Women who Kill: The Image of Postfeminist Success as Motive in the Novels of Ann Cleeves and Val McDermid

Dr Lindsay Helwig

University of Southern Queensland

lindsay.helwig@unisq.edu.au

Dr Lindsay Helwig is a Lecturer in Pathways at the University of Southern Queensland, where she teaches academic communication skills and creative and critical thinking. Her main research areas are in Welsh historiography, and the engagement of popular culture with postfeminism in the British, American and Australian contexts.

Abstract

Within the crime genre, women who kill are provided with motivations that echo points of tension in society, killing to gain or retain something necessary for the successful life that they believe they cannot attain using any other method. The recent appearance of the image of postfeminist success, as outlined by Angela McRobbie, as a motive for murder in the novels of Ann Cleeves and Val McDermid is significant as it indicates a critical engagement with the neoliberal expectation that women need to achieve the postfeminist image of success to reach a feminine version of the good life. This article will examine how the image of postfeminist success becomes a motive for murder in Cleeves and McDermid's novels, highlighting societal concerns over the impact on women of the expectations of the postfeminist image of success.

Keywords

Crime fiction, postfeminism, feminism, neoliberalism, Britain, Val McDermid, Ann Cleeves.

Within the crime genre, murderers are provided with motivations that emerge from points of tension in society, which are formed by that society's requirements for a successful life. Both men and women are depicted as killing to attain or retain something that they believe is unattainable in any other way, and that they believe is necessary for their societally defined happiness. Agatha Christie, for instance, allowed her female murderers to kill for money and social advantage, both of which provide access to socio-economic security, a requirement of the twentieth and twenty-first century good life (Light 95). Readers find such murders believable because of the lived experience of the challenges of achieving both money and social advantage through legitimate channels. Such experiences have intensified since the advent of neoliberalism in British society, with its emphasis on individual social mobility through personal effort, and the corollary that failure to advance and to achieve socio-economic success equates to personal failure. The intensification of these demands on the individual is reflected in modern British crime fiction, with women killing to gain or maintain their status as a successful woman, as interpreted through Angela McRobbie's analysis of the postfeminist image of success. The challenge real women face in achieving this image, as outlined by McRobbie, arguably positions this image as a believable motive for murder in fiction. This is visible in the novels of Val McDermid and Ann Cleeves, both of whom write multiple best-selling crime series. This article will, then, examine the ways in which the postfeminist emphasis on individual responsibility for and the maintenance of success in the areas of career, family and socio-economic status serves as a motive for murder for female killers in Val McDermid's Karen Pirie series, and Ann Cleeves' Vera series. I will focus on two books from McDermid's Karen Pirie series, *A Skeleton Road* (2014) and *Broken Ground* (2018), and two of Ann Cleeves' Vera series, *The Crow Trap* (1999) and *Telling Tales* (2005), as all four novels contain both female detectives and female murderers, with the latter motivated to kill in order to retain or gain their image of success. As such, these novels act as

exemplars for how the crime genre is beginning to position the requirements of the image of postfeminist success as a motive for murder.

Both McDermid and Cleeves are bestsellers, each with two series developed for television, and are positioned as Britain's leading female crime writers, with sales of over 19 million books for McDermid (McDermid), and of over 6 million books for Cleeves (Forshaw). Their significant presence in the genre, then, brings the engagement of their novels with the image of postfeminist success well into the public arena, although it should be noted that the televised versions of their novels tend not to engage as critically as the novels. As such, I am focusing on their novels which, as illustrated by their sales figures, have significant reach, demonstrating that postfeminism's demands on women are widely recognised by the genre as unrealistic and, therefore, useable as a motive for murder within the novels. The two series selected focus on female detectives, and contain novels with female killers and this, combined with the long-running nature of their series and their steady presence in the bookstores, makes them valuable exemplars of the ways in which the perceived need to achieve the image of postfeminist success can justify and motivate murder. McDermid is the least critical of the two authors, with her detective, Karen Pirie, utilising elements of postfeminism to achieve her success in her career and domestic life. Despite this, McDermid's three female murderers illustrate that the postfeminist demand for career and domestic success can act as a motive for murder. Cleeves uses elements identifiable as components of postfeminism to have her detective, Vera Stanhope, more directly question the price women pay in the pursuit of success, with her two female murderers killing to retain, rather than gain, an image of success threatened by events out of their control. Both authors, however, base their women's motives for murder around the concepts of individual responsibility for the attainment and maintenance of the image of female success, and the corresponding concept of individual failure. For the purposes of clarity, I will be using

