

# DISSECTING PATRICIA CORNWELL'S DR. KAY SCARPETTA IN THE FORENSIC LABORATORY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper studies the symbolism of the forensic laboratory in Patricia Cornwell's forensic detective fiction, a genre which this author pioneered at the beginning of the 1990s. As the representative space in this genre, the detailed analysis of the forensic laboratory— particularly in the novels *Postmortem* (1990), *Scarpetta* (2008) and *The Scarpetta Factor* (2009) as characteristic examples in the series—suggests the essential identity features in the presentation of self of the woman hero in the series, Kay Scarpetta. It also showcases gender interactions between the woman forensic scientist and both those dead and alive involved in the investigation. In this way, the forensic laboratory acquires its full meaning for the revelation of the main pieces of the puzzle of Kay Scarpetta's feminist discourse.

KEY WORDS: Forensic detective fiction, forensic laboratory, Kay Scarpetta, Patricia Cornwell, feminist discourse.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo estudia el simbolismo del laboratorio forense en la ficción de detectives forenses de Patricia Cornwell, autora pionera de este género a principios de la década de los años noventa. Como espacio representativo de este género, el análisis detallado del laboratorio forense—en particular en las novelas *Postmortem* (1990), *Scarpetta* (2008) y *The Scarpetta Factor* (2009) como ejemplos característicos de la serie—revela los rasgos esenciales de la identidad en la presentación del yo de la mujer heroína de la serie, Kay Scarpetta. También muestra la interacción de género entre la médico forense y tanto los vivos y muertos que participan en la investigación. De esta manera, el laboratorio forense adquiere su pleno significado en la revelación de las principales piezas del rompecabezas del discurso feminista de Kay Scarpetta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ficción de detectives forenses, laboratorio forense, Kay Scarpetta, Patricia Cornwell, discurso feminista.



Patricia Cornwell, “the first writer to bring forensic techniques to the center of her novels” (Blakesley 51), has decisively contributed to the current popularity of forensics both in popular fiction and TV shows thanks to her creativity, skilful use of forensic technology as well as adequate timing. As forensic detective fiction, in Patricia Cornwell’s novels “medical forensics”, quoting Linda Mizejewski, “guarantees the authority of the main character and the gritty realism of the details” (*Hardboiled* 42). This author has placed her woman hero, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, in the forensic laboratory since the beginning of her series with the novel *Postmortem* in 1990. Being a forensic scientist involves handling lifeless bodies and coming face to face with death as her daily routine in the only specially designed place for this task: the forensic laboratory.

As follows, works of forensic detection have at their cores the forensic laboratory and its dissection has essential symbolic undertones. The laboratory itself as well as the scientists and detectives who interact within that space at any one time form the centre of the action and provide the dynamism of the narrative. The laboratory is a singular world, unknown to most people. At the same time, it is the scene—the context—of an encounter between a living person—the forensic scientist—and a dead person, a socially-and-legally-sanctioned interaction between the living and the dead that is unique in modern society.

In the case of the Scarpetta series, the forensic scientist, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, is a woman who, like other fictional women detectives, functions as “a metaphor for all women, as they are all part of a masculine-dominated society” (Dilley 90), so, from the start - and many times by means of a first person voice—Patricia Cornwell’s series is presented from a woman’s point of view addressing the problems that women have to face in contemporary society. Within this general context, the fictional investigation permits the interaction between the female scientist and other subjects, giving rise to gendered perceptions and attitudes. The encounters also reveal power relationships and control that characterise the behaviour and decisions of the woman scientist. The analysis of the forensic laboratory in the first novel of the series, *Postmortem*, and two of the last ones, *Scarpetta* and *The Scarpetta Factor*, are proposed as relevant examples in the development of the construction of a discursive paradigm that, in the case of the fictionalisation of Patricia Cornwell, enables the presentation of feminist principles, beliefs and objectives—based on the understanding of women as intelligent and independent, able to do the same job as men and thus, deserving equal consideration—that, in turn, constitute the meaning of the works of fiction.

Thus, this article contends that Patricia Cornwell’s novels can be framed within the tradition of feminist detective fiction, as works that, quoting Maureen T. Reddy, “participate in the larger feminist project of redefining and redistributing power, joining a long and valuable tradition of women’s fiction” (149). In order to do so, the forensic laboratory enhances the importance of violence in the novels’ agenda as a symbol of feminist critique. As Susan Elizabeth Sweeney highlights:

feminist detective novels...investigate incidents of sexism, homophobia, and violence against women[...]. They suggest that these particular instances of wrongdo-



ing are the logical outcome of a society based on women's oppression, and that patriarchy and other hierarchical systems which discriminate against groups of people constitute the real evil behind such crimes (125).

