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## Revelations from "Cheesecake Manor": Agatha Christie, detective fiction, and interwar England

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REVELATIONS FROM “CHEESECAKE MANOR”:  
AGATHA CHRISTIE, DETECTIVE FICTION, AND INTERWAR ENGLAND

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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In

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by  
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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .....	iii
CHAPTER	
1 MIRRORS OF SOCIETY: THE IMPORTANCE OF POPULAR FICTION, THE DETECTIVE GENRE, AND AGATHA CHRISTIE’S NOVELS IN INTERWAR STUDIES. ....	1
2 “O POIROT, DELIVER US”: RELIGION, MORALITY, LAW, AND ORDER IN INTERWAR ENGLAND .....	18
3 “MR. AIR KULE PROTT”: CLASS RELATIONS IN INTERWAR ENGLAND. .	43
4 “ALL THESE ARABS LOOK ALIKE TO ME”: EMPIRE AND IMPERIALISM IN CHRISTIE’S FICTION .....	65
CONCLUSION. ....	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY. ....	91
VITA .....	99

## **Abstract**

For too long standard interwar histories have portrayed the interwar years as a period marked by failure, instability, depression, and volatility. Instead, rising living standards, the narrowing of socioeconomic disparities, expanded avenues of social welfare, increased leisure time, and mass consumerism resulted in an altogether peaceful, healthier, stable, and increasingly affluent England. Out of these rising economic improvements emerged forms of mass entertainment, including popular fiction. Cheaper paper and printing methods, rising literacy, faster distribution methods, new forms of advertising, and the expansion of public libraries led to the creation of a mass readership across England. For the first time, publishers truly had to give the people what they wanted. As such, the proliferation and popularization of genres, both new and old, occurred. Most notably, the detective genre matured and blossomed during this period, which marked its “Golden Age.” As its authors’ sales depended on popular approval and because of the genre’s realistic, conservative nature, detective fiction offers historians an inside look into the conventional morals, attitudes, beliefs, and values of the English interwar public.

It was Dame Agatha Christie’s fiction that dominated sales both in the detective genre and in popular fiction in general. Throughout her astonishingly successful career, from 1920 until 1976, she always attempted to be as realistic, current, and up-to-date as possible. As such, she left behind a record of the times that she experienced firsthand. As a highly conventional middle-class woman, she mainly wrote for and about the class that guided England’s social and cultural life. Her works affirm the reality that interwar England was a nation that still followed and believed in late Victorian and Edwardian morals and values, accepted the existence of hierarchy and class distinctions based primarily on birth, and condoned Britain’s role as an imperial nation.

## **Chapter 1:** **Mirrors of Society: The Importance of Popular Fiction, the Detective Genre, and Agatha Christie's Novels in Interwar Studies**

Many historians portray the interwar period as one wrought with turmoil, failures, and hardship, hence such ominous labels as the “Radical Twenties,” “The Angry Thirties”, and “The Locust Years.” In these accounts the booms and busts of the 1920s, the failure of national industries, strikes and worker discontent, class antagonism, the Slump’s millions of unemployed, the emergence of radical right and left wing political parties, and the worsening global diplomatic scene resulted in a volatile, cataclysmic period. Revisionist historians from the 1970s onward, however, argued that this narrative overlooked many of the positive attributes and developments of the interwar years. For John Stevenson and Chris Cook, the interwar years were not the Locust Years but rather the “Dawn of Affluence.”<sup>1</sup> Revisionists acknowledge the “black spots” of the decade, but they emphasize interwar England’s increasing affluence. Even those temporary financial difficulties brought on by tax increases, the busts of the 1920s, and the Slump actually resulted in slowly but surely narrowing socio-economic disparities. Ultimately, a rise in living standards occurred, which resulted from the arrival of mass consumerism, the development of new science and consumer industries, the steady rise in real incomes, the growth of suburbia, and the expansion of holidays and leisure time. Stability, not volatility, characterized politics, with the “Safety First” policy of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and the Conservatives dominating the period. The absence of revolution and extremist factions in mainstream politics and culture throughout the interwar years reinforces the reality of a stable social order with prosperity steadily increasing among *all* the classes.

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Slump: Politics and Society during the Depression*, John Stevenson and Chris Cook devote an entire chapter to this argument.

As a result of this prosperity, the interwar years witnessed the arrival of an entirely new consumer culture truly driven by the demands of the people. Popular culture in particular became a mass commodity to be bought and sold quickly and cheaply. The enormous growth of the popular fiction industry reinforces this development. To discover the actual figures for readership in the interwar years proves virtually impossible. It is extremely difficult to establish who bought particular works within the various price bands for each individual title. Matching sales figures with readership patterns then presents extraordinary difficulties. Until the 1970s, few concerted efforts took place to provide clear statistics, and even then the attempts were made by journalists and booksellers for the purpose of compiling bestsellers' lists.<sup>2</sup> Historians do know that by the interwar years, readers could choose to buy most titles from a diverse range of popular authors from half a crown, one shilling, and sixpenny editions, thus widening readership across England.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of the paperback in the 1930s accelerated this development even faster. The Public Library System remained archaic and poorly funded, but 'tuppenny' subscriptions flourished across England. Chain stores such as Boots and W. H. Smith provided library services, although people usually preferred those available in their neighborhood newsagents and sweet shops. Now, working-class readers, who at the turn of the century could usually only afford newspapers, could join the rest of the book-reading public through both the greater affordability of books and proliferation of lending libraries.<sup>4</sup>

In the age of Northcliffe and Rothermere, the rise of mass circulation newspapers and book publishing was encouraged and driven through the insatiable demands of the English public. Publishers found themselves faced with two choices: they could either maintain the

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Hayes, "Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste" in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume One, 1900-1929*, ed. Clive Bloom (London and New York: Addison Wesley Foundation, 1993), 76.

<sup>3</sup> Clive Bloom, introduction to *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume One, 1900-1929*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Hayes, "Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste," 81.

“paternalistic mantle of the Victorian tradition” as “guardians of moral values” or they could survive in the age of mass consumerism by selling the public what it wanted.<sup>5</sup> Most chose the latter option. The rise in mass readership, driven by increasing literacy, cheap paper and print methods, faster distribution through rail and motorized transport, new forms of advertising media (radio and cinema), the expansion of public libraries, and growing leisure time resulted in the proliferation and popularization of relatively new genres.

As the demand for and supply of these popular genres increased, the segregation of high-brow from low-brow fiction materialized more dramatically than ever before. This seems hardly surprising in a period where class played a crucial role in creating divisions and identities in society. Authors and readers of “proper” or “legitimate” literature criticized publishers for providing this “counter-revolutionary dope”<sup>6</sup> for the masses.

Historians have tended to adopt this contemptuous attitude toward popular fiction. They have cast off most popular fiction genres as fads for escapist reading and “cheap thrills,”<sup>7</sup> lacking in use as a research tool. Most studies of interwar culture focus on canonical works, such as those from the Auden generation or the Bloomsbury group. The average interwar reader, however, simply did not prefer to read serious, psychological writing. To regard the works of the avant-garde as representative of English society as a whole is a serious mistake. Popular fiction can fill a void in histories because of its authors’ sensitivity to giving the people what they want. Unlike the literary avant-garde, popular authors take care that their work identifies with the concerns of their readers. Because sales depend on mainstream support, authors and their publishers ensure that plots, themes, and conclusions coincide with and reinforce the moral

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<sup>5</sup> Hayes, “Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste,” 82, 86, 93.

<sup>6</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 282-284

<sup>7</sup> Michael Hayes, “Popular Fiction 1930-55,” in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume Two, 1930-1955*, ed. Gary Day (London and New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 70.

convictions of readers. As Dennis Porter observes, “No novel is likely to be considered readable if... it appears to contradict our learned expectations concerning life’s operations,” unless clearly a work of fantasy.<sup>8</sup> The themes, attitudes and values of characters and conventions used in popular fiction demonstrate that the private experience and historical narratives often fail to match.<sup>9</sup>

To uncover what ordinary men and women thought and felt, a variety of voices must be utilized. Colin Watson argues that what historians must do is “look for clues within the works to the convictions and attitudes of the large section of British society for which it was written.”<sup>10</sup> Norman Page notes that each genre of literature offers a point of view that is “individual and partial,” but in “bringing together these voices as a chorus... a number of viewpoints may give a less incomplete idea of a truth.”<sup>11</sup> As one of those voices and as a cultural medium, popular fiction both shapes and reflects the attitudes and ideologies of the time of its production. As Raymond Chandler explains, “Fiction in any form has always intended to be realistic. Old-fashioned novels which now seem stilted and artificial to the point of burlesque did not appear that way to the people who first read them.”<sup>12</sup> Robin W. Winks puts forth the argument that social and cultural historians “who seek to recapture the texture as well as the content of what they judge to be a collective mentality in a given country in a specific decade will...include the second and third rate in their investigation, while not omitting the first rate.”<sup>13</sup> In many ways, the

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 116.

<sup>9</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Norman Page, *The Thirties in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1946), 222.

<sup>13</sup> Robin W. Winks, introduction to *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Woodstock, Vt.: Countryman, 1988), 1.



actual literary quality of any type fiction proves immaterial in historical analysis. Valentine Cunningham argues that “fictions are themselves history” telling us about “events and sets of happenings,” as well as perceptions of what actually occurred.<sup>14</sup> Even in the interwar years, literary critics recognized popular fiction’s relevant qualities and advocated analyzing “novels of sheer entertainment” as a separate category, as they differ in content and form from those “written for purposes of intellectual and aesthetic stimulation.”<sup>15</sup>

Interwar popular fiction can be broken down into four distinct varieties: novels and stories of romance, adventure, mystery, and detection. Of the four categories, the detective novel was the most popular, “the youngest, the most complicated, the most difficult of construction, and the most distinct.”<sup>16</sup> The demand, publication, and sales of detective fiction exploded during the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, it is this period when its classic, “Golden Age” form reached its maturity and sealed its reputation. Julian Symons argues that “crime literature is almost certainly more widely read than any other class of fiction.”<sup>17</sup> Detective fiction enjoyed the widest appeal, as it cut along generational, gender, and class lines more than any specific genre.<sup>18</sup> It also does not fit neatly into the low-brow category. Instead, it borrowed from both high- and low-brow forms as part of the “culture of the middle,” which developed in the interwar years.<sup>19</sup> This middle-brow culture emerged out of economic, social, and technological change, especially in the forms of mass communications and mass entertainment. Although no exact figures are available, it seems safe to estimate that in comparison with 1914, the number of crime stories

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<sup>14</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Willard Huntington Wright, “The Great Detective Stories,” in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, “The Great Detective Stories,” 35.

<sup>17</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder, From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972; revised edition, New York: Viking, 1985), 16-17.

<sup>18</sup> Hayes, “Popular Fiction 1930-55,” 77; Symons, *Bloody Murder*, 17; Anthea Trodd, *Women’s Writings in English: Britain 1900-1945* (London and New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 130.

<sup>19</sup> Siân Nicholas, “Being British: Creeds and Cultures,” in *The British Isles 1901-1951, The Short Oxford History of the British Isles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 105.

published multiplied by five in 1926 and by ten in 1939.<sup>20</sup> Howard Haycraft muses that during the bombings of London in 1940, detective fiction consistently dominated requests in the “raid” libraries of the shelters.<sup>21</sup> By 1939, detective fiction comprised one quarter of all published fiction.<sup>22</sup>

Since the 1920s, careful literary studies have appeared that examined the general and timeless appeal of the detective story as a mentally stimulating puzzle in addition to dissecting its structure and format as distinctive formula fiction. These specialists sought more than anything to make detective fiction a respectable literary genre, rather than proving its sociological or historical significance.<sup>23</sup> In the 1970s, an immense increase in critical studies devoted to crime stories emerged, best represented by H. R. F. Keating, Ernest Mandel, Dennis Porter, Julian Symons, Colin Watson and Robin W. Winks. What they have aimed to answer is the same riddle that perplexed literary specialist and critic Willard Huntington Wright in 1927:

What, then, constitutes the hold that the detective novel has on all classes of people—even those who would not stoop to read any other kind of ‘popular’ fiction? Why do we find men of high cultural attainments—college professors, statesmen, scientists, philosophers, and men concerned with the graver more advanced, more intellectual problems of life—passing by all other varieties of best-seller novels, and going to the detective story for diversion and relaxation?<sup>24</sup>

While such an inquiry continues to be interesting and relevant even today, detective fiction’s value in constructing a historical narrative and in revealing social attitudes for a given time period has generally been overlooked.

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<sup>20</sup> Symons, *Bloody Murder*, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century, 1941), vii.

<sup>22</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 65; Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> Winks, introduction to *Detective Fiction*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, “The Great Detective Stories,” 35.

For readers, the initial and most obvious appeal of detective fiction is how it presents a “dramatic problem, ‘a feather to tickle the intellect.’”<sup>25</sup> For historians, classic English detective writers, just like any other producers of popular fiction, left behind a mirror to society, and thus an invaluable primary record that aids in the assembling of a social history. By its very nature, detective fiction must reflect a sense of reality. By the interwar years, the rules of “fair play” evolved, perhaps because of writers’ desires for the genre “to be the accurate reflector of a sociological scene.”<sup>26</sup> If a reader is to participate alongside the great detectives and test their “acuteness in following up disguised clues,”<sup>27</sup> then an environment of verisimilitude and plausibility must be maintained. Ernest Mandel observes that “Exact time is always mentioned, precise locations offered, sometimes complete with maps and other sketches. The actions of the characters are described in the most minute detail, as are their clothes and physical appearance.”<sup>28</sup> If the novel was too fantastical in setting and plot, then the reader would not be able to make logical and rational calculations. As for characters, “we must know them at least as well as we know the many people...with whom we deal in daily life.”<sup>29</sup> Without being able to recognize stock societal types, readers would be incapable of deducing their possible motives for crime. The success of a detective novel depended on the use of the natural, the matter-of-fact, and the commonplace. Wright concurs:

The plot must appear to be an actual record of events springing from the terrain of its operations; and the plans and diagrams so often encountered in detective stories aid considerably in the achievement of this effect. A familiarity with the terrain and a belief in its existence are what give the reader his feeling of ease and freedom in manipulating the factors of the plot to his own (which are also the

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<sup>25</sup> H. Douglas Thompson, from the opening chapter of *Masters of Mystery*, reproduced in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, 129.

<sup>26</sup> David I. Grossvogel, “Death Deferred: The Long Life, Splendid Afterlife and Mysterious Workings of Agatha Christie,” in *Essays on Detective Fiction*, ed. Bernard Benstock (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 289.

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Mandel, “A Marxist Interpretation of the Crime Story,” in *Detective Fiction*, 212.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Barzun, “Detection and the Literary Art,” in *Detective Fiction*, 152.

author's) ends. Hampered by strange conditions and modes of action, his personal participation in the story's solution becomes restricted and his interest in its sequiturs wanes.<sup>30</sup>

Because of this social realism, detective fiction provides a glimpse into the dominant conventional ideologies, attitudes, values, and mores of the interwar years. In 1902, detective novelist and creator of the famous Father Brown series, G. K. Chesterson "defended" his artistic medium,

Not only is a detective story a perfectly legitimate form of art, but it has certain definite and real advantages as an agent of the public weal. The first essential value of the detective story lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life.<sup>31</sup>

Like any other form of popular fiction, detective writing "follows rather than parallels social change," thus making the genre's conservatism immediate from its beginnings.<sup>32</sup> Put another way, the genre must be conservative if it is all about a disruption that gets resolved at the ending of each novel or story. After all, few people want to escape or retreat into a work of chaos and uncertainty.

Just as it does with its solutions, detective fiction affirms the absence of chaos and uncertainty in England's social system. The Golden Age detective novel, more so than any other genre of popular fiction, reveals that even after such a cataclysmic event as WWI, very little significant transformation had actually taken place within England. Golden Age novelists testify to a conservative, stable world where religiosity and morality, class distinctions and separation, and the acceptance of British imperialism remained central to the story of England's social and cultural history during the two decades leading up to World War II. What domestic metamorphosis did occur in the wake of the Great War was easily managed in detective fiction,

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<sup>30</sup> Wright, "The Great Detective Stories," 38.

<sup>31</sup> G. K. Chesterson, "A Defense of Detective Stories," in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 57.

which asserted that change did not necessarily mean the erasure of traditional, accepted late Victorian and Edwardian mores and values. Fiction held out the promise that compromise between the new and the old could be reached and maintained. The masters of the genre managed to forge the contradictory natures of “change” and “tradition” into the soothing form of what Alison Light calls “conservative modernity,”<sup>33</sup> which characterizes the bulk of British interwar society and politics.

It was the writings of the “Queen of Crime,” Agatha Christie, which dominated the sales figures of interwar detective fiction. By the early 1930s, requests for “another Christie” could be heard daily where library subscriptions were available.<sup>34</sup> As the famous quip goes, she made more money by crime than any woman since Lucrezia Borgia. To date, her sixty-seven novels and 117 short stories have sold over 500 million copies worldwide in over 100 languages, making her the world’s third best-selling literary figure, after the Bible and Shakespeare, respectively. As many tourists to England know, her *Mousetrap* play has run longer than any in the history of English theater. The royals actually attended the opening of the film adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express* in 1974. Her infamous Belgian detective with the “egg-shaped” head, Hercule Poirot even received the honor of the *New York Times* printing his obituary on its *front page* on 4 August, 1975. Christie remains a public institution, a significant part of English tradition and national heritage, evidenced by the Christmas Day showings of film adaptations of her fiction. Even the state publishing house sponsored and produced her works. The interwar reading public responded by eagerly anticipating, even demanding, a “Christie” at least once each year, and her sales effortlessly surpassed those of her genre’s colleagues. She joked that the

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<sup>33</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 1-18. Light details the need to explore the “lived” conservatism of interwar Britain by meshing the values and attitudes of political Conservatives with that of social conservatism, particularly expressed and evident in popular literature.

<sup>34</sup> Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 101.

high point of her career was reached when one of her characters appeared in a *Times* crossword puzzle.

C. H. B. Kitchen once remarked that there were five Agatha's: "the seeker of thrills, the philosopher, the archaeologist and traveler, the sociologist, and the world citizen."<sup>35</sup> However, for a writer whose works have been a considerable presence in bookshops, libraries, and homes for over eighty years, Christie is quite noticeably absent from most surveys of interwar literature and studies of female novelists and women's writing. Too often there has been a severe misunderstanding of the type of books she wrote, and as such too often critics get caught up in the debate over the quality of her writing. Robert Barnard summarizes the common critical reaction: "The burden of the prosecution as a whole, then, is that these books are worthless: trivial, dated, class-bound, socially and intellectually dead. Their appeal is to the lowest kind of mind, to which any kind of puzzle, however feeble, is better than no puzzle at all. It is the sort of public vice best ignored, in the hope that it will go away."<sup>36</sup>

What such critics fail to understand is that as an avid observer of middle-class life, Christie provided insight into that world over a fifty-year period. Historians can learn much from examining why she was so popular, why she was the "queen" of her field, and most importantly, what her works reveal about the society in the time that she wrote. One could argue that her social history is limited by its class view, but since the values of the middle-class family dominated English life for much of the century, it hardly qualifies as a distortion. According to A. J. P. Taylor, "The middle classes set the standards of the community. They were its conscience and did its routine work."<sup>37</sup> Alison Light further adds to this argument, "What were

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Earl F. Bargainnier's *The Gentle Art of Murder: The Detective Fiction of Agatha Christie* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1980), 19.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (London: Collins, 1980), 15.

<sup>37</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 173-74.

once the virtues of the private sphere of the middle-class life became public, national identities.”<sup>38</sup> Like most crime writers in the 1920s and 1930s, Christie was a devoted Christian, “a champion of the status quo,”<sup>39</sup> “unquestionably right-wing” and willingly, even gladly, catered to the preferences and prejudices of her anticipated audience, “with a few warmed-over *Daily Telegraph* clichés.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite its conservatism, the middle class was not completely resistant to change. Even classic Burkeian conservatism was not anti-change. Conservative modernity generally characterized interwar England, as people favored gradualism and slowly allowed progress to advance. Alison Light argues that it was a society that could “simultaneously look forwards and backwards; it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before.”<sup>41</sup> Surprisingly, as Light observes, conservatism “is the most obvious feature of British life and yet the least studied.”<sup>42</sup> Political conservatism itself still needs greater attention and definition, but historians have conspicuously ignored the notion of a lived conservatism. Christie’s fiction allows historians to recreate that conservative modernity at an everyday level by combining Conservative Party politics with a set of conservative attitudes and beliefs. Instead of focusing on politicians, prime ministers, foreign and domestic policy, her fiction displays the everyday conservatism of the English people. Her work ultimately reflects interwar England’s ability to peacefully reconcile tradition with change.

Agatha Christie was an obsessively secret woman, and her family and closest friends maintained a respect for her privacy even after her death in 1976. Immediately following her

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<sup>38</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 194.

<sup>40</sup> Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 10.

death, a renewed and immense interest in Christie's personal life emerged. To reward the public's appreciation and admiration of her, Christie's family relinquished personal papers, correspondences, and manuscripts to Janet Morgan, who then wrote the most prominent and respected biography on Christie. Most biographies that have followed after Morgan's 1984 publication are merely rehashings of what was already known or offer disputable secondhand information. Therefore, the best sources to get to Christie are her fiction and her autobiographical writings, which "bear the stamp of her attitudes and values."<sup>43</sup> Jared Cade, one of her most recent biographers, agrees that "There's no shortcut to Agatha. You have to read the books."<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, a brief biographical sketch helps provides some necessary background for her fiction's plots, themes, and settings. Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born on 15 September, 1890 at her family's home, Ashfield, in Torquay, Devonshire. She came from a tightly knit, upper-middle-class family. Her father, Frederick Alvah Miller, grew up in Massachusettes, and married his step-cousin, Clara Margaret Boehmer, whom he met while visiting his American father and his English step-mother in Manchester. Her father was a jovial, carefree man of leisure, and for a time the family lived comfortably on the investment income from his father's company in New York. Christie described Clara as a loving, intuitive, almost clairvoyant, woman. Christie had two siblings, Margaret, or "Madge", eleven years older, and Louis Montant, or "Monty," ten years older. Madge appears to have been the most intelligent and promising of the three children, and she married into the Watts family, who owned a prosperous textile business in Manchester. Monty was ever the prodigal son, handsome, and

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<sup>43</sup> Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1982), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Jared Cade, *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* (London and Chester Springs: Peter Owen, 1998), 9.



financially irresponsible. He eventually served in East Africa, but then returned to England in the early 1920s as a wounded invalid.

Once her siblings left Ashfield, Christie enjoyed the lavish attention her mother bestowed upon her. Although her sister Madge went to a progressive girls' boarding school, Clara decided that her youngest was to be taught at home under her own instruction. Her lessons consisted of piano, dancing and cooking, typical of a late Victorian education. Christie was a creative, shy child who liked time to herself to create stories to act out with her imaginary friends. She began recording these stories at Clara's suggestion when a cold forced Christie to remain bedridden for days.

At the turn of the century, the family fortune suddenly dwindled from declining investments, which put an enormous strain on Frederick's health. He died when Christie was only eleven. This tragedy forced Clara to economize by releasing servants, ordering less ostentatious dinners, and neglecting household repairs. Still, the Millers maintained their reputation as one of Torquay's most respected and esteemed families.

At sixteen, Clara sent Christie to Paris to improve her singing and piano skills, but her shyness and weak voice prevented a career in music. After a series of suitors, in 1912 she finally decided on the dashing Archibald Christie, a young officer in what became the R.A.F. They married on 24 December, 1914, while he was on a brief leave from his station in France. Christie joined the V.A.D. at the hospital in Torquay and worked at the dispensary where she learned about those poisons she frequently featured in her books.

Meanwhile, she began writing seriously and had a few short stories published. In 1916, she experimented with detective fiction for the first time. Her sister Madge, who introduced her to detective stories, complained that contemporary authors seemed incapable of writing really

clever detective stories and challenged Christie to write one. Christie accepted this challenge and began work on what would become *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. She worked on it sporadically and finished it while on a two-week leave from the hospital. Christie sent dozens of publishers the manuscript, but the number of rejections discouraged her. Then, she sent it to John Lane at Bodley Head, who took nearly a year to respond. Finally, they set up an interview with her and then a contract to publish *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920. The book was not an astonishing success and sold 2,000 copies initially. Christie earned only £25, but this was enough to encourage an accelerated writing pace. It took about half a dozen books published in the 1920s to convince her that she could earn a solid living from writing detective stories.

By 1926 Christie's success convinced her to entertain other publishing offers. When her contract with Bodley Head expired, she signed with William Collins and Sons, thus beginning a lifelong partnership. In 1926, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* appeared and caused an immediate sensation as readers and critics alike screamed "Foul Play!" over the novel's conclusion. It remains one of the most heated debates in detective fiction's history, as it "pushed the principle that the murderer must be the least likely suspect" to its possible limits.<sup>45</sup> Shortly after this publication, Clara died. At the same time, Christie's marriage to Archie dissolved. He was having an affair with and planned to marry a Miss Teresa Neele, whom he met during a golf game.

Both situations placed emotional and psychological strain upon Christie and resulted in one of the biggest scandals of the 1920s. On 4 December, 1926, Christie mysteriously disappeared. She took a drive from her Berkshire House, Styles, and failed to return. Archie alerted the police, and two days later they found her car on the edge of a cliff. A nationwide

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<sup>45</sup> Russell H. Fitzgibbon, *The Agatha Christie Companion* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1980), 18.

search with over 15,000 volunteers ensued. Nearly two weeks later, a staff member at a Yorkshire spa hotel reported that a guest, ironically signed in as “Teresa Neele,” resembled the published photographs of Christie. Archie and the police ventured to the hotel, quickly identified her, and they brought her back home for rest and recuperation. Already a shy woman, this event forever sealed her distrust of the press and of publicity. Rumors circulated, and the mystery has never been solved to anyone’s satisfaction. There are three main theories behind her disappearance: she staged the event to boost her sales, which seems highly unlikely considering her private nature; she wanted to punish Archie for his infidelity and for abandoning her;<sup>46</sup> or she suffered from amnesia brought on by the emotional strain.<sup>47</sup> Naturally, sales of all of her books increased dramatically after this episode. Many bookstores sold out of copies, and newspapers began serializing her works.

Christie’s divorce to Archie finalized in 1928, and she spent much of the next two years traveling while her only child, Rosalind, was away at a girls’ boarding school. In the spring of 1930, she spent a few days at Ur where she met Max Edgar Lucien Mallowan, an archaeologist from the University of London. After a brief courtship, they married on 11 September, 1930. Afterwards, Christie spent many months in Iraq or Syria helping Max at the digs. The experience in the Middle East gave her inspiration for several novels. At around this time she began using the pseudonym Mary Westmacott to write romance novels of a highly autobiographical nature; the most famous are *Giant’s Bread* (1930) and *Unfinished Portrait* (1934). For years only Christie’s publisher and her family knew that she was Westmacott.

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<sup>46</sup> Jared Cade’s *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* supports this theory based on new testimonies and evidence provided by the daughter of Nan Watts, Christie’s sister-in-law, whom she regarded as one of her best friends. Cade argues that Christie and Watts concocted the plan to punish Archie, but they had no idea that her planned disappearance would make national headlines.

<sup>47</sup> Janet Morgan’s biography on Christie maintains the family’s and doctors’ stance that the emotional pain from her mother’s death and her pending divorce caused this bout of amnesia. It was only after Archie confronted her at the hotel that she began to regain her memory.

Christie and Mallowan enjoyed their annual routine of spending summers in the Middle East and winters in England. During those winters she composed the bulk of her interwar novels. Mallowan eventually became the head of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, and he was later knighted for his work there. World War II, however, brought major changes for the couple. Mallowan joined the R.A.F., but the government decided to use him as an advisor on Arab affairs. Christie volunteered as a nurse and once again worked in the dispensary, this time at the University College of London. She used her evenings to write.

Their routine returned to normal following the war until her age prevented her from making such strenuous trips to the digs. Christie was determined, however, to continue writing fiction for as long as possible. By the 1950s her success earned her numerous awards and honors. In 1950 she became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1956 the Queen named her Dame Commander, Order of the British Empire. In 1961 the University of Exeter bestowed the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature upon her. *Curtain*, the final exploit of Poirot, appeared in the fall of 1975. After months of ailing health, Christie died peacefully on 12 January, 1976. *Sleeping Murder*, the last Marple novel and the final “Christie,” followed in the summer of 1976. Her long anticipated autobiography, which she began constructing in 1950, hit the shelves in 1977. To no one’s surprise, it was an instant best-seller.

No matter the genre of writing, Christie always tried to reconstruct contemporary everyday life as realistically as possible. In essence she created a living environment in which characters function naturally, as evidenced by her use of natural, modern dialogue and expressions. She utilized representations of real people that she met throughout her life. After reading her autobiography, readers can then go back into her fiction and recognize exactly who she based many of her characters upon. Growing up, the author Eden Phillpotts lived close to

Christie's family in Torquay. When Christie was a teenager, Phillpotts volunteered to look over some of her writings and give her some constructive criticism. A few of his observations stood out from all of the rest, which he sent to her in a letter:

You have a great feeling for dialogue. You should stick to gay natural dialogue. Try and cut all moralizations out of your novels; you are much too fond of them, and nothing is more boring to read. Try and leave your characters *alone*, so that they can speak for themselves, instead of always rushing in to tell them what they ought to say, or to explain to the reader what they mean by what they are saying. That is for the reader to judge for himself.<sup>48</sup>

She took this advice seriously, and her respect for his keen literary insights shows throughout all of her works. There is at times a duality of some sorts even in the presentation of the social scene: a nostalgia for the past, mixed with amusement for its follies, and a respect for the necessity of change. Whether she liked it or not, Christie knew that changes had occurred and always attempted to be as up-to-date as possible.

Raymond Chandler once sarcastically remarked that all of Christie's crimes take place in "Cheesecake Manor," obviously expressing the opinion that her fiction is out of touch with reality. On the contrary, many pertinent revelations emerge out of her painstakingly realistic fiction. The themes, expressions, characterizations, and dialogue she carefully selected help fill in gaps in both traditional and revisionist interwar histories, and sometimes challenged accepted analyses of standard topics, especially those of religion, class, and empire.

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<sup>48</sup> Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1977), 183.

## **Chapter 2:** **“O Poirot, Deliver Us”: Religion, Morality, Law, and Order in Interwar England**

Detailed discussions and explanations concerning the state of religiosity in England remain conspicuously and curiously absent from the pages of most interwar histories. Economics, domestic politics, and international relations dominate the traditional narratives of this period, while historians consistently give short shrift to religion. Historians agree that while religious concerns certainly still existed and caught the public’s attention, church attendance and participation steadily declined. A society’s basic religious beliefs and values cannot, however, be solely measured by church attendance statistics. Evidence drawn from the most popular forms of reading material, particularly the detective novels of Agatha Christie, reveals that Christian ethics continued to guide English attitudes towards codes of proper public and private behavior, morality, and the law.

Within standard interwar histories, the Prayer Book Controversy of 1927-28, the miniature revival of Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism’s gains in the 1920s, and the Oxford Group Movement all testify to the perpetuation of religious loyalties and even fervor across England.<sup>49</sup> Religious affiliation followed the traditional pattern of Nonconformity retaining its hold in the industrial North and of Anglicanism maintaining its strength in rural areas and the South. Three out of four English claimed to be baptized, while Anglican churches married four out of five.<sup>50</sup> With the benefit of Establishment, Anglicanism continued as the faith of the grammar schools with the newly constructed secondary schools following suit. The thoughts and personal writings of Anglican leaders still appeared in the newspapers. Atheism found little support and was practically nonexistent. Intellectuals often advocated agnosticism; at the other

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<sup>49</sup> For more about religious controversies and movements within interwar England, Robert Graves’ and Alan Hodge’s *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* and A.N. Wilson’s *After the Victorians: The Decline of Britain in the World* provide the best overviews.

<sup>50</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 168.

extreme, conversion to Roman Catholicism became fashionable. Writers such as T. S. Eliot, Dorothy L. Sayers, Evelyn Waugh, and C. S. Lewis proudly carried on the torch of Christianity as informal proselytizers through their fiction and radio chats. Non-Anglican religious identities united immigrant communities throughout England, particularly the Irish Catholics in all major port cities, Muslims in London and in the ports, the Jews of London's East End, and the Welsh-speaking chapel attendants of London or Oxford. To an extent, religious identities still encouraged the persistence of discrimination against Jews, and to a lesser degree, Roman Catholics.

Despite these notable exceptions of active faith, England essentially represented “a denominationally fragmented nation, in which religion played an increasingly passive role”<sup>51</sup> in society and politics. The last truly significant religious revival took place in 1904-05. The increase in church membership of the 1920s quickly met with sharp reversals in the 1930s. While people loyally identified themselves with the Church of England, Roman Catholicism, or the Free Churches (Nonconformity), only a fraction of the population declared active church participation. John Stevenson estimates that there were around two and half million Anglicans, two and half million Roman Catholics, and two million Nonconformists.<sup>52</sup> In his study of York in 1935, Seebom Rountree found church attendance only half as common as in 1901.<sup>53</sup> Publicized squabbles between religious sects became infrequent or practically ignored by the populace. Parents still sent their children to Sunday School regularly, although the allure of having a morning alone might have been enough inducement. In the newly constructed and relatively isolated council estates, churches arguably fulfilled a much needed social rather than

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<sup>51</sup> Siân Nicholas, “Being British: Creeds and Cultures,” in *The British Isles 1901-1951*, The Short Oxford History of the British Isles, ed. Keith Robbins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 117.

<sup>52</sup> John Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1915* (London: Allen Lane, 1984), 357.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann's *Britain in the 1930s* (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1971), 247.

religious role. Prominent church figures owed their fame to other factors besides their religious philosophies: Bishop William Temple for his Labour Party affiliation, Father Ronald Knox for his charming prose and radio segments, and the defrocked Rector of Stiffkey for his scandalous relations with young females as well as his shocking death while acting out the Biblical scene of Daniel in the lion's den. In a sharp contrast to the late Victorian era, congregations in the interwar period generally greeted ritualistic innovations with neither applause nor dismay. Religion featured less frequently in political matters, with Stanley Baldwin as the last prime minister until Tony Blair to represent himself as a strict Christian. Church allegiance no longer dictated political allegiance.

In reaction to these realities, modernist and highbrow writers alike bemoaned what they perceived as the onslaught of secularization. Evelyn Waugh, for example, deplored how willingly people chose to identify with crowd patriotism rather than communal Christianity.<sup>54</sup> These developments stemmed from pre-1914 trends,<sup>55</sup> but they dramatically accelerated after the cataclysmic watershed, the Great War. As historian A. J. P. Taylor noted, perhaps the image of “priests and bishops blessing guns or tanks during the Great War was not a good advertisement for the gospel of the Prince of Peace.”<sup>56</sup> The disillusionment resulting from the war's millions of casualties, its affirmation of the criticisms hurled at Western Civilization, and the countless images of mass destruction, however, do not wholly explain the rapid decline of religious zeal in English society, particularly from the 1930s onwards.

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<sup>54</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 278.

<sup>55</sup> Alan D. Gilbert's *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (London and New York: Longman, 1980) offers a thorough look at the evolution of a secular culture in Britain, exploring evidence as far back as the early modern period.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, 169.



The standard explanation for how England became an increasingly secularized culture focuses on the onset of advanced modernization and industrialization. This argument also emphasizes that secularization may vary in pace and in specific social and institutional manifestations, but it usually involves common psychological and cultural characteristics no matter the time or the place. The Industrial Revolution broke with the past so completely that few aspects, if any, of social organization, cultural reality, or human consciousness escaped metamorphosis. In Western countries when industrialization took place, there emerged the realization of “the autonomy of man and the world.”<sup>57</sup> A relationship inescapably exists between decline in religion and the emergence of a complex urban-industrial society. While the secularization process actually preceded it, the Industrial Revolution rapidly sped it up. The industrial techniques mastered during World War I, the world’s first total war, continued the acceleration of a more secular English society by ushering in the arrival of a truly mass produced culture in the decades following World War I.

It was in the interwar period when that “mass everything” culture matured. As Alan D. Gilbert asserts, it is a “salient fact that the crisis of contemporary Christianity lies not in challenges to the truth of its dogmas, but in the fact that...people in a secular culture have become increasingly ‘tone-deaf’ to any orchestration of those dogmas.”<sup>58</sup> A new, more secular consciousness took hold of the mass of ordinary citizens whose worldview was steadily shaped more and more by the satisfaction arising from the cheaply produced, readily available material comforts brought by advanced capitalism and scientific innovation. On the whole, society became wealthier as primary production, national industrial production, domestic consumption, per capita income, and national earnings from world trade and finance outstripped population

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<sup>57</sup> Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain*, 14.

growth. Average real wages rose while the range of mass produced consumer goods and variety of leisure entertainment increased. As a result, people from all classes engaged in more spending than ever before. No longer were appliances, automobiles, and vacations reserved just for the wealthy. For example, the astonishing spread of radio ownership<sup>59</sup> meant that more people than ever were brought in range to listen to the BBC's numerous religious broadcasts, but this also resulted in less need of the parish church or cathedral. During the interwar era, industrialization finally produced the ultimate benefit of providing basic, material comforts to the majority of society.

By the 1930s, England's churches no longer existed as the sole or chief outlets for everyday leisure and recreation. Religious organizations remain effective only if their structures mirror those of the society in which they aim to serve.<sup>60</sup> In relation to the decline in church attendance, Sabbatarianism additionally fell into disrepute. With the reduction in workday hours, more people utilized Saturday *and* Sunday to go to holiday camps by the seaside, take a drive into the country, go hiking or "rambling," or attend sporting events. More businesses, including new retail chains, pubs, restaurants, and cinemas opened their doors on Sunday. The proliferation of cheap means of transportation including buses and railways along with the steep drop in the price of motor cars enabled access to more forms of leisurely pursuits. Arguably, the average English person increasingly felt little need for organized religion when science and technology gave each individual so much.<sup>61</sup>

The problem with this standard secularization narrative is that it overlooks visible evidence that affirms the persistence of Christian precepts as part of English identity, both

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<sup>59</sup> In *British Society 1914-1945*, Stevenson cites the following significant sales figures for the number of radio licenses issued: 1922: 36, 000; 1926: 2 million; 1939: 8 million. By 1939, about three-fourths of all households had access to a radio (408).

<sup>60</sup> Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain*, 80.

<sup>61</sup> Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain*, 61.

individually and nationally. Most recently, Callum Brown and Christie Davis propose that marginalization or decline of Christian religiosity in England actually took place after the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>62</sup> Brown emphasizes that social scientists since the Enlightenment have wrongly measured religiosity by church membership and attendance.<sup>63</sup> The English did not equate churchgoing as a necessary requirement to be a good, morally devout person. Brown utilizes a variety of primary sources such as autobiographies, biographies, magazines, novels, and personal testimonies to demonstrate the resilience of Christianity in mainstream English culture. Davies points to lower rates of crime and imprisonment, alcohol and drug consumption, illegitimate births, and abortions, all products of a legal system based on moral principles, as evidence for the prevalence of Christianity in interwar society.<sup>64</sup> As for industrialization and urbanization being the catalysts for church decline, John Wolffe argues that from 1780 until 1850, the period of their greatest acceleration, the most rapid expansion of churches occurred.<sup>65</sup> Brown seconds this and labels the idea of the “unholy” industrial city as a myth.<sup>66</sup>

What the revisionist histories reveal is that despite science’s ability to satisfy material desires, it could not fulfill religion’s moral role of helping individuals and societies distinguish between right and wrong. Many Britons may have expressed apathy to organized religion, but people remained dedicated to the maintenance of traditional morals. In relation to public

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<sup>62</sup> In *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), Callum Brown argues that the early 1960’s mark the sudden, not gradual, decline of Christianity in Britain. He notes that the privatization of culture, the dramatic extension of affluence, drugs, easier divorce, the sexual revolution, and the women’s movement all signal the marginalization of Christianity in British culture and society. In *The Strange Death of Moral Britain* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2006), Christie Davies argues that the decline in Christian morality took place in the 1950s when legal changes occurred. Law, order, justice, and punishment went from being based on moral principles of right and wrong to being overtaken by what Davies calls the “causalist” approach, in which person’s individual circumstances determine his or her behavior instead of individuals solely responsible for making decisions between right and wrong behavior.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 11-12, 30-33, 38.

<sup>64</sup> Davies, *The Strange Death of Moral Britain*, Introduction, Chapters One and Two.

<sup>65</sup> John Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843-1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 93.

<sup>66</sup> Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 18-30.

conventions and private morality, Christian values continued to influence, even direct, major aspects of English society and culture. The widespread decline in churchgoing did not lead to an abandonment of basic religious beliefs and values. Gilbert even goes so far as to claim that “‘secularization’ could be a metamorphosis rather than a decline.”<sup>67</sup> Christianity had not departed from England; churchgoing had become marginalized. A. J. P. Taylor summarizes this best in the observation that “England remained Christian in morality, though not in faith.”<sup>68</sup>

England could hardly be categorized as a primarily secular culture, at least not in the interwar years. As Davies describes interwar England:

“...a world with a low and declining incidence of crime and illegitimacy and falling drug and alcohol abuse in which respectability ruled, a world in which the value of duty, religion, and patriotism was taken for granted, even though their requirements might be evaded. It was a world that assumed that individuals were autonomous moral agents responsible for their own behavior, that the innocent ought to be protected, the virtuous rewarded, and the guilty punished.”<sup>69</sup>

Brown argues that people exhibited religiosity in “rituals or customs of behavior, economic activity, dress, speech...which are collectively promulgated as necessary for Christian identity.”<sup>70</sup> Stevenson argues that Christianity influenced the maintenance of a rigid morality in public and private society. As he notes, “Christian opposition to divorce, artificial birth control, obscenity, drink, homosexuality and the ‘continental Sunday’ helped to shape” the interwar years.<sup>71</sup> As such, a variety of indicators appear in the historical record which reinforce Christianity’s strong presence in interwar England. The 1920s’ brief relaxing of sexual mores met with resistance and reversal in the 1930s. The public continued to draw a distinct parallel between Christianity and the ideal of the English gentleman or gentlewoman. Divorce continued

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<sup>67</sup> Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, 169.

<sup>69</sup> Davies, *The Strange Death of Moral Britain*, xi.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 12.

<sup>71</sup> Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945*, 369-370.

to hinder the careers of certain professionals, particularly and altogether not surprisingly, politicians and judges. Of course, the scandal over Edward VIII's marriage to the divorcee', Mrs. Wallis Simpson raised countless eyebrows across the nation. The Conservative Party, which guided the nation through the 1930s, maintained its ban on divorce for MPs until after World War II. In the areas of state, the armed forces, the courts, and many organized activities, Christianity, through song or prayer, upheld its significant role during the opening of meetings, ceremonies, and other special events. The majority of English men and women continued to use the church for religious rites, such as baptisms, funerals, and weddings. Many homes featured a variety of religious artifacts, including Bibles, religious pictures, Sunday School prizes, and religious magazines.<sup>72</sup> Even the Sunday lunch remained an integral religious ritual for many interwar families.<sup>73</sup>

Organized religion may not have appealed to their palate, but the English still flocked towards informal media of religion primarily in the form of popular fiction. The religious novel, however, no longer fulfilled this need and its place in the mainstream of popular fiction faded quickly.<sup>74</sup> Modernist and highbrow authors who criticized the public's insatiable appetite for novels of detection, mystery, adventure, and romance clearly judged the quality of literature from a purely aesthetic point of view.<sup>75</sup> What they failed to comprehend was the public's *need* for such a catharsis. Popular fiction by its nature is neither out of touch with reality nor suffices merely as an antidote for boredom. The interwar public found pleasure in such genres not just because of the thrill of escape but because the popular authors of the day affirmed the validity of

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<sup>72</sup> Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 141-142.

<sup>73</sup> Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 144, 161.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Hayes, "Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste" in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume One, 1900-1929*, ed. Clive Bloom (London and New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1993), 88.

<sup>75</sup> Valentine Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties* offers an excellent examination throughout of how the literati of the 1930s deplored the growth of mass media, particularly the cinema and popular fiction.

accepted traditional morals and values. Even those avant-garde writers who actually recognized how popular fiction reinforced aspects of religion, deplorably referred to it as “the people’s opium.”<sup>76</sup>

As Max Weber understood, even though modernity brings with it plenty of benefits, many traditional values fall to the wayside.<sup>77</sup> Secularization, as a direct result of advanced modernization and industrialization, provides material comforts and proves humanity’s ability to conquer nature, but it fails to provide all the answers, especially those in the realm of ethics. Dealing with the realities of the Great War’s horrifying aftermath, the continuation of bloodshed, the devastation of an unprecedented Slump, and the ominous growth of extremist politics, the British desired the confidence that stems from knowing that right and wrong can be easily defined, law and order prevails, and good will always triumph over evil. People wanted reassurance that the social fabric would not tear even under the most extreme of circumstances, especially when civilization as they knew it seemed more threatened than ever.<sup>78</sup>

The detective novel, more than any other form of popular fiction in the interwar period, confronted and resolved those postwar anxieties and afflictions. Golden Age detective stories helped the English public to “restore its nerve and to take its mind off the irrational and disconcerting things that other people, in other places, continued so wantonly to do.”<sup>79</sup> It confirmed the stability and virility not only of Christian values but of the nation itself. As mentioned in the introduction, like any other form of popular fiction, detective novels follow rather than parallel social change. Their authors project the image of a given social order and the

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<sup>76</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 284.

<sup>77</sup> In *The Making of Post-Christian Britain*, Gilbert includes in “Chapter One: Secularization and the Historian,” a brief but fascinating analysis of Weber’s views on the effects modernization has upon religion’s status in a society.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (London: Collins, 1980), 16-20.

<sup>79</sup> Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971), 167.

implied values system that helps sustain it. In contrast to the authors of much of postmodern detective fiction, interwar detective writers took a stand in defense of the established social order. Therefore, the genre's conservatism was assured from its start. Literary critic E. M. Wrong noted, "Perhaps art in general should have no moral purpose, but the art of the detective story has one and must have one."<sup>80</sup> No other form of popular literature conformed more clearly to a period's notions of decency. Detective fiction authors presented a capitalistic, traditional, moralistic worldview of absolutes, which readers found both appealing and relevant. These authors successfully meshed the conservative with the modern so that the new age of mass domestic consumption in no way conflicted with the longstanding moral codes of English society.<sup>81</sup> The moral legitimacy of the detective-heroes is never in doubt.

More so than any other Golden Age writer, Agatha Christie mastered both the articulation and the contemplation of these central themes in the detective novel. Christie gravitated to the detective genre for the same reasons that her readers did. As a "middle-class lady of highly conventional opinions,"<sup>82</sup> she often discussed the comfort that comes from knowing that evil can and will be hunted down, while good always triumphs. Throughout her life, prayer and a belief in the constant presence of God guided her behavior and life choices. Faith in the power of order, control, and reason drove her to write detective novels. In the opening section, "Ashfield," of her autobiography, Christie lamented the loss of the Edenic innocence and contentment of her childhood nursery, a world that symbolized order, comfort, and boundless love. She listed her Calvinistic "Nursie" as one of her main religious influences. A self-

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<sup>80</sup> E. M. Wrong, "Crime and Detection," in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1946), 31.

<sup>81</sup> Alison Light's introduction to *Forever England* and her analysis of Agatha Christie's fiction illustrate this concept of conservatism and modernism working cohesively together in the interwar period.

<sup>82</sup> Julian Symons, "The Mistress of Complication," in *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, ed. H. R. F. Keating (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), 27.

professed observant child, she paid particular attention to Nursie's Protestant ethics and lessons on the steady presence of evil in the world and the importance of playing fair.

Christie possessed an acute understanding of how readers' fears had changed since the pre-1914 days of Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes. She recognized that she could not "portray the Edwardian world in full effect."<sup>83</sup> After World War I, she used her sleuths to address the new postwar fears and moral concerns, and to affirm an orderly and sensible approach to life and to problems. What remained constant throughout Christie's career was her utilization of the detective story as a modern version of the medieval morality play, which exposes the endless conflict between good and evil. The genre's popularity in the interwar period depended upon the successful inclusion of such themes, which reveal much about Britain's attitudes towards morality, justice, law, and order.

Following the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction, Christie challenged modernists' lack of faith in the Western world's intellectual and religious order, and therefore in its ability to find coherence and to prevent chaos. Christie's detective-heroes represent the ultimate, albeit often quirky, solution seekers and problem solvers. These sleuths gather information, piece it together, make rational explanations, allocate responsibilities and blame, isolate the culprit and exonerate the innocent, all the while remaining supremely confident in their abilities. In doing so, they confirm and uphold the stalwart structure of England's social and moral values, primarily bourgeois in nature. Christie's fiction consistently reflects on the ideas of an ordered universe, the nature of truth, fair play, the inequality between good and evil, the difference between right and wrong, and the necessity of justice in a civilized society. As Robert S. Paul contends, "All these ideas are ultimately grounded in theology, or in what serves

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<sup>83</sup> Robin W. Winks, Introduction, *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Woodstock, Vt: Countryman Press, 1988), 9.



as theology in a professedly secular society.”<sup>84</sup> As part of a tradition dating as far back as the ancient Greek tragedy, Christie’s crime stories participate in the classic dialectic of innocence and guilt.

And just as religious fiction writers did in decades past, Christie put forth and then answered the question, “what does it mean to be a good and heroic human being?” The ideal of the perfect Christian English gentleman and gentlewoman persists in virtually every one of Christie’s interwar detective stories. Her detective-heroes consistently rely on their unwavering conservative virtues, as well as their “resourcefulness, common sense, good breeding, morality and bravery.”<sup>85</sup> As the criminal’s action implicates an entire community, the detective-hero, whether male or female, professional or amateur, dutifully returns it to its usual normative state by absolving the innocent of guilt and aiding law- enforcement agents in the expulsion of any evil-doers. After all, crime involves both direct and indirect victims. Doctor Haydock in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) expresses his opinion of the curate Hawes, who he believes committed the murder:

That damned scoundrel! That poor devil Hawes. He’s got a mother and a sister, too. The stigma of being the mother and sister of a murderer would have rested on them for life, and think of their mental anguish. Of all the cowardly dastardly tricks!<sup>86</sup>

The defender of the innocent, the sleuth constantly engages in a Manichaeian struggle. As previous generations relied on countless folk and fairy tales, the generation of World War I took immense pleasure in the detective acting as “Fairy Godmother” to avenge the innocent at the story’s end.

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<sup>84</sup> Robert S. Paul, *Whatever Happened to Sherlock Holmes?: Detective Fiction, Popular Theology, and Society* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>85</sup> Michael Hayes, “Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste” in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain*, 89.

<sup>86</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1930; reprint Toronto: Bantam, 1983), 225.

Of all of Christie's detectives, Hercule Poirot features most frequently in her interwar novels as that beacon of moral truth and order and as the dispenser of justice. He shares the values of the ruling middle class and proves himself to be a relentless defender of innocence and justice. Poirot's success stems not from being a typical "human bloodhound," but from his confidence in the power of common sense, deductive reasoning, and intuition, all products of relying on his repeatedly mentioned "little grey cells." He summarizes his Christian duty and faith in reason and logic to solve cases in *Cards on the Table* (1936), "It is true that I have a thoroughly bourgeois attitude to murder."<sup>87</sup> Those bourgeois sensibilities along with Christian humanism guide his never ending respect for the English legal system, *le Bon Dieu*, and most emphatically, truth. When questioned by one character in *Murder in Three Acts* (1934) about his choice of profession, Poirot responds:

Like the *chien de chasse*, I follow the scent, and I get excited, and once on the scent I cannot be called off it. All that is true. But there is more...It is—how shall I put it?—a passion for getting at the *truth*. In all the world there is nothing so curious and so interesting and so beautiful as truth.<sup>88</sup>

In *The Patriotic Murders* (1940), the leading suspect's girlfriend appeals to Poirot: "Oh, M. Poirot, do help us. If I could only feel that you were on our side---," to which he responds, "I do not take sides. I am on the side only of the truth."<sup>89</sup> As for God, Poirot disapproves of anyone interfering with divine will:

Once a man is imbued with the idea that he knows who ought to be allowed to live and who ought not—then he is halfway to becoming the most dangerous killer there is, the arrogant criminal who kills not for profit but for an idea. He has usurped the functions of *le bon Dieu*.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1936; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1986), 4.

<sup>88</sup>Agatha Christie, *Murder in Three Acts* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1934; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1988), 124.

<sup>89</sup>Agatha Christie, *The Patriotic Murders* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1940; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1986), 170.

<sup>90</sup>Christie, *Cards on the Table*, 122-123.

The one and only time Poirot allows murderers to escape punishment occurs in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), where he expresses an acquiescence to a “higher moral law” and to a “Hebraic settling of acts.”<sup>91</sup> Poirot concludes that *every one* of his fellow passengers stabbed the victim, thus making it difficult to decipher who actually made *the* fatal stab. Only because of the absence of definitive proof, he declines reporting their concerted plan to murder the man who kidnapped the child of a family to whom each had a personal connection at some point. Despite any potential danger that might arise from his investigations, Poirot always proves determinedly tenacious in going inside “the tiger’s cage”<sup>92</sup> to catch a murderer.

While Christie’s elderly spinster, Miss Jane Marple, enjoyed the peak of her renown after World War II, she appeared frequently enough in the interwar years to make her quite the familiar amateur sleuth. Christie modeled her after her own grandmothers and their Victorian sensibilities. Miss Marple represents the curious village “know-it-all,” with very little escaping her knowledge or observation. She uses her hobbies of gardening and birdwatching to mask her sleuthing activities. Miss Marple also employs idle chit-chat and gossip to solve murders. She resolutely defends this tactic:

*How often is tittle tattle, as you call it, true!...if [people] really examined the facts they would find that it was true nine times out of ten! That’s really what makes people so annoyed about it.*<sup>93</sup>

According to the narrator of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Reverend Leonard Clement, “There is no detective in England equal to a spinster lady of uncertain age with plenty of time on her hands.”<sup>94</sup> Like Poirot, she symbolizes orderly and sensible approaches to life. Even more so

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<sup>91</sup> Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie’s Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1982), 98.

<sup>92</sup> Christie, *Cards on the Table*, 52.

<sup>93</sup> Agatha Christie, “The Christmas Tragedy,” in *The Tuesday Club Murders* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1933; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1986),

<sup>94</sup> Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, 25

than Poirot, Miss Marple expresses fundamentalist, almost Puritan, views on crime and its subsequent punishment. Her experiences and family members have taught her that the “depravity of human nature is unbelievable.”<sup>95</sup> Therefore, she unapologetically advocates severe retribution. In “A Christmas Tragedy” (1932), Miss Marple says of the murderous culprit: “Sanders was hanged...And a good job too. I have never regretted my part in bringing the man to justice. I’ve no patience with modern humanitarian scruples about capital punishment.”<sup>96</sup> Miss Marple’s faith in female intuition as a “sound way of arriving at the truth”<sup>97</sup> and moral conviction allow her to unfailingly solve the crime and thus restore order to her quaint village of St. Mary Mead.

Through her detectives, Christie delivers the message that those who follow the accepted legalities and values of a community and who refuse to tolerate injustice and social deviancy serve the interests of the public at large. In interwar Britain, the rate of crime actually decreased in comparison to the early Victorian period.<sup>98</sup> British detective writers turned to murderous plots, then, not as an aspect of social reality, but rather because it is the most serious example of an unacceptable cataclysm within one’s immediate social world.<sup>99</sup> Classic detective fiction and particularly Christie’s provided the reassurance that there can be no transgression without consequences and no individual criminal act without communal condemnation. Disturbances of any nature can and will be contained at all cost.

The law enforcement officials often featured within Christie’s fiction provide the legal sanction for such a maxim. In addition to reinforcing conservative morality, Christie

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<sup>95</sup> Agatha Christie, “The Strange Jest,” in *Miss Marple: The Complete Stories* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1985), 167.

<sup>96</sup> Agatha Christie, “The Christmas Tragedy,” 146.

<sup>97</sup> Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, 74.

<sup>98</sup> Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945*, 372-373. Stevenson also points out that between 1923 and 1938, the number of murder trials was lower than any other period since 1830.

<sup>99</sup> Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, 37.

demonstrates that Christian ethics and secular law work as partners, never at odds with one another. From a present day standpoint, it is particularly curious that detective novels only occasionally raise questions concerning the code of law itself. Christie usually omits trial and punishment, thus implying to readers that retribution will naturally follow and allow justice to prevail.<sup>100</sup> In only two of Christie's works, "The Witness for the Prosecution" (1924) and *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), does she incorporate courtroom scenes.

Christie created law-enforcement agents who conform to social mores, and such efforts reconciled the reader to the exercise of power. In doing so, she reinforced the tradition that makes acceptable the necessity of policing. This coincides with the historical record in which the interwar public regarded bobbies as jovial, respectful, and socially concerned. As in detective fiction, the police served as the "safeguard of the public."<sup>101</sup> Officers of the law are called upon to provide support and background in the crime's solution and to assume the role of the arm of justice in eventually bringing the case to court. The detective leaves the final work of apprehending the criminal and hauling him or her off to jail to the police officials.

Unquestionably, it is the amateur detectives who win the day, but the ceaseless appearances and continuous aid of the British police force demonstrates the unequivocal support for the established forces of law and order. As a result, the police became a part of the promotion of national self-worth.

Although many Golden Age writers incorporated policemen in their works, Christie created some of the most memorable, admirable characters, whose popularity earned them repeat performances. Her characterizations reflected contemporary attitudes and expectations on the role of the police. Perhaps more so than any other detective story writer, she humanized her

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<sup>100</sup> Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 123.

