

---

## Noir and the Psycho Thriller

*Philip Simpson*

The “psycho thriller” is a subgenre of the versatile thriller genre in which crime is represented as an outward manifestation of the internal workings of the pathological individual psyche. This examination of the psyche is harnessed to the relentless forward momentum of a narrative designed to generate suspense. Though physical action is usually present, the narrative focus is on the criminal mind; thus the psycho thriller is more character study than it is a plot-driven narrative. Its characters must confront a blend of psychological and physical danger, with the physical danger usually an external manifestation or result of a psychological imbalance. The lead character in a psycho thriller is often engaged in a death struggle with the destructive, violent impulses of his or her own mind, or entangled in a contest of wits with a more-or-less equally matched opponent. Because the conflict between characters is at its root psychological, the psycho thriller often blurs the line between good and evil, virtue and vice. The “good” and “evil” characters share many of the same traits and commit many of the same violent and/or venal acts, though for differing reasons.

“Thriller” as a literary phenomenon covers a great deal of territory. In fact, there are many different kinds of thrillers, including but not limited to the following as cataloged by David Glover: “racing thrillers (Dick Francis), legal thrillers (John Grisham), psychological thrillers (Dick Lehane), political thrillers (Jack Higgins), futuristic thrillers (Philip Kerr), and so on” (2003: 139). But “thriller” in the generic sense tends to connote an emphasis on physical danger and action over in-depth character study. The term originated in the last few decades of the nineteenth century as a mildly disparaging label applicable to a broad range of American and British stories involving intense battles between individualistic heroes and vast criminal conspiracies and/or “super” villains. These thrillers, in turn, owed something to the mysteries of Wilkie Collins during the 1860s and 1870s. (See Mangham, chapter 30 in this volume.)

The plot of a thriller is structured on the basic principle of suspense, or the heightened audience anxiety created when the protagonist is fighting a contest against what looks like overwhelming odds. Because of the need to escalate the level of suspense

to a climactic resolution, the textual reliance upon sensational plot devices (or “cliff-hangers”) to keep intensifying the action is one of the thriller’s most obvious features. The constant presence and awareness of physical danger in the narrative is the direct result of the hyper-exaggerated violence, or the threat of it. The criminals are often larger than life, imbued with a Gothic brand of pseudo-supernatural cunning and malice. The protagonist must prove his/her worth by overcoming a series of obstacles, each one more daunting than the last, thus demonstrating the thriller’s indebtedness to tales of heroic romance. The moral plane of the thriller is usually quite defined, with the individual hero embodying admirable qualities, such as loyalty, and the criminal despicable ones, such as betrayal. But because the threat is represented as so dire, the hero usually dispenses with the social niceties of due process, much to the audience’s approval, and exacts a kind of frontier justice to resolve the threat.

The thriller plot typically proceeds in linear fashion, from one danger to the next, until the ultimate defining confrontation between good and evil. However, the conflict usually addresses at some subliminal level a contemporary anxiety (or more than one) facing the thriller’s audience: the fear of a foreign enemy, the fear of inner-city crime, the fear of the disenfranchised drifter, and so forth. For example, the pioneering thriller text *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), by Erskine Childers, is at one level a serious contemplation of the global threat of the German navy. Likewise, Sax Rohmer’s *The Insidious Fu Manchu* (1913) relies upon a foundation of Western suspicion of the Asian world for its success. The psychological component of the thriller is another vital part of what drives the engine of the plot. For any thriller to succeed, the characters must react to extreme stress and frankly incredible scenarios in at least somewhat plausible fashion to sustain audience belief in the plot. Thus, even the most action-driven of thrillers is built upon a psychological foundation. The psycho thriller simply calls more attention to that foundation.

The psycho thriller’s relationship to other genres is not easy to delineate. Just to give one example, Robert Bloch’s landmark crime thriller, *Psycho* (1959), often designated as the origin of the fictional psycho thriller, is just as often labeled “horror.” In that the modus operandi of the criminal anti-hero may resemble the predations of the supernaturally evil and monstrous denizens of horror, the elision between horror and the psycho thriller is easily comprehensible, indeed inevitable. Tales of psychotic murderers unsettle the audience into looking askance at one’s seemingly normal neighbors. Given that social paranoia depends on a sense of anxiety or even fear, and that the threat of violent or sadistic death at the hands of madmen (or madwomen) sparks that fear, the psycho thriller just as easily falls within territory more traditionally assigned to horror.

