



# Crossing the Crime Scene: The Case of *Gaslight*

Alessandra Calanchi

**Abstract.** In crime fiction courses, students cannot grasp the extent of psychological pressure, the danger of evil, or the importance of rational behavior without necessary involvement. Discussed here is coursework involving the film *Gaslight* (dir. George Cukor, 1944), where, although no murder occurs, the crime scene is spread all over the story and remains relevant today.

I taught Anglo-American literature and culture at an Italian university for more than 20 years, and crime fiction—especially crime fiction involving women—soon became one of my favorite subjects. During my career, my students and I analyzed the main female characters in Sherlock Holmes’ adventures, Louisa May Alcott’s *A Whisper in the Dark* (1877), Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), Anna Katharine Green’s stories starring Violet Strange (1915), Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* (1916), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892) and *Unpunished* (1927, pub. 1997). Many of these female protagonists are victims of manipulation and abuse, and a recurring motif is the charge of insanity by a husband, a relative, or another representative of the patriarchy (Gilbert and Gubar; Melville).

A fascinating case study is a particular film that attracted my attention since it perfectly shows what manipulation is and how it works. *Gaslight* (aka *The Murder in Thornton Square*) was directed by George Cukor in 1944. It was inspired by a 1938 play by the British author Patrick Hamilton (*Gas Light*, aka *Angel Street*) and by a previous film version by Thorold Dickinson (1940). This film gave the term *gaslighting* the meaning it still has today—that is, the act of manipulating a person to make the individual appear insane and thus to take control of the person’s will (Carey; Cowie).

The story takes place in the 1880s and features the young protagonist Paula. After the mysterious death of her aunt, a famous opera singer, Paula moves to Italy to become an

*Alessandra Calanchi* is a former professor of Anglo-American literature and culture at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo in Italy and is an honorary member of the Italian Academy of Forensic Sciences (ACISF). Her publications include “Crime, Crime Fiction, and the Construction of Public Feeling through the Media in Italy” in *Italian Americana. Cultural and Historical Review* (Summer 2014) and *Forever Noir: Practices, Metaphors, Fractals* (ed., 2017).