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The Non-Dead in John Dickson Carr's *The Burning Court*

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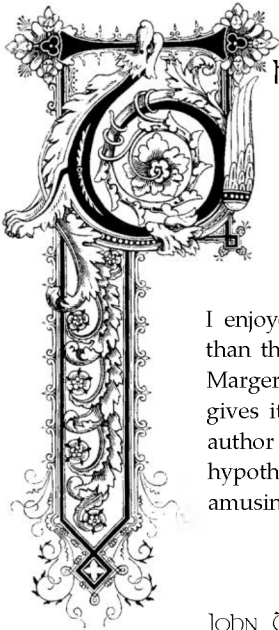


Abstract

Dickson Carr's *The Burning Court* is an atypical novel for this author, who in nearly all other cases provides a purely mundane explanation for seemingly supernatural events in his detective fiction. In this novel, the mystery centers around undead characters who create more of their kind through witchcraft or killing and reincarnation.

Additional Keywords

Carr, John Dickson. *The Burning Court*; Mysteries—Mythopoeic themes; The undead; Witches



THE NON-DEAD IN
JOHN DICKSON CARR'S
THE BURNING COURT

JOE R. CHRISTOPHER

I enjoyed *The Burning Court* by John Dickson Carr more than the novels of [Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, and Margery Allingham]. There is a tinge of black magic that gives it a little of the interest of a horror story, and the author has a virtuosity at playing with alternative hypotheses that makes this trick of detective fiction more amusing than [detective fiction] usually is.

—Edmund Wilson

JOHN DICKSON CARR IS KNOWN FOR having written clever puzzle-plotted mystery novels, mainly in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s—more precisely, from 1930 to 1972. A number of these novels, particularly those with Dr. Gideon Fell as detective, invoke the supernatural only to dispel it in a natural (if often highly unusual) solution. For example, two of the Gideon Fell novels play with the suggestion of vampires, the undead as they are often called—*The Three Coffins* (1935) and *He Who Whispers* (1946). In these mysteries' natural resolutions, they belong to the tradition of Ann Radcliffe among the Gothic novelists.

But one of Carr's novels has the supernatural as central to the plot and does not explain it away. In writing this, I am presenting what is usually called a SPOILER in detective-fiction criticism, but one can hardly discuss a novel without mentioning a central element. To state the final twist at the beginning prepares one to actually analyze what the fiction says.

In this essay, first, I want to discuss *The Burning Court* as a detective story; second, I want to consider in one instance how the plotting affects the characterization; and finally I want to discuss *The Burning Court* as a Gothic novel of the supernatural kind, with a closing suggestion of its meaning.

To start, then: *The Burning Court* is a detective novel—more particularly, a puzzle-plotted mystery. Four puzzles are presented to the reader, the first three tied to seemingly supernatural events. I use the word *seemingly* because, in a consideration of the book as detective fiction, a critic has to ignore the final

reversal in the Epilogue. These are the three main puzzles: first, a woman, who in an ancient costume is seen administering a poison to a sick man, thereafter is seen walking out of the room through a door in a doorway that has been bricked up for two hundred years; second, the body of the poisoned man vanishes from a thoroughly sealed underground tomb; and, third, the body is thereafter seen in a rocking chair rocking and raising its hand to a visitor as if to shake his hand. The fourth puzzle has to do with how a second poison is administered, but it does not affect the seemingly supernatural events.

The third of the three puzzles rests on the description of one person and, if he is believed, on the question of how the dead man's appearance was gimmicked. The first of the three is more elaborate and more elaborately developed. I will not go into the question of the costume, with members of the poisoned man's family going to a costume ball, *etc.*, but the walking through a sealed doorway is obviously a variant of the locked-room puzzle for which Carr is famous. The other doors to the room were known to be locked, of course. The amateur detective of the novel, an elderly true-crime writer named Gaudan Cross, explains it with a highly unlikely but possible use of a mirror and one of the supposedly locked doors, but only after a hole has been knocked through the walled-up door, to show there is no secret passageway.

