

Introduction to Crime Fiction

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Office hours: Wednesdays, 12–1 p.m. or by appointment

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review: starting points for Ngũgĩ

- ▶ yet Ngũgĩ comes to English fiction differently
 - ▶ speaks English, Gĩkũyũ, Swahili
 - ▶ educated in (English) colonial institutions
 - ▶ participates in early postcolonial African novel in English
 - ▶ already by 1977 a major figure in world literature
- ▶ *Petals* as a classically postcolonial text
 - ▶ quasi-anthropological account of tradition
 - ▶ ...confronted by colonial modernity
 - ▶ English inflected by indigenous languages/storytelling traditions
 - ▶ plot of thwarted individual and communal development

- ▶ so: largely discontinuous with Anglo-American crime fiction
- ▶ yet...there's a triple murder and a detective
 - ▶ bodies at the start, work backwards to the solution
 - ▶ clues even (where?)
- ▶ and, as in our other readings so far, **social problems**
 - ▶ corrupt elites, a femme fatale, threatening Others
 - ▶ but also: colonialism and post-, economic underdevelopment, religion, cultural preservation, education
- ▶ furthermore, this fiction *was* a crime (to the postcolonial state)
 - ▶ like Hammett, Ngũgĩ went to prison for leftist activism

Petals as diagnosis

This was what I was trying to show in *Petals of Blood*: that imperialism can never develop our country or develop us, Kenyans. In doing so, I was only trying to be faithful to what Kenyan workers and peasants have always realised as shown by their historical struggles since 1895.... Hopefully out of *Petals of Blood* we might gather petals of revolutionary love. (“Petals of Love,” 97, 98)

In my mind I now put this wretched corner beside our cities: skyscrapers versus mud walls and grass thatch; tarmac highways, international airports and gambling casinos versus cattle-paths and gossip before sunset. Our erstwhile masters had left us a very unevenly cultivated land: the centre was swollen with fruit and water sucked from the rest, while the outer parts were progressively weaker and scaggier as one moved away from the centre. There is a story of dwarf-like Gumbas who lived long, long before the Manjiri generation, before the iron age in Kenya, and whose heads were over-huge and so sat precariously on the rest of the body. Whenever a Gumba fell, so goes the legend, he could not lift himself without aid from outside. (58)

but is that the whole story?

My mother and all the peasant characters there represented were never going to be in a position to read the novels, and so what was the point of writing in English? I knew about whom I wrote: but for whom did I write?

“A Novel in Politics: The Launching of *Petals of Blood*,” in *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 84, [JSTOR](#).

read all about it

- ▶ What is the significance of the *Daily Mouthpiece* presentation of the initial events of the *sjužet* (6)?
 - ▶ How do you know not to listen to the *Mouthpiece*?
 - ▶ How does the novel challenge the newspaper narrative formally?

perspective

p.	N	F	who	when
3	EN	EF	Munira	now
4	EN	Abdalla	Abd.	now
4	EN	EF	Wanja	now
4	EN	Karega	K, union	now
6	<i>DM</i>	<i>DM</i>	victims, K	now

point of view, irony, critique

They nearly all had one thing in common: submission to the Lord. They called him Brother Ezekieli, our brother in Christ, and they would gather in the yard of the house after work for prayers and thanksgiving. There were of course some who had devilish spirits which drove them to demand higher wages and create trouble on the farm and they would be dismissed. One of them attempted to organize the workers into a branch of the Plantation Workers' Union that operated on European farms. He argued that there was no difference between African and European employers of labour. He too was instantly dismissed. (17)

- ▶ Who narrates? Who perceives?
- ▶ Who judges?

Who could not feel the subterranean current of unrest in the country?...Karega and his following of Theng'eta factory workers were not any different: they had rejected it is true mere brotherhood of the skin, region and community of origins and said no to both black and white and Indian employers of labour. But they too would fail: because they had also rejected the most important brotherhood – the only brotherhood – of religion, of being born anew in the Lord of the universe and of the eternal kingdom. What other truth did the officer want? Munira wanted to show him that Wanja was the 'She' mentioned by the Prophets. (50–51)

- ▶ Who narrates? Who perceives?
- ▶ Who judges?

structure

- ▶ Divide into groups and work on the *sjužet's* relation to the *fabula* in one chapter of Part One: who narrates? who perceives? and when do the narrated events take place? It will not be possible to be comprehensive.

Chap. 2: 7

Chap. 3: 50

Chap. 4: 80

Chap. 5: 94

Chap. 6: 127

next

- ▶ read at least through 188 (Part Two, “The Journey,” sections 1–3)
 - ▶ ...but try to go a little further
- ▶ Carter essay is not assigned (spoilers!)