Having said this, it is nevertheless possible to point to one enormous influence on the psycho thriller, one which helps construct a coherent framework around the genre’s history and direction. The psycho thriller derives its mood and atmosphere from another kind of literary phenomenon: the so-called “noir” style (see Rubin 1999 and Horsley 2001). Though for many noir is more commonly associated with film and the years following World War II, the noir style really has its origins in crime

and so-called “pulp” fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. Of course, these stories are often lumped together under the generic “thriller” label, demonstrating if nothing else that sensational tales of varying proportions of crime and mystery and action are hard to pigeonhole for those who prefer their categorizations clean. Stories of lawbreakers, murderers, thugs, and other assorted violent criminals flourished in print during the nineteenth century and on into the first decades of the twentieth century. One need only look at the countless police memoirs, British “penny dreadfuls,” and American “dime novels” to verify that fact. Yet the element of violent crime does not in and of itself define noir; rather, noir is stamped by its prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure, urban paranoia, the individual’s disconnection from society, and cynicism. It addresses social issues, such as class inequities and the motivations behind adultery, in an explicitly uncompromising fashion typically not found in mainstream fiction. Noir’s universe is bleak, divested of meaning. Flawed human beings in these stories must somehow make moral decisions with no transcendent foundation of morality on which to base them. The consequences of those decisions are frequently fatal and always tragic to someone.

While noir thrillers predate the World War II era, noir itself was not defined until the 1940s. The term is popularly believed to originate in the French crime-novel publishing imprint *Serie Noire*, which in turn inspired critic Nino Frank in 1946 to dub a certain mood and tone of postwar cinema as “film noir” (see Silver and Ursini, chapter 4 in this volume). These films, in turn, evolved from the fiction published first in pulp magazines and then novels in previous decades. While critical arguments over whether to define “film noir” as a genre or a movement continue to simmer if not boil over, noir in fiction is no less challenging to pin down. Is it a genre, with easily recognizable audience conventions? Or is it more a matter of mood, of tone, of style, of loosely connected ideas? Literary noir takes many different forms, “morphing” into such distinct but related subgenres as hard-boiled detective fiction, gangster fiction, and the psycho thriller. This transformative process does not follow a clearly delineated progression from one form to the next, nor are the categories mutually exclusive, but an examination of the structure, central concerns, and themes of psycho thrillers does reveal the relationship to literary noir.

The evolution of both noir and the psycho thriller must be understood within the larger context of the history of crime fiction, set in motion by the detective story of the late nineteenth century. Because the attempt to solve murders in classic detective fiction usually compels the investigator to examine the motives and hence the psyches of potential suspects in order to uncover the culprit, these stories can also be considered early entries in the psycho thriller canon. But beginning in the 1930s and on into the 1940s, two new kinds of crime fiction appeared in America: the “avenger-detective” and the “hard-boiled detective.” According to Gary Hoppenstand, the avenger-detective “emerged ... to captivate the nation’s fancy by effectively solving criminal problems with vigilante violence. This new detective ... catered to the societal desire for simplified solutions to complex problems” (1984: 91). These heroic, larger-than-life detectives, of which Walter Gibson’s *The Shadow* is typical, fought

supervillains who posed apocalyptic threats to the social order. The hard-boiled detective is a much more ambiguous character, less an upholder of social order than “an emblem of personal honor, a knight operating within a social structure of civic corruption, decadence and dishonesty” (Hoppenstand 1984: 92; see also Pepper, chapter 10 in this volume). The first hard-boiled detectives appeared in the pulp magazine *Black Mask* during the 1920s, giving rise to a story type identified by Michael Walker as one of the three noir narrative patterns (quoted in Robson 2005: 14). An amalgam of the traditional structures of popular American fiction (such as the adventure story and Western) and detective fiction, hard-boiled detective fiction dispensed with the notion of the consulting detective and replaced him with an anti-hero who solves cases with as much brawn as brain. However, the psychological focus still remains in the sense that these stories are character studies of people involved in extremely tense and trying circumstances.

