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An Inquiry Into

**THE EMERGENCE OF THE FEMALE DETECTIVE NOVELIST
IN GREAT BRITAIN**

AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The Paradox of Progressive Conservatism

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"The rise of the feminine author in the field of detective fiction may well serve some future scholar as a subject of a learned thesis. Certainly many a less intriguing and even less 'important' theme has been treated for an academic degree."
Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*

I Introduction

The history of the detective story proper begins in 1841 with Edgar Allen Poe's *Murder at the Rue Morgue*. Since then, detective fiction has become one of the most popular literary genres. It has often been denounced as 'literature for the masses', yet throughout its existence, its most remarkable feature was its popularity in **all** stratas of society. If diversity of audience was a meter for a genre's significance, the literary description of crime, its investigