

Your main commentary should be focused on *THAT*. Other topics may also be addressed

She was due at Harley Street at eleven fifteen. Usually with a London appointment she preferred to walk at least part of the way, but today she had ordered a taxi for ten thirty. The journey from the City shouldn't take three-quarters of an hour but the London traffic was unpredictable. She was entering a world that was strange to her and had no wish to jeopardise her relationship with her surgeon by arriving late for this their first meeting. Eight years ago she had taken a lease on a house in the City, part of a narrow terrace in a small courtyard at the end of Absolution Ally near Cheapside, and knew as soon as she moved in that this was the part of London in which she would always choose to live. The lease was long and renewable; she would have liked to buy the house, but knew that it would never be for sale. But the fact that she couldn't hope to call it entirely her own didn't distress her. Most of it dated back to the seventeenth century. Many generations had lived in it, been born and died there, leaving behind nothing but their names on browning and archaic leases, and she was content to be in their company. Although the lower rooms with their mullioned windows were dark, those in her study and sitting room on the top storey were open to the sky, giving a view of the towers and steeples of the City and beyond. An iron staircase led from a narrow balcony on the third floor to a secluded roof, which held a row of terracotta pots and where on fine Sunday mornings she could sit with her book or newspapers as the Sabbath calm lengthened into midday and the early peace was broken only by the familiar peals of the City bells. The City which lay below was a charnel house built on multi-layered bones centuries older than those which lay beneath the cities of Hamburg or Dresden. Was this knowledge part of the mystery it held for her, a mystery felt most strongly on a bell-chimed Sunday on her solitary exploration of its sudden alleys and squares? Time had fascinated her from childhood, its apparent power to move at different speeds, the dissolution it wrought on minds and bodies, her sense that each moment, all moments past and those to come, were fused into an illusory present which with every breath became

the unalterable, indestructible past. In the City of London these moments were caught and solidified in stone and brick, in churches and monuments and in bridges which spanned the grey-brown ever-flowing Thames. She would walk out in spring or summer as early as six o'clock, double-locking the front door behind her, stepping into a silence more profound and mysterious than the absence of noise. Sometimes in this solitary perambulation it seemed that her own footsteps were muted, as if some part of her were afraid to waken the dead who had walked these streets and had known the same silence. She knew that on summer weekends, a few hundred yards away, the tourists and crowds would soon be pouring over the Millennium Bridge, the laden river steamers would move with majestic clumsiness from their berths, and the public city would become raucously alive. But none of this business penetrated Sanctuary Court. The house she had chosen could not have been more different from that curtained, claustrophobic semi-detached villa in Laburnum Grove, Silford Green, the east London suburb where she had been born and in which she had spent the first sixteen years of her life. Now she would take the first step on path which might reconcile her to those years or, if reconciliation were impossible, at least rob them of their destructive power. [...] She was back in that small rear room, both kitchen and sitting room, in which she and her parents colluded in their lies and endured their voluntary exile from life. The front room, with its bay window, was for special occasions, for family celebrations never held and for visitors who never came, its silence smelling faintly of lavender furniture polish and stale air, an air so portentous that she tried never to breathe it. She was the only child of a frightened and ineffective mother and a drunken father. That was how she had defined herself for more than thirty years and how she still defined herself.