The Scarpetta series discourse is figuratively revealed from the moment the reader is led into the forensic laboratory. When entering the morgue, the building is defined by its outer security, as described in *The Scarpetta Factor*. In order to open a heavy metal door, Dr. Scarpetta needs to pass a swipe card through an electronic reader. Once inside, the corridors form a network of tunnels, the underground location enhances its security but also its labyrinthine quality. The building itself, described as "a catacomb of white subway tile with teal green accents and rails that seemed to lead everywhere and nowhere" (*The Scarpetta Factor* 4), replicates the difficulties that the forensic scientist has to overcome during her scientific investigation of a victim's death in her dealings with the system. When she started working in the New York office, the intricacy of the building's layout caused Dr. Scarpetta to get lost, her perseverance and capacity for logical analysis helping her to discover the rationality of the space and, eventually, find her way. This gift for logical deduction has formed Kay Scarpetta's attitude to life and to work. While external influences are intended to discourage her professionally and personally, her application of logical deduction confers on her the strength of character, personality, resourcefulness and tenacity so that she continues her struggle until she succeeds.

Once inside the forensic laboratory, this space is introduced as intrinsically connected with death. Its distinctive nature is underlined in *Postmortem* in the following manner: "The morgue had a distinctive odor, the stale stench of death no amount of air deodorizer could mask" (*Postmortem* 24). It is a unique smell that Dr. Kay Scarpetta can recognise anywhere and that has permeated the walls of the morgue. This feature underlines the invasive nature of death and the contamination that it entails, in this case in the air that you breathe in the morgue. The dead body that is being wheeled in also has this contaminating power, as the white-tiled corridor leading into it is stained by blood leaking from the body. The first stop in the body's stay in the morgue is the "stainless steel refrigerator" (*Postmortem* 24), a place whose purpose is to avoid death's power because it is made of a strong material and its low temperature can prevent the spread of any viruses that the dead body may enclose.

This trait of the forensic laboratory is suggested to wrap the novels' feminist constructed discourse symbolically, establishing a connection between the stench of death and gender violence together with its deadly consequences. It is the invasive smell of putrefaction, the stinking abuse of a criminal perpetrator on the victim, and the only valid protections are to be found in the forensic scientist's realm, the forensic laboratory, thanks to its antiseptic qualities. The scientific environment of the laboratory stands out as the place where the most devastating effects of power abuse can be exposed.

Patriarchal prejudices are deconstructed through the dead but also through the living, particularly through the personage of Pete Marino, the detective who assists Dr. Scarpetta in the investigation. During the autopsy, she wants him to

phone her in order to discuss her forensic findings. However, their relationship at the beginning of the series has echoes of the relationship that Kay Scarpetta has with the system, a relationship characterised by resistance to her as a woman scientist, because she excels at her work and proves that women can be as talented as men. This resistance causes Pete Marino to let the phone go on ringing:

The black telephones on the desk mocked me with its silence. Marino knew I was waiting by the phone. He was having a good time knowing that. It was idle speculation to go back to the beginning and try to figure out what had gone wrong. Occasionally I thought about it anyway. What it was about me. I had been polite to Marino the first time we met, had offered him a firm respectful handshake while his eyes went as flat as two tarnished pennies. (*Postmortem* 32)

Pete Marino symbolises patriarchal masculinity and can be portrayed as “a bigot, a chauvinist, and a homophobe” (Robinson 104), especially at the beginning of the series. On her part, Kay Scarpetta cannot understand men’s reluctance against her and she definitely deconstructs patriarchal prejudice against a woman’s work by means of her decisive contributions to the investigation in every novel. As the series progresses, patriarchal power abuse does not only bring about the death of the weak but also social and professional discrimination against women, those considered to be inferior.

