



Pearson
Edexcel

GCE English Literature

Component 2: Prose

The Cutting Season,
Attica Locke

An Introductory
Guide





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An Overview

Attica Locke's novel, *The Cutting Season* was published in 2012. This dark, gothic crime novel, set in the fictional Belle Vie plantation in Louisiana, allows the reader to gain insight into the lives of the workers at the plantation – both from the past and in the present. It explores the legacy of slavery and how this affects attitudes in modern America, making links to modern day issues and inequalities.

The novel follows the investigation of the death of Inés Avalo, a migrant worker whose body is found at Belle Vie plantation. The plantation, with its grand Antebellum mansion and slave quarters, has been redeveloped and now serves as a venue for events as well as an educational centre. Caren Grey, the manager of the venue who has strong familial links and roots with Belle Vie, is the main protagonist. Through her eyes, the reader learns more about the mystery of the death of Inés Avalo, but also about Caren's rich family history.

The novel focusses not just on crime and detection, but also on race, politics, law and injustice in America today and how many of these issues can be linked to the past.



Key themes of the novel

- **Past and present** – this is a key theme in the novel and allows the reader to see how important the history of both people and places is, and how the two are linked. This is best exemplified in Caren's relationship with Belle Vie. Belle Vie is an old plantation and we learn that Caren's family not only used to be paid workers there but also that Jason, a distant relative on her mother's side, was a slave there. We also learn that Caren was childhood friends with the owners, the Clancy family, and that it is this link which caused her to take the job as manager several years ago. The haunting presence of the slave village, which has been renovated as part of the tour of Belle Vie, highlights the venue's guilty past and it is telling that the body of a present-day farm worker is found next to this village, killed by a knife originally used by slaves to cut the sugar cane. Locke also shows how history has been sanitised and made more palatable for visitors in her depiction of the actors and their show.
- **Family and duty** – family is also a key theme in the novel. Caren, the main protagonist, has a complex family life. She is a single mother to 9-year-old Morgan and she herself grew up in a single parent family. As the novel unfolds, we learn about Caren's complex and fractured relationship with her mother. In the present, she feels a duty to her daughter but also to her family's past and legacy. She is drawn to the mystery of Jason (a distant relative) and is determined to solve it. The idea of motherly duty is also apparent in the characters of Inés Avalo as Caren discovers that she too is a mother who was working to take care of her family and in the character of Letty, Caren's nanny, who leaves her own family to look after Morgan.
- **Work and community** – the idea of family can be extended to the theme of work and community. The people who work at Belle Vie are a community (both in the past and in the present) and Caren is often pulled by her duty to them and keeping their jobs and her duty as a mother. As the modern manager of Belle Vie, she is put in contrast to the older staff members of Belle Vie who are more old-fashioned and traditional, but they all respect each other and the job that they have to do. A sense of community is fostered within the actors as they have to work together to 'entertain' the tourists with their play and we also see how the migrant farm workers are also a community as they hold a vigil and gather in the church to commemorate the loss of one of their own. This sense of community through work is also reflected in the past story of Jason. Caren is amazed to learn that he stayed at the plantation out of a sense of duty – much like herself in modern times.
- **Race and injustice** – the theme of race and injustice is apparent within this novel as it is in many of Locke's other novels. *The Cutting Season* is set in modern-day Louisiana but also refers back to the past as it is set on a plantation. In the present, the injustices around race are highlighted with the police's arrest of Donovan Issacs, a young black worker/actor at Belle Vie. His disappearance, after the body is found and prior criminal record, lead the police to incorrectly suspect him. Caren and her ex-husband, Eric, have to then fight to get him released. Likewise, we are told of the prejudice towards the Mexican and Guatemalan seasonal workers when Caren remembers that Inés Avalo was unable to buy food as she did not have any ID. This present-day racial injustice mirrors the historic racial injustices in Belle Vie and the slave village. Just as in the 19th century, Belle Vie is run by the influential, white Clancy family. Although



Raymond, Bobby and Leland are trying to right the wrongs of their ancestors, it is revealed that they are still motivated by greed and will do anything to keep control.