<sup>101</sup> Maida and Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, 146.

police characters and made them more appealing to the public. These men always work unarmed, and members of the community not only regard them as the protectors of public safety but also as familiar and respected neighbors. Time and again, Christie presented police officials as enlightened, tolerant, and humane. She never portrayed them as violent, secretive, deceptive, or militaristic. She typically used three types of officials: the village constable; the Detective-Inspector, who works with Scotland Yard; and the “Secret Agent, often a retired colonial officer or ex-policeman.” While she may have included them for comic relief, she never used them to mock the law.

In her interwar novels, Christie’s most familiar officials are Superintendent Battle, Secret Service agent Colonel Race, and Inspector Japp. As Scotland Yard’s “best representative,”<sup>102</sup> Battle cautiously, methodically gets the job done, refusing to pander to nonsense. A stoic man of few words, Battle is a respectful man who treats all suspects and witnesses without rudeness, crudeness, or insults. He describes his preferred methods:

A straightforward, honest zealous officer doing his duty in the most laborious manner—that’s my style. No frills. No fancy work. Just honest perspiration. Stolid and a bit stupid—that’s my ticket.<sup>103</sup>

Christie usually describes his physical features as square and wooden-faced, and he “also managed to convey the impression that the wood in question was the timber out of a battleship.”<sup>104</sup> According to consistent descriptions of him, Battle has “a face so singularly devoid of expression as to be quite remarkable”<sup>105</sup> and displays the blank look of a “Chinese porcelain mandarin.”<sup>106</sup> As such his expressions prove impossible to determine. This all works to his advantage since suspects rarely initially recognize just how quick and capable Battle truly is.

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<sup>102</sup> Christie, *Cards on the Table*, 7.

<sup>103</sup> Christie, *Cards on the Table*, 65.

<sup>104</sup> Christie, *Cards on the Table*, 7.

<sup>105</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1925; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1987), 81.

<sup>106</sup> Christie, *Cards on the Table*, 19.

As he explains, “‘Never display emotion.’ That was a rule given to me once, and I’ve found it very useful.”<sup>107</sup> He often lets the suspects do the talking, as he believes they will unfailingly reveal more information than they originally intended. And yet when he wants to, Battle’s solid, steady pose can help put those he interviews at ease. In *Easy to Kill* (1938), the protagonist Luke Fitzwilliam feels “comforted and soothed”<sup>108</sup> after choosing to discuss confidential information about a suspect with Battle. Christie then adds, “Many people had had that feeling after an interview with Superintendent Battle.”<sup>109</sup> Battle also features in *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), and *Cards on the Table* (1936).

When readers first meet the small, “ferret-faced,”<sup>110</sup> and over-eager Inspector Japp, he exerts far less poise and tact than Battle and Race. Poirot admires Japp’s determination and resourcefulness. In *Thirteen at Dinner* (1933), Poirot professes his admiration of Japp to his friend and assistant Captain Hastings after the inspector brought them new information on the murder case: “Japp brings us here the result of the physical energy you admire so much. He has various means at his disposal which I have not.”<sup>111</sup> In contrast to his own insistence upon order, Poirot also admits disappointment in Japp’s lack of method.<sup>112</sup> Fortunately as the years progress, Japp molds himself into a true leader. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), his title is that of Detective-Inspector. In *Dead Man’s Mirror*, Poirot explains that Japp’s reliability and success earned him the promotion to Chief Inspector, Scotland Yard’s representative on cases involving jewel robberies, stolen documents, and occasionally, murder. Even though he frequently expresses perplexity over Poirot’s tactics, Japp expresses the utmost admiration for Poirot’s

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<sup>107</sup> Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys*, 155.

<sup>108</sup> Agatha Christie, *Easy to Kill* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1938; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1987), 189.

<sup>109</sup> Christie, *Easy to Kill*, 189.

<sup>110</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1920; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1983), 93.

<sup>111</sup> Agatha Christie, *Thirteen at Dinner* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1933, reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1988),

<sup>112</sup> Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, 100.

intelligence and genius. Japp makes other notable appearances in *Peril at End House* (1932), *Death in the Air* (1935), and *The Patriotic Murders* (1940).

Handsome and debonair Secret Service agent Colonel Race achieves his fame in *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), *Cards on the Table* (1936), and *Death on the Nile* (1937). A typical soldierly empire man, his bronzed face and mannerisms make him the stereotypical big-game hunter. To no surprise, he once served in India and South Africa. Not one single character knows his *exact* title or details of his profession, which adds to his enigmatic, mysterious aura. Unfortunately, this also means the least amount of personal information is known about Race. Smugglers, spies, and saboteurs appear to be his specialty in fighting crime for Britain. For example, in *The Man in the Brown Suit* he claims to be on the hunt for diamond smugglers, and he uncovers the smuggling ring by the novel's end. In *Death on the Nile*, he confides in Poirot that he believes a dangerous rebel in Egypt is masquerading as an ordinary passenger on board the cruise:

There's no need to be mysterious to you. We've had a good deal of trouble out here—one way and another. It isn't the people who ostensibly lead the rioters that we're after. It's the men who very cleverly put the match to the gunpowder. There were three of them. One's dead. One's in prison. I want the third man—a man with five or six cold-blooded murders to his credit. He's one of the cleverest paid agitators that ever existed...<sup>113</sup>

In the end, Race corners his foe and brings him to justice. His gracious and dignified manner make him an invaluable assistant to Poirot during interrogations of witnesses and suspects.

The main function of these men is to provide the official sanction for Poirot and Marple to conduct their sleuthing. Although usually allotted supporting roles and clearly inferior in intelligence to the sleuth, Christie's police are depicted as heroes thanks to their successful efforts to combat delinquents and villains who defy the law. Her detectives rarely work without

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<sup>113</sup> Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1937; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1983).



police assistance; the policemen usually present themselves at the moment of resolution to make the necessary arrests. When working with the police, Poirot and Miss Marple always insist upon allowing the investigators to take the credit and honors for the crime's solution. As a result, Christie encourages readers to view the police as steadfastly hardworking and honest citizens who deserve supreme admiration and respect. Her novels both reflect and reinforce the wider faith in the police force. It is hardly surprising, then, that the English perceived the legal system as just and reliable.

Christie also examined the motivations of the criminals. Even when she attempted to explore the psychological dimension of crime, the answer to why a person, male or female, committed a crime stems from the murderer or criminal's lack of self-control over the negative, sinful aspects of human nature, particularly jealousy, greed, revenge, and hate. Essentially, the criminal always commits atrocities against others while sane and never because of a mental derangement. As Poirot explains in *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936) when asked if a madman can actually have a motive:

Of course he has, man. A deadly logic is one of the special characteristics of acute mania. A man may believe himself divinely appointed to kill clergymen—or doctors—or old women...and there's always some perfectly coherent reason behind it.<sup>114</sup>

Poirot elaborates on this notion towards the conclusion of the case:

It is no answer to say that the man was mentally unhinged. To say a man does mad things because he is mad is merely unintelligent and stupid. A madman is as logical and reasoned in his actions as a sane man—*given his peculiar biased point of view*. For example, if a man insists on going out and squatting about in nothing but a loin cloth his conduct seems eccentric in the extreme. But once you know *that the man himself is firmly convinced that he is Mahatma Gandhi*, then his conduct becomes perfectly reasonable and logical.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Agatha Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1936; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1983), 45.

<sup>115</sup> Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders*, 189.

Christie rarely strayed towards the complicated contemporary psychological developments. Instead, she delved into the basic but potentially dangerous sides and sins of human nature. The sleuth's job and unwavering success revolve around his or her ability to expose those who allow "the power of the unconscious in our desires"<sup>116</sup> to wreak havoc and destabilize a community. As the psychologist Dr. Gerard declares in *Appointment with Death* (1938), "There are such strange things buried down in the unconscious. A lust for power—a lust for cruelty—a savage desire to tear and rend... We shut the door on them and deny then conscious life, but sometimes they are too strong."<sup>117</sup> Christie gave her own assessment of criminals in her autobiography, "They have chosen Evil, I think, much as Milton's Satan did."<sup>118</sup> Her characters often discuss the concept of what to do with such individuals in many novels, most extensively in *The A.B.C. Murders*. The Assistant Commissioner condemns the likely "punishment" the murderer will receive once he or she is caught:

I suppose a thoroughly up-to-date doctor would suggest putting a man like A.B.C. in a nursing home, telling him what a fine fellow he was for forty-five days on end and then letting him out as a responsible member of society.<sup>119</sup>

While she believed that social deviants and misfits were born with something inherently wrong with them, Christie refused to allow pity to overshadow the very real danger that they posed to society.<sup>120</sup> To Christie the causes of crime rest with individuals, not society. Crime is the result of a moral choice, not of an institutional malfunction.<sup>121</sup> Against a background of order and stable social relations, crime is the exception proving the rule. Criminal acts result from an

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<sup>116</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 103.

<sup>117</sup> Agatha Christie, *Appointment with Death* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1938; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1982), 34.

<sup>118</sup> Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1977), 425.

<sup>119</sup> Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders*, 167.

<sup>120</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 425.

<sup>121</sup> This is in direct contrast to the American hard-boiled detective novel that also appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, illustrated most vividly in the novels by Raymond Chandler.

individual's inability to prevent human passion from taking over his or her decision-making capabilities. This weakness will unfailingly be punished by other members of society.

One final significant aspect of the interwar detective novel deals with its reification of death. By the interwar period, English culture was obsessed with the health of the body, as a tool for work and earning. Welfare, pensions, insurance, and the professionalization of medicine ended the feeling of powerlessness and insecurity about disasters involving a person's property, employment, and livelihood. In other words, with increased life *assurance* in the interwar period, there emerged changing attitudes towards death and dying, which then stimulated the need for new ways to confront one's earthly mortality. Improved national health and the conquering of many commonplace diseases<sup>122</sup> meant that the British no longer viewed death as an inevitable conclusion in life, but rather as catastrophic event.

What Christie's fiction reinforces is one's absolute right to live. Murder is the ultimate crime. No matter how unpleasant and hated a person may be, he or she has the right to live life to the last natural moment. Poirot tirelessly defends this notion and takes no account of the likeability or the social standing of the culprits. In *Appointment with Death* (1938), the monstrous, domineering, and emotionally abusive Mrs. Boynton is murdered by lethal injection. Although many characters argue that she probably deserved to die because of her oppressive behavior towards her children, Poirot vehemently disagrees and immediately instigates an investigation. Psychiatrist Dr. Gerard concurs:

It is my instinct to preserve life—not to hasten death. Therefore, though my conscious mind may repeat that this woman's death was a good thing, my unconscious mind rebels against it! *It is not well, gentleman, that a human being should die before his or her time has come.*<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> In Stevenson's *British Society 1914-1945, Social Conditions in Britain Between the Wars*, and *The Slump: Society and Politics during the Depression*, he discusses the progressive developments of England's national health, nutrition, medicine, insurance, and social welfare over the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>123</sup> Christie, *Appointment with Death*, 96.

Poirot later seconds this belief when Mrs. Boynton's daughter-in-law, Nadine, pleads with him to leave her mother-in-law's death alone:

"The moral character of the victim has nothing to do with it! A human being who has exercised the right of private judgment and taken the life of another human being is not safe to exist amongst the community. I tell you that! I, Hercule Poirot!

"How hard you are!"

"Madame, in some ways I am adamant. I will not condone murder! That is the final word of Hercule Poirot."<sup>124</sup>

In *The Patriotic Murders* (1940), Christie's main theme centers on the idea of whether or not there can ever be justification for murder. Readers discover that the stalwartly conservative Alistair Blunt, the fictional director of England's banking system, engaged in murder so as to prevent the exposure of his secret past. Out of professed concern for England's future, Blunt desperately pleads to Poirot:

"It's in your hands—Poirot. It's up to you. But I tell you this—and it's not just self-preservation—I'm needed in this world. And do you know why? Because I'm an honest man. And because I've got common sense—and no particular axe of my own to grind."

Poirot nodded. Strangely enough, he believed all that.

He said:

"Yes, that is one side. You are the right man in the right place. You have sanity, judgment and balance. But there is the other side. Three human beings who are dead."<sup>125</sup>

Despite its preoccupation with death and violence, detective fiction's puzzle hinges on this "fundamental assumption that people matter."<sup>126</sup> Christie assured readers that the dutiful English state would devote all possible police resources to ensure and protect this right.

Christie's detective stories usually feature a corpse; regular reading of the genre, however, helps to distance death's horrors and "to blunt temporarily the fear of death."<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Christie, *Appointment with Death*, 130.

<sup>125</sup> Christie, *The Patriotic Murders*, 206-7.

<sup>126</sup> Paul, *Whatever Happened to Sherlock Holmes?*, 24.

Christie achieves this “disinfection” or “sanitizing” partly by turning the death into a kind of ritualized puzzle and partly by showing readers that however difficult and dangerous life can be, at least they are not the corpse on the library’s floor. The use of now infamous euphemisms such as “pool of blood,” “a neat bullet-hole,” or “a dark stain” aid the reification process. As Joseph Wood Krutch comments, because Christie and other Golden Age authors “usually only employ dread as a very minor element...or, by avoiding it completely,” they consistently produce some “of the most detached and soothing of narratives.”<sup>128</sup> In the aftermath following an unprecedented world war and emerging political extremism, when extraordinary violence, cruelty or even death wrought by science and technology seemed more imminent than ever, this proved immeasurably comforting and reassuring.

Christie appealed to a society that was concerned not so much with holding onto the past, but rather with creating moral and material comfort in the present. She neither idealized the Victorian and Edwardian past nor proposed utopian visions for England’s future. She knew what mass consumers not only wanted but desperately needed to read. The ultimate comfort found within Christie’s detective fiction arose not from the proposition that evil deeds and people do not exist but from a confident affirmation that the good will always allow justice to triumph over immorality. The locale matters not; the implication is that the same disturbances and disruptions, righteousness and benevolence occur again and again, in different locations, among different people. As Miss Marple opines in *The Tuesday Club Murders* (1933): “human nature is much the same everywhere...”<sup>129</sup> Because of this consistency, pinpointing the good and expelling the bad in a community can be easily managed as long as one exercises a faith in reasonable

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<sup>127</sup> Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 173.

<sup>128</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, “Only a Detective Story,” in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 43.

<sup>129</sup> Agatha Christie, “The Thumb Mark of St. Peter,” in *The Tuesday Club Murders*, 65.

deduction and observation. In many ways, Christie reduced human problems and ethical queries to solvable mysteries. Her fiction strengthened the belief that traditional British social, political, and moral systems would survive intact in a changing world.

### Chapter 3

#### “Mr. Air Kule Prott”: Class Relations in Interwar England

Interwar histories nearly always allow ample space for detailed analyses of the status of the English class system as well as relations among the classes. According to René Cutforth: “It is impossible to set the English scene at any period without becoming involved in the subject of class...”<sup>130</sup> The standard interwar histories often weave a tale of a highly defensive middle class determined to defend its privileges against the dual threats of the organized working class and socialism. Yet, class antagonisms never truly threatened England’s social stability. The emphasis placed on such events as the General Strike of 1926, the Invergordon Mutiny of 1935, and the unemployment marches of the 1930s, created a skewed picture of imminent class war. During the 1920s and 30s, socioeconomic divisions and “careful class discriminations”<sup>131</sup> remained important but were not tied to “an aggressive class consciousness.”<sup>132</sup> The habits, and to some extent the outlooks within each class may have altered but the overall class structure did not.

The popular literature of the period displays a social world in which everyone knew their “proper stations.”<sup>133</sup> This social world was not a product of middle-class authors’ wishful thinking. Revised interpretations of interwar statistics and trends support the social accuracy of these fictional presentations of class relations.<sup>134</sup> Popular literature reveals that class barriers and loyalties continued as noticeably and vigorously as ever before, with few opting for the radical

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<sup>130</sup> René Cutforth, *Later Than We Thought: A New Portrait of the Thirties* (Newton Abbot, England: David & Charles, 1976), 25.

<sup>131</sup> Cutforth, *Later Than We Thought*, 28.

<sup>132</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s: The Deceptive Decade* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 86.

<sup>133</sup> Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (London: Collins, 1980), 34.

<sup>134</sup> Some of the best examples of these revised interpretations on class relations are found in David Cannadine’s *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, Sean Glynn and John Oxborrow’s *Interwar Britain: A Social and Economic History*, John H. Goldthorpe’s *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*, John Stevenson and Chris Cook’s *The Slump: Society and Politics during the Depression*, John Stevenson’s *British Society 1914-1945* and *Social Conditions in Britain Between the Wars*, and Andrew Thorpe’s *Britain in the 1930s: The Deceptive Decade*.

route in advocating a leveling of society. The qualities and characteristics of one's profession still overshadowed income and wealth as the determinant of social prestige.<sup>135</sup> Class primarily functions as an economic category, but one's class membership determines all the relationships which people experience within that class and among other classes. As such, class also represents a cultural category, describing shared assumptions and values. Agatha Christie in particular became famous for her use of class *milieu*. Her principal players were middle-class, the class she naturally knew best, but knowledge of the inner mechanisms of another class is not necessarily integral to the realistic presentation of class *relations*. According to Robert Barnard, Christie's "working-class readership was probably more numerous than that of any other popular writer."<sup>136</sup> Christie's popularity indicates that her readership found little to no fault with her depictions, simply because she accurately reenacted the world of class relationships that they knew so well. Based on her social constructs, the obvious conclusion drawn is that while the social fabric of England proved taut at times, the traditional class system and cultural divisions remained firmly intact.

The "old order of society" hardly appeared "seriously crippled,"<sup>137</sup> as Cutforth alleges, but changes undoubtedly occurred in the interwar years. C. L. Mowat observed that "stability was never absent and change was never triumphant."<sup>138</sup> Some significant alterations within the socioeconomic system occurred and the connotations attached to class evolved during this period. By 1951 peerages ceased to be based heavily on land holdings, and the upper class on the whole lost its predominance in relation to the ownership of land, wealth, and political power. Cabinet membership now usually went to middle-class men, with the aristocracy and the

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<sup>135</sup> W. D. Rubinstein, *Wealth and Inequality in Britain* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 38-39; Margot Branson and Noreen Heinemann, *Britain in the 1930's* (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1971), 155.

<sup>136</sup> Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, 11.

<sup>137</sup> Cutforth, *Later Than We Thought*, 34.

<sup>138</sup> Charles Loch Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars, 1918-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 202.



working class each filling one-fourth of positions.<sup>139</sup> The largest group elevated to peerages were MP's from the House of Commons as well as middle-class professionals. All of the interwar Conservative Prime Ministers came from middle-class, professional or business, backgrounds. In addition to its political hegemony, the middle class took over the "administration of English example and precept," especially in terms of gentility, manners, fashion, hobbies, and speech.<sup>140</sup> An "England" based on "tradition, resilience, self-restraint"<sup>141</sup> served as a shared idea that helps account for the degree of middle-class social hegemony as well as the endurance of traditional class structures in the interwar years.

Many historians focus on the lingering economic inequalities and on the slowness of any redistribution of wealth as causes for growing class antagonism. Certainly, such issues often entered the political debate. One could argue that the development of a national two-party system resulted from the strengthening of class solidarity.<sup>142</sup> Utilizing a "Them vs. Us" campaign in politics and social movements, however, generally proved counter-productive. While most voters continued to loyally, willingly identify with their own class, politicians and political parties alike abruptly discovered that utilizing class issues to win elections spelled defeat. The dominance of the coalition National Government, with Conservatives at the helm, reflects the nation's willingness to favor compromise over total change. The Labour Party favored the language of class to sway voters. Such tactics quickly earned it the label of a "selfish" party worried only about proletariat interests.<sup>143</sup> Labour leaders realized that as a platform, class warfare was simply not dependable. To compete, a party had to present itself as

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<sup>139</sup> John Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1984), 349.

