will’s tone had a cutting bitterness: he was moved to put his question as nakedly as he could.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Ch. LXI



WORLD'S  CLASSICS  
OXFORD



**IS HEATHCLIFF  
A MURDERER?**

PUZZLES IN 19TH-CENTURY FICTION

**JOHN SUTHERLAND**

‘Crimes cause their own detection, do they? And murder will out (another moral epigram), will it? Ask Coroners who sit at inquests in large towns if that is true, Lady Glyde. Ask secretaries of life-assurance companies, if that is true, Miss Halcombe. Read your own public journals. In the few cases that get into the newspapers, are there not instances of slain bodies found, and no murderers ever discovered? Multiply the cases that are reported by the cases that are *not* reported, and the bodies that are found by the bodies that are *not* found, and what conclusion do you come to? This. That there are foolish criminals who are discovered, and wise criminals who escape.’

Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1859-60), The Second Epoch, III

He had failed with Dickie, in every way. He hated Dickie, because, however he looked at what had happened, his failing had not been his own fault, not due to anything he had done, but due to Dickie's inhuman stubbornness. And his blatant rudeness! He had offered Dickie friendship, companionship, and respect, everything he had to offer, and Dickie had replied with ingratitude and now hostility. Dickie was just shoving him out in the cold. If he killed him on this trip, Tom thought, he could simply say that some accident had happened. He could—He had just thought of something brilliant: he could become Dickie Greenleaf himself.

Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), Ch. 12



It was the sound of two or three cars pulling up outside, the slam of doors and the hurried footsteps of several people coming up our front path that woke Tom. Through a chink in the curtain a revolving blue light made a spinning pattern on the wall. Tom sat up and stared at it, blinking. We crowded round the cot and Julie bent down and kissed him.

‘There!’ she said, ‘wasn’t that a lovely sleep.’

Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (1978), chapter ten

This particular department had dealt with several such crimes. A senior uniformed policeman who brought Mary a cup of coffee in the waiting-room sat down close beside her and explained some of the key characteristics. . . . He concluded by tapping her knee and saying that for these people it was as if being caught and punished was as important as the crime itself. Mary shrugged. The words ‘victim’, ‘assailant’, ‘the crime itself’ meant nothing, corresponded to nothing at all.

Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), chapter ten

Trudy and I must have dozed. I don't know how many minutes have passed until we hear the doorbell. How clear it sounds. Claude is still here, still hoping for his passport. He may have been downstairs to hunt. Now he goes towards the videophone. He glances at the screen and turns away. There can be no surprises.

‘Four of them,’ he says, more to himself.

We contemplate this. It's over. It's not a good end. It was never going to be.

Ian McEwan, *Nutshell* (2016), Twenty



Hurley and Chris are saying good-night to their friends when the bell rings.

‘Hilda!’ says Chris.

It is not Hilda, but a police officer. They have found Hurley’s name in her diary: ‘*Look in after dinner.*’

Hurley stands at the front door with the policeman. Another officer sits outside in the police car, waiting. ‘Hilda Damien? Her son is here.’ William is staring at the man in uniform.

‘They stole a picture. I’m very sorry to tell you that Mrs Damien has been the victim of a misfortune. My condolences. If you wouldn’t mind coming along.’

Muriel Spark, *Symposium* (1990), Ch. 14

He sees already the gleaming buttons of the policemen's uniforms, hears the cold and the confiding, the hot and the barking voices, sees already the holsters and the epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear.

Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat* (1970), Ch. 7