- **Law and order** – as this is a work of crime fiction, the theme of law and order is an important one within the novel. Caren (and her ex-husband Eric) have experience with the law (Eric is a lawyer, and Caren went to law school and briefly worked in a legal-clinic) and are able to deal with the police and talk about the legal implications of any decisions that have been made. Interestingly, both are prepared to break the law when it comes to her own family as they protect Morgan by hiding the blood-stained clothes and arguing about going to the police when she reveals that she witnessed the murder. The murder also upsets the orderly life of many people – the staff at Belle Vie are worried about their jobs and Caren’s life is turned upside down in a number of ways.



Literary features that shape meaning

- **Setting** – Locke uses the setting of Belle Vie – both past and present – to evoke and shape meaning within her novel. Her descriptions of Belle Vie and its grounds, with the use of personification and natural images, create a sense of beauty and of mystery. The description of the slave village add to the mystery and tension as Caren looks around them and their ghost-like quality help the reader to link the building to its unpleasant history and past. The setting almost becomes a character in the novel from the opulence of the house to the coldness and darkness of the grounds and its buildings.
- **Characterisation** – Locke uses her characters to shape meanings and to underline the main themes of her novel. The character of Caren, as the main protagonist, perhaps unusually for a crime fiction novel, is not a detective. She does become very involved in the mystery and is determined to solve both the murder of Inés but also the murder of her distant relative, Jason. The fact that she does this whilst running Belle Vie and dealing with her complicated personal life with her daughter and ex-husband, Eric, makes her an interesting character and allows Locke to discuss family, loyalty, race and motherhood. The use of another Black character, Donovan, also allows Locke to highlight the key theme of racial injustice as he is arrested on very little evidence and is, it materialises later, set up by the white owners of the plantation to take the fall for the crime. The ‘invisible’ and silent characters in the novel are also important. Both murder victims, Inés and Jason, are silent throughout the novel, but their presence, in the memories of others and in Locke’s third-person narration, highlight the injustices of slavery and racial inequality both in the past and in the present day.
- **Timelines and narrative structure** – Locke’s innovative use of timelines and narrative structure allow the reader to make the connections between the past and the present within the novel as a whole, but also help to build the tension and the mystery of the murder. The novel starts with an omen – the discovery of a snake at a wedding at Belle Vie – and then the timelines move back and forth to Caren learning about the discovery of the body, to then retracing her steps. We are also taken back to various parts of Caren’s past to help reveal elements which feed into the overall narrative and provide clues, as well as ‘red-herrings’ for the reader. We also slowly and gradually learn more about Caren and the other characters and what may motivate them to act as they have done creating an intriguing but also naturalistic narrative.
- **Dialogue and voice** – Locke writes in the third-person narrative throughout her novel but does use different voices and different forms to shape meaning. Some of her characters from Louisiana uses colloquialism or slang to show accent – such as ‘y’all’. She also writes in Spanish in some parts to show the dialogue between the migrant workers and show the closeness of their community. Locke also plays around with form and voice to drive her narrative. For example, she uses the opening of Danny Olmstead’s dissertation to talk about the history of Belle Vie and an old newspaper article with headings to relate the story of Jason, Caren’s distant relative who disappeared.
- **Crime and mystery genre techniques** – as discussed above, Locke’s use of timelines helps to create a sense of mystery and provide ‘clues’ to the reader. She also uses a number of other crime genre techniques to shape her meaning. There are a lot of



suspects from the outset and an obvious suspect is identified early on (and then found to be innocent). Locke also builds tension with her use of familiar crime fiction tropes: Caren is followed by a red car; the murder weapon is discovered in an unusual place and the police are seemingly one step behind the main protagonist in their investigations. Perhaps more unusually, Locke does not give any information about the murder victim for some time. The use of moving and changing timelines means that she slowly reveals more information rather than using a more linear timeline that would tell the reader more about the victim early on in the novel.