More elaborate, and perhaps even more unlikely, is the vanishing corpse. The family vault on the estate is under ground, with the entrance to the vault dug up before each interment and buried again afterwards. The path with cemented stones is removed and replaced each time since it runs over the entrance. That entrance to the vault has a stone slab, weighing "over half a ton," on it, which has to be moved, after a thin covering of gravel and soil under the cemented stones is also removed. Carr has a footnote, citing an actual vault like this in Scotland (Ch. 6). One of the characters, when four of them reopen the vault after the burial of the poisoned man and find no body in the coffin, identifies the situation as a locked room with four possible solutions: (1) the body was removed through a secret passage; (2) the body was still in the crypt; (3) the entrance was dug open after the burial; or (4) the body was never in the coffin (Ch. 7). All of these seem to be eliminated, although the characters later conjecture about possibilities three and four (Ch. 10). Gaudan Cross's solution near the end is an elaborate form of the second (Ch. 21).

I am not explaining these in detail, but one notices that Carr is deliberately leading his readers, with his characters' conjectures about possibilities three and four, not to focus on one and two. In fact, when the four possibilities were given, the character enumerating them says, "Two of these possibilities we can discard; subject, of course, to the examination of an architect. We can pretty well decide that there is no secret passage, and the body is not now in the crypt" (Ch. 7). The architect might be able to decide about a secret

passage—although with granite walls (Ch. 7) a secret passage does not seem likely anyway—but an architect surely is not an authority on bodies in tombs. However, the reader has been directed away from the first two possibilities.

As an entertainment, all of this works well. The author is playing a game with the reader. When one of the characters announces the crypt to be a locked room, he is assuming a detective-story culture. Later, an elderly mortician who has the habit of tying knots in pieces of string is compared to an amateur detective in Baroness Orczy's series of short stories collected as *The Old Man in the Corner* (1909), who has a similar habit (Ch. 17, set up in Ch. 10). Again, a detective-story culture is assumed.

A truism of literary criticism is that heavily plotted fiction seldom has much depth in characterization. At least, it would take a very long novel to have both an elaborate plot and character complexity. Baroness Orczy no doubt was trying to give an additional personality trait to her nameless detective with his knot tying. He also untied the knots, which may reflect symbolically his ability as an "armchair detective" to solve problems. In Carr's novel a good case can be made that the man who is poisoned—Miles Despard—is more shaped by the plot than developed for himself. Admittedly he is dead at the start of the book (at least, so to speak), so he cannot be expected to react to events; but what is said about him is curiously limited. He was wealthy, and he had lived abroad as a reprobate. His stomach, suffering gastro-enteritis, led him toward death, and his poor health brought him back to the family home in a Philadelphia suburb (Ch. 1). (Arsenic hurried the deathly process.) He is described briefly, the previous summer, as having "punctilious bearing, his scrawny neck emerging from shiny white knives of collars [; he had a] curled grey moustache and air of far-off hilarity" (Ch. 1). That is fairly external, and the hilarity is not apparent elsewhere in the book. When he returned to America, he was abstracted, not as genial as he had been. About two years before his death he began keeping "by himself in his own room [in the afternoons and evenings] and wouldn't let anybody go into it [...]. He even had his meals sent up to him" (Ch. 1; the dating from Ch. 4). He still came out for breakfast and for some walking in the morning, but from noon on, he retreated. What did he do in his room? He may have spent his time looking out the window; he may have spent time changing his clothes—he had an extensive wardrobe (Ch. 4). The latter implies he admired himself in a mirror. The wardrobe try-outs are later assumed to be true.

I am leading up to something. A later description of the room says that the bureau with a mirror was in such a position that it received "little light from the windows in daytime, and none at all from the two electric bulbs by night." Thus, when Despard wanted to see himself in his clothes, he rolled the bureau to a position under one light (Ch. 20). Now I find it difficult to believe that a man who was something of a rogue wouldn't want to show off his clothes to others.

But, be that as it may, I find it harder to believe that a wealthy man would not pay to have his bedroom fixed with better lighting and/or with a mirror so he did not have to move a bureau back and forth daily. The whole rationale of the room and the desire to try on his clothes by himself seems to be invented to set up the puzzle of the woman who seemed to walk through a wall.