Angela McRobbie's theory and analysis of postfeminism, where postfeminism is viewed as 'a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the "good life"' (McRobbie, "Notes" 9).

Scholars have long identified that women's crime writing has engaged with socially relevant issues. Alison Light and Megan Hoffman, for example, argue that female writers of crime fiction have engaged in this critical process since the Golden Age of British crime writing (c.1920–1939), with authors like Agatha Christie and Gladys Mitchell writing what Hoffman termed 'non-conforming' women who 'can be read as questioning and renegotiating social, gender and genre norms' (1). Agatha Christie's novels, as argued by Alison Light, reflected the increasing challenges to class stability seen in the interwar and immediate post-war period in Britain, questioning the idea of respectability (95–7). Indeed, Light argues that many of Agatha Christie's female murderers kill to retain the appearance of respectability (95). Megan Hoffman built on Light's argument, pointing out that the novelists of this period engaged with the new ideas about women juggling marriage and career, with many of the female writers' novels reflecting the difficulties women experienced when combining these roles (191–2). Allowing women to participate in a violent response to the problems they experience can also, as Tiina Mäntymäki (2013) maintains, allow space for the criticism of gender and power. Merja Makinen (2006) argues that Agatha Christie's novels challenged the gendered understanding of violence as male by allowing women to kill for the same reasons as men: to gain or to retain something that provides status in society. The concept, then, of crime fiction engaging with rather than simply reflecting the society of the time is well established, as is the female resort to violence to retain or gain social status. Indeed, as Mary Evans argues, the fact that women, as well as men, need money means that money, as a motive for murder, is equally open to men and women (62). She points out that Agatha Christie's female murderers kill for two main reasons: 'the fear of unflattering aspects of their

lives being discovered or the desire for money and the escape from either likely or actual poverty' (67). Evans also states that in Christie women who kill are not villains suffering from some individual pathology, but '"ordinary" people making extraordinary choices' (67). Their extraordinary choices were made because they could see no other way of maintaining or gaining social status which, in the twenty-first century, has taken on a specific appearance for women.

The appearance of female success in twenty-first century women has, according to Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie, been strongly shaped by popular culture's rendition of postfeminism. While Gill argues that postfeminism has been disseminated by popular culture ('Postfeminist Media Culture'), McRobbie demonstrates that the outline of female success produced by postfeminist popular culture has found a place in British neo-liberal society, becoming the standard for women across Britain and the Western world in general (*Feminism and the Politics*). McRobbie argues that postfeminist female success can be summarised in what she refers to as 'the perfect', which is composed of success in both domestic and professional arenas, along with the retention of a sexually attractive body, aspects that are maintained through constant calculations regarding the effects of actions and choices ('Notes' 9). As a woman successfully undertakes these calculations, she thereby gives the impression of being in control of her life (9), and of following the life plan that has become the social norm for the modern woman (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 77). Where things go wrong, women are expected to fix the problems on an individual basis, bringing them back to their constantly monitored life plan (McRobbie, 'Notes' 17). The individual response of the woman to the slide into the 'imperfect' is resilience, the ability to recover and repair, producing a woman who can do it all (McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics* 31–2). The postfeminist idea of success has, according to McRobbie, been well disseminated and reinforced by the media, shifting attention away from any structural inequities that may complicate the individual