When dealing with the dead, Dr. Kay Scarpetta treats the body with extreme care and delicacy, displaying all the respect that the victim’s body deserves because a part of her humanity is still in there and it has a name. Vander, the autopsy technician, also shows his respect—“Vander delicately dusted what appeared to be three latent fingerprints left on Lori Petersen’s skin” (*Postmortem* 29). As Dr. Scarpetta herself acknowledges, the tenderness towards the woman that she feels seems to belong to one Self—a Self which she readily recognises as her own and that is capable of empathy towards others, while another more rational Self is focused on the science and responds only to reason—“my gloved fingers working the forceps seemed to belong to somebody else” (*Postmortem* 28). Nevertheless, Kay Scarpetta’s two selves are shown to complement each other as she, the forensic detective, and the laboratory technician work in unison. They can both share the same experience and similar emotions, since both women and men are portrayed as having the necessary empathic gaze towards others. Scarpetta’s is not a gendered battle against men, but against power abuse—“Vander was slow and deliberate and tense, as I was. A feeling of helplessness and frustration was getting to us” (*Postmortem* 28). The sight of the dead human being may be overwhelming, but forensic science and technology create the decisive environment for the study of death as well as the final exposure of crime.

Inside the forensic realm, Dr. Scarpetta presents herself as being in control, conscious of her position in the laboratory since the first novel in the series, as suggested when in *Postmortem* she warns the security guard about a new arrival in an abrupt tone of voice—“I sounded hard and sharp, and I knew it” (*Postmortem* 25). The first test that the body that has just arrived in the morgue has to go through



is an X-ray. The X-ray room is equipped with a new laser that is able to stimulate atoms and molecules so that they produce an effect which allows for the identification and collection of fibres. Dr. Kay Scarpetta waits for the technician to adjust the equipment, standing next to “the dark shape of Lori Petersen’s remains” (*Postmortem* 27); the body is still dark, hiding its secrets and truths. Dr. Scarpetta is also in the dark, with no light, literally as well as mentally, but her mind is alert and she is focused on her task: “my thoughts undisturbed, my hands perfectly still, my senses undisturbed” (*Postmortem* 27).

The forensic laboratory, apart from enabling the use of technical equipment that proves “its usefulness in finding fibers and other trace evidence, [and] it reveals various components of perspiration that fluoresce like a neon sign when stimulated by a laser” (*Postmortem* 28, 29), also provides other extra, but necessary, accessories like gloves and forceps, and even more specialised ones such as powder and a Magna brush. The autopsy suite on the whole is characterised by order, cleanliness, virus-and-death-stench neutralizer, situated in a sturdily custom-built section of the building:

I paced the hard tile floor inside the autopsy suite with its gleaming stainless steel tables and sinks and carts lined with surgical instruments. [...] Disinfectant smelled sweetly revolting, only smelled pleasant when there were worse smells lurking beneath it. (*Postmortem* 32)

The forensic laboratory is the only place where whatever problem that death and crime pose can be dealt with successfully and scientifically, despite the frequently challenging nature of the corpse—“This was puzzling, a piece that seemed to fit but didn’t, really” (*Postmortem* 31). Dr. Kay Scarpetta encounters obstacles, but working in the laboratory allows her to, eventually, overcome them and excel at forensic science.

Apart from providing the right equipment to do her job adequately, the forensic laboratory in which Dr. Kay Scarpetta works is updated in every novel of the series and forensic reports are made easier with items of the latest technology, as described, for example, in the novel *Scarpetta* with equipment such as a smartpen and a smart notepad. Objects like a ballpoint pen, a clipboard, and sheets of paper are not to be found there. However, Kay Scarpetta prefers some of the old ways, and looks back to a time when a forensic scientist’s expertise was required to provide an explanation for societal violence:

technology had no remedy for her fluent thoughts, and she still dictated them after she was done and her gloves were off. Hers was a modern medical examiner’s office, upgraded with what she considered essential in a world she no longer recognized, where the public believed everything “forensic” it saw on TV, and violence wasn’t a societal problem but a war. (*Scarpetta* 2)

Times have changed and the job of the forensic scientist has adapted to modern times, too. But Kay Scarpetta has learnt to combine the best of the old with the best of the new, as technology cannot fully reflect all the details in her forensic



analysis. In her experience, she is the one who knows best what is needed in order to do the job well. Her professional career in the forensic field reinforces her suitability for the investigation and empowers her. Moreover, as Christine A. Jackson argues regarding forensic fiction, “the protagonist, usually a coroner or medical examiner, follows ritualized procedures to identify the deceased. [...] These high-tech methods of detection are metaphors for knowing the self. [...] [During this process of explaining death,] the character understands more about experiencing life” (14, 15). In this way, Patricia Cornwell’s novels deal with death and the dead but also talk about life and our modern society.