I have picked the murderess for this analysis because it is fairly straightforward; the character has been partly shaped to fit the plot. Other characters in the novel would take fuller discussions, but to a lesser degree I believe the same is true: in some cases their responses to events are intended to support or introduce plot points, not to plumb their psyches.

These comments are not necessarily negative. Carr's readers came to his books to enjoy dramatized puzzles, not for Gabriel Conroy's feeling that snow—meaning death—is common all over Ireland, not for a lyrical novel in which the main thing that happens is that Mrs. Dalloway gives a party. I pity the reader who can't read each kind of fiction for its individual merits, but the world of fiction is wide and tastes do differ.

However, Carr, as has been said, is also playing a game with his readers' rationalistic expectations—expectations that are spelled out in the genre. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire," has Sherlock Holmes exclaim: "This agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply" (1215). Later he comments, "The idea of a vampire was to me absurd. Such things do not happen in criminal practice in England" (1229). Therefore, Carr's readership expected the supernatural to be explained away.

But in the "Epilogue" to the novel, mainly following the thoughts of Marie Stevens, it turns out that the supernatural explanation is the true one. Miles Despard, poisoned by arsenic admittedly, had joined the non-dead—risen from his coffin, passed through the earth from the underground tomb, and really was seen in the rocking chair. None of this is stated in detail in the epilogue. Marie just thinks about Gaudan Cross, "It was clever of him to pluck a physical explanation, a thing of sizes and dimensions and stone walls, out of all those things which had no explanation I was prepared to give [...]." Gaudan Cross, of course, was another member of the non-dead, offering an explanation of the supernatural in natural terms and accusing two other people of murder, protecting Marie Stevens, who actually had done the poisoning. Whether she left through the bricked-up doorway or through a supposedly locked door, reflected in the mirror, is never clarified.

What does Carr mean by the "non-dead" and what sorts of powers do they have? They are immortal witches. In Chapter 16, Carr has a series of nine footnotes supporting a lengthy discussion of witchcraft and poisoning being interrelated in Europe in the seventeenth century. The title of his book comes

from what is described as the Burning Court in France, set up to try witches and to burn them at the stake.

Evidently, from the implication of the text, witchcraft gives immortality, although it is not clear if this really involves pacts with the devil, as the Church in Medieval and Renaissance times believed. Certainly Marie's thoughts do not introduce the devil into the discussion. Also, death by poisoning does not seem to be necessary to gain this immortality—that seems just to be a sadistic pleasure for the witches. For example, Marie thinks of her husband, "I love him, I love him; he will be one of us presently, if I can transform him without pain. Or too much pain" (Epilogue). Douglas G. Greene, in his biography of Carr, points out that the husband receives a passing mention in Carr's *Panic in Box C*, published in 1966, which (he thinks) proves the husband has not succumbed to poison thirty-six years later (462). He does not consider the possibility that the husband has, and he is now one of the non-dead.

I said that poisoning was not a necessary part of the process, but perhaps a violent death of some type is. Marie D'Aubray Stevens (Carr's book capitalizes the D) has survived at least two previous lives, both with the same maiden name and, at least in the second case, the same appearance. She was married in the seventeenth century, becoming the Marquise de Brinvilliers. If I may remove myself from my argument for a moment, I might mention that this person—Marie-Madeleine-Margarite d'Aubray—is historical. She lived from 1630 to 1676, poisoning her father, brother, and two sisters in order to inherit their property; she also was rumored to have poisoned people during her visits to hospitals. Previous fiction about her includes "The Leather Funnel" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the fictionalized "The Marquise de Brinvilliers" by Alexandre Dumas, père. She was beheaded and then burned. (See Ch. 2.)

In Carr's novel the next Marie D'Aubray lived in the nineteenth century, was also a poisoner, and was guillotined in 1861 (Chs 1-2). The current Marie was born and grew up, not being aware of her previous lives. In the epilogue, she thinks, "It is well that I am beginning to remember."

By the end of the novel, Gaudan Cross has been poisoned by Marie because he wanted to be her lover as payment for presenting the rational explanation of events. She thinks, "[...] Gaudin [*sic*] was flesh and bone, until the ointment [I assume she means the cyanide] was used. He will return to flesh and bone presently, but I have the better of him now" (Epilogue). As another character says earlier, "[Y]ou can construct a whole cycle of the non-dead, and a return for ever of the slayers and the slain" (Ch. 9).¹

¹ Editor's note: Gaudan Cross's name in an earlier "cycle of the non-dead" was Gaudin St. Croix.

