

BURKE AND HARE

Main Character Arcs

Character development analysis based on the 20 July 2026 four-part screenplay

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1. Overview of the Character Architecture

Burke and Hare is built around a chain of moral surrender. Poverty and anti-Irish prejudice create genuine pressure, but the drama shows how economic desperation becomes opportunity, opportunity becomes murder, and murder becomes an organised trade sustained by ambition, loyalty, denial and institutional appetite. The central arcs are therefore linked by a shared question: at what point does a person stop being carried by circumstance and begin consciously choosing evil?

Character	Arc Type	Starting Position	Ending Position
William Burke	Negative corruption / belated confession	Impoverished labourer, initially cautious and subordinate to Hare	Independent murderer, betrayed accomplice, condemned confessor and dissected criminal
William Hare	Negative corruption / betrayal	Angry, opportunistic survivor who identifies the market for bodies	Cold architect who gives King's Evidence and escapes punishment by sacrificing Burke
Margaret Hare	Negative complicity / hardening	Practical landlady frustrated by poverty and limited prospects	Active organiser and defender of the murders who escapes but loses home, status and community
Helen McDougal	Negative dependency / moral collapse	Uneasy partner whose conscience and religious concern initially resist the scheme	Participant and protector who survives legally but is rejected and driven from Edinburgh
Dr Robert Knox	Negative ambition / deliberate blindness	Celebrated anatomist convinced scientific progress justifies exceptional methods	Disgraced professional forced from Edinburgh while still rationalising his pursuit of greatness
Archibald Johnson	Positive investigation / witness	Journalist suspicious of anatomical procurement and driven by personal loss	Public exposé, recorder of Burke's confession and witness to justice
David Paterson	Negative enabling / self-corruption	Practical assistant handling irregular bodies for Knox	Knowing intermediary who seeks deeper participation and helps sustain the murder economy
Sergeant Fisher	Positive awakening / enforcement	Ordinary officer initially constrained by weak evidence and institutional deference	Investigator who challenges Knox, secures the case and brings the killers into the law

The series forms a moral marketplace. Hare and Burke supply bodies; Margaret and Helen normalise and protect the trade; Paterson receives and pays; Knox refuses to examine provenance because the subjects serve his ambition. Johnson and Fisher gradually connect the separated parts of that chain.

2. William Burke

Burke carries the most extensive negative arc and the series' final tragic focus. He begins as the more hesitant partner, but resentment, pride and repeated success lead him to claim independent authorship of murder. His late confession reveals awareness without redemption.

Burke moves from asking whether the scheme is wrong to insisting that he is capable of directing it himself.

Starting State

- He experiences genuine discrimination, unemployment and poverty, making his early frustration understandable.
- He initially warns that selling bodies may lead to Calton Jail and treats Old Donald as a one-off opportunity.
- He is emotionally dependent on Helen but resents Hare's authority and increasingly wants recognition as an equal.
- His humour and rough loyalty initially soften him, but alcohol, jealousy and wounded pride make violence easier.

Driving Want and Internal Test

External want: Money, dignity, independence and recognition within the partnership.

Internal need: Accept responsibility for his choices and reject the belief that deprivation grants permission to prey upon the powerless.

False belief: Because society treats him as worthless, he may take value from people society will not miss.

Fatal contradiction: He demands respect and fairness for himself while denying humanity to vulnerable victims.

Major Stages of the Arc

1. Uneasy participation

Burke accepts the sale of Donald's naturally deceased body because the payment appears extraordinary and no murder has yet occurred. His question, "How well?", reveals that caution is already vulnerable to reward.

2. Murder becomes collective survival

Hare frames killing as the only alternative to poverty. Burke adopts the language of desperate times, allowing economic grievance to replace moral judgement.

3. Repetition erodes inhibition

Each successful delivery confirms that the doctors will pay and ask few questions. Burke becomes increasingly capable of restraining victims and helping complete the method later associated with "burking".

4. Rivalry produces independent murder

Burke resents Hare making every decision. With Mary Paterson, he chooses a victim without agreement and insists that he has ideas too. Murder becomes a demonstration of status inside the partnership.

5. Sexual entitlement and contempt deepen corruption

Burke's treatment of Janet, Mary and Helen shows that he increasingly regards vulnerable women as objects available for sex, money or disposal.

6. Conscience returns as terror rather than restraint

Nightmares, visions and fear reveal that Burke knows what he has become. Yet he interprets torment as a reason to continue: if one murder damns him, many seem no worse.