The “founding father” of hard-boiled detective fiction is Dashiell Hammett, a writer who believed that the typical intellectual protagonist of detective fiction was too far removed from what detectives really do. For Hammett, detectives do not solve cases in drawing rooms; they solve them out in the field. They are characteristically employees, not independent contractors, but nevertheless exhibit independence from the mainstream society in which they operate. Over the course of eighty short stories and five novels, Hammett invented anti-intellectual, “real” detectives such as Sam Spade (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1930), Nick and Nora Charles (*The Thin Man*, 1934), and the Continental Op (*Red Harvest*, 1929, and *The Dain Curse*, 1929) to populate a new kind of crime fiction, one in which breakdowns of social law and order and individual identity are thematically intertwined. His work combines elements of social commentary, complexly plotted mysteries reminiscent of the realistic tradition he evolves from, and pulp-style adventure. Hammett’s work is prototypically noir in the way it establishes the thematic landscape of corruption, violence, pathological sexuality, and psychological character study.

Raymond Chandler was another such writer, who gave literature the character of Philip Marlowe, first appearing in short stories beginning in 1933 and then novels, including *The Big Sleep* (1939), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), and *The Long Goodbye* (1954), among others. *The Big Sleep* is representative of Chandler’s usage of noir conventions, with Marlowe exemplifying modern urban alienation from the pathetic and/or sordid characters he encounters. The detectives of Hammett and Chandler spoke the tough vernacular of the urban streets and back alleys, chasing thugs through a kill-or-be-killed world very far removed from the politely cerebral, locked-room mysteries of Christie and Sayers. The hard-boiled detectives, or “seekers” in Walker’s terminology, embark upon quests through nightmarish worlds to solve problems of archetypal significance – in a sense, knight-errants with only their own codes of justice to guide them through a fallen world. They find no help from the recognized social institutions of justice, which have long since degenerated into corruption and thievery at the expense of the public. Their reactions to the stress of their quests form the psychological interest of the stories.

In these stories, many of them published in the popular “pulp” magazines of the day, killers used fists and knives and guns to commit graphic crimes motivated by passion and greed: easily understood acts even if not condoned by the readership. Sex and violence, so courteously disguised in most earlier crime fiction, become explicit. The line between detective and criminal becomes very thin indeed in the hard-boiled genre; methods of detection must as be of necessity brutal as well as quick-witted in order to survive the savage urban milieu in which these characters live. The hard-boiled detective uses his gun just as much as if not more than his brainpower. His modus operandi is often extra-legal or even illegal. He uses extortion, seduction, and torture as tools of his trade, deployed in the service of a strong individual code of ethics rooted in frontier mythology and owing little to the liberal fictions of modern culture. The apotheosis of this character type is the suitably named Mike Hammer, the creation of writer Mickey Spillane in the late 1940s. Dispensing vigilante justice and seducing women in the pages of thrillers such as *I the Jury*, Hammer is practically indistinguishable from the psychopaths he encounters in the grimy streets of a paranoid postwar cityscape from hell. The villains he combats are grotesque or even monstrous distortions of the human form, such as Lily Carver in *I the Jury*. Spillane, once reviled by establishment critics, has now been acknowledged for his significant contributions to the literature of noir, on a par with Hammett and Chandler.

The hard-boiled detective story is just one type of noir story, however. A second type of noir identified by Walker is the seduction/betrayal, in which a male protagonist has the great misfortune to fall in love, usually against his better judgment and past experience, with a *femme fatale* who then turns on him. In this noir narrative, love and sex promise redemption in a fallen world but deliver only further heartbreak and disillusionment. The pattern is almost invariably one of a tough male being victimized by a symbolically castrating seductress, thus leading to the frequent accusations of sexism leveled against noir. James M. Cain is a writer whose eighteen different novels characteristically follow this pattern, departing from the mystery or detective “whodunit” to focus on the psyches of those who commit the crimes. Cain deliberately departed from the hard-boiled detective formula but used vernacular speech rhythms and frank sexuality to create characters as memorable as the hard-bitten urban detectives of Hammett and Spillane. Cain’s first novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), establishes the formula with an adulterous affair between Cora Papadakis and drifter Frank Chambers that ends in the murder of Cora’s husband, Nick, in order to bring them both insurance money and happiness. However, the scheme ends in mutual self-destruction, with the two of them turning against each other in a murder prosecution. By the time it is all over, Cora is dead in a car accident and Frank falsely convicted of her murder. The novel, laced throughout with scenes of physically rough sex in addition to violence, was a worldwide bestseller and led to praise from renowned critic Edmund Wilson and French writer and existentialist Albert Camus, who stated that his own novel *The Stranger* was based on Cain’s story template. Cain followed this successful debut with other crime novels such as *Double Indemnity* (1936), *Serenade* (1937), and *Mildred Pierce* (1941). In *Double Indemnity*, an insurance agent named