<sup>140</sup> Cutforth, *Later Than We Thought*, 37.

<sup>141</sup> Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith, *Cinema, Literature and Society: Elite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 38.

<sup>142</sup> Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945*, 346.

<sup>143</sup> David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 138.

the party of common sense with both the individual and the nation's interests, not just one's supporters, at the forefront of its agenda.<sup>144</sup> Not surprisingly, the Conservatives' emphasis on "patriotism and order"<sup>145</sup> helped them assemble a formidable coalition of social groups, embodied by the success of the National Government.

On the whole, the English largely agreed with prime minister Stanley Baldwin, in favoring a "Safety First" attitude towards not only politics but society as well. Desires for continuity and stability far outweighed any pleas for change and innovation. Enthusiastic support for the monarchy indicates a nationally shared acceptance, whether reluctant or not, that hierarchies would endure. A love and respect of fairness in sport also encouraged an adherence to "playing by the rules" and not disrupting the existing system.<sup>146</sup> In the interwar era, the English resigned themselves to live in world where both democracy and hierarchy prevailed side by side. Interwar class disputes can be described as "only patchy and sporadic."<sup>147</sup> Even with the Slump, mass unemployment never devastated the social structure to the extent it did in, say, France or Germany.

Most people rejected calls for radical social change, primarily because they saw little reason for it. More people than ever had more money to spend or save. John Stevenson notes that by 1938 twice as many people left behind some property than those in 1900-01.<sup>148</sup> C. L. Mowat argues that an increase of real income per head of the population rose about 24 percent and that "even the unemployed man with a family was better off than the unskilled worker full of work in 1913."<sup>149</sup> A variety of factors guided this rise in living standards. Advanced forms of

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<sup>144</sup> William McElwee, *Britain's Locust Years 1918-1940* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1962), 192.

<sup>145</sup> Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, 138-39.

<sup>146</sup> Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 21-23.

<sup>147</sup> Miles and Smith, *Cinema, Literature and Society*, 25.

<sup>148</sup> Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945*, 340.

<sup>149</sup> Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*, 492.

mass production and the Slump led to steadily falling prices, which meant that people's money went further than ever. The government influenced new housing standards and the construction of over four million new homes in the interwar years. This was followed by more affordable mortgages, which even lower-middle-class or upper-working-class families could work towards. The expansion of social services and nutrition and diet studies directly improved national health. Cheaper and more efficient forms of transportation coincided with the rise in mass leisure, shorter workdays, and the proliferation of holidays. Across the classes, demands and desires slowly but surely came to be fulfilled. As George Orwell so famously commented in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, "It is quite likely that fish and chips, art-silk stockings, tinned salmon, cut-price chocolate, the movies, the radio, strong tea and the football pools have between them averted revolution."<sup>150</sup> Although falling short of total equality, the widening opportunities in leisure and mass production partly explain the minority status of revolutionary proclivities.

Class awareness rather than class hostility dominated interwar social relations. As Cutforth has noted, in interwar England, "The universal game was class assessment and judgment." He continues, "to score well at this game was the chief reason for existence."<sup>151</sup> Light also acknowledges that "There was a preoccupation, even obsession, with the need to place people as individuals or groups...which is so much the bedrock of English social life."<sup>152</sup> This "obsession" featured prominently in Christie's fiction. Detailed descriptions of locales served to establish the social environment. The overgrowth of weeds in the garden or paint chipping off of shutters, for example, indicated a family's declining fortunes. Whether a man or woman traveled in a first- or third-class carriage was an often-included key detail. Such details allowed the

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<sup>150</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Harmondsworth, 1962), 80.

<sup>151</sup> Cutforth, *Later Than We Thought*, 34.

<sup>152</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 87.

reader to make conclusions about a person's social class, integrity, tastes, and social consciousness. Her characters, too, make clear distinctions in rank, especially within the household.

The daily lives of professional and middle-class people, even in the humbler sectors like teaching, were much more sharply cut off from those of workers than they are today. The new housing estates increased class separation. Graves and Hodge point out that "Until the mid-Victorian days there had been a mixed development of new houses, but now there was 'zoning'", which "segregate[ed] families according to their incomes."<sup>153</sup> Education as a way to jump over rigid class barriers had yet to reach greater numbers of working class boys and girls. Working-class children attended day school until age fourteen while privileged children enjoyed the advantage of the far superior day schools until age eighteen. Christie's fiction mirrored the highly segregated society of interwar England. She allowed little fraternization across ranks. Films and novels of the interwar years provide only glimpses of working-class tastes and lifestyles. In this sense then, Christie accurately reinforces the common features of class relations, not necessarily class snobbery, of her day. And just like Orwell's *Wigan Pier*, her fiction "exposes the depth of the class gulf,"<sup>154</sup> which proved impossible to bridge until well after the Second World War.

Even though Christie lived a highly unconventional adult life, especially during her marriage to and travels with the archeologist Max Mallowan, her name came to embody traditional Englishness. Her background aptly explains this connection. As Agatha Miller, she spent a free and easy childhood in Torquay. Her American father, Frederick Miller, lived a life of leisure, thanks to the revenues and investments from his own father's business. He took his

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<sup>153</sup> Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 164.

<sup>154</sup> Miles and Smith, *Cinema, Literature and Society*, 35.

family abroad whenever he could. After his American company's fortune declined, the family engaged in reluctant retrenchment. This unexpected stress and anxiety eventually led to Frederick's death. Even though her widowed mother Clara could not afford London, Christie was treated to an elaborate "coming out" season in Cairo, Egypt. Christie's parents taught her that one was *born* a lady, and she believed that, in many ways, birth trumped intelligence and wealth. Her brother Monty represented the typical irresponsible middle-class son, who landed a military post in the Empire and then promptly wasted his inheritance. Despite such financial difficulties, Christie still came from an upper-middle class lifestyle and enjoyed the respect and confidence tied to membership in that class. Her values mirrored those of her class: trust in reason, desire for stability, belief in civilized conduct, faith in property, and a strong sense of morality. Her novels of manners serve as a record of both the attitudes of the middle class and the changes with which it had to cope from the 1920s to the 1970s. Christie's personal history and fiction both work to uphold the idea that no matter how much the modern world intrudes, the middle class survives, adapts, and prevails.

Who exactly are Christie's stock "middle of the road" prototypes? She drew them from the complex class structure of interwar England. Besides her principal detectives, they are middle-middle to upper-middle class: army men, clergymen, colonial men, country gentry, successful doctors or lawyers, secretaries, policemen, and businessmen. And, of course, there are the wives, widows, sisters, and daughters who depend upon them—which is what she thought they ought to do, as indicated throughout her autobiography.<sup>155</sup> Christie's middle class was "conservative, isolationist, inward-looking, indulging in 'the long weekend' before the

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<sup>155</sup> Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (New York: Collins, 1977), 4-5, 51, 121-122, 158-159, 161, 250, 274, 343-342, 418.

war.”<sup>156</sup> Her characters act as they do because of the social class to which they belong. It is hardly surprising that Christie was unable to escape the views of the middle class and its prejudices. Yet, she refused to play to the snobbery of her readers by encouraging vicious sneering at their “inferiors.”

Christie at times displayed disdain for her own class, and there is often satire, albeit mild, of the pretensions attached to their stereotypical behavior. A fitting example comes from *Thirteen at Dinner* (1933) as Hercule Poirot interviews the murdered Lord Edgware’s secretary Miss Carroll:

“Enemies! People in these days don’t have *enemies*. Not English people!”  
“Yet Lord Edgware was murdered.”  
“That was his wife,” said Miss Carroll.  
“A wife is not an enemy—no?”  
“I’m sure it was a most extraordinary thing to happen. I’ve never heard of such a thing happening—I mean to anyone in our class of life.”  
It was clearly Miss Carroll’s idea that murders were only committed by drunken members of the lower classes.<sup>157</sup>

Christie also pokes fun at the bourgeois, and usually sensational, press with a plethora of imagined newspaper and magazine titles such as the *Daily Blare*, *Daily Flicker*, *Evening Shout*, *Weekly Howl*, and *Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*.

Of all of Christie’s recurring characters, Hercule Poirot consistently represents the perfect embodiment of the English middle-class individual (even though he was born in Belgium). Christie presents Poirot as quintessentially and unapologetically bourgeois in action, belief, and lifestyle. In fact, when others label him as “bourgeois,” he finds no fault with their assessment: “The epithet *bourgeois* was, he admitted, well applied to him. His outlook on life was essentially *bourgeois*, and always had been...”<sup>158</sup> In the 1930s he resides at 203 Whitehaven

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<sup>156</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England*, 9.

<sup>157</sup> Agatha Christie, *Thirteen at Dinner* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1933; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1988), 56.

<sup>158</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Patriotic Murders* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1940; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1940), 137.

Mansions, a chic, modern, crescent-shaped building, with all of the latest modern appliances. Poirot respects learning but lacks interest in the academy or high scholastic matters (this must have been a welcome relief to Christie's audience). Officially, Poirot is a retired professional man, with a past career in the Belgian police force. He possesses a fondness for the finer things in life, most obviously in the forms of food, drink, and sedentary leisure (he professes a need for building card houses and working on jigsaw puzzles to clear his mind). He unabashedly celebrates the pleasures of domestic life. His valet George and his secretary Miss Lemon provide assistance with his attire and his comfort. They are never treated as equals, but he respects them as integral parts "of the machinery of efficient living."<sup>159</sup> Poirot also expresses a love of travel and considers himself the consummate tourist. His cases bring him the financial means, which must be an ample amount, to enjoy this bourgeois life. Poirot never discusses monetary matters, however, and he adamantly expresses that a high regard for justice prompt him to take a case, not the allure of greater wealth. He is a conservative in his politics and values. As his detective partner and devoted friend Captain Hastings observes in *Thirteen at Dinner*, "There is nothing of the Socialist about Poirot."<sup>160</sup>

In contrast to her treatment of Poirot's life, Christie focused on Miss Marple's personality and reputation in her village of St. Mary Mead rather than on her life's history. Christie offered significantly more substantial biographical details from the 1940s until the early 1970s, Miss Marple's most prolific period. The shrewd spinster originates from an even more distinguished background than Poirot. As a child, she had a German governess, was taught proper posture, and studied at a *pensionnat* in Florence, planned to nurse lepers, and declined marriage (her one serious suitor bored her). Miss Marple's two uncles were canons of Ely and Chichester

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<sup>159</sup> Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1982), 89.

<sup>160</sup> Christie, *Thirteen at Dinner*, 130.

Cathedrals, a great-uncle served as an admiral, and a distant cousin, Lady Ethel Merridew, enjoyed noble status. Although she inherited a small fixed income, she prides herself on being careful with her finances. These facts put together establish her thoroughly upper-middle-class background.

Christie carefully constructed her upper- and middle-class characters, and she extended those efforts to her depictions of the working class. Valentine Cunningham notes that a trend emerged in the interwar years, particularly in the 1930s, to represent accurately the proletariat's world and viewpoint.<sup>161</sup> The Slump awakened the upper and middle classes to the undeserved plight of the poor on a large scale for the first time. The publication of nonfiction novels about the plight of depressed towns, the Mass Observation movement, and the proliferation of left-wing publications influenced authors writing their fiction in a more factual, documentary fashion. Despite this trend, however, Christie, thought it best to simply write about what she knew firsthand. She avoided writing on what she had never experienced. As a result, readers never really know "the Ednas, Annies, Agneses, and Beatrices, or the Lorrimers, Parsons, Snells and Lanscombes. [The reader] knows only their employers' impressions, and those are determined largely by the position, not the person."<sup>162</sup> She once remarked, "I could never manage miners talking in pubs, because I don't know what miners talk about in pubs."<sup>163</sup> Therefore, she focused more on these members of the working class directly related to her own social world: domestic servants.

Standard histories, however, emphasize that the interwar years saw the waning of domestic servitude. As opportunities for employment in the new electric and electronic factories

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<sup>161</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 316-339.

<sup>162</sup> Earl F. Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder: The Detective Fiction of Agatha Christie* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1980), 142-143.

<sup>163</sup> Quoted in Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 30.



arose, many female domestic servants proved ready and willing to abandon their posts. Angry and indignant letters appeared in the middle-class press, deploring the difficulties of acquiring servants.<sup>164</sup> Domestic servants increasingly demanded real pay (four or five shillings), a day off in the week and more tolerable rooms to live in. In addition, a boom in new labor saving devices raised the possibility of not needing servants at all.

Yet, for the middle class, the real problem lay not in the availability of domestic servants. There actually was an almost endless supply of domestic servants. The Slump guaranteed that there were plenty of men and women from industrial areas in need of employment. Nearly one-fourth of all employed women worked in private domestic service.<sup>165</sup> On average one family in eight hired a resident servant.<sup>166</sup> At the typical low rate of a sixpence or eightpence an hour,<sup>167</sup> the presence of servants comprised an affordable daily feature of the homes of not only the upper class but also the upper- to middle-middle class.”<sup>168</sup> The average upper-middle-class couple rarely contemplated marriage until financially secure enough to acquire a cook, housemaid, parlormaid and future nanny.<sup>169</sup> Christie filled the pages of her autobiography with intricate descriptions of her family’s servants and her interaction with them as a child. This feature of her late Victorian and Edwardian England adolescence persevered through the interwar years. In her fiction, butlers, cooks, gardeners, nannies, valets, chauffeurs, and assorted maids—lady’s, parlor, upstairs, downstairs, and kitchen—all testify to a world where domestic labor was not a luxury but an affordable, common feature of many households.

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<sup>164</sup> Cutforth, *Later Than We Thought*, 22.

<sup>165</sup> Branson and Heinemann, *Britain in the 1930’s*, 158.

<sup>166</sup> Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971), 138.

<sup>167</sup> Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 138. Watson comments that employers found a shilling an hour “generous.”

<sup>168</sup> Branson and Heinemann, *Britain in the 1930’s*, 156.

<sup>169</sup> Branson and Heinemann, *Britain in the 1930’s*, 157.

What employers' complaints masked was their frustration with the *temperament* of their workers. Servants were plentiful; properly subservient servants were not. Until after World War II, Christie nearly always hired servants within her home, including maids, nannies, and secretaries. She certainly recognized the differences between the old and new schools of servants. From the middle-class perspective, domestic help acted too independently, dressed inappropriately for men and women of their station, and produced increasingly incompetent work. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Hastings assists Poirot in questioning the staff over the murder of their employer, Emily Inglethorp. He nostalgically reflects on the behavior of the maid Dorcas:

Dorcas was standing in the boudoir, her hands folded in front of her, and her grey hair rose in stiff waves under her white cap. She was the very model and picture of a good old-fashioned servant.<sup>170</sup>

Hastings continues his admiring description later in the story:

Dear old Dorcas! As she stood there, with her honest face upturned to mine, I thought what a fine specimen she was of the old-fashioned servant that is so fast dying out.<sup>171</sup>

Perhaps the most poignant example of the exasperation employers felt towards apparent changes in the quality and attitudes of servants comes from *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928).

Katherine Grey, the heroine of the story, questions her neighbor Miss Amelia Viner on why she calls her maid "Ellen" when in fact the young woman's name is "Helen." Miss Viner responds,

I can sound my h's, dear, as well as anyone; but Helen is *not* a suitable name for a servant. I don't know what mothers in the lower classes are coming to nowadays.<sup>172</sup>

Miss Viner's reenactment of a recent conversation with Helen on the matter of fashion adds

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<sup>170</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1920; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1983), 43.

<sup>171</sup> Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, 116.

<sup>172</sup> Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1928; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1986), 199.

further reinforcement,

“Ellen”, I said, “you look at Miss Grey. She has been hobnobbing with some of the greatest in the land, and does she go about as you do with skirts up to her knees and silk stockings that ladder when you look at them, and the most ridiculous shoes that ever I set eyes on?”<sup>173</sup>

Another such irate employer appears in *Easy to Kill* (1938). Miss Honoria Waynflete describes her recently deceased maid, Amy Gibbs, to the amateur detective Luke Fitzwilliam:

Well, of course, she wasn't at all a good servant. But nowadays, really, one is thankful to get anybody. She was very slipshod over her work and always wanting to go out. Well, of course, she was young and girls are like that nowadays. They don't seem to realize that their time is their employer's.<sup>174</sup>

In *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), even the kindly vicar Len Clement and his gregarious wife Griselda express irritation over their maid Mary's inadequacies:

Mary gave a loud knock on the dining-room door and entered hard upon it. “What is it?” said Griselda. “And Mary, you remember not to knock on doors. I've told you about it before.”<sup>175</sup>

Further through the novel, a similar situation arises:

“Is that all?” said Mary. “Because what I mean to say is, I've got the joint in the oven and pudding boiling over as likely as not.”  
“That's all right. You can go.”  
She left the room, and I turned to Griselda.  
“Is it quite out of the question to induce Mary to say ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’?”  
“I am perfectly aware of that,” I said. “But raw things do not necessarily remain raw forever. I feel a tinge of cooking might be induced in Mary.”<sup>176</sup>

Christie's upper- and middle-class characters consistently make a variety of such general observations and assessments about the nature and characteristics of members of the working class. The upper and middle classes at times treat workers with thinly veiled distrust, especially the household staff. Her characters rarely display warm sentiment or understanding towards

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<sup>173</sup> Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, 195.

<sup>174</sup> Agatha Christie, *Easy to Kill* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1938; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1987), 36.

<sup>175</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (York: Dodd Mead, 1938; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1987), 46.

<sup>176</sup> Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, 69.

their occupational “inferiors.” They treat workers, especially female domestics, as naïve and childish. In *Thirteen at Dinner* Poirot investigates the suspicious overdose of a famous actress, Carlotta Adams. He goes to her residence to question her maid, Alice Bennett. Once Poirot overawes her with his suave manners, she succumbs obediently to his interrogation:

Alice Bennett would have permitted anything. Like most canny and suspicious women, once she had overcome her distrust she was child’s play to manipulate. She would have assented to anything Poirot suggested.<sup>177</sup>

Christie only portrays working-class women in this manner; her upper- and middle-class women *never* appear “canny and suspicious.” Her own family treated servants with courtesy and as respected craftsmen of a trade, which she recognized was the exception to the rule.<sup>178</sup> Christie thus chose to portray the conventional ways that others treated their servants. As a result, her descriptions show the negative features behind a rigid class system.

Just like most upper- and middle-class men and women of the interwar years, Christie’s characters never come to understand that a vicious cycle of poor living conditions led to unfair socioeconomic disparities. When characters express even a hint of sympathy for the poor, it is accompanied by neither indignation nor activism on behalf of their plight. In *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936), Poirot and Hastings examine the lodgings of Alice Asher, one of the story’s murdered victims:

From the parlour a stair led to two upstairs rooms. One was empty and unfurnished, the other had evidently been the dead woman’s bedroom. After being searched by the police it had been left as it was. A couple of old worn blankets on the bed—a little sock of well-darned underwear in a drawer—cooking recipes in another—a paperbacked novel entitled *The Green Oasis*—a pair of new stockings—pathetic in their cheap shininess—a couple of china ornaments—a Dresden shepherd much broken, and a blue and yellow spotted dog—a black raincoat and a woolly jumper hanging on pegs—such were the worldly possessions of the late Alice Asher. If there had been any personal papers, the police had taken them.