7. Partnership fractures

He and Hare fight over control, victims and risk. By the Docherty murder, Burke wants the killing to stop, but he remains complicit and accepts a share.

8. Betrayal and trial

Hare gives King's Evidence and recasts Burke as the principal killer. Burke's rage is justified by Hare's hypocrisy, but it cannot erase his own acts.

9. Confession without absolution

In prison, Burke admits that the victims haunt him and agrees to tell Johnson the full story. The confession acknowledges guilt but is entangled with vanity, payment and the desire to shape his public account.

10. Public and anatomical punishment

Burke is hanged before the city and then dissected before applauding students. The ending turns the supplier into the subject, completing the series' most severe irony.

Arc Resolution

Burke ends with greater self-knowledge than Hare, but too late for transformation. His calm at the gallows is not redemption; it is the final stage of a man who knows justice has caught him and accepts that he entered hell long before death.

3. William Hare

Hare follows a negative corruption and betrayal arc. He is the entrepreneurial engine of the murders: quicker than Burke to identify opportunity, more controlling within the group and ultimately more willing to sacrifice anyone for survival.

Hare treats loyalty as sacred until loyalty threatens his own freedom.

Starting State

- He is volatile, proud of his Irish identity and quick to answer humiliation with violence.
- He is more calculating than Burke and first recognises that Donald's body may have commercial value.
- He defines the lodgings and the scheme as his territory, expecting the others to follow his decisions.
- His charm with neighbours coexists with intimidation, showing an early capacity to perform respectability.

Driving Want and Internal Test

External want: Money, control, escape from poverty and dominance within the partnership.

Internal need: Recognise that survival without loyalty or humanity is moral annihilation.

False belief: The powerless must seize what they can, and cleverness will always protect him from consequence.

Character engine: When pressure rises, he reframes cruelty as practicality and transfers risk to others.

Major Stages of the Arc

1. Opportunity recognised

Hare proposes selling Donald and immediately sees that repeated supply could replace ordinary labour.

2. Poverty becomes ideology

He argues that they are already dead within the filth and deprivation of Edinburgh, turning murder into apparent resistance against a society that excludes them.

3. Control of the enterprise

Hare insists that victims and timing must be jointly decided but, in practice, asserts ownership of the house and method. His anger at Burke's independent choices is as much about authority as danger.

4. Emotional detachment

He can charm neighbours, drink with victims and then suffocate them. The social performance becomes part of the predatory method.

5. Institutional confidence

Regular payments and Paterson's complicity convince Hare that the medical world requires and protects them. He no longer sees the doctors as remote buyers but as partners in an understood arrangement.

6. Docherty exposes the failing alliance

After fighting with Burke, Hare kills Docherty while Burke refuses active participation. He interprets resistance as betrayal and declares that Burke owes him loyalty for all he has done.

7. Self-preservation replaces fraternity

Once arrested, Hare accepts immunity and gives evidence against Burke. The man who repeatedly praised Irish solidarity and partnership survives by abandoning both.

8. Escape without moral victory

Hare leaves under disguise. Legal survival confirms his cleverness, but he departs isolated, hated and stripped of every relationship that gave his identity meaning.

Arc Resolution

Hare avoids the gallows but completes the darker arc. Burke is publicly punished; Hare lives with the proof that every principle he claimed—brotherhood, covenant and shared survival—was conditional.

4. Margaret Hare

Margaret follows a negative complicity and hardening arc. She begins as a practical woman frustrated by poverty and a disappointing earlier marriage, then becomes the strongest domestic advocate for continuing the scheme.

Margaret converts the home from refuge into infrastructure for murder.

Starting State

- She is dissatisfied with poverty and has already acted ruthlessly to change her circumstances.
- She controls the lodgings and understands that domestic security depends on income.
- She is more pragmatic than sentimental and quickly asks what share she will receive from Donald's possessions and body.
- Her loyalty is primarily to Hare, the child and the household they are trying to build.

Driving Want and Internal Test

External want: Financial security, control of the lodging house and escape from degradation.

Internal need: Recognise that protecting a household cannot justify turning it into a place where vulnerable people are killed.

False belief: Once the group has chosen its path, survival requires absolute commitment and silence.

Major Stages of the Arc

1. Immediate commercial calculation

Margaret moves quickly from concern for Donald to insisting on a share and asking whether the body can pay the lodging costs.