woman's journey towards the 'perfect' (*Feminism and the Politics* 75–6). It is, however, this refusal of postfeminism to acknowledge the gap between the idea of the perfect and the reality of the presence of structural inequities that enables novelists to use the image of postfeminist success as a motive for murder. As McRobbie argues, popular censure is reserved for women who do not meet the idea of the 'perfect', through becoming a single mother, remaining childless within marriage, suffering a marriage breakdown for reasons other than domestic violence, resorting to welfare payments, or living in poverty (*Feminism and the Politics* 78–96). This censure tends to blame the individual for their failure to achieve postfeminist success, citing a lack of self-governance or self-regulation as a causal factor (78–96). Fictional women, then, who for narrative purposes find themselves unable to achieve or maintain the image of postfeminist success on an individual basis may, in the crime genre, be positioned within the narrative to feel that murder will enable them to achieve what individual effort may not. While the novels of McDermid and Cleeves do not offer a structural alternative to the image of postfeminist success within modern neo-liberal Britain, they are, by allocating postfeminist success as a motive for murder, engaging critically with the concept. The acknowledgment in crime fiction that the image of postfeminist success is out of reach via legitimate means for many women opens the door to a wider critical engagement at a popular level.

Val McDermid's *A Skeleton Road* (2014) and *Broken Ground* (2018) follow Detective Chief Inspector Karen Pirie through cold case investigations in Scotland. Detective Chief Inspector Karen Pirie is the head of the Historic Cases Unit in Edinburgh, tasked with dealing with cold cases throughout Scotland. *A Skeleton Road* sees her investigating the discovery of a skeleton on top of a derelict Edinburgh school, The John Drummond School. The investigation takes her to Bosnia, where she discovers the truth about the victim's role in both the military and the genocide of the 1990s, which leads her to the realisation that the

murderer is Tessa Minogue, a human rights lawyer working for the International Tribunal investigating genocide in Yugoslavia. Despite her efforts, Tessa has experienced difficulties in bringing many of the war criminals to justice, something that has impacted on her sense of professional success. To rectify this and provide the justice she believes is necessary, Tessa begins to execute the war criminals who are escaping justice, including General Dimitar Petrovic. Pirie is unable to arrest Tessa, though, as Tessa is pushed to her death by her best friend, Professor Maggie Blake, also the General's widow, in retaliation for the General's murder. In *Broken Ground*, Pirie investigates the discovery of a body buried in a peat bog in the Highlands of Scotland whilst simultaneously participating in the investigation of the stabbing of a man by his estranged wife. Over the course of the investigation, Pirie uncovers the identity of the body in the bog and discovers that the man, Joey Sutherland, died at the hands of now-property tycoon Shirley O'Shaughnessy, to facilitate her theft of some World War Two diamonds buried in the bog. As a working-class girl bright enough to attend university, O'Shaughnessy believed that she needed the financial boost from the sale of the diamonds to be truly successful. By the end of the novel, Pirie has also proven the guilt of Willow Henderson, showing that she murdered her best friend and attempted to murder her husband to prevent him from divorcing her and, thus, securing ownership of her house and retaining her status as a mother who may be seen as successful through a postfeminist lens.

Ann Cleeves' *The Crow Trap* (1999) and *Telling Tales* (2005) similarly follow the investigations of Detective Inspector Vera Stanhope of the Northumbria Police. Stanhope, in contrast to Pirie, is the antithesis of postfeminist success in her depiction as single, overweight, unattractive, scruffy, loud, boisterous, and rude. Despite this, she is professionally successful, running her team of detectives from Newcastle-Upon-Tyne and solving even the most challenging of cases. Over the course of *The Crow Trap*, Stanhope solves two murders and resolves a cold case, revealing the murderer as Barbara Waugh.