Walter Huff, involved in an affair with Phyllis Nirdlinger, plots with her to kill her husband. As usual in a Cain story, ruin comes to Huff, ostensibly through being tracked down by a claims agent, but really by the compulsions of his own psyche.

The third pattern, according to Walker, is paranoid noir, best exemplified in the work of Cornell Woolrich. The noir protagonist of this kind of story is typically a persecuted victim, caught up in a deterministic world in which the standard rules have suddenly changed for the worse. Events have conspired to bring down the protagonist, either because of the main character's bad decisions or because of the actions of others. No matter what he or she does, the protagonist is doomed in a world that has targeted him or her for destruction. Besides its sense of fatalistic inevitability, Woolrich's mystery fiction is marked by its focus on character, as opposed to action and neat resolution of the central mystery by the main character. As a matter of fact, his characters are consumed by vast webs of events far beyond their control, usually involving murders whose implications stretch far beyond the limited lives of the characters. All investigations are doomed to failure; no resolutions are possible. His plots make little linear sense. What is key, however, is the pervasive atmosphere of futility even as the characters struggle against the inevitable. Some of his fiction, such as *The Bride Wore Black* (1940), even crosses over the genre line into the fantastic, an easy journey for Woolrich's paranoid vision in which surface events are controlled by unseen forces. His other novels include *Beware the Lady* (1940), *The Black Curtain* (1941), and *The Black Angel* (1943).

Through writers such as Woolrich and Chandler, the mood of classic noir had been established. Its next generation of practitioners preserved the mood but transformed it both to fit into and to critique the changing cultural landscape of America of the 1950s and 1960s. As Cold War tensions increased and domestic unrest over civil rights and American involvement in the Vietnam War intensified, noir became, if possible, even more estranged from superficial mainstream genres and idiosyncratic to the individual writer. Like any literary movement, noir progresses and grows through the contributions of each of its writers. So while the noir fiction of the 1930s and 1940s was pioneering, and the classic film noir cycle began and then faded throughout the 1940s and 1950s, later authors took noir in new directions.

One such direction was to move away from the amateur and private professional sleuths of the detective genre and acknowledge the primary reality of modern criminal investigation – that crimes are investigated and sometimes even solved by police departments. According to Carl D. Malmgren, the most distinctive feature of the police procedural is its focus on methodology, “systematically and intensively applied by a group of public servants who are usually working on more than one case” (2001: 172). The kinds of cases investigated by the police force, however, come right from the pages of hard-boiled fiction: murder, corruption, and all forms of vice in a contemporary urban setting. The narrative focus in the police procedural, as in hard-boiled fiction, remains on the detective navigating through the hazards of a fallen, corrupt environment, guided only by an inner compass of besieged idealism and an individual code of ethics.

A second direction in post-noir is the move inward, away from the blighted topography of the hard-boiled city streets and the public servants who police them and into the dripping back-alleys of the criminal and/or deviant mind. This closing in on the individual criminal consciousness mirrors in many ways the exponentially increasing alienation and self-consciousness of the postwar world. Malmgren emphasizes that crime fiction “features and focuses on a protagonist whose Selfhood succumbs to or embraces criminality. . . . Readers occupy the perspective of the criminal and share his experiences. . . . Crime fiction invites readers to undergo vicariously various forms of psychopathology” (2001: 193). Thus, in a key departure from earlier mystery and detective fiction, crime fiction does not necessarily depend upon the apprehension or death of the criminal. In fact, the criminal protagonist often gets away with his/her crime. It is at this juncture between classic noir and post-noir, between criminal fiction and earlier mystery and detective fiction, that one sees the shape of the contemporary psycho thriller begin to emerge. Some of the earliest psycho thriller fiction arguably includes Paul Cain’s *Fast One* (1933), in which the deranged Gerry Kells tries to out-murder and out-con the mob in Los Angeles but dies in the process. Other prototypical psycho thrillers include Horace McCoy’s *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* (1935), about a man named Robert Syverten who kills his dance partner Gloria Beatty, and *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* (1948), told from the point-of-view of a psychotic gangster.