2. Moral language becomes management

She helps arrange the false funeral and concealment, converting guilt into practical tasks.

3. Helen's doubts are suppressed

Margaret repeatedly tells Helen that the men know what they are doing and warns that withdrawal means poverty and abandonment.

4. The household hierarchy hardens

She defends Hare's authority, monitors Burke and Helen, and interprets hesitation as dangerous weakness.

5. Active assistance

Margaret helps restrain situations, conceal evidence and manage neighbours. She is not merely aware; the continuation of the enterprise depends upon her domestic organisation.

6. Exposure and flight

When the Grays discover Docherty, Margaret tries persuasion and delay before directing Hare. She later escapes Scotland with her child, preserving life but losing the home and future the murders were meant to secure.

Arc Resolution

Margaret's arc is not one of sudden corruption. It is a progressive conversion of care, practicality and household loyalty into reasons for continued violence.

5. Helen McDougal

Helen follows a negative dependency and moral-collapse arc. She begins as the character most visibly troubled by the treatment of the dead, but fear of poverty, emotional dependence on Burke and pressure from Margaret gradually override that resistance.

Helen's tragedy is that she repeatedly recognises the wrong and then chooses belonging over the knowledge she already possesses.

Starting State

- She insists that Donald receive a priest and expresses concern that selling the body is illegal and disrespectful.
- She depends emotionally and economically on Burke, even when he humiliates or mistreats her.
- She is more anxious and reactive than Margaret, making her an important measure of how the group normalises horror.

Driving Want and Internal Test

External want: Remain with Burke, avoid poverty and share the improved life promised by the money.

Internal need: Act upon her conscience rather than surrender moral judgement to Burke, Hare or Margaret.

False belief: Burke will protect and remain loyal to her if she proves committed to the group.

Major Stages of the Arc

1. Ritual resistance

Helen demands a priest for Donald, attempting to preserve dignity after agreeing to conceal the body.

2. Conditional acceptance

The payment and food weaken her resistance. She asks what happens if they are discovered but does not leave.

3. Jealousy redirects moral anger

Her strongest confrontations increasingly concern Burke's infidelity and disrespect rather than murder itself.

4. Pressure from Margaret

Margaret warns that doubt could leave Helen alone and destitute. Helen accepts the path because exclusion appears more frightening than guilt.

5. Active participation

Helen urges Hare to help Burke during Mary Paterson's murder and demands that the killing be completed quickly. The observer becomes an enabler.

6. Docherty and discovery

She helps manage the final victim and attempts to bribe the Grays after the body is found. Her instinct remains concealment rather than confession.

7. Survival without restoration

Helen avoids conviction but is recognised and attacked in the street. The community's violence drives her away, leaving her legally free but socially condemned and alone.

Arc Resolution

Helen's ending is the bleak consequence of dependency. She sacrifices conscience to preserve Burke and the group, yet loses both security and relationship.

6. Dr Robert Knox

Knox follows a negative ambition and deliberate-blindness arc. He does not murder, but the series repeatedly shows him choosing not to know because abundant fresh bodies sustain his reputation, lectures and rivalry with Monro.

Knox's moral failure lies less in ignorance than in treating ignorance as a professional privilege.

Starting State

- He is brilliant, charismatic and genuinely committed to anatomical education.

- He believes existing law obstructs scientific progress and regards perseverance as a virtue that places him beyond ordinary caution.
- He seeks historical recognition and measures success through packed lectures, institutional influence and professional dominance.
- His private family life reveals concern with class, reputation and appearances.

Driving Want and Internal Test

External want: Secure bodies, dominate anatomical teaching and make his name synonymous with medical progress.

Internal need: Accept that scientific achievement cannot be separated from the human and moral cost of its materials.

False belief: The anatomist is responsible only for the usefulness of a subject, not for investigating how it was obtained.

Major Stages of the Arc

1. Principle stated

Knox openly rejects responsibility for investigating every subject and separates his scientific role from the resurrectionist trade.

2. Reward creates demand

His generous payment and guarantee of similar sums establish the economic incentive that transforms one accidental body into murder.

3. Warning signs accumulate

Recognisable victims, fresh bodies, bruising and the regularity of Burke and Hare's deliveries make innocence increasingly implausible.

4. Paterson absorbs the discomfort

Knox relies on his assistant to receive and pay, allowing administrative distance to function as moral insulation.

5. Johnson becomes a threat

Knox fears what the journalist may discover because he knows there is much to find. Rather than stop, he considers how associates might silence or contain the problem.