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<sup>177</sup> Christie, *Thirteen at Dinner*, 69.

<sup>178</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 4, 15-19.

“*Pauvre femme*,” murmured Poirot. “Come, Hastings, there is nothing for us here.”<sup>179</sup>

The implication is that a lack of domestic aesthetics and belongings, not really the reason behind their absence, saddens Poirot. The behavior of those rare social welfare activist characters actually reveals why there remains such a gulf between the “have’s” and the “have not’s.” The resident pushy philanthropist of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Miss Hartnell, simply cannot understand why the poor show such ingratitude towards her charitable efforts:

The lower classes don’t know who are their best friends. . . I always say a word in season when I’m visiting. Not that I’m ever thanked for it.<sup>180</sup>

What the Miss Hartnells apparently fail to realize is the social stigma still attached in the interwar years to receiving social services of any kind.<sup>181</sup>

Oftentimes, upper and middle class characters muse on the famous contempt and distrust members of the working class harbor towards the police. In *Death in the Air* (1935), Poirot works alongside the “human foxhound” of the Sûreté, Monsieur Fournier. Sensing Fournier’s intense frustration after interviewing the murdered Madame Giselle’s maid, Èlise Grandier, Poirot reminds him:

It is natural—very natural. The police—it is always a word frightening to that class. It embroils them in they know not what. It is the same everywhere, in every country.<sup>182</sup>

This sentiment finds expression again in *Cards on the Table* (1936), as one of the police officials, the handsome Sergeant O’Conner (aptly nicknamed “The Maidservant’s Prayer”), interviews incognito the murdered victim’s young parlormaid, Elsie Batt. He remarks on why this was a brilliant plan:

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<sup>179</sup> Agatha Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1936; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1983), 28.

<sup>180</sup> Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, 183.

<sup>181</sup> Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*, 495.

<sup>182</sup> Christie, *Death in the Air*, 92.

...how fortunate it was that Elsie was being approached unofficially. On interrogation by Sergeant O'Connor of the Police, she would have virtuously protested that she had not overheard anything at all.<sup>183</sup>

As Earl F. Bargainnier has noted, “[Elsie] must know that to the police and her betters she is considered imbecilic, uncooperative, inefficient, stubborn, possibly dishonest, probably promiscuous, and loquacious only when it suits her.”<sup>184</sup> Put in that light, her reservations seem more than adequately justified.

Alison Light argues that Christie never demonized or depicted the working class as “something that crawled out of the gutter.”<sup>185</sup> On a number of occasions, leading characters show respect for and good humored dependence on valued servants: Miss Marple’s Florence, Tommy and Tuppence’s Albert, and Poirot’s George (a notably greater snob than his master). In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, Poirot discusses the status of one of his favorite pieces of clothing with George (Poirot addresses him as “Georges”):

“There is a grease spot on the waistcoat,” objected Poirot. ‘A *morceau* of *filet sole à la Jeannette* alighted there when I was lunching at the Ritz last Tuesday.”

“There is no spot there now, sir,” said George reproachfully. “I have removed it.”

“*Très bien!*” said Poirot. “I am pleased with you, Georges.”<sup>186</sup>

Poirot respects George as the master of his craft, and always treats him with affection, although never as a social equal. Poirot often depends on George’s opinions and advice about a case:

George entered the room with his usual noiseless tread. He set down on a little table a steaming pot of chocolate and some sugar biscuits.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

“I am in a great perplexity of mind, Georges.”

“Indeed sir? I am sorry to hear it.”

Hercule Poirot poured himself out some chocolate and stirred it thoughtfully.

George stood deferentially waiting, recognizing the signs. There were moments when Hercule Poirot discussed his cases with his valet. He always said that he found George’s comments singularly helpful.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1936; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1986), 105.

<sup>184</sup> Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 142.

<sup>185</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 81.

<sup>186</sup> Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, 105.

No matter how genially treated, manual laborers rarely play a significant role in the action. Proletariat characters discover corpses, scream, faint, deal with police interrogations, supply information, serve as witnesses (albeit often unreliable ones), provide humor, and sometimes become victims. They are not smart or savvy enough to solve crime. Such depictions offered a sense of comfortable familiarity to Christie's class bound readers.

While she professed an ignorance of working-class life, Christie revealed an uncanny ability to recreate mannerisms and speech patterns onto paper, a skill she developed in childhood. Christie actually talked out her works, and if a character did not "sound" right, she changed it until he or she did.<sup>188</sup> Within Christie's fiction the laboring class "talks funny," meaning ungrammatically. Very rarely does a servant pronounce Hercule Poirot's name correctly when announcing his presence in a home; hence one maid introducing him as "Mr. Air Kule Prott." Anne Beddingfield, narrator and heroine of *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), describes how her maid Emily encouraged her to write her elaborate adventure down onto paper: "Lor', miss, what a beyewtiful book you might make out of it all—just like the pictures!"<sup>189</sup>

The above quotation also demonstrates how working-class characters, whether they are servants or not, address their "betters" with classic terms of respect and deference such as "my lady", "sir," and "ma'am." In *The A.B.C. Murders*, a potential witness, Mrs. Fowler, initially declines a visit from Poirot, whom she thinks is nothing more than a common traveling salesman. Her tone and treatment of him instantly changes once he proves to be of a more reputable profession, one evidently above her own:

"No good you wasting your time—" she began, but Poirot interrupted her. He took off his hat and bowed magnificently.

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<sup>187</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Patriotic Murders*, 81.

<sup>188</sup> Maida and Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, 193.

<sup>189</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1924; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1988), 7.

“Good-evening, madame. I am on the staff of the *Evening Flicker*. I want to persuade you to accept a fee of five pounds and let us have an article on your late neighbor, Mrs. Ascher.”

The irate words arrested on her lips, the woman came down the stairs smoothing her hair and twitching at her skirt.

“Come inside, please—on the left there. Won’t you sit down, sir.”

The tiny room was heavily over-crowded with a massive pseudo-Jacobean suite, but we managed to squeeze ourselves in and on to a hard-seated sofa.

“You must excuse me,” the woman was saying. “I am sure I’m sorry I spoke so sharp just now, but you’d hardly believe the worry one has to put up with—fellows coming along selling this, that and the other,—vacuum cleaners, stockings, lavender bags and such foolery—and all so plausible and civil spoken. Got your name, too, pat they have. It’s Mrs. Fowler this, that and the other.”<sup>190</sup>

These efforts may come off as “painful parodies,”<sup>191</sup> but socioeconomic status determined educational background, and this emphasis on dialectical differences kept class distinctions alive and well. Speaking incorrect or non-standard English indicated one’s lower place on the social scale.<sup>192</sup> Therefore, Christie’s middle-class characters always favor the polished version of polite, although not necessarily formal, middle-class English speech.

Now, what about the upper class? While the upper class no longer dictated political matters, its members still shone in high society. Wealth and glamour enabled upper-class men and women to “win a sympathetic press and mix with leaders of popular fashion, such as film stars, thereby ‘enchanted’ the general public.”<sup>193</sup> Christie capitalized on continuing public interest in the interest in the creation of titles and the activities of those with existing titles. She included the upper class for guaranteed amusement, much as *Punch* did, always “poking fun at snobbish lordlings and clumsy foxhunters.”<sup>194</sup> Unlike contemporaries such as Ngaio Marsh and

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<sup>190</sup> Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders*, 30-31.

<sup>191</sup> Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 106.

<sup>192</sup> Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945*, 343. Stevenson argues that evidence indicates that dialect and regional differences were slowly dissipating as a main marker of status, but in the interwar years such differences mattered in the class game.

<sup>193</sup> Rodney Lowe, “Riches, Poverty, and Progress,” in *The British Isles 1901-1951*, *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles*, ed. Keith Robbins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 204.

<sup>194</sup> Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*, 204.



Dorothy L. Sayers,<sup>195</sup> Christie treats the peers of the realm with either indifference or satire, particularly when it comes to their values and sensibilities. The nobility are not illustrious, noble figures worthy of hero worship. For example, the murdered victim in *Thirteen at Dinner* is Lord Edgware, a frightfully evil man, a lover of Casanova and de Sade, and a collector of medieval torture books. More typically, though, Christie creates a comic effect by allowing the upper class to unleash their sense of entitlement in a ridiculous manner. The demanding Lady Horbury from *Death in the Air* creates quite a scene on the airplane *Prometheus* when the police detains the passengers after the discovery of the murder on board:

The reasonableness of this order was appreciated by most of the occupants of the car, but one person protested shrilly.  
“Nonsense!” cried Lady Horbury angrily. “Don’t you know who I am? I insist on being allowed to leave at once!”  
“Very sorry, my lady. Can’t make any exceptions.”<sup>196</sup>

Christie frequently pokes fun at those members of the aristocracy who obsess over their extensive noble lineages. In “Dead Man’s Mirror” (1936), the murdered Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore’s passion and snobbery towards his ancestry aggravates his family and friends. Poirot investigates Sir Gervase’s friend and business ally Mr. Burrows, who reveals the truth about what everyone thought about the deceased man:

“You did not, I think, like Gervase Chevenix-Gore very much?”  
Burrows flushed.  
“Oh, yes, I did. At least—well, all that sort of thing strikes one as rather ridiculous nowadays.”  
“All what sort of thing?” asked Poirot.  
“Well, the feudal motif, if you like. This worship of ancestry and personal arrogance. Sir Gervase was a very able man in many ways, and had led an

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<sup>195</sup> Ngaio Marsh created Roderick Alleyn, son of Lady Alleyn. His noble family connections open many doors for this amateur sleuth and man of leisure. Dorothy L. Sayers is best known for her proud, debonair, monocle-wearing Lord Peter Wimsey.

<sup>196</sup> Christie, *Death in the Air*, 14.

interesting life, but he would have been more interesting if he hadn't been so entirely wrapped up in himself and his own egoism."<sup>197</sup>

In an era when aristocratic power waned and when upper-class ideas of "ancestry, traditions, and kinship" were dying out,<sup>198</sup> Christie's fiction reflected growing middle-class confidence.

Christie catered to popular interest in peers but also refrains from mesmerizing her audience with the use of titles.

Christie's noble characters often come from rather ordinary circumstances, and usually won a peerage through amassing a sizeable fortune or marriage. In *Death in the Air*, the heroine Jane Grey, another passenger on the *Prometheus*, tries to place the face of a fellow passenger she saw on her vacation in France:

She remembered one of the women perfectly—remembered how she had seen her last, at the baccarat table, her little hands clenching and unclenching themselves; her delicately made-up, Dresden-china face flushing and paling alternately. With a little effort, Jane thought, she could have remembered her name. A friend had mentioned it; had said, "She's a peeress, she is. But not one of the proper ones; she was only some chorus girl or other."<sup>199</sup>

Perhaps the most vivid example of the "new" peerage comes from *Easy to Kill*, which takes place in a village named Wychwood under Ashe. Readers soon learn about the local presiding elite, Lord Easterfield:

Rather a nasty little man too. Pompous! He was born in Wychwood under Ashe, and being the kind of snob who rams his birth and breeding down your throat and glories in being self-made, he has returned to his home village, bought the only big house in the neighborhood—it belonged to Bridget's family originally, by the way—and is busy making the place into a model estate.<sup>200</sup>

Another character, the shopkeeper Mrs. Pierce also remarks on Lord Easterfield's social climb:

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<sup>197</sup> Agatha Christie, "Dead Man's Mirror," in *Dead Man's Mirror* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1936; reprint, New York: Dell, 1971), 54-55.

<sup>198</sup> Light, *Forever England*, 80.

<sup>199</sup> Christie, *Death in the Air*, 2.

<sup>200</sup> Christie, *Easy to Kill*, 13.

Well, of course, sir, he isn't really gentry—not like Miss Waynflete, for instance, and Miss Conway. Why, Lord Easterfield's father kept a boot shop only a few doors from here. My mother remembers Gordon Ragg serving in the shop—remembers it as well as anything. Of course, he's his lordship now and he's a rich man, but it's never the same, is it, sir?<sup>201</sup>

It is no coincidence that Lord Easterfield, the fictional mastermind behind some of England's best-selling news publications, and the notorious press barons Lords Northcliffe and Beaverbrook share similar social-climbing biographies.

Christie did allow her upper class characters to express the traditional attitude of *noblesse oblige*. Though executed in an entirely obnoxious fashion, Lord Easterfield prides himself on his philanthropy:

Do you know what stands where my father's shop used to be? A fine building, built and endowed by me—Institute, Boy's Club, everything tiptop and up to date. Employed the best architect in the country! I must say he's made a bare plain job of it—looks like a workhouse prison to me—but they say it's all right, so I suppose it must be.<sup>202</sup>

It comes as no surprise to learn through Honoria Waynflete, a childhood chum of Lord Easterfield's, that “there are people who are sadly ungrateful”<sup>203</sup> for his generosity.

Susan Rowland argues that Christie's fiction taught that the class system must “survive, or social chaos may ensue.”<sup>204</sup> Fear of social chaos, however, hardly figures in Christie's work. Her middle-class characters are unafraid that the traditional class divisions will dissolve. In the worlds of Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, traditional social hierarchies remain firmly intact. As Julian Symons mused, “Decent men play games that are not highly intellectual, women slept only with their husbands, and servants know their place—which was in the servants' hall.”<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Christie, *Easy to Kill*, 66.

<sup>202</sup> Christie, *Easy to Kill*, 19.

<sup>203</sup> Christie, *Easy to Kill*, 40.

<sup>204</sup> Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 40.

<sup>205</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder, From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972; revised edition, New York: Viking, 1985), 21.

Any presupposition that the working class might encroach upon their territory never seems to cross middle-class minds. Again, what they fret and mumble over are the changes *within* each class, particularly the quality of the habits of the working class. Only after World War II does a resentment against the emerging egalitarian Attlee Age conspicuously enter Christie's fiction.<sup>206</sup> It is the post-WWII, not the interwar, middle class, which understandably felt under attack. By then, a once or twice a week "daily" was quickly replacing the live-in help. In 1920's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, a mass of servants fill the halls of Styles Court. By 1971's *Nemesis*, only a single elderly servant waits upon his master. After World War II, only the truly affluent could afford at least one servant on a regular basis.<sup>207</sup>

In the interwar years, however, most members of the middle class enjoyed a comfortable and satisfying existence, with no need to fear a successful working-class challenge to middle-class primacy. The confidence of Christie's characters reflects a wider social stability. My argument here thus contrasts with the dominant thesis which contends that resentment toward the working-class was *the* defining characteristic of the middle class in the interwar years. The reactionary and defensive paranoia commonly attributed to the interwar middle class belongs to the postwar era.

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<sup>206</sup> Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, 97.

<sup>207</sup> Maida and Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, 186.

#### **Chapter 4:**

### **“All These Arabs Look Alike to Me”: Empire and Imperialism in Christie’s Fiction**

Until its dissolution, historians of the British Empire focused on explanations of its rise, with heavy emphasis on its political, military, and economic aspects. After decolonization, studies on the individual colonies and dominions and their active, not passive, role in the imperial process found their way into the historiography. Then in the 1980s, John Mackenzie opened a new direction in the history of empire, one that put imperialism back into Britain’s domestic history. The Mackenzie, or “Manchester,” school argues that British imperialism was not simply a concern and fascination for political and economic elites and administrators. Instead, pride and enthusiasm for the world’s most grandiose empire stretched across England,<sup>208</sup> from the top to the bottom of society. Imperialism from the late Victorian period onwards created a new kind of morally infused patriotism, one based on “renewed militarism,” “devotion to royalty,” “identification and worship of national heroes,” “a cult of personality,” and “racial ideas associated with Social Darwinism.”<sup>209</sup> Accelerating in the 1890s, newer and exciting forms of mass media appeared that enabled quicker and cheaper access to information, visualizations, and representations, accurate or not, about the empire than ever before. Similarly by the interwar years, advanced and increasingly affordable forms of transportation and communication drew distant parts of the empire closer together. The empire was projected, “publicized and commercialized as never before for domestic consumption,”<sup>210</sup> especially after 1918 when bolstering economic relations with the periphery seemed the solution to Britain’s dwindling global financial security. The numerous imperial propagandist societies’ activities influenced

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<sup>208</sup> The use of the words “English” and “England” are for deliberate distinction in emphasizing the English experience of and reaction to British imperialism, as the Irish, Scottish, or Welsh national responses are not under analysis in this study.

<sup>209</sup> John M. Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 2-7.

<sup>210</sup> Dane Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880-1914* (London and New York: Pearson, 2005), 20.

and helped direct the path of the “educational system, the armed forces, uniformed youth movements, the churches and missionary societies, and the forms of public entertainment.”<sup>211</sup> Edward Said’s influential *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) further reinforced the idea that imperial references permeated various avenues of culture, particularly literature, whether initially obvious or not. With pro-imperial themes embedded throughout music, plays, film, radio, school classrooms, popular literature, advertising, political campaigns, newspapers, and “bric-a-brac,” what English man, woman, and child could possibly go unaffected and uninterested by both formal and informal vehicles of propaganda? The Mackenzie school acknowledges that many people proved themselves ignorant of factual matters of empire, but that does not necessarily indicate mass disinterest.<sup>212</sup> According to Dane Kennedy, “...the empire’s presence in the domestic scene is too abundant to ignore. Whatever the dimension of British life one wishes to consider—the political, the economic, the social, the cultural, the ideological—the markings of empire were there to be seen.”<sup>213</sup> In essentials, then, England was a nation *and* a society steeped in a “collective colonial memory.”<sup>214</sup>

By the late 1990s, historians began to revise the Mackenzie school’s treatment of empire. Represented most recently, and arguably most substantially, by Bernard Porter in *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* (2004), these revisionists claim that just because the empire “was one of the biggest things in history”<sup>215</sup> it does not necessarily follow that the English public cared, embraced, or felt any overwhelming sense of pride over Britain’s imperial conquests. Whereas the Mackenzie school views pride in the monarchy, racism, militarism, masculinity, patriotism,

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<sup>211</sup> Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 2-3.

<sup>212</sup> John M. Mackenzie, Introduction, *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M. Mackenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 8-9.

<sup>213</sup> Kennedy, *British Imperialism, 1880-1914*, 26.

<sup>214</sup> James R. Ryan, *Picturing the Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>215</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

escapist adventure stories, and classroom geography instruction as evidence of a culture that revolved around its imperial status, Porter argues that plenty of other non-imperial cultures also possess these features.<sup>216</sup> And as Andrew Thompson points out, “The dividing line between pride in the empire and pride in Britain’s broader position as a world power...is by no means always clear.”<sup>217</sup> That the government, economists, and industrialists felt the urgent need to convince the population through imperial schemes to support the empire, can reasonably be interpreted as proof that the empire was never widely popular. Before the 1920s, the empire had not required a substantial national effort in terms of expansion and control, and the interwar campaigns to correct Britain’s global financial decline by convincing the public suddenly and wholeheartedly to dedicate themselves to its maintenance failed. The Empire Marketing Board’s leaflets and pamphlets such as *A Book of Empire Dinners* and *Why Should We Buy from the Empire?* or slogans such as “Remember the Empire, Filled with Your Cousins” resonated little with the English populace. Robert Johnson argues that for the most part, displaying imperial enthusiasm, jingoism, aside from jubilees or *durbars*, was labeled as vulgar.<sup>218</sup>

The empire undoubtedly *indirectly* affected everyday lives through material commodities and foodstuffs. The revisionists, however, find paltry evidence that it *directly* affected British ideologies, beliefs, emotions, and thoughts. Even major publicized events saturated with imperial achievement and celebration such as Empire Day and the Wembley Exhibition of 1924-25 probably provided more amusement and entertainment rather than a stirring of the heartstrings for the empire. To be sure, more people across society had easier and cheaper access to learning, or at least being aware, about the empire than ever before, whether it was through

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<sup>216</sup> Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, 12.

