

‘my little Aussie snob’: The Role of Class in Dorothy Porter’s The Monkey’s Mask

Emma Woodward

The Monkey’s Mask by Dorothy Porter interweaves poetry in the form of a detective novel that further explores the themes of gender, class, and the myths of Australian society in its structure, characters, plot, and storyline. This article discusses the theme of class that while not directly evident is reoccurring throughout the book. The author begins the article by posing the question of whether or not Porter is bringing to light deeper ideas of the Australian community. Further determining, “Australia is a land for the working class hero, yet if terms gain meaning through opposition in a binary, then Australia cannot be imagined as a classless society when the working class needs a foil in order to gain meaning.”

An Australian detective novel written in verse, Dorothy Porter’s *The Monkey’s Mask*, refuses entirely to conform. Feminist, literary, genre page-turner, does such a work simply hang around *themes*? Or can it explore deeper ideas? Ideas of the imagined community of its Australian setting. Ideas of class and belonging. Class is not openly spoken about, nor portrayed as a barrier, yet it causes an uneasy tension throughout the text.

Something which Australians appear proud of, as they imagine their Australian community, is that it is a classless society, where societal boundaries do not impinge on freedom. Australia is a land for the working class hero, yet if terms gain meaning through opposition in a binary, then Australia cannot be imagined as a classless society when the working class needs a foil in order to gain meaning. In *The Monkey’s Mask*, working class Jill Fitzpatrick (and her friends Steve and Louie) come up against the upper class – loosely defined by wealth, and intellectual academic status.

The poem, "Reckless, careless and sexy" (245) is filled with the tensions of opposing class ideals, yet as in the rest of the text, an actual labelling of class conflict is never made. It is as though the characters have glimpsed something out of the corners of their eyes that they refuse to acknowledge. Class (like gender, sexual orientation or violence) is simply one of the many undercurrents and divisions of daily life. In this poem, Jill is "home" after the fallout and climax of the story. There is a brief homely pause in which Jill reflects and drinks "a pot of tea" before the dénouement, when she will confront the murder victim's parents, as well as putting her own affairs in order by "selling up" (250). It appears that Jill is retreating to the comforts of "home," "alone" because she is battered and bruised by the turbulent events she has lived through and investigated. This is a trait of the detective novel genre, for the decent detective hero should be upset and unsettled by senseless cruelty, especially when it has been directed against innocents or "kids" (53). The detective story often revolves around explicit or implicit class ideologies, for the detective is most often working class, and broke, with a rough exterior hiding a good heart. Think of the endless stream of private eyes tramping in the footsteps of Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled, hard-drinking Philip Marlowe. In order to do their job, this working class detective must face forces of power, wealth or corruption. In the 1980s, Peter Corris successfully transplanted this private investigator into an Australian setting with his Cliff Hardy series. Jill is described as "a pint-sized Cliff Hardy," (33) and proves herself a detective in this tradition in one of the opening poems, "Blue Mountains recluse" (5). Jill likes living in "quiet", she dislikes "diesel fumes, high rent/ and corrupt cops". She is inclined to "hard drinking" and she "need(s) a new job." And when this new job comes, it is offered by "a woman's voice/ pure North Shore" (7), setting up Jill as the working class detective, hired by the upper class, "tracking down/ North Shore brats" (33).

Jill confronts the forces of power, wealth, and corruption, when she encounters Diana and Nick, who are "reckless, careless/ and sexy/ both of them/ running on empty" (245). They are "witty" (148) as opposed to wise; they are beautiful and stylish, but inside they are "empty" for the glamorous exterior of the upper class is hiding a rotten core. For a time, working class Jill enters their world, journeying as a guest of Diana and Lou, into the world of the glamorous, rich intellectuals. Jill strives to uncover and understand the humanity of empty, inhuman people, for the detective of fiction is inherently possessed of a good heart. Jill questions Diana "is it the bastard's money?/ what do you owe him?" (254). For a time Jill even has a go at being "reckless, careless" like them; but the consequences are grave, for it "nearly killed" her (245). The conflict of class is furthered by the convention of an outsider narrator. Jill is not a part of the world she investigates, she cannot be. Her outsider status creates an *us and them* mindset, siding the reader with Jill against the *badies*, the others. What groups the *others* of Porter's text together is their disconnection from decency and empathy. One reason the detective novel often involves a conflict of class is because the murderers have come to see people not in humane, but in economic terms. The heedless upper class dispose of a person who is *worthless* and Diana explains her actions as a method to "protect my interests" (254). Jill's friend Louie, her "guide to the poetry scene" (77), could be part of the upper class intelligentsia because of her education and profession, but she is locked out of this club of affluent intelligentsia, denied entry and true belonging, because the well-established and well-off like Tony "had the whole scene/ sewn up" (84). Jill also has the brains to hold her own with the academics, as Nick is keen to point out, labelling detective work as a "'bit of a waste/ of a smart woman's time.'" (34) But Jill is not ashamed of her blue collar police work: "'This smart woman/ needs the money.'" (34) And so Lou and Jill remain as outside observers of the foibles and failures of the academic elite.

Another factor placing Jill and Lou in a class apart is that they are unmarried, "feminist(s)", and "dyke(s)" (68). Anne Cranny-Francis, in her paper "Gender and Genre: Feminist Rewritings of Detective Fiction," presents "an analysis of the detection fiction genre and its use by feminist writers to reveal the practices of race, class and sexual politics in contemporary society." (69) Barbara's "private school" education (86) may have gained her entry, but it is her marriage to Tony that ensures her status in the upper class poetry world. There is simply no power afforded to women who do not fit this heteronormative mould, whose power is not connected to a man's. Thus, another subclass of underdogs is created within the novel. When Jill describes Diana as "worthless" (225) Lou is quick to shoot back that "Worth is a patriarchal construct/ not to mention/ capitalistic" (225). Jill is not the first fictional detective to fill this role. Marele Day wrote her Sydney-based feminist detective Claudia Valentine "into this hard-boiled American school because it allowed a greater questioning of traditional roles, both in terms of the real world and of the conventions of the genre" (47).