Waugh, an apparently successful postfeminist woman with a professional role, a husband, a child, and an attractive body, murders a child a decade earlier during a psychotic episode triggered by multiple miscarriages followed by a still birth. Once recovered from this episode, she bore a child, thereby reconstructing her life to appear as the successful postfeminist woman. When this appearance is threatened by the proposed development of a quarry near the location of the burial site of the dead child, Barbara murders two more people to stop the development from going ahead and uncovering her secret. In *Telling Tales*, Stanhope also solves a cold and a current case after she is sent to review the investigation of a murder that resulted in a wrongful conviction. Stanhope determines that Mary Winters murdered both Abigail Martel, for which crime an innocent woman was jailed, and her son, to hide her earlier crime. Mary Winters murders fifteen-year-old Abigail Martel to prevent her from revealing her inappropriate relationship with Mary's husband, Robert Winters, and thereby destroying Mary's position in society as a career woman with a successful domestic life. Mary murders her son to prevent her earlier murder from being discovered, placing her position in society over the life of her child. In both novels, Stanhope is positioned in opposition to the women who kill, allowing Cleeves to use her voice to question the demands for the concurrent achievement of a successful relationship and career, both elements of the image of postfeminist success regardless of mitigating circumstances, and to show how challenging it can be for women to meet those demands.

As can be seen through McRobbie's analysis of postfeminism, modern British women are expected to accept individual responsibility for their socio-economic advancement, excelling in their domestic life, their physical appearance, and their careers ('Notes' 9). The women who kill in both McDermid's and Cleeves' novels demonstrate an awareness of this expectation of individual responsibility, making choices that facilitate their socio-economic advancement or their retention of their socio-economic status. Two of the three killers in

McDermid's *Skeleton Road* and *Broken Ground* consider killing as part of their career plans. The first of these, Tessa Minogue, is introduced as professionally successful and physically attractive. As Linda Mizejewski argues in *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*, this combination remains important for the successful woman, with crime fiction retaining a focus on female appearance whilst also expecting career-success and intelligence. Tessa receives two main introductions in *Skeleton Road,* when she is first introduced in the book, and when she meets DCI Pirie, with both introductions positioning her as physically striking and self-confident:

> Raven-black hair with strands of silver that caught the light as if they'd been strategically placed for effect. Pale skin, high cheekbones and eyes set too deep to discern the colour until they were inches away. Tessa Minogue strode in with her usual self-assurance […]. (McDermid, *Skeleton Road* 25)

When she meets DCI Pirie, her appearance and self-confidence are tied to her profession as a lawyer, with DCI Pirie noting that 'The tall, slender woman who swept in ahead of Maggie had all the self-assurance of the best of the breed […] her pale skin and soft features combined to give the impression of collected intelligence and compassion' (213). Her professional success is reflected in her fiscal success: 'She was dressed casually, in linen trousers and a dark blue sweater, but it was the kind of casual that cost a lot to achieve' (213). Yet, despite appearances, Tessa Minogue's career success, at least in her mind, is not based entirely on legitimate legal means.

Throughout the novel, McDermid depicts Tessa as passionate about her career as a human rights lawyer working with the International Criminal Tribunal to bring war criminals to justice. Tessa's passion is evident to her friends as well as her colleagues, with an old friend saying: 'Mitja used to tease Tessa about being our Ellen Ripley. Taking on the alien monsters like Milosevic and Mladic' (425). Such an epithet, however, hints that Tessa's

passion for bringing war criminals to justice may extend beyond the bounds of the law, given Ripley's frequent use of violence and murder in achieving her goals. Tessa's turn to violence is brought about, not by the discovery of aggressive aliens, but by her realisation that she is failing to achieve justice within the parameters of her job: in her mind, she is failing in a professional sense. Tessa's sense of justice is simple: 'I think people shouldn't dodge the consequences of their actions, that's all' (430). Her friend, Professor Maggie Blake, also the widow of Tessa's first victim, says:

> I remember the nights when the three of us […] would sit up late, raging about the impotence of the international criminal justice system. How outrageous it was that Milosevic was being held in comfort in The Hague while the monstrous crimes of his regime still reverberated in ordinary people's lives on a daily basis. How offensive it was that so many of the war criminals who'd presided over massacres and rape camps and appalling desecrations of people's lives were walking about free as birds. (431)