During the 1950s, two key writers in the transitional zone between noir and the psycho thriller are Jim Thompson and Patricia Highsmith. Jim Thompson solidifies the psycho thriller as a separate genre from noir, though his literary reputation did not grow until after his death in 1977. Thompson wrote over thirty novels, most published during the “paperback original” era of the late 1940s and 50s. Some of the better-known include *The Getaway* (1959), *The Grifters* (1963), *Pop. 1280* (1964), and *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), now one of his most famous. It is told from the first-person point of view of Deputy Sheriff Lou Ford, a nice guy given to uttering well-meaning clichés who also happens to be a sociopathic murderer. In Ford, the reader can discern many of the characteristics of what came to be known as the serial killer: a charming, friendly, and harmless-looking fellow in a position of respectability, but whose mask of normalcy conceals a twisted desire to harm other people for the most idiosyncratic of reasons. Integral to the effect that Thompson creates in the novel is the sense of intimacy between Ford’s sociopathology and the reader. By the novel’s end, the reader has come to understand and even empathize with Ford, simply because so much time has been spent in his psyche. Disturbingly, the narrative tempts the reader to partake of Ford’s attitudes and, by implication, to assume some degree of his sociopathology. Such reader/character identification, seemingly benign in other types of fiction, takes on a disconcerting edge in the psycho thriller.

Patricia Highsmith’s novels explore the intricate workings of the criminal psyche and by doing so take the reader vicariously through a variety of anti-social activities, including but not limited to murder (see Nicol, chapter 41 in this volume). Making her literary debut in *Strangers on a Train* (1950), which was adapted into a film of the

same name by Alfred Hitchcock, Highsmith creates the character of Guy Haines, who encounters Charles Anthony Bruno on a train journey and agrees to murder Bruno's father if Bruno murders Haines's unfaithful wife. After Bruno does indeed kill the wife, Haines is reluctant to carry out his end of the bargain but eventually does so, thus leading to his ruin.

Highsmith's most enduring pathological character, however, is her anti-hero Tom Ripley, who debuted in the novel *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1956). Scarred by a traumatic childhood as an orphan and verbally abused by the aunt who raised him, Ripley retreats into a world of fantasy for self-protection and eventually loses much of his capacity to distinguish fantasy from reality. In this state of mind, he commits a murder and takes on the victim's identity. Thus begins Ripley's various sociopathic adventures, which continue throughout three further novels, *Ripley under Ground* (1970), *Ripley's Game* (1974), and *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980). As the novels progress, Ripley becomes more confident and more secure in his sense of self, yet his moral hollowness infects those who come into contact with him. Under his influence, characters commit suicide, enter into criminal actions, and otherwise behave in ways they would not have done on their own. He can only assuage his moral vacuity through the intense excitement of criminality, yet he also believes he is a moral man who is superior to other criminals and to a society that is itself criminal. In fact, by the last novel in the series, Ripley arguably becomes a hero by using his criminal mind and experience in battle against a gang of kidnappers decidedly less sympathetic to the audience than Ripley is – a multi-novel character arc not dissimilar to that of Hannibal Lecter in the psycho thrillers of Thomas Harris. Taken together, Highsmith's novels pay homage to the moods and themes of noir by presenting an existential universe in which moral codes are fashioned by the individual, with little regard for whatever larger social codes there may be. These social codes are in themselves suspect, since individuals paying lip service to them are hypocrites or naifs who are easily corrupted. Yet the intimate examination of the deviant mind places the novels firmly within the psycho thriller tradition. The novels are, in fact, some of its foundational texts.