Written in verse, *The Monkey's Mask's* style is a surprisingly good fit for the murky world of detective noir. Each poem looms, caught in the headlights, illuminating details, giving us clues. Yet still the murky background darkness is left intact. The reader is left unsure as to where each poem, with its brief moment of illumination, takes place. And the budding armchair-sleuth is left to wonder how much time has elapsed between this poem and the one before. The connections of a prose novel are lost, and the reader floats like Jill, disorientated in a world she doesn't belong to or understand. And so, each crisp, balanced poem illuminates Jill's world in startling detail, whilst refusing to explain it. Rather than a clear explanation of facts, we are left with the effect of a loose, fluctuating concept of an upper class, rather than a manifesto. It is the instinctive knowledge that whilst the lefty intellectuals think they are the friends of the downtrodden, it is actually uneducated, broke Jill who belongs to the underclass of "Aussie battlers" (32) without even trying. Lawyer Nick is constantly trying to flash his friend-of-the-downtrodden-credentials.

'G'day' he says

'you're not too busy

Dobbing in migrant Workers' Comp. cheats

to join two lefties for lunch?' (71)

Jill may conscientiously separate herself from the working class Western suburbs, saying that "Blacktown/ or Penrith/ would kill me" (32). But this is what the people who *belong* there do, given a chance. Jill feels the need to escape the hopelessness of this place. It is only the idealists like Diana and Nick who *try* to belong. In the end, Diana and Nick remain firmly rooted in the upper class because they enjoy the lifestyle of their high-paid jobs, whilst Jill does not remain in Diana's snobbish world. Reflecting on her time with Diana, Jill notes "She never taught me/ to like real coffee" (252).

Another effect of the novel's form, coupled with its narrative of adventure, is the nod this gives to the Australian bush ballad. Essential to the imagining of the Australian community, ballads such as "Waltzing Matilda" have shaped who the Australian people think they are, including their relationship to class and the law. With lyrics by Andrew Barton "Banjo" Paterson, "Waltzing Matilda", like other bush ballads, was enjoyed and retold across class divides. A solicitor and author, the son of

landowners, Paterson is nonetheless celebrated for his championing of the *Aussie* (often working class) hero.¹ The "swagman" of Patterson's ballad is a homeless wanderer and opportunistic thief – a true underdog (9-12). He is pursued by the "squatter" or landowner from whom he has stolen, and the squatter is backed up by the "troopers" in force (17-19). In Porter's novel, "bent cops" (160) are still on the side of the wealthy and powerful. The elite class (Diana and Barbara especially) believe they can bend the "stupid" PI to their will, that she will be "a smart girl," and follow "all the clues" (226) that they have laid out for her.

However, unlike the ballad genre, in Jill's world, there is no crossover between the literature of the people and that of the elite. At poetry readings, Jill feels:

Illiterate and stupid.

Just like the brain-dead cops

Nick loves

demolishing in the witness box. (82)

The elitism of literary studies and academia persists. Diana, "incessantly intellectual", reads "academic stuff... no thrillers, no crap." (70)

In the scene painted by "Reckless, careless and sexy" (245), Jill is perhaps not a very likeable character. Jill will not go to "the cops". Nick and Diana will get away with murder. Yet the reader is able to sympathise with Jill because she is a flawed, all-too-human character. Jill is appalled by Diana and Nick's "reckless, careless" actions, and she questions her own actions. Jill has remained "broke" (135), our "little Aussie battler" (32), because she is uneasy about compromise and profiting at other people's expense. Jill questions herself "do I owe Mickey/ more than I owe/ my mortgage?" (247) Once again, the honest detective has solved the case, only to be defeated by the rich and powerful. In their final confrontation, Diana has this to say "You can't make/ the mud stick, Jill,/ you open your mouth/ we'll sue" (254). This is how the upper class stay *clean*, how they are absolved of their crimes. They use their money to wash the dirt away. It can't stick to them, "blonde, silky" and "smooth" as they are (238). The rich, the heedless, and the intellectual are inter-tangled in Jill's mind, and in the text. Steve from homicide, and Jill the ex-cop "tell each other/ we'd both have big views/ of the Harbour/ if we weren't mugs/ if we weren't honest" (160).

Woodward, Emma. “my little Aussie snob”. *Readings* 3.1 (2017)

Works Cited

Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. Penguin, London 2000.

Corris, Peter. *The Dying Trade*. Text Publishing, Melbourne 2012.

Cranny-Francis, Anne. “Gender and Genre: Feminist Rewritings of Detective Fiction.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 11.1 (1988): 69-84.

Day, Marele. “On Writing a Feminist Detective Novel.” *Hecate* 15.1 (1989): 47.

Paterson, Andrew Barton. *The Complete Poems*. HarperCollins, Sydney 2001.

Paterson, Andrew Barton. “Waltzing Matilda.” *The Complete Poems*. HarperCollins, Sydney 2001.
213. Print.

Porter, Dorothy. *The Monkey’s Mask*. Picador by Pan MacMillan Australia, Sydney 2011.

ⁱ In *The Complete Poems*, the publisher notes that though the solicitor’s writings may have been “romanticised” Paterson was known and applauded for his “general championing of the underdog” (ix).