The fact that Tessa was unable to bring these criminals to trial challenges her understanding of herself as a successful human rights lawyer. As McRobbie argues, the postfeminist construction of female professional success emphasises control and planning (*Aftermath* 72), with an emphasis placed on individual responsibility for actions that achieve the end goal of success. When faced with a roadblock to her goals of legally achieved justice, Tessa chooses to enact extrajudicial punishment, thereby preserving her internalised image of herself as a successful postfeminist woman. Despite the illegality, Tessa feels that her actions were right: 'it doesn't change the fact that justice should be swift if it's to be truly just. Not bogged down in legal hair-splitting and endless procedural delays. And what I delivered was just' (*Skeleton Road* 436). Tessa, then, is depicted as committed to her role as a human rights lawyer and, when faced with roadblocks in her professional role, resorts to murder to restore her sense of self as a successful career woman. For Tessa, then, the postfeminist requirement that women

achieve the 'perfect', as outlined by McRobbie, demands action and, as postfeminism also contains the expectation that women act as individuals to fix any problems or inadequacies in their life (McRobbie, "Notes" 17), Tessa undertakes the role of the vigilante.

Val McDermid's second female killer, Shirley O'Shaughnessy in *Broken Ground*, kills for yet another reason, one that underlines the difficulties experienced by many women because of their adherence to the image of postfeminist success. Shirley O'Shaughnessy murders to begin her journey into a position of wealth and privilege. As McRobbie notes, the postfeminist emphasis on self-management and self-governance indicates an increased emphasis on individual effort with the individual pushed towards becoming the person who can make the right choices (*Aftermath* 19). Correspondingly, women who fail to make those choices and who, therefore, fail to advance themselves are considered to have failed (19). Those who are seen as unable to help themselves are considered to be of little value to society and, therefore, as postfeminist failures (73). As McRobbie argues, 'The vocabulary of personal responsibility also personalises disadvantage and marks out poverty and economic hardship as issues connected with the family and dysfunctionality rather than as socially generated phenomenon' (77). O'Shaughnessy, as the child of a widowed and therefore, single mother, and a member of the working class of the United States of America, grew up in a group marked by poverty and economic hardship. As Shirley comments about her grandfather who, along with her mother, brought her up: 'He should have been so much more, but escaping a blue-collar background took more luck than ever came his way' (*Broken Ground* 258). Shirley, taking her lessons from the world around her, does not intend to rely on luck to escape that blue-collar world, working hard to get to university and to build her property empire in Edinburgh: 'Shirley may have had good fortune, but she's mostly worked for it. There was no available silver spoon for her infant mouth' (257). Thus far, Shirley

appears to be the perfect postfeminist success story, utilising individual effort to lift herself from economic hardship to a life of hard earnt wealth.

McDermid's news story about Shirley's rise to wealth and status, however, contains a clue in the word 'mostly'. While the news article may well be referring to the $20,000 she was gifted by her grandfather for her university education in Edinburgh, the reader is drawn to consider the role murder has played in her meteoric rise. As Shirley reflects in an analepsis: 'Shirley had dreams, and now the means to pursue them was almost within her grasp. She was going to leave something behind more lasting than anyone in her entire family had ever managed' (363). Her discovery of the suite of fit and strong young men participating in the Highland games gives her the tool she needs to access the buried diamonds her grandfather had stolen during his war-time service in Antwerp. 'How much would it take to persuade one of them to do a job for her? And did she have the nerve to make sure he'd keep his mouth shut afterwards?' (363). Despite being at university, Shirley does not consider higher education and hard work enough to overcome the limits of her working-class background. Illegal diamonds provide the missing finance, and she murders to prevent anyone from uncovering her appropriation of the diamonds her grandfather had stolen. Here, she reflects the reality, noted by McRobbie (*Feminism and Politics* 97), that individual effort is not always enough to overcome structural inequities, something that is echoed by the contrast of her meteoric rise with that of DCI Pirie. While Pirie rises to a relatively high rank in the police force and heads up the two-to-three-person Historic Cases Unit, despite also coming from a working-class background and lacking tertiary education, she is essentially middle management. Pirie is aware of her rise in a way that Shirley is not:

> Karen still couldn't believe that she had escaped into so much respectability […]. Sometimes she was tempted not to turn into the gravel drive between the voluptuous herbaceous borders, to keep on driving to the end of the street and beyond, back to

where she wouldn't be found out for the fraud she feared she might be. (*Skeleton Road* 49)

Yet Pirie's rise is genuinely on the back of hard work and individual effort, positioning her as a postfeminist success. As with earlier crime authors' critiques of questions of gender, as argued by Light and Hoffman, McDermid uses Pirie to criticise Shirley's resort to murder to achieve the same success: 'If they'd had the inner steal to turn their backs on the seductions of what seemed the easy way out, at least three people would still be alive' (*Broken Ground* 334). Yet Shirley's 'easy way out' reflects the reality that many working-class young people find the path to middle class success out of their reach due to structural inequities, rather than individual failings.

The postfeminist emphasis on individual responsibility, as noted by McRobbie, correlates to the concept of individual failure. McDermid engages with this concept, as well, positioning the avoidance of failure as a motive for murder. When Willow Henderson, from *Broken Ground*, experiences marital breakdown, she faces relegation to the ranks of unemployed single motherhood. According to McRobbie, single unemployed motherhood is, for postfeminist women, the mark of failure (*Feminism and the Politics* 78), particularly if the mother is also welfare dependent (96). Such a position indicates a failure in planning and the maintenance required to ensure a stable financial situation and the avoidance of marital breakdown (31–2). Willow is, in fact, depicted as having failed in both areas, with her husband gambling away the family money and falling behind on mortgage repayments (*Broken Ground* 17). Despite being responsible for neither situation, Willow and her children have to move out of their nice house, taking refuge in a friend's granny flat (17). As a result, Willow faces failure as a successful woman. As a married woman, her position as a full-time mother is considered within postfeminism as a mark of success (McRobbie *Feminism and the Politics* 30–1), indicating that she married a man capable of providing the financial support

this requires, her position as a divorced full-time mother is considered a failure. Her error in choice of husband, indeed, indicates a failure in planning. Rather than endure this situation, however, Willow makes it clear that she wants to regain her position in society, a position for which her house acts as a symbol. As Willow says:

> 'He needs to move out.' Firm. Calm. A woman who had made her mind up. 'I need to be back in the house with the kids. It's crazy that we're camped out in Fiona's granny flat while he's in the family home'. (*Broken Ground* 17)

Superficially, Willow's statement seems reasonable. Yet McDermid steadily casts narrative doubt on Willow's accusations of spousal abuse, depicting her as entitled. As Pirie notes: 'Willow Henderson's fight was with her husband. She wanted him out of the picture so she could move back into the big house with her kids. Because she felt entitled to that' (278). The big house and the appearance of wealth are an essential element of Willow's image of herself as a successful woman, and she kills to avoid the allocation of individual failure associated with the loss of that image.

Ann Cleeves' *Telling Tales* (2005) focuses on the same fear of the allocation of individual responsibility for marital failure as the motive for murder. Mary Winter, a solidly middle-class woman with a husband, two children, a grandchild, and a career, finds her status threatened because of her husband's predilection for teenage girls. She resorts to the murder of a teenage girl and, later, her son, to remove the threat of revelation, hiding her husband's actions to save herself. As Riya Das observes, Mary's lack of genuine agency in the maintenance of her status as a successful postfeminist woman is reflected in Mary's automatic antagonism towards, rather than sympathetic friendship with the teenage girls with whom her husband, Robert, forms inappropriate relationships (1–3). Her husband's actions, over which she had no control, threatened her marriage, the success of which is a necessary component of female success. As McRobbie notes, concepts of gender justice and solidarity

have been replaced by what she terms ‘can do and must do better’ ethos, with women expected to achieve success individually, regardless of the actions, events and structures outside their control (“Notes” 3–20). The conflict between Mary’s need to maintain her status, to avoid the allocation of individual failure, and to deal with the threat posed by her husband’s actions pushed her to commit murder. As Catherine Rottenberg points out in *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, placing the responsibility for happiness on the shoulders of the individual woman correspondingly places the burden of unhappiness on those same shoulders. Mary acts to address her unhappiness, with her individual response echoing a pattern noticed by Anna Westerståhl Stenport and Cecilia Ovesdotter in Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* in which the initiating violence may be structural but the response of the murderer embedded in neoliberal society is always individual (157–78).