<sup>217</sup> Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back?: The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2005), 6.

<sup>218</sup> Robert Johnson, *British Imperialism* (Houndsmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), ix.

classroom instruction and textbooks, photography books, slideshow productions, empire exhibitions, newsreels, newspapers, cinema, advertising posters, magazines, journals, or radio. However, coverage of the empire represented only a minute fraction of the total output within each form of mass media and communication, and thus the empire's appearance through such media did not result in a thoroughly imperial culture. As Porter summarizes, "The empire has always seemed to mean less to most British than to its admirers and critics abroad. It hardly features at all in any obvious way in British literature and art. It was usually neglected in English schools."<sup>219</sup> In short, according to the revisionists, people had many other distractions, concerns, and responsibilities in their home lives and in the workplace that took precedence over interest and passion for imperial matters and events.

What, then, did the empire mean for English men and women in the 1920s and 30s? Was imperialism deeply embedded in English customs and culture, or is Porter correct—did the empire mean little to most people? Both the imperialist and the revisionist schools offer compelling arguments. It proves in fact difficult to label English society as either an imperial culture or as one devoid of popular imperial sentiment altogether. In 1929, Lord Beaverbrook's *Sunday Express* put forth an alternative perspective, one that combines the arguments of the Mackenzie and Porter schools: "Who is for Empire? The answer is all men and no one. For while all men are willing to register the sentiment of goodwill towards the Empire, the practical side of Imperial development has been forgotten."<sup>220</sup>

These issues, debates, and questions within the historiography of empire are crucial, for the interwar decades witnessed both the dramatic expansion and the rapid weakening of the British Empire. Britain after World War I dominated more territory and peoples than ever in her

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<sup>219</sup> Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, vii.

<sup>220</sup> Quoted in Robert Graves and Alan Hodge's *The Long Week End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 240.



history. The peace treaties enhanced and extended Britain's imperial reach, adding nearly a million square miles and around thirteen million inhabitants. The dominions of South Africa, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia maintained their allegiance. Yet Britain's hold on this vast empire was shaky at best.

In March 1919, Egypt appeared on the verge of eruption with nationalists led by Saad Zaghlul "demonstrating, rioting, sabotaging and assassinating British army officers."<sup>221</sup> Egypt became an independent constitutional monarchy in 1922, but the British insisted upon keeping a military presence there to protect the Suez Canal. The Amritsar massacre in India occurred in April 1919, the worst case of violence in India in twenty years. A British commander ordered his troops to open fire on unarmed Indians during a peaceful nationalist rally, wounding around 1200 and killing nearly 400 more. Nationalist sentiment, as well as devotion to the charismatic Mohandas Gandhi, grew steadfastly throughout the next two decades. Nationalist upheavals also shook Britain's new imperial possessions of Iraq and Palestine, heavily guarded and "protected." In 1920, 1929, and from 1936 on confrontations between Arabs and Zionists threatened the stability of the region and the viability of British rule. In general, Iraq resembled a "bloody mess,"<sup>222</sup> with fierce resistance to mandate rule dominating relations. Even in Africa nervous nationalist aspirations, though not nearly as serious a threat as after the Second World War, grew throughout the interwar years, particularly in Kenya, Northern Rhodesia, Sierra Leone, and Somaliland.

In this era of imperial expansion and of increasing challenges to imperial rule, what did the empire mean for ordinary men and women? Agatha Christie's interwar fiction offers at least

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<sup>221</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism 1850-2000*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2004), 244.

<sup>222</sup> A. N. Wilson, *After the Victorians: The Decline of Britain in the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), 216.

a partial answer to this important question. A significant portion of that fiction provides invaluable tools for measuring standard English attitudes during the imperial experience abroad, including most notably *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *Death on the Nile* (1937), and *Appointment with Death* (1938). In many of her other novels and short stories, moreover, references and anecdotes about imperial themes appear. Christie offers snapshots of those English men and women who actually experienced the periphery first hand. Her accounts of their reactions to foreign lands and indigenous peoples allow historians to determine conventional attitudes and reactions to the empire.

If, as this thesis argues, Christie's fiction provides reliable evidence, then her middle-class readers were at least generally aware of imperial instability and of the imperial crises of the interwar years. Even in her first novel featuring the empire, *The Man in the Brown Suit*, Christie bears witness to imperial tensions, as she demonstrates how volatile South Africa had become.

The narrator Anne Beddingfield describes the situation upon entering Johannesburg:

There is something about the state of things here that is not at all healthy. To use the well-known phrase that I have so often read, we are all living on the edge of a volcano. Bands of strikers, or so-called strikers, patrol the streets and scowl at one in a murderous fashion. They are picking out the bloated capitalists ready for when the massacres begin, I suppose. You can't ride in a taxi—if you do, strikers pull you out again. And the hotels hint pleasurably that when the food gives out they will fling you out on the mat!<sup>223</sup>

Anne later agonizes over what would likely occur if she happens to make a wrong decision, albeit unwittingly, with either faction:

...it would end in my being summarily shot by a bloodthirsty rebel, or one of the supporters of law and order whom I notice guarding the streets wearing bowler hats and smoking pipes, with rifles tucked carelessly under their arms.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1924; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1988), 186.

<sup>224</sup> Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit*, 188.

Anne's commentary illustrates how the British government and its imperial proxies quickly reacted to such challenges with a "willingness to use violence...against political enemies" and on civilians.<sup>225</sup>

Anne's commentary also hints at the least surprising aspect of Christie's interwar fiction: that Christie's characters maintain the Social Darwinist view of colonial indigenous peoples as dark, inferior, childish, sneaky, mischievous, and intellectually weak. In their fiction popular writers, such as Christie, depicted the typical attitudes of travelers abroad. As Susan Rowland asserts, "Golden Age writers lived and wrote in a racist society," and within their works are "unchallenged racist comments."<sup>226</sup> Christie's fiction proved no exception. In *Murder in Mesopotamia*, the archaeologist Dr. Leidner hires nurse Amy Leatheran to look after his wife, who has suddenly succumbed to delusions and paranoia. Amy immediately ascertains that "Perhaps she's just nervous of natives and colored people."<sup>227</sup> Later in the book, Dr. Leidner explodes in fury and uses locals as scapegoats when his friend Dr. Reilly informs him that it is a "fact" that many people on the dig dislike Mrs. Leidner:

"Facts? Facts? Lies told by an Indian cook and a couple of Arab houseboys. You know these fellows as well as I do, Reilly. Truth as truth means nothing to them. They say what you want them to say as a mere matter of politeness."<sup>228</sup>

While the moral justification of the empire may have gradually weakened in the interwar years,<sup>229</sup> the English continued to see colonial peoples as inferior in terms of morals and civilization on many different levels. In *And Then There Were None* (1939), the group of visitors to the novel's setting of Indian Island learns that fellow housemate Philip Lombard left twenty-

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<sup>225</sup> Wilson, *After the Victorians*, 213.

<sup>226</sup> Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 66.

<sup>227</sup> Agatha Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1936; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1985), 7.

<sup>228</sup> Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, 67-68.

<sup>229</sup> Porter, *The Lion's Share 1850-2000*, 274-275. Porter gives a succinct account of how the change from viewing the empire mission as largely a global moral mission to a primarily economic one, namely to aid Britain alone, caused disillusionment in imperial purpose.

one indigenous East African soldiers behind to die during a mission. Lombard admits with a grin, “Story’s quite true! I left ‘em! Matter of self-preservation. We were lost in the bush. I and a couple of other fellows took what food there was and cleared out.”<sup>230</sup> He then continues: “Not quite the act of a *pukka sahib*, I’m afraid. But self-preservation’s a man’s first duty. And natives don’t mind dying, you know. They don’t feel about it as Europeans do.”<sup>231</sup> One of his traveling companions, Miss Vera Claythorne validates his behavior by commenting that, after all, “They were only natives...”<sup>232</sup> Clearly the implication is that in terms of mortality, natives have not the complex ideologies and concerns about the afterlife that civilized English men and women do. In *Death on the Nile*, Hercule Poirot’s fellow traveler, the cynical socialist, Mr. Ferguson, reasserts this opinion as he eschews the emotional Cornelia Robson’s lamentations on the three recent murders: “That’s because you’re over civilised. You should look on death as the Oriental does. It’s a mere incident—hardly noticeable.”<sup>233</sup> Also in *Death on the Nile*, another of Poirot’s traveling companions, Rosalie Otterbourne, mocks indigenous religious beliefs as she sarcastically describes her alcoholic mother and author of scandalous romance novels, ironically named Salome: “Look at—at some people’s mothers—and look at mine. There is no God but Sex, and Salome Otterbourne is its Prophet.”<sup>234</sup> Rosalie conspicuously draws upon stereotypical notions about Islam in her disgruntled mockery of her mother.

In addition to racial prejudice, class conceptions followed the English traveler to the empire. Just as the English accepted hierarchy in their own society, they expected and conceived of the periphery as constructed along the same lines.<sup>235</sup> As David Cannadine argues in

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<sup>230</sup> Agatha Christie, *And Then There Were None* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1939; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1983), 44.

<sup>231</sup> Christie, *And Then There Were None*, 44.

<sup>232</sup> Christie, *And Then There Were None*, 44.

<sup>233</sup> Christie, *Death on the Nile* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1937; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1983), 214.

<sup>234</sup> Christie, *Death on the Nile*, 78.

<sup>235</sup> David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001),

*Ornamentalism*, the British heavily modeled their empire on their domestic class system, and they anticipated certain treatment once they arrived in what was supposed to be a recognizable, similarly constructed, stable social order.<sup>236</sup> The English pictured the periphery as an extension of the metropolis, or at least a replica of it. They anticipated vacations full of booking teas, playing golf, and any other quintessentially English pastimes. If discomfort was absent in the home, then “roughing it” was not supposed to be the fate of the upper and middle classes when leisurely traveling.

It is plausible that treatment of local people as a labor supply to boss around was just as much a class-based bias as a racial one. The English typically lorded over indigenous peoples just as they would servants and other working-class individuals in the metropolis. Just as an upper- or middle-class person often frowned upon working-class customs, values, and appearance,<sup>237</sup> so they also self-righteously expressed disdain and criticism towards those of indigenous people. In *Appointment with Death*, Poirot asks one of his traveling companions in Palestine, Lady Westholme, to describe a suspicious man she saw lurking around their camp at night:

He was a man of more than average height...and wore the usual native headdress. He had on a pair of very torn and patched breeches—really disgraceful they were—and his puttees were wound most untidily—all anyhow! These men need discipline!<sup>238</sup>

And just as many upper- and middle-class men and women failed to understand why the poor lived, worked, and dressed in the deplorable fashion that they did, so they failed to express

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<sup>236</sup> Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 4.

<sup>237</sup> Rodney Lowe, “Riches, poverty, and progress,” in *The British Isles 1901-1951*, The Short Oxford History of the British Isles, ed. Keith Robbins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 213.

<sup>238</sup> Christie, *Appointment with Death*, 113.

sympathy towards the locals. Amy Leatheran expresses this best in *Murder in Mesopotamia* as she describes the workmen on Dr. Leidner's archaeological dig:

It was the workmen that made me laugh. You never saw such a lot of scarecrows—all in long petticoats and rags, and their heads tied up as though they had a toothache. And every now and then, as they went to and fro carrying away baskets of earth, they began to sing—at least I suppose it was meant to be singing—a queer sort of monotonous chant that went on and on over and over again. I noticed that most of their eyes were terrible—all covered with discharge, and one or two looked half blind...what a miserable lot they were.<sup>239</sup>

Placing people into class categories is a very English feature, and it seemed only natural to English upper- and middle- class tourists to equate natives with the English working class. After all, many colonial officers and administrators brought back native servants with them to England. In *Murder at Hazelmoor* (1931), the irascible Captain Wyatt explains why he prefers Indian servants to English ones: “That’s the best of having a native servant. They understand orders.”<sup>240</sup> But just like many other employers treated English domestics, he also feels free to verbally abuse Abdul:

Wyatt dropped a glass of whiskey he was just raising to his lips with a crash upon the floor. He immediately roared for Abdul and cursed him in no measured terms for not placing a table at a convenient angle to his chair.<sup>241</sup>

Just as class determined respect and prestige back home, so it continued when the English encountered colonial people.

Christie's fiction thus bears witness to the racism and class prejudices that characterized interwar British society. Popular fiction mirrored popular attitudes, as evidenced by the frequent inclusion of racial slurs and Social Darwinist prejudices. Interwar culture, then, does not seem to fall in line with the arguments of David Cannadine or Duncan Tanner about British attitudes toward imperial peoples. Cannadine argues that the idea of indirect rule represents “admiration”

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<sup>239</sup> Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, 36-37.

<sup>240</sup> Agatha Christie, *Murder at Hazelmoor* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1931; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1984), 110.

<sup>241</sup> Christie, *Murder at Hazelmoor*, 139.

and “recognition of indigenous genius” rather than “condescension” and a “sentence of perpetual inferiority.”<sup>242</sup> Duncan Tanner seconds this and finds that many politicians “idealized the people...believing they could become active and moral citizens” through the gradual democratization process.<sup>243</sup> Bernard Porter appears to be much more accurate in surmising that “Race prejudice, and the habit of authority, made it difficult for many colonial officials to take seriously the prospect of non-Europeans governing themselves, still less to contemplate serving under them.”<sup>244</sup> The English tended to view the non-white peoples in their empire as races on “the lowest step on the ladder of knowledge,”<sup>245</sup> which earned them the label of “poor creatures.”<sup>246</sup> One can hardly imagine that they would feel reassured by “the idea of anyone with a brown face being left in charge of his own country or destiny.”<sup>247</sup> They certainly fail to see them as individuals or as having differing religious beliefs and ethnicities. It is very likely that during the interwar years, a greater awareness of empire resulted in the spread of racial prejudices more widely than ever before. In the colonies, dominions, and mandates, many English visitors displayed the attitude that they were “God’s Englishmen,” which gave them a justifiable sense of uniqueness, superiority, and dominance.<sup>248</sup>

This sense of superiority was *racist*—it was not, however, necessarily *imperialist*. “God’s Englishmen” displayed the same sort of condescension and contempt toward non-imperialist peoples. In many of Christie’s interwar novels, characters frequently express ethnic and racist sentiments. In *Poirot Loses a Client* (1937), Poirot visits Miss Peabody, one of the elderly spinsters of the village of Market Basing, and questions her about the family members of

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<sup>242</sup> David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 67.

<sup>243</sup> Duncan Tanner, “Electing the Governors,” in *The British Isles 1901-1951*, 71.

<sup>244</sup> Porter, *The Lion’s Share 1850-2000*, 279.

<sup>245</sup> Ryan, *Picturing the Empire*, 184, 186.

<sup>246</sup> Christie, *Death on the Nile*, 214.

<sup>247</sup> Wilson, *After the Victorians*, 214.

<sup>248</sup> Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

Miss Emily Arundell, the murdered victim. Miss Peabody divulges details about Miss Arundell's niece Arabella and her marriage to Dr. Tanios, a Greek man:

"Made a fool of herself...Married some foreigner who was over at the University. A Greek doctor. Dreadful-looking man—got rather a charming manner, though, I must admit. Well, I don't suppose poor Bella had many chances. Spent her time helping her father or holding wool for her mother. This fellow was exotic. It appealed to her.

"Has it been a happy marriage?"

Miss Peabody snapped out:

"I wouldn't like to say for certain about *any* marriage! They *seem* quite happy. Two rather yellow—looking children. They live in Smyrna."<sup>249</sup>

Poirot encounters similar remarks when he goes to interview the other village spinsters, Misses Julia and Isabel Tripp. Isabel seconds Miss Peabody's reservations about the Tanios marriage, while also mistaking Dr. Tanios' ethnicity:

Not that I've anything to say against Mrs. Tanios—she's quite a nice woman—but absolutely stupid and completely under her husband's thumb. Of course, he's really a Turk, I believe—rather dreadful for an English girl to marry a *Turk*, I think, don't you? It shows a certain lack of *fastidiousness*. Of course, Mrs. Tanios is a very good mother, though the children are singularly unattractive, poor little things.<sup>250</sup>

Poirot later converses with Miss Minnie Lawson, Miss Arundell's former companion, and she also expresses her apprehension of Dr. Tanios:

"And she looks so peculiar, poor thing, so—well, so *scared*. What can he have been doing to her? I believe Turks are frightfully cruel sometimes."

"Dr. Tanios is a Greek."

"Yes, of course, that's the other way about—I mean, they're usually the ones who get massacred by the Turks—or am I thinking of Armenians? But all the same, I don't like to think of it. I don't think she *ought* to go back to him, do you, M. Poirot? Anyway, I mean, she says she won't...She doesn't even want him to know where she is."<sup>251</sup>

In Christie's fiction, the word "dago" appears frequently in reference to people like Dr. Tanios, foreigners with dark skin color. In the *Secret of Chimneys* (1925), the hero and

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<sup>249</sup> Agatha Christie, *Poirot Loses a Client* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1937; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1985), 77.

<sup>250</sup> Christie, *Poirot Loses a Client*, 88.

<sup>251</sup> Christie, *Poirot Loses a Client*, 203-204.



adventurer Anthony Cade runs into his old friend Jimmy McGrath, who then attempts to retell a story about an Eastern European man he encountered while working in Uganda:

“It was when I was up in Uganda. There was a Dago there whose life I had saved—“

“If I were you, Jimmy, I should write a short book entitled ‘Lives I have Saved.’ This the second time I’ve heard of this evening.”

“Oh, well, I didn’t really do anything this time. Just pulled the Dago out of the river. Like all Dagos, he couldn’t swim.”

“Wait a minute, has this story anything to do with the other business?”

“Nothing whatever, though, oddly enough, now I remember it, the man was a Herzoslovakian. We always called him Dutch Pedro though.”

Anthony nodded indifferently.

“Any name’s good enough for a Dago,” he remarked.<sup>252</sup>

In Christie’s fiction, characters condescendingly use the word “dago” when referring to anyone with dark skin and thus implying a lazy, untrustworthy person prone to immoral or illegal behavior.

A far more interesting and less predictable picture emerges when we widen the focus from racial ideas and attitudes to actual travel experiences. Despite the constant chaos and turmoil throughout the empire during the interwar period, travel across imperial territories occurred quite often. Year after year, the English ventured to these hotbeds of discontent. Members of the upper and middle classes not only served as the administrators of empire, they additionally toured and holidayed throughout the various regions. Foreign holidays became available to larger numbers of people, both financially and practically. Domestic and foreign travel increasingly became a “normal” leisure activity whether “first hand or second hand through travel books.”<sup>253</sup> In the interwar years, the acceleration of trains actually reached a fast

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<sup>252</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1925; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1987), 13.