6. The murder economy serves rivalry

His competition with Monro and desire for the Chair deepen the incentive to accept supply without inquiry.

7. Exposure without prosecution

The legal case does not place the noose around Knox, but the city and professional establishment recognise disgrace. His lecture and standing are challenged.

8. Exile and limited remorse

Knox leaves Edinburgh with Susan and the child, apologising to his sisters and asking forgiveness. Yet he still speaks of forgetting the past so he can reach the prize ahead, suggesting ambition remains stronger than full accountability.

Arc Resolution

Knox loses Edinburgh, prestige and social certainty, but not the belief that future achievement can redeem or eclipse the means. His arc therefore ends in defeat without complete moral conversion.

7. Archibald Johnson

Johnson follows a positive investigative and witness arc. Personal grief gives him motive, but his development lies in converting suspicion into disciplined evidence, public exposure and a permanent record.

Johnson answers a trade built on making people disappear by ensuring that the victims and crimes remain visible.

Starting State

- He begins sceptical of Knox's separation between scientific ends and criminal means.
- The theft of his mother's body makes the issue personally painful rather than merely journalistic.
- He is persistent but initially dependent on inference, rumour and sources who fear speaking.

Driving Want and Internal Test

External want: Expose the body trade, connect Knox to unlawful procurement and bring the perpetrators into public view.

Internal need: Turn personal anger into patient investigation rather than accusation unsupported by proof.

Core belief: Public truth can force powerful institutions to answer conduct they prefer to hide.

Major Stages of the Arc

1. Moral challenge to Knox

Johnson asks directly whether Knox facilitates body snatching, establishing the conflict between inquiry and denial.

2. Evidence patiently assembled

Graveyard clues, interviews, observation and Monro's guarded encouragement teach him to look for the bubbles that reveal hidden activity.

3. The investigation becomes personal

He discloses that resurrectionists stole his mother, explaining the intensity behind his pursuit.

4. Witness to the final breakdown

Johnson observes the Grays' discovery and recognises that the scattered suspicions have become a provable murder case.

5. Alliance with Fisher

His information helps move the police from weak local suspicion toward the Surgeons' Hall and the institutional destination of the bodies.

6. Court and public record

Johnson attends the trial, supports Janet and ensures the story is published beyond legal testimony.

7. Burke's confession

He offers Burke the opportunity to authenticate a full account. The exchange serves both journalism and historical memory, though Johnson also negotiates through Burke's desire for clothing and recognition.

8. Justice witnessed

Johnson walks with Janet to the execution and gives her the published account, completing the movement from private suspicion to public record.

Arc Resolution

Johnson's arc provides the series' positive counterforce. He cannot restore the dead, but he prevents the powerful and guilty from controlling the only surviving version of events.

8. David Paterson

Paterson follows a negative enabling and self-corruption arc. As Knox's assistant, he turns the anatomist's demand into a working market and gradually moves from discreet receiver to knowing participant.

Paterson's practical neutrality becomes the mechanism through which murder is converted into respectable scientific supply.

1. Gatekeeper

He is the first medical contact Hare approaches and directs the men to the mortuary.

2. Payment normalises the arrangement

He handles deliveries, prices and later payments, creating repeatability and distance between Knox and the suppliers.

3. Recognition without intervention

Paterson notices rumours and recognisable victims, but treats provenance as outside his role.

4. Willingness to deepen complicity

He tells Hare he knows and is willing and ready, showing that enabling has become appetite for participation.

5. Institutional shield weakens

When Fisher searches the Hall, Paterson must guide police through the very system he helped operate.

Arc Resolution

Paterson embodies bureaucratic guilt: no single decision appears as spectacular as murder, but the enterprise could not have functioned without his repeated practical cooperation.

9. Sergeant Fisher

Fisher follows a positive awakening and enforcement arc. He begins limited by absent bodies and the deference surrounding the medical establishment, then develops into the officer willing to confront Knox and pursue the evidence wherever it leads.

Fisher's development is the movement from policing what can easily be proved to challenging the powerful system that makes proof disappear.

1. Procedural limitation

At Burke's lodging, he sees blood and contradictions but cannot act decisively without the missing body.

2. Johnson supplies the larger pattern

The journalist connects the local disappearance to Knox and the Surgeons' Hall.

3. Institutional confrontation

Fisher enters Knox's study and refuses to be intimidated by prestige, insisting that his duty applies even to the celebrated doctor.