Robert Bloch also plays a crucial role in defining the parameters of the psycho thriller – in fact, the title of his most famous novel, *Psycho* (1959), lends the subgenre its most enduring label. *Psycho* is the tale of the fatal intersection of worlds between pudgy, forty-ish motel proprietor Norman Bates, whose name "Norman" is an ironic wordplay upon the concept of "normal," and Mary Crane, a secretary who absconds from her office with thousands of dollars of someone else's money. The bulk of the novel is told from Norman's point of view, so that the reader becomes intimately familiar with the contours of his psychopathology. Basing the novel in part upon the crimes of Wisconsin farmer Ed Gein, Bloch creates in Norman a character with a bifurcated mind – committing a number of murders of young women (including Mary) while assuming his dead mother's identity and then cleaning up the mess afterward in his "normal" identity. The novel was famously adapted for the screen by suspense director Alfred Hitchcock in 1960, so, rather unfairly, Hitchcock is usually

given the credit for the storyline. However, the screenplay by Joseph Stefano is relatively faithful to the highlights of Bloch's narrative. Bloch had earlier written a character study of a psychotic man in *The Scarf* (1947), a tale about a serial strangler of women whose formative traumas at the hands of a verbally abusive mother and a horrific first sexual experience with a female teacher shaped the contours of his mental illness. Following *Psycho*, Bloch went on to write other psycho thrillers, including *American Gothic* (1974), *Psycho II* (1982), *Night of the Ripper* (1984), and *Psycho House* (1990).

During the decades of the 1960s and 70s, a plethora of films about psychologically warped characters, inspired by the success of *Psycho*, hit the movie screens, culminating in the infamous "slasher" movies of the late 1970s. A corresponding trend in fiction also developed, with Shane Stevens's novel *By Reason of Insanity* (1979) showcasing a type of sociopath soon to be popularly known as the "serial killer." Much of the novel is told from the point of view of the killer, Thomas Bishop, who is committed to an insane asylum at the age of eight for killing his abusive mother and then escapes at the age of 25 to begin a cross-country killing spree. But the novel that solidified the serial killer's hold on the bestseller lists was *Red Dragon* (1981), by Thomas Harris. Harris's book, about a psychologically tormented man who slays entire families and the criminal profiler who attempts to uncover the killer's identity before another family murder happens on the night of the full moon, established a popular new subgenre closely linked to the psycho thriller: serial killer fiction. While other authors over the years had written tales of characters who commit multiple murders for reasons rooted in their trauma-riddled pasts, Harris in *Red Dragon* merged the forms of the police procedural, detective fiction, and psycho thriller to produce a hybrid that both terrified readers and appealed to their intellects.

Like Norman Bates, *Red Dragon's* killer is a pitifully lonely middle-aged man, Francis Dolarhyde, who often slips into an alternate identity, the titular "Red Dragon," based on painful memories of childhood abuse by a maternal caretaker. A retired FBI profiler, Will Graham, seeks to unravel the clues at the murder scenes to lead him to the identity of the Red Dragon. Graham is aided in his reading of clues by an unlikely ally: Hannibal Lecter, an imprisoned serial killer who also happens to be a psychiatrist. By creating a dynamic between a detective and a serial-killing psychiatrist, Harris's intent to create a psycho thriller could not be clearer. He perfects the hybrid detective/police procedural/psycho thriller subgenre in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988). This time, the pairing is between a female FBI student named Clarice Starling and Lecter. Throughout the course of the novel, Starling trades personal information about herself to Lecter in exchange for his revelation of clues to lead her to the capture of yet another serial killer, "Buffalo Bill" (as the tabloid newspapers dub him) Jame Gumb. Following the cultural phenomenon of the Academy Award-winning film adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter became the featured character in Harris's next two novels: *Hannibal* (1999) and *Hannibal Rising* (2006). In this last novel, Lecter becomes less a villain and more of a hero, engaged in an epic quest to reclaim his past memories and

take vengeance upon the war criminals who cannibalized his younger sister on the Eastern Front in World War II.