In Mary’s case, her individual response does not begin with murder. After her husband’s first affair, she agreed to a move from ‘a pleasant house on the outskirts of York in a street with trees on the pavement’ to a run-down house on the outskirts of a small coastal town called Elvet (*Telling Tales* 26). Mary herself changes after the move. Every Sunday, Emma Bennett, Mary’s daughter, and her family visit Mary and Robert for Sunday lunch, and Emma notes: ‘Mary claimed to enjoy it, but the Mary she remembered from York hadn’t been at all domestic. There’d been a cleaning lady then, and they’d eaten out a lot’ (34). By the middle of the book, Cleeves has established that Mary’s world revolves around her husband and the maintenance of their relationship. As Mary tells Stanhope: ‘He does so much good here. In the village. With his work. It would be a dreadful thing if that was lost. My role has always been to support him in that’ (204). Cleeves depicts Mary as taking on the responsibility for ensuring her family remained together, from becoming more domesticated to taking on a less demanding job to focus on her husband. When her actions fail to prevent her husband from embarking on another affair, combined with the expectation outlined by

McRobbie that women act to fix any problems that arise without relying on outside help ('Notes' 17), Mary murders the people who threaten her status. While killing Abigail, her husband's latest target, seems heinous enough, given that she fails to hold her husband to account for his actions, her willingness to murder her own son illustrates the depth of her desperation. As Mary says: 'It was the greatest sacrifice a woman can make […] I did it to protect Robert, to keep the rest of the family together. I couldn't let the sacrifice be in vain' (*Telling Tales* 406). While Mary does not specify the nature of the sacrifice that cannot be in vain, the context of the statement indicates everything she and her children had given up after Robert's first indiscretion with a teenage babysitter in York. Mary changes, becoming more domestic, changes her career, and loses income and position to retain the image of being a successful wife and member of a close, loving family. While she knows this is only an image, the image matters to her, enough for her to murder her son when he threatens to tell the police about his father's relationship with Abigail.

While Mary's murders emerge from her need to avoid the appearance of failure as a woman, despite knowing that the image she murders to preserve is a façade, Barbara Waugh in Cleeves' *The Crow Trap* (1999) murders to maintain a constructed image of success. As Alison Light points out, middle-class status has, historically, been a vulnerable one, subject to changes in fortune that threaten a retreat to a less financially secure position (20–60). Mary Evans argues that the logical consequence of this is illustrated in Agatha Christie's novels, where women commit murder to hide the parts of their lives that might threaten this status (67). Cleeves' women kill for the same reason, and like Christie's, they are not depicted as suffering from some individual pathology so much as murdering for amoral reason: murder seems, to these women, to be the logical solution to a problem they cannot solve in any other manner. *The Crow Trap* illustrates this point, when Barbara Waugh murders two people to hide a murder she committed years before during a psychotic episode. Her psychotic episode

was triggered by recurrent miscarriages followed by the still birth of her son, during which time she would wander the hills behind her home, sometimes for days at a time. As Vera explained:

> At the same time as one of Barbara's disappearances, a toddler disappeared […] The boy was taken by Barbara Waugh […] At some time, either then or later, she buried him […] She tried to forget him but couldn't quite, although she had a child of her own and a husband who stuck by her […] And so things would have continued if her husband hadn't decided to develop the site as a quarry […] The unpleasantness which she'd tidily hidden away under the engine-house floor could be brought to light […] The fight to stop the quarry was an obsession. Perhaps she was just trying to save herself but I think it was more than that. She saw it as a desecration of the little boy's grave. (*The Crow Trap* 531–5)

The revelation of this murder threatens not only to return Barbara to a vulnerable, dangerous period of her life, but also threatens the image she has carefully reconstructed since that time. As Stanhope says, Barbara has tidied away her massive breech of the requirements for success in her murder of the toddler and has attempted to repair the breech through her burial of and delivery of flowers to the little boy.