Contextual factors

- **The author's life and beliefs** – Attica Locke is a well-known and successful novelist and screen writer. As well as writing several novels focussing on crime and justice, she has also worked on a number of drama series which focus on injustice and politics such as *When They See Us* and *Little Fires Everywhere*.
- **Historical contexts** – the novel is set in 2009 – a year after Barack Obama is elected President in the United States – which is referenced in Locke's work when Caren remembers the day she voted for him. The novel also refers to the history of Belle Vie as a plantation and talks about the history of slavery and sugar cane farming in Louisiana. As well as talking about the historical facts of slavery in the state, Locke also highlights the difficulties and harsh treatment of the migrant workers who work on the land in the present day. Locke references the Homestead Act of 1862 within her novel to highlight the injustice of both Jason and Inés' deaths and the unlawful claims of ownership of Belle Vie and its land by the Clancy family.
- **Literary context** – the novel is regarded as a work of crime fiction as it involves a murder which is solved after a few twists and turns. The novel, as discussed above, does follow some of the typical tropes of a mystery novel but also subverts them in a number of ways. The main protagonist is not a detective – in fact the police and their procedures take a back seat within the novel. Unlike other crime novels, Locke does not use a linear timeline and also deals with two different murders in two different centuries to add to the mystery. Locke uses some conventions of the Southern Gothic genre, particularly in her use of settings.
- **Social context** – as the novel is set in Louisiana at the end of the 2000s, Locke is able to refer to the social contexts which are apparent in America today. The influx of migrant workers and the way that they are treated both in the community and by their bosses is highlighted sensitively throughout the novel. The character of Caren and the other single mothers in the novel allow the reader to see the struggles of family life and the sacrifices parents have to make to support their families. Caren and Eric's background in law also allows Locke to discuss the injustices, particularly around the treatment of non-white victims and suspects, within the current US legal system.



Further information and reading

The following links may be a useful introduction to Attica Locke and her thoughts about *The Cutting Season*.

- [Attica Locke](#) – the author's own website provides a lot of useful information, written by Locke, about the ideas behind *The Cutting Season* and what inspired her to write it.
- [Noirwich 2020](#) – this long interview with Locke was recorded as part of the Noirwich 2020 festival. In it, she talks about all of her novels and what inspires her as a writer.
- Interview [part 1](#) and [part 2](#) – in these two videos, Attica Locke talks about *The Cutting Season* in detail.
- [The Guardian Interview](#) – in this interview about her 2017 novel, *Bluebird, Bluebird*, Locke talks about her life, her politics and her work.
- [The Guardian review of The Cutting Season](#) – this review from the Guardian newspaper praises Attica Locke's work.
- [The Independent review of The Cutting Season](#) – this review from The Independent newspaper praises but also has some reservations about the novel.
- The [introduction from the Penguin edition](#) is provided on the Edexcel website as a separate document for use – it includes a piece by Locke and questions on the novel.

The following links may be a useful introduction to some of the historical/social context mentioned above.

- [The American Civil War](#) – this webpage provides a basic history of the American civil war
- [Slavery in Louisiana](#) – this site, created by the Whitney Plantation, provides some useful background about slavery in Louisiana
- [Oak Alley Plantation](#) – Oak Alley Plantation was the inspiration for Belle Vie in the novel. The site gives the history of the plantation as well as some pictures. It is interesting to compare the map of the plantation on this website with the drawing of Belle Vie plantation at the start of the novel.
- [The Homestead Act 1862](#) – this act which allowed all Americans, including freed slaves, to own their own land, is explained on this webpage.
- [Report into immigration and migrant workers 2010](#) – this report from the Centre for Immigration Studies outlines the key facts about immigration at the time the novel was set.
- [Key elements of the crime genre](#) – this simple table from Scholastic.com lists the main elements of the crime and mystery genre.