4. Evidence and witness strategy

The investigation uses the recovered body, the Grays, Janet and ultimately Hare's testimony to construct a prosecutable case.

5. Justice achieved imperfectly

Burke is convicted while Hare and the women escape the same punishment. Fisher's success exposes the crime but also the compromises required by law.

Arc Resolution

Fisher helps end the murders and brings the system into public view, but the immunity bargain ensures that legal justice remains partial rather than morally complete.

10. Supporting Character Arc Functions

Susan Knox

Encourages Knox to defend his position, deny Monro bodies and protect the family's future. She represents the private ambition reinforcing his public moral blindness.

Mary and Jessie Knox

Begin within social comfort but end sharing Knox's disgrace. Mary's gift of the Bible and insistence that family shares the burden provide the possibility of forgiveness without erasing consequence.

Janet Brown

Moves from vulnerable witness and grieving friend to a determined public voice. Her persistence helps identify Mary Paterson and she attends the execution with a bittersweet demand for justice.

Alexander Monro

Begins as jealous professional rival but becomes an indirect source who encourages Johnson to observe more carefully. He finally dissects Burke, inheriting the anatomical spectacle that Knox once dominated.

The Grays

Represent ordinary people whose refusal to accept bribery breaks the conspiracy. Their discovery of Docherty converts rumour into an immediate police case.

Mrs Docherty

Functions as the final victim whose resistance, visibility and discovery collapse the group. Her murder exposes the partnership's internal fracture as well as its public danger.

11. Interlocking Relationship Arcs

Relationship	Beginning	Ending
Burke / Hare	Fellow Irish labourers bound by poverty, humour and mutual defence.	A murderous rivalry ending with Hare's testimony and Burke's public denunciation.
Hare / Margaret	A covenant built on escape from poverty and control of the lodgings.	They preserve loyalty long enough to flee separately after the enterprise collapses.
Burke / Helen	Dependent partnership marked by affection, jealousy and abuse.	Helen protects Burke and shares complicity, but survives to face public hatred alone.
Knox / Paterson	Celebrated doctor and practical assistant.	A hierarchy of deliberate distance in which Paterson carries knowledge Knox refuses to formalise.
Knox / Johnson	Public intellectual and sceptical journalist.	Johnson's investigation helps turn Knox's fame into disgrace and exile.
Johnson / Fisher	Separate journalist and police enquiries.	Complementary alliance joining public scrutiny to legal enforcement.

12. Overall Evaluation

The strongest character architecture comes from presenting the murders not as the work of two isolated monsters but as a widening chain of consent. Each principal character crosses a different moral threshold, and the drama repeatedly distinguishes explanation from excuse.

- Burke develops the clearest internal deterioration and the strongest late recognition.
- Hare provides the entrepreneurial drive and completes the theme through ultimate betrayal.
- Margaret converts domestic loyalty into operational complicity.
- Helen demonstrates how dependency can repeatedly defeat conscience.
- Knox embodies respectable ambition sustained by deliberate ignorance.
- Paterson shows how administration and payment make atrocity repeatable.
- Johnson and Fisher provide complementary forms of accountability: public truth and legal action.
- The final dissection of Burke turns the body seller into merchandise, completing the central dramatic irony.

Arc Classification Summary

Character	Arc Classification	Essential Movement
Burke	Negative corruption / confession	Hesitant accomplice -> independent murderer -> condemned confessor and anatomical subject
Hare	Negative corruption / betrayal	Opportunistic survivor -> controlling architect -> immune informer and fugitive

Margaret	Negative complicity	Practical landlady -> active domestic organiser -> displaced survivor
Helen	Negative dependency	Uneasy conscience -> participating protector -> socially condemned survivor
Knox	Negative ambition / blindness	Celebrated anatomist -> knowing beneficiary -> disgraced exile
Johnson	Positive investigation / witness	Suspicious journalist -> evidence-builder -> recorder of confession and justice
Paterson	Negative enabling	Discreet assistant -> knowing market intermediary
Fisher	Positive enforcement	Constrained local officer -> investigator willing to confront institutional power

The ending deliberately distributes consequence unevenly. Burke is hanged and dissected; Hare escapes; Margaret flees; Helen is driven out; Knox leaves in disgrace. That imbalance strengthens the series' argument that legal punishment and moral responsibility are not the same thing.

Source: Analysis based on BURKE AND HARE, four-part screenplay draft dated 20 July 2026.