<sup>253</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 349. Cunningham provides an entire chapter on the popularity of travel literature during this period, with detailed examples from numerous authors.

pace, and airplanes began to affect leisurely travel,<sup>254</sup> including excursions to the empire. Although other civil aviation companies preceded and existed alongside it, Imperial Airways, founded in 1924, came to replace all others. For travelers too poor to leave English shores, entrepreneurs of holiday resorts and camps utilized imperial-inspired names and structures in their décor and architecture, such as the Victoria Pier and the Empress Ballroom.<sup>255</sup> Just like the English themselves in the 1920s and 30s, writing entered the age of airplanes, fast trains, and affordable cruise liners. Valentine Cunningham observes that 1930s writing was “obsessed by holidays.”<sup>256</sup>

So, too, was Christie. Again and again Christie used her fiction to satirize English travelers in the empire. Once her characters went abroad to actually experience imperial locales, they were often utterly disappointed. They expressed disillusionment and even dismay over what they had envisioned as a world full of exotic luxury and fantastical ancient wonders. The reality failed to live up to those exotic, romantic representations many had viewed throughout the years in magazines, newsreels, movies, and photographs. When the expectations and reality diverged, Christie’s characters usually express disdainful disappointment. Even a ready supply of indigenous servants waiting on them came with “drawbacks,” mainly in the form of “quality.” As the formidable and ceaselessly demanding Lady Westholme of *Appointment with Death* laments, “to have servants about who cannot understand a word of English is very trying.”<sup>257</sup> She continues her admonition moments later:

“They are very trying to the patience sometimes,” said Lady Westholme. “One of them took my shoes away, though I had expressly told him—by pantomime too—that I preferred to clean my shoes myself.”<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Charles Loch Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars, 1918-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 238.

<sup>255</sup> Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, 86-87.

<sup>256</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 380.

<sup>257</sup> Christie, *Appointment with Death*, 113.

<sup>258</sup> Christie, *Appointment with Death*, 114.

Similarly, Christie recreates English travelers' negative reactions to Middle Eastern climate and peoples, which they found uncomfortable and taxing on their nerves. Lady Westholme deplores how "one has to dust one's things three or four times a day" and comments on how "terrible" the flies in the bazaars are.<sup>259</sup> The unbearable heat admittedly could reach well into the 120's Fahrenheit, and blinding sandstorms characterized many a day. They envision shopping as a luxurious exercise in acquiring exotic finds to send home, but Christie's characters quickly find the experience tedious and annoying. In *Death on the Nile*, Poirot and Rosalie Otterbourne take a walk through the bazaar in Assuan together. In an unusually long, descriptive passage, Christie details their journey:

They came out from the shade of the garden on to a dusty stretch of road bordered by the river. Five watchful bead sellers, two vendors of postcards, three sellers of plaster scarabs, a couple of donkey boys and some detached but hopeful infantile riff-raff closed in upon them.

"You want beads, sir? Very good, sir. Very cheap..."

"Lady, you want scarab. Look—great queen—very lucky..."

"You look, sir—real lapis. Very good, very cheap..."

"You want ride donkey, sir? This very good donkey. This donkey Whiskey and Soda, sir..."

"You want to go granite quarries, sir? This very good donkey. Other donkey very bad, sir, that donkey fall down..."

"You want postcard—very cheap—very nice..."

"Look, lady... Only ten piastres—very cheap—lapis—this ivory..."

"This very good fly whisk—this all amber..."

"You go out in boat, sir? I got very good boat, sir..."

"You ride back to hotel, lady? This first-class donkey..."

Hercule Poirot made vague gestures to rid himself of this human cluster of flies.

Rosalie stalked through them like a sleep walker.

"It's best to pretend to be deaf and blind," she remarked.

The infantile riff-raff ran alongside murmuring plaintively.

"Bakshish? Bakshish? Hip, hip, hurrah—very good, very nice..."<sup>260</sup>

Poirot and Rosalie exit the scene from there as quickly as possible to rid themselves completely

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<sup>259</sup> Christie, *Appointment with Death*, 114.

<sup>260</sup> Christie, *Death on the Nile*, 41.

of that “human cluster of flies.” Another character in *Death on the Nile*, Mrs. Allerton, shares a similar experience with Poirot one morning on the island of Elaphantine. She greets him pleasantly but expresses no cordiality towards the native children who keep pestering her to buy their wares:

“I thought they’d get tired of me,” said Mrs. Allerton sadly. “They’ve been watching me for over two hours now—and they close in on me little by little, and then I yell ‘Imshi’ and brandish my sunshade at them and they scatter for a minute or two, and then they come back and stare and stare and their eyes are simply disgusting and so are their noses, and I don’t believe I really like children, not unless they’re more or less washed and have the rudiments of manners.”<sup>261</sup>

Clearly then reality fell dramatically short of expectations for Christie’s tourists.

Christie’s characters extend their negative reactions to the imperial terrain and landmarks.

At the opening of *Murder in Mesopotamia*, Christie includes a letter written by Amy Leatheran, to a friend back home. Amy details her overall negative opinion of Iraq:

*I must say it’s been nice to see a bit of the world—though England for me every time, thank you! The dirt and the mess in Baghdad you wouldn’t believe—and not romantic at all like you’d think from the Arabian Nights! Of course, it’s pretty just on the river, but the town itself is just awful—and no proper shops at all. Major Kelsey took me through the bazaars, and of course there’s no denying they’re quaint—but just a lot of rubbish and hammering away at copper pans till they make your head ache—and not what I’d like to use myself unless I was sure about the cleaning. You’ve got to be so careful of verdigris with copper pans.*<sup>262</sup>

Amy further continues her rant on conditions in Iraq during a sightseeing trip. This time she evaluates the transportation system:

Jolting! I wonder the whole contraption didn’t fall to pieces! And nothing like a road—just a sort of track all ruts and holes. Glorious East indeed! When I thought of our splendid arterial roads in England it made me quite homesick.<sup>263</sup>

A few hours later, she relates her hazardous experience crossing a river:

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<sup>261</sup> Christie, *Death on the Nile*, 72.

<sup>262</sup> Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, 1.

<sup>263</sup> Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, 13.

Presently we had to cross the river, which we did on the craziest ferryboat you can imagine. To my mind it was a mercy we ever got across, but everyone seemed to think it was quite usual.<sup>264</sup>

Amy disappointingly finds the destination of Hassanieh filled with “a smell, and everything ramshackle and tumble-down, and mud and mess everywhere.”<sup>265</sup> After an already dejected account of the day’s travels, this final review comes as no surprise.

What does seem surprising is Christie’s willingness to portray her English characters in so poor a light. These negative characterizations imply a critique of a certain type of imperialism, a critique that makes sense in the context of Christie’s autobiography. Traveling around the empire comprised much of Christie’s adult life, and it was a repeated venture that she relished. Christie took her first trip to Egypt during her “coming out” season and enjoyed a summer of dancing and romance floating along the Nile. During her first marriage, she accompanied her husband Archie Christie on a tour of the colonies and dominions, including South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Archie worked as a financial advisor on the 1922 British Empire Exhibition Mission to solicit the colonial and dominion support for the upcoming Wembley Exhibition. After her divorce from Archie in 1928, she embarked on a long solo tour of the Middle East where she met an up and coming archaeologist, Max Mallowan. In 1930, they married. Throughout their marriage, she joyously traveled and spent months at a time on expeditions in the Middle East, usually in or around the Iraqi cities of Baghdad, Mosul, Nimrud, and Ninevah. In his memoirs, Mallowan often reflects that only Christie’s passion for travel rivaled her love of writing.<sup>266</sup> These experiences gave her the knowledge to describe accurately not only the terrain but the typical English upper- and middle-class traveler.

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<sup>264</sup> Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, 13.

<sup>265</sup> Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, 13.

<sup>266</sup> Max Mallowan, *Mallowan’s Memoirs* (London: Collins, 1977).

Christie acknowledged in her autobiographical writings that traveling, particularly in the Middle East, often meant temporary hardships: unpredictable and unexpected detours and disruptions in transportation, “rudimentary” or “primitive” accommodations, and severe weather. She recalls the Empire Exhibition Mission’s tour of Melbourne, where the bathroom facilities consisted of a bare room with “two chamber pots in isolation in the middle of the floor.”<sup>267</sup> Yet, even as a woman of modest Victorian upbringing, she never complained or criticized; she merely described those sporadic occurrences in a matter of fact way so her readers could experience the journey alongside her. Her husband Max once told her that her consistently easy-going nature while traveling, despite sudden difficulties that occasionally arose, made him quickly surmise that she would make the perfect wife for him.<sup>268</sup> Whether these difficulties included enduring a mud brick hotel that leaked all night during a rainstorm, six-wheelers lodging themselves in the mud or sand for hours at a time, drivers getting temporarily lost in the blinding sandstorms, or bed bug bites, Christie handled each situation with grace and decorum. Usually, any physical discomfort she regretfully experienced while traveling was because of her own proneness to motion sickness, especially aboard water vessels.<sup>269</sup>

Many surprises awaited her during her trips abroad. She reflected in her autobiography how “countries are never described to you in terms you recognize when you get there,”<sup>270</sup> whether for better or for worse. For example, when she arrived in Australia for the first time in 1922, she expected to find nothing but a mass of kangaroos and sandy desert everywhere. Instead, she delightfully encountered the Blue Mountains that “really *were* blue—a cobalt

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<sup>267</sup> Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1977), 281.

<sup>268</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 382-383

<sup>269</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 278-279.

<sup>270</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 281.

blue”<sup>271</sup> as well as forests of tress with “silvery white barks” and “darker leaves” or “tropical jungle foliage.”<sup>272</sup> One passage in particular from her autobiography vividly illustrates her love of travel and her marvel over imperial locales:

About five or six in the morning, when dawn came, we had breakfast in the desert. Nowhere in the world is there such a good breakfast as tinned sausages cooked on a primus stove in the desert in the early morning. That strong black tea fulfilled all one’s needs, and revived one’s flagging energy; and the lovely colours all over the desert—pale pinks, apricots and blues—with the sharp-toned air, made a wonderful ensemble. I was entranced. This was what I longed for. This was getting away from everything—with the pure invigorating morning air, the silence, the absence even of birds, the sand that ran through one’s fingers, the rising sun, and the taste of sausages and tea. What else could one ask of life?<sup>273</sup>

Christie confessed that any disappointments she felt mainly resulted from her own rampant, overly romantic imagination and her tendency to expect too much of the terrain and landmarks.

That she traveled to the Middle East dozens of times and consistently spoke glowingly of its visual and social pleasures confirms how inconsequential overall such instances of disappointment were in her memory. It also affirms her pro-imperialism. It was not comprised, however, of the jingoistic fervor put forth by the Mackenzie school. Instead, Christie’s imperialism was the kind that promoted loyalty to the empire through appreciating all the empire’s natural wonders and all the exciting experiences that accompany Britain’s role as an imperial power. Christie’s imperialist leanings ultimately mimic those of the heroine of *Cards on the Table* (1936), Rhoda Dawes. In a conversation with the colonial adventurer, Major Despard, she reveals her envy of his life:

“I think one ought to live frightfully dangerously—if one gets the chance, that is. But life, on the whole, is terribly tame.”  
“It has its torments.”

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<sup>271</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 284.

<sup>272</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 281.

<sup>273</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 360.

“Yes, for *you*. You go to out-of-the-way places and get mauled by tigers and shoot things and jiggers bury themselves in your toes and insects sting you and everything’s terribly uncomfortable but frightfully thrilling.”<sup>274</sup>

Christie acted on that principle with her resolute desire as a traveler not to be a guest of “Mem-Sahib Land”<sup>275</sup> but a bonafide tourist. In doing so, she “escaped from the thrall of social life in the English manner.”<sup>276</sup> On her tour of the Middle East in 1929, one of the first people she encountered on the Orient Express was the indefatigable and overbearing “Mrs. C.,” who insisted that Christie stay with her and her husband in Baghdad once she arrived. Mrs. C. promised all the delights of English leisure, resulting in the Christie’s “immediate revolt.”<sup>277</sup>

As much as Christie enjoyed returning home to see her family and friends, she also relished Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and New Zealand for all the ways in which they diverged from the geographic and domestic features of England. She respectfully and willingly accepted and embraced that “One’s rules of life and conduct, observation and behaviour, have all to be reversed and relearned”<sup>278</sup> when traveling. Those discontented tourists who refused to embrace such a philosophy left an indelible mark upon her. During the Empire Exhibition Mission, for example, Archie’s boss, Major Belcher, made himself an embarrassing spectacle throughout the trip. In South Africa, he berated even the fruit and found its state appalling: “What do you call these? Peaches? You could bounce them and they wouldn’t come to any harm!”<sup>279</sup> Then, he promptly threw five peaches on the ground to prove his point. Christie herself did not engage in such tirades and always held extreme regard and respect for native people’s land and customs. She remained particularly concerned with treating indigenous people

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<sup>274</sup> Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1936; reprint, Toronto: Bantam, 1986), 87.

<sup>275</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 360.

<sup>276</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 365.

<sup>277</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 351.

<sup>278</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 361.

<sup>279</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, 279.



with respect. Upon her first visit to Ur, she expressed astonishment and dismay over the way that the archaeologists yelled at the native workers. She quickly learned from Max that the only way for workers to hear the instructions from down in the pits and over the noise of the dig was through shouting.

In contrast to her characters, who were based heavily on the numerous fellow travelers she met throughout her many trips abroad, Christie's personal behavior proved to be the exception, not the rule. She used her fiction to satirize those English men and women who fail to engage in the cultural relativism that she not only advocated but embodied throughout her own travels. In that sense, then, she represented the kind of pro-imperialist who embraced the system but believed that most English men and women needed to reform their vulgar attitudes and behavior, as well as the way they treated non-white peoples. The imperial experience should consist of enjoying and taking pride in the natural wonders, exotic locales, and diversity of culture that all comprised the British Empire. Her portrayals of her traveling characters reveal that Christie clearly disapproved of her countrymen's "wrong kind" of imperialism, a failure to fully appreciate the imperial experience, hardships or not.

Yet were they vociferous imperialists, as the Mackenzie school argues? As a woman of her times and as an author attune to popular conventions, Christie included in her works mainstream contemporary observations, opinions, and beliefs expressed through her characters' dialogues and monologues that provide valuable insight into interwar English views on the physical, social, and political aspects of the imperial experience. Christie's fiction indicates that many English people did have exotic imaginings and preconceptions about what the empire looked like, what indigenous peoples acted like, and what experiencing the empire would be like. Those romantic visions, however, did not translate into a vigorously pro-imperial society. At

best, Britain's imperial destiny had simply become a regular staple of public virtue when national identity and heritage was played up,<sup>280</sup> such as during ceremonies, exhibitions, wars, parades, and holidays. Therefore, the empire was in many ways a subconscious symbol of stability, hierarchy, security, and permanence, much like the monarchy, the military, and a good cup of tea. In short, her featured players display neither pride in nor disdain for British imperialism.

At the same time, they clearly fail to envision or relate to the indigenous colonial people as social, intellectual, or moral equals, hence the opinion of one of Poirot's travel companions in *Appointment with Death* that "All these Arabs look alike to me." Accepted hierarchy at home quickly and naturally resulted in expected hierarchy in the colonies, dominions, and mandates. That colonial subjects should object to "being ruled by Western secularists" appears absent from Christie's characters' consciousness.<sup>281</sup> Christie and her characters, and it seems safe to say, most English men and women, condoned and accepted the imperial subjugation of millions of "inferior" indigenous peoples, finding it neither morally nor ethically corrupt.

As such, the empire existed as part of the natural order of things. Few imagined in the interwar years wishfully, reluctantly or even realistically, that it would or should ever unravel. Only a scant minority actively sought and encouraged the dismantling of empire. Most criticism of the empire tended to focus on curbing expansion, physical brutality, abuses of power, obnoxious jingoism,<sup>282</sup> or the deployment of troops.<sup>283</sup> When the transformation from British Empire to British Commonwealth finally occurred, it was not accompanied by wistful lament nor by gleeful relief. It was a most unspectacular and peaceful transition. As Keith Jeffrey muses,

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<sup>280</sup> René Cutforth, *Later Than We Thought: A New Portrait of the Thirties* (Newton Abbot, England: David & Charles, 1976), 38.

<sup>281</sup> Wilson, *After the Victorians*, 206.

<sup>282</sup> Kennedy, *British Imperialism, 1880-1914*, 40-41.

<sup>283</sup> Keith Jeffrey, "British Isles/British Empire," in *The British Isles 1901-1951*, 18.

“While the last of the Byzantine emperors had died fighting on the walls of Constantinople in 1453, in February 1952, as reported by *The Times*, the last King-Emperor, George VI, ‘passed peacefully away in his sleep’ at his country house of Sandringham.”<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>284</sup>Jeffrey, “British Isles/British Empire”, in *The British Isles 1901-1951*, 41.

## **Conclusion**

In addition to the addictive pleasure that readers experienced for over fifty years, Christie's fiction provides an invaluable resource for historians in reconstructing England's social and cultural past. That past underwent drastic changes from the 1920s and 1930s to that of the postwar years, as evidenced by changes in her plots, characterizations, and themes. Her interwar fiction depicts a society where, despite a visible decline in overall church attendance, late Victorian and Edwardian Christian morals and values remained front and center in determining respectability and maintaining social order. Disruptions of society and crimes against individuals would not be tolerated. People trusted that the police and judicial institutions would ensure that justice and order would prevail, and thus good will always triumph over evil. Christie's England was by no means a secular society.

That stable social order comprised rigid class distinctions and separations, which most people readily accepted or at least begrudgingly condoned as the natural order of things. Class determined one's status and prestige (or lack thereof) in life, and birth mattered much more than wealth does in today's English society. While many historians portray the interwar period as either one of class antagonism or growing egalitarianism, Christie paints a very different picture. As the standard of living steadily rose and the cost of living went down, little need arose for class warfare. However, Christie also shows that the interwar years were part of an era where domestic labor remained affordable and plentiful for the upper and middle classes, which aided in their feelings of superiority, contentment, comfort, and security.

Many interwar historians argue that British imperialism further bolstered those feelings. With improvements in travel, mass communication, and mass entertainment, the empire literally became more accessible than ever before. While Christie's characters avoid jingoistic fervor or

sheer enthusiasm for the empire, they certainly accept it as a natural, never immoral, aspect of being part of the English “race.” Just as her upper- and middle-class characters often condescend, patronize, and show little understanding of the world of the lower class, they also display such behavior when abroad in the empire. They treat imperial territories as an extension of the metropolis, a playground for pleasure and excitement.

In short, Christie’s fiction reveals a stable social order where its members embraced the modern world and all its material advancements while they stalwartly maintained traditional social, cultural, political, and religious mores and values. The conservative and the modern generally co-existed naturally, peacefully without mass experiences and expressions of anxiety or dismay in post-1914 England.

The famed literary critic Edmund Wilson once wrote an article condemning detective fiction titled “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?” The answer to Wilson’s query was, quite frankly, everyone. From the “Bright Young Things” of the 20s to the “mods” of the sixties, Christie granted current readers a chronicle of changing social trends of her day. Her use of series detectives and recurring characters over time gives a sense of continuity to metamorphoses in society. Without even looking at the copyright date, any student of English history could pinpoint the decade, if not the year, in which her plots take place. She usually avoided the large political and economic issues, and instead focused on their impact on the everyday world of her characters. Unconsciously or not, she left behind a social history of fifty years of life, recording the changes, welcomed or not, of England. Christie often commented on how different the world of her earlier works was from that of her later ones. Her works provide a glimpse into popular feelings and attitudes in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Her sales hinged upon her ability to provide

familiar, recognizable, and relevant social scenes, which affirmed the survival of the traditional social order and commonly held values in a century of change.

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