Barbara is introduced in the novel in a way that indicates her success in the recreation of her image: 'Barbara was serious competition. She was expensively dressed, beautifully groomed. She had cheekbones some women would die for and softly permed hair' (11). Her daughter, still in primary school, is picture perfect. At the end of the school day the child, Felicity, is described as: 'She was so tidy that she looked as if she was just setting off for school. Her white knee-length socks were unrumpled and stainless. Her black patent-leather sandals were shining' (389). To all appearances, Barbara as mother, wife and partner in her husband's business has her life together. Yet her husband's proposed quarry development

threatens her carefully constructed image, to the point where Barbara attempts to bribe, first, Grace, one of the environmental assessment team looking at the potential impact of the quarry, and then Anne, another member of the team. While Grace proves willing to accept bribery, at least initially, her growing reluctance to falsify her results leads to Barbara murdering her and attempting to bribe Anne. Her threat was subtle:

> 'All I wanted to say,' Barbara went on, was that if you, or one of your team, were to find something which would have an impact on the planning inquiry, if you could recommend that after all the development shouldn't go ahead […' She paused. 'Well, it would certainly be in all our interests, wouldn't it?' (122)

Barbara's desperate efforts to protect her image as a successful woman by hiding her initial murder led her to murder both Grace and her father, the latter of whom knew her secret having been at the same facility as Barbara during her breakdown, and to push another woman who was also at the facility, to commit suicide. Barbara's efforts failed, yet her more recent murders are calculated and logical, the product of amoral reason rather than individual pathology, aimed at protecting her image as a successful woman who appeared to be meeting the demands of postfeminist success.

Ann Cleeves makes it clear throughout *The Crow Trap*, though, that Barbara was driven to psychosis and murder by the demands society makes on women. Stanhope, in contrast to Barbara, makes it clear that she never wanted children: 'Even when she'd been younger the thought of producing kids had made her feel ill' (472). She views Barbara's efforts to appear physically attractive at all times, even when doing the dishes as 'letting the side down' (500). In Vera's opinion, Barbara is obsessed with having children (514) and it is this obsession, this need to be seen as perfect, that pushed her towards murder. As Mäntymäki argues, the presentation of female violence within a crime novel enables a critique of socio-institutional structures by granting the female murderer a voice with which

to critique gender and power (441–54). By positioning Barbara as driven to murder by her obsession with wanting children, Cleeves' narrative challenges the continued requirement of postfeminism's political parent, neoliberalism, as pointed out by Catherine Rottenberg (2018), that women retain a place for reproduction in their lives, along with career success. Barbara Waugh's internalised acceptance of the requirement for female reproduction enables Cleeves' fiction to critique the unrealistic expectations placed on women to be exemplars of postfeminist success by allocating it as a motive for murder.

McDermid and Cleeves, then, both engage critically with elements of the postfeminist sensibility found throughout British popular culture, demonstrating how women are engaging with the demands McRobbie identifies as part of postfeminism. The positioning of the image of female success as a motive for murder also illustrates the complexities of the ideology, supporting McRobbie's statement that it can also be used to create social isolation by excluding the women who fail to achieve the status of a successful postfeminist woman. Barbara Waugh, Mary Winters and Willow Henderson in particular, feared this exclusion to the point of murder, seeing no other way of maintaining their status. Shirley O'Shaughnessy believed that she would never achieve the status she dreamed of without committing murder, and Tessa Minogue murdered to maintain her belief in her professional success. For all five women, the image of postfeminist success is unachievable without resorting to murder. The positioning of this ideal as a motive for murder indicates that crime fiction continues to engage critically with the culture that surrounds the authors and, particularly, that female crime authors continue to offer profound critiques of issues of relevance to women.

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