So the witches and warlocks can be reincarnated. The example of Miles Despard certainly seems to suggest a different means of joining the non-dead. He is poisoned but comes back to some sort of life. Let me suggest that his example seems to be a witches' mockery of Christian belief. (I do not claim that Carr was conscious of this.) Both Jesus and Miles Despard died painfully. In the process of dying, Despard cried that he couldn't stand the pain; Jesus cried out, asking God the Father why He had abandoned Him. They both were laid in stone tombs, with large stones across the doorways. When the tombs were opened, they were empty (at least at first, in three of the Gospel accounts). Later Jesus and Miles Despard appeared to individuals who knew them and could testify to their resurrections. Since the Black Mass, mentioned a few times in *The Burning Court* (e.g., Chs. 16, 18, Epilogue), is a parody of the Christian mass, then it is appropriate that one means of joining the non-dead is a parody of the Christian mystery of the Resurrection.

Now what does this all mean? Is it just an entertainment for the reader with a surprise for him or her in the epilogue? If so, this would be acceptable. Many movies and many books are just entertainments and popular for that reason. I have already suggested that the book is not to be read primarily for depth of characterization. But Douglas Greene says something interesting about this book so far as Carr himself was concerned. Carr wrote to Frederic Dannay (the editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and half of the Ellery Queen writing team) about a ghost story "The Door to Doom":

[...] a formula of mine [is] that every apparently supernatural event should be explained, and yet [as in "The Door to Doom"] at the end a real enigma of the supernatural should remain. You see, Fred, I *can't* write a straight ghost story. For my own soul's comfort I must have an explanation. (Qtd. in Greene 216)

Greene comments,

[Carr] needed to believe that the world is ordered, that things somehow do make sense. [...] It is this consideration that makes *The Burning Court* so unusual in his oeuvre and that may explain [...] why he never wrote another story of this kind. (217)

I have indicated that *The Burning Court* is a mystery with two solutions, a false one and then a real one, like many of Ellery Queen's novels. I have suggested that the true solution is based on a reversal of detective-story conventions in order to surprise readers. But Greene has suggested a meaning beyond this.

Let us consider *The Burning Court* as a work which supports the irrationality of the world, perhaps in a very loosely symbolic way. When Marie

Stevens insists she loves her husband but is willing to cause him some pain, doesn't she suggest ambivalence in marriage? One can love and want to hurt the same person. When the cook first sees Miles Despard through the window being approached with the poison, his expression is one of fear (Ch. 7); when she looks again, less than fifteen minutes later, his expression is neutral (Ch. 8). Obviously Despard is preparing to "die," so to speak, to become one of the non-dead. His first expression is one of fear of death, or at least of a painful death, even if he intends to take the poison. His second expression is, perhaps, one of acceptance of the pain involved in his "death." Either that or Marie, in a malign sense, has "bewitched" him. (Cf. the hexing use of a string with nine knots, "called the witch's ladder," as mentioned in Ch. 16.) Several hours later, when his nephew finds him, Miles Despard says, in French, "I can't stand it any longer. I can't stand the pain any longer. I tell you I can't stand it any longer" (Ch. 4). These reactions can be explained, and the third has been mentioned previously, in a different context, but isn't the death wish involved in these events part of human irrationality, considered from a this-worldly or rationalistic perspective? Is an acceptance of a painful death very rational, even from a supernatural perspective?

When Marie Stevens hears arsenic mentioned in a conversation some time before the actual events of the novel, she becomes excited and demands to know where arsenic—which she calls Glaser's Receipt—can be obtained. A woman who sees her at that moment says that she looked like a woman in sexual excitement (Chs. 4-5). A different character comments at a different point about the second Marie D'Aubray, "A bad business. Very little motive to *her* various bumpings-off, it would seem . . . just the pleasure of watching them die . . ." (Ch. 5). A sexual or semi-sexual pleasure in poisoning people obviously lies in this area of irrationality.