As charted in detail in Philip L. Simpson's book *Psycho Paths*, Harris's success has spawned numerous tales of "profilers" seeking to "understand" psychologically damaged serial killers and other "extreme" criminals by reading the various clues left behind at their crime scenes and on their victims and, from those clues, discerning both motive and the criminal's identity. The "Kay Scarpetta" novels of Patricia Cornwell are among the most well known of the successors to Harris. Cornwell's heroine, Dr Kay Scarpetta, is the medical examiner for the State of Virginia. As a law enforcement professional (albeit not a cop), she deals with any number of dangerous criminals, but her serial-killing nemesis Temple Gault is one of the most cunning and dangerous. (Gault appears in *Cruel and Unusual* [1993] and *From Potter's Field* [1995].) The discovery of identity becomes a structuring theme in that the criminal seeks his or her identity through violence and the detective seeks to discover that criminal's true identity behind whatever monstrous mask the criminal dons. Typically, the detective ultimately wins the contest, the criminal is unmasked, and the social order temporarily restored. But, as Malmgren puts it, "the psychopathology of the criminal can leak out and affect members of the police" (2001: 179). So the lines between detective and criminal characteristically blur, intersect, and even disappear. Identities become fluid, and moral high grounds rapidly erode. Pathology begets pathology. So once again, the noir mood returns, in which a de-centered world proves ethically and morally ambiguous, corrupt, and dangerous. Psychological dynamics are repeatedly depicted as slippery, twisted, and treacherous.

Not all psycho thrillers pit the criminal against a master detective, of course. Some novels, such as Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), explore the innermost recesses of the serial killer's mind, with any police presence in the narrative minimal or entirely absent. In that the world of Wall Street inhabited by serial killer Patrick Bateman is described by Ellis as morally bankrupt at its core, certainly *American Psycho* can be considered noir in temperament, a point made by Lee Horsley (2001: 221). Another of the contemporary writers who best captures the noir tone is James Ellroy, in police procedurals that can also be classified as psycho thrillers. In part, Ellroy's versatility in noir themes may be due to a traumatic event that shaped his youth: the unsolved murder of his mother, as chronicled in his autobiographical *My Dark Places: An L.A. Crime Memoir* (1996). As a crime writer, Ellroy is best known for his so-called "L.A. Quartet" novels: *The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A. Confidential* (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992). However, his novels *Because the Night* (1984) and *Silent Terror* (aka *Killer on the Road*; 1986 – his first written from the criminal's point of view) feature murderous psychopaths as chilling as any found in fiction. In *Because the Night*, Dr John Havilland, aka "The Night Tripper," is a psychiatrist who manipulates his patients into committing various violent crimes. Martin Michael Plunkett, the main character in *Silent Terror*, is a serial killer who teams up with another serial killer, state trooper Ross Anderson, to carry out a nationwide killing spree.

---

In conclusion, noir and the psycho thriller share many common features, as this brief survey has demonstrated. One of the most obvious connections between the two forms is the structural focus on violent crime and the individual psyches of those who perpetrate crime and those charged with preventing it. The noir movement focuses on social deviants and outlaws, and so does the psycho thriller. In both forms, notions of right and wrong are always up for grabs. The characters must make moral decisions based on individual circumstances, which leads them inevitably into conflict with other individuals making their own fateful decisions. Little moral difference exists between the characters, no matter which side of the traditional "hero/villain" binary they are on. The universe in which these characters clash is both existential and deterministic. Arbitrary chance may strike down the most virtuous of characters for no good reason whatsoever, but the essence of a character also usually determines his or her ultimate destiny in the narrative. Finally, noir and the psycho thriller critique the deleterious impact of social institutions upon psychological development. The tone of much fiction within these two genres, and the many others that are cousin to them, is one of paranoia. We fear that the institutions we depend on for our shared existence are not only fundamentally unsound but downright rotten. The psycho thriller enacts this fear for us in unforgettable fashion.

Psycho Thriller (22) Sociopath (22) Anger (21) Blonde (21) Chase (21) Corpse (21) Lawyer (21) White Panties (21) Apartment (20) Bare Breasts (20) Bathtub (20) Cult Film (20) Erotica (20) Pistol (20) Title Spoken By Character (20) Beating (19) Dancing (19) F Word (19) Fear (19) Hotel (19) Leg Spreading (19) Money (19) One Word Title (19) Shot In The Chest (19) Underwear.À Upon arriving to a small town, a drifter quickly gets into trouble with the local authorities - and the local women - after he robs a bank. Director: Dennis Hopper | Stars: Don Johnson, Virginia Madsen, Jennifer Connelly, Charles Martin Smith. Votes: 10 071 | Gross: \$1.29M.