In the forensic laboratory Dr. Scarpetta is very busy doing her work, protected by surgical clothing from the invading nature of death, brain tissue and blood—two of the main parts in a human body that are a sign of life, but that are now dead—are trying to invade her body, and death is all around—“bone dust sifted through the air like flour” (*Scarpetta* 1). For her defence, the forensic scientist is surrounded by laboratory instruments that resemble those that might be used in a torture chamber, all manner of saws and knives, and it is even pointed out that they are in need of sharpening. There are similarities between the forensic laboratory and the torture chamber, not only the smell—the odour of death and fear, and a duplication of instruments and uniforms—but also because both scenarios are specifically designed for the extraction of the truth, the former from the dead and the latter from the living.<sup>1</sup> Unlike torturers and murderers, however, forensic scientists are legally sanctioned to use these deadly instruments and to perform all kinds of incisions on the body before them, all in order to unveil the truth, in pursuit of justice and restoration of the status quo. In this sense, Philip L. Simpson underlines the contrast between Kay Scarpetta and the serial killer as contributing to the novels’ feminist discourse, when he argues that, since most victims in the series are women, Kay Scarpetta confronts “the serial killer as nightmarish embodiment of masculine backlash against female encroachment into the traditional male arenas of power” (114). A woman becomes the suitable crusader against crime and evil, against tradition, involving a basic reversal of gender roles in contrast to traditional male detective fiction: Kay Scarpetta is a woman who investigates women’s abuse and murders triggered by a patriarchal conception of the world.

In *The Scarpetta Factor*, the overriding characteristic of the forensic laboratory is its impersonality, as one might expect of an institutionalised space in a big city like New York but also as a reflection of a patriarchal system that does not care about those victimised. The security guard at the entrance, for instance, is quite indifferent to Dr. Scarpetta’s arrival—“the security guard was busy on the phone

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<sup>1</sup> The comparison and contrast between the instruments used by Dr. Kay Scarpetta as a forensic scientist and the serial killer as an agent of torture, as well as the legal difference in their objective, are made apparent at the beginning of *Book of the Dead*. In the introductory chapter of the novel, the serial killer opens his toolbox full of cutters, knives and fine-tooth saws in front of his terrorized victim, echoing the list of instruments that fills Dr. Scarpetta’s forensic laboratory available to her in the legally-sanctioned forensic analysis of the victim—in this case, a lifeless mute body.

behind Plexiglas and barely gave her a glance as she went past” (*The Scarpetta Factor* 4). In more general terms, it is the surroundings that reflect the hostility that Kay Scarpetta has to overcome—“a frigid wind gusted in from the East River, snatching at Dr. Kay Scarpetta’s coat as she walked quickly along 30th Street” (*The Scarpetta Factor* 1). Together with the weather, antipathetic contrasts are further accentuated, it being just one week before Christmas, a time of the year when everybody is expected to be happy, a time of good cheer, a time when persons help each other. Even the location of the medical examiner’s office is symbolically inert and sterile, situated dramatically as it is in what Kay Scarpetta calls “Manhattan’s Tragic Triangle, three vertices connected by wretchedness and death”:

Behind her was Memorial Park, a voluminous white tent housing the vacuum-packed human remains still unidentified or unclaimed from Ground Zero. Ahead on the left was the Gothic redbrick former Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital, now a shelter for the homeless. Across from that was the loading dock and bay for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, where a gray steel garage door was open. (*The Scarpetta Factor* 1)

In the general context of the novels, the surrounding hostility points to a patriarchally-based society and its palpable degradation.

Against this backdrop, death and its victims appear to lie colourless, demanding a tremendous effort from the forensic scientist to focus and overcome the difficulties on the way. However, the victim’s body may still keep some of its female owner’s life, like in *Postmortem*—not just a cold corpse yet—“the covers from her bed open but still underneath her. [...] Her body was warm, her life so recently ended it seemed to linger about her like an odor” (*Postmortem* 27). It is suggested that the woman’s body is still offering some kind of resistance to death, displaying the minimum connection with life, part of its warmth and smell, which contrasts with the coldness and the stench that permeates the whole morgue. The victim seems to resist accepting her death, as if waiting for Dr. Scarpetta’s help, waiting to speak to her. There is a close connection between the victim and the forensic scientist, since they are both women and the pattern of violence in the novels, as underlined by Christine A. Jackson’s analysis of Cornwell’s novels, “extends the idea that one woman’s murder is a crime against the entire gender” (57). In general terms, the violated body of the victim becomes a metaphor for women’s abuse in society.

The overall analysis of the interactions between Kay Scarpetta and the victims in the novels has led Linda Mizejewski to argue for Patricia Cornwell’s use of the body double, that is, “two simultaneous materialization of the same person” (2001: 8), particularly when Kay Scarpetta investigates the murder of women victims, which symbolically empowers the forensic scientist’s critique of violence.<sup>2</sup> As

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<sup>2</sup> In *Postmortem*, for instance, Kay Scarpetta notices that Lori Petersen, one of the victims, had the same profession, had gone through the same long medical training and used to lay her clothes on a chair in a similar way after a long day at work like her. Judith Halberstam points out a





Sandra Tomc remarks about feminist mysteries, these “moments of metaphoric or mistaken identity are typical of feminist mystery stories; they help to establish the grounds for the text’s description of political options” (46).

Sometimes Kay Scarpetta’s involvement with the victim also entails its most difficult part, that is, dealing with the grief of the bereaved. It is not one of her professional duties, but she may offer generously to relieve the technician responsible who is gifted at it, and take on this delicate task in her place. In *The Scarpetta Factor* she meets the victim’s mother and, as usual, she is at her best, providing details at this terrible moment of anguish and preparing the mother for the terrible sight of her daughter’s inert body. Scarpetta behaves impeccably, being “as gentle as she could be” (*The Scarpetta Factor* 21). Kay Scarpetta does not only deal with the scientific side of crime but she is also capable of an empathic gaze when having to face the consequences that it ensues—the victims.

Besides, her relationship with the dead also unveils her deep social concerns so as to promote changes for a better society, even though she realises that change is difficult to bring about. At the beginning of her career she wondered whether “giving substance abusers a tour of the morgue might shock them into sobriety” (*Scarpetta* 1), but she regretted things did not work that way. Then, the novels suggest that there is something criminally evil persistently lurking in the dark and willing to permeate society at all levels—most of the novels imply that there are natural born predators in our society—but Kay Scarpetta’s work on behalf of victims prevents her from surrendering all hope.

On the other hand, the presentation of the forensic laboratory is also an indicator of Dr. Kay Scarpetta’s professional situation. In the last books of the series, it is revealed that she is not in charge of the laboratory, nor does she have authority in the workplace. Dr. Scarpetta holds a position in which she has to accept the supervision of a boss, a situation unusual for her as she has been “either a chief herself or the owner of a private practice for most of her career” (*The Scarpetta Factor* 6). Kay Scarpetta has got tired of finding herself in the middle of power battles, since what she is only interested in is forensic science. She is unwilling to take on the responsibilities of heading a forensic laboratory in a big city like New York, since she has already had a taste of what political pressures can be like when you are in charge, and she prefers to focus her attention on forensic science, partially apart from the system. In this sense, Kimberly J. Dilley remarks that “[the police-trained] women detectives work to balance understanding and carrying out the rules of the state with what they feel to be their higher purpose—their responsibility to the community. The law must take into account the people it is supposed to serve” (68). It is the question of justice that makes Scarpetta, like other women

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similar doubling narrative device referring to *The Silence of the Lambs*, between Clarice Starling and the “body found in Clay County, West Virginia, Starling’s home state, [as] the corpse laid out on the table, of course, is a double for Starling, the image of what she might have become had she not left home, as Lecter points out, and aspired to greater things” (42).





detectives, get on with her job, “more concerned with finding some sense of justice than simply putting away killers” (Dilley 77), because she works for the victims. Kay Scarpetta’s attitude to power suggests her deconstruction of any kind of abuse due to the injustice that it entails, which foregrounds her personal choice of working for the benefit of the social community disregarding her own benefit.

Despite the fact that the forensic laboratory embodies the realm of science, Scarpetta’s professional world is not completely detached from her own life. Her most personal self and life concerns also enter the forensic laboratory. In *Postmortem*, for instance, before starting the autopsy, Kay Scarpetta’s own beloved come into her mind: her niece Lucy, who is now staying with her, as she frequently does, has come looking for some motherly care that her mother, Scarpetta’s sister, denies her. Scarpetta phones Bertha, her housekeeper, the person who takes care of Lucy whenever Scarpetta is called out for an emergency; she wants to make sure that everything is all right at home, so that she can give all her attention to the work in hand.

This scene of Kay Scarpetta’s personal life, which stands in marked contrast to classic crime writing—where “the focus is on the investigation and the private life of the detective is largely or even wholly kept out of sight” (Bertens 58)—introduces another highlight of the series’ feminist agenda. The fact that Kay Scarpetta is divorced, with no children of her own, but acts as a surrogate mother for her niece Lucy urges the reader to reflect on the traditional ideal of family. Sally R. Munt, taking into account Maureen T. Reddy’s arguments and discussing the female private investigator in hard-boiled fiction—like Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone and Sara Paretsky’s Warshawski—underlines that, as lonely heroines cut off from their families, they “can be positively understood as proposing independence as an ideal [. . .and thus,] are free to choose non-traditional intimacies in order to reformulate as ‘pretended’ family units” (49), what Maureen T. Reddy calls “chosen families” (109). Kay Scarpetta’s behaviour, in this way, contends that the best mother is not necessarily the natural mother but the one that can provide a child with the necessary care and affection, since every individual should be free and independent to choose their own personal alliances.

All in all, when viewing the forensic laboratory as the symbolic space for self presentation of the principal character in forensic detective fiction, the main pieces of the puzzle of Patricia Cornwell’s novels feminist discourse fall into place. Firstly, the forensic scientist comes across as a tough woman capable of overcoming any obstacles on her way. The labyrinthine layout of the forensic laboratory echoes other hindrances in Dr. Kay Scarpetta’s daily routine. On the one hand, the gore reality on her autopsy table always poses a difficult challenge by itself. The truth about the crime lies secretly hidden in the dead body and Dr. Scarpetta has to make that body speak to her until she can scientifically explain the murder and unveil the truth. On the other hand, during her dissection of the body, Dr. Kay Scarpetta has to deal with law-enforcement officers, as exemplified by Pete Marino in the first book of the series. The pattern of their symbolic interactions underlines the prejudices of the patriarchal law-enforcement system, a traditional male preserve, against a woman’s work as well as the unfairness of such irrational beliefs. The analysis of



these interactions confers Kay Scarpetta's attitude feminist undertones, since it showcases the need of women's active resistance in order to fight for a more egalitarian society. In this sense, Sabine Vanacker's study of Kay Scarpetta—together with Kinsey Millhone and V. I. Warshawski—as a feminist detective hero describes her “struggle within a patriarchal society [as] [...] the loneliness and vulnerability of the successful woman in a masculine hierarchy and the ease with which she can be ousted from her professional role” (76).

Apart from highlighting Dr. Kay Scarpetta as an empowered woman because of her performance in the realm of forensic science as well as in her dealings with the system, the forensic laboratory also showcases her symbolic interactions with the corpse and the contaminating power that it embodies. The invasive nature of death seems to parallel that of the crime, an evil force in society that lies hidden in the body ready to spread its influence in society. Thus, the forensic laboratory is the scene where a battle of powers takes place. It is the battle between Dr. Kay Scarpetta and crime, between good and evil. This is when Dr. Kay Scarpetta's job takes on a missionary dimension and her eventual success in the investigation acquires a heroic perspective as she remains, with the help of the sterilisation permeating the forensic laboratory, untainted by crime, both physically and symbolically.

In this way, Kay Scarpetta stands out as a suitable woman character for the defence of feminist beliefs in gender equality and, in more general terms, for the pursuit of societal justice. Her portrayal acquires its full meaning when taking into account the driving force of her struggle, that is, the victims. The forensic laboratory allows Dr. Scarpetta to explain the reader the victimisation that the dead body has had to go through from her experienced scientific perspective. This is a direct appeal to the reader to share Kay Scarpetta's view against societal ills, that is, all types of inequality and power abuse.

The dissection of the forensic laboratory in Patricia Cornwell's novels highlights its importance regarding the portrayal of the woman scientist's identity as a feminist woman hero since, quoting Peter Messent, “Scarpetta's intelligence, expertise, tough assertiveness and success in her (‘unfeminine’) professional arena [...] work to subvert conventional gender assumptions” (127). It is the realm of science and where Kay Scarpetta's work stands out for its difficulty, scientific worth but also for its symbolic construction of a feminist discourse. Due to the still unprivileged situation of women in contemporary society, fictional women characters cannot defy traditional detective genre conventions and must certainly succeed, so that feminist detective novels can call for societal change. Consequently, in Patricia Cornwell's fiction the woman hero becomes an empowered female character who deconstructs the traditional association of woman with the domestic, passivity and submission and whose life attitude and behaviour support the need of gender resistance as well as active agency so as to promote the belief in a more egalitarian society for both women and men.



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