If one wants to be classical, it is the contrast of Apollo and Dionysus—reason and madness. As I said, the symbolism of witchcraft in this novel is not anything like an allegory—but enough hints exist to find a pattern. One of the characters says to a policeman, after the hole axed through the wall shows no secret passage, "[...] I rather think, Captain, that you've been taken by the slack of the trousers and pitched into belief [in the supernatural, he means]. What price are you offering for a material universe now?" (Ch. 16). A rational explanation and then a supernatural one are yet to come, but the language suggests the theme. It is not the absurd universe of the later existentialists; it is a malevolent universe. Carr could only look at it one time.

Addendum: Two Undertakers

In the first chapter of *The Burning Court*, Edward Stevens (the husband of Marie) is on a commuter train from Philadelphia to the village of Crispen, a stop located between Haverford and Bryn Mawr. An “undertaker’s shop,” a funeral home in modern terms, owned by J. Atkinson, is located there. At the end of the second chapter, Atkinson is seen looking out of one of the funeral home’s front windows.

More specifically, in the novel two undertakers are mentioned: Jonah Atkinson and Jonah Atkinson, Jr. (Chs. 10, 17). Jonah Atkinson, Sr. (so to speak—he is never given the title), is the one who ties nine knots in strings. (It is appropriate to emphasize in the present context that he is fixated on nine knots per string.) One such string is found in the coffin after the “corpse” has vanished (Ch. 6). Junior has taken over the business since that funeral (Chs. 12, 17).

What is not said in the book but is clearly implied (I believe) is that both are members of the non-dead. First, about Jonah Senior. At one point, one of the characters describes the process of the burial ceremony of Miles Despard; here is the first part:

You see, nowadays they don’t put the body in the coffin and put the coffin in the parlor for people to go past and look at—the way they used to. They keep the body, embalmed, right on the bed until it’s time to bury it; then they put it in the coffin and close it up, and the pall-bearers take it downstairs. See? That’s what they done with Mr. Miles. (Ch. 7)

The significant word here is *embalmed*. Although no doubt a reader could imagine all sorts of unstated rules about the non-dead, the process by which a person’s blood is drained out and embalming fluid—probably formaldehyde—is substituted seems as deadly as arsenic or cyanide for killing a member of the non-dead. Unlike Miles Despard, who escapes the grave, one would expect a member of the non-dead who was filled with formaldehyde to have to be reincarnated. This implies that Jonah Senior never embalmed the body, so that the new member of the non-dead did not have to undergo reincarnation yet.

Second, about Jonah Senior’s habit of tying those knots in strings. At one point, a character speaks of American beliefs in magic, particularly the hexes practiced by the Pennsylvania Dutch—one might recall that the novel is set in 1929 (Ch. 1). He says, “I know all about that nine-knots-in-a-string curse. It’s called the witch’s ladder” (Ch. 16). This is an actual part of wide-spread folklore. Montague Summers mentions malevolent uses of the witch’s ladder in his 1928 introduction to his *Malleus Maleficarum* translation. Within the context of Carr’s novel, the elder Jonah Atkinson seems to have been casting hexes, which is appropriate for a non-dead warlock.

Jonah Junior has a different sort of evidence for his probable membership in the non-dead. Like Gaudan Cross, he smooths over and explains away bothersome evidence. Near the end of the novel, he returns a photograph of the nineteenth-century Marie D'Aubray to Edward Stevens. Stevens had thought that his wife had taken it from a typescript of a book (Ch. 3). I am assuming, in the world of the novel, she did. Atkinson has an explanation of the photograph being dropped on the commuter train and the process by which he was asked to return it (Ch. 17). He also explains away his father's knot tying, without a reference to the number of the knots:

That? Oh, that's my father's work. [...] He's getting a little—well, you know. But he's always done that. He takes a piece of string and ties knots in it, the way some people smoke and others twist buttons or rattle keys, to keep his hands busy. (Ch. 17)

As he explains it, the habit seems very normal.

The evidence seems to me to be certain about the elder Atkinson and highly probable about the younger. Carr does not make the situation ultra-obvious, but has left something for his readers to discover on their own. However, Marie Stevens does think, in the Epilogue, about the non-dead, that "We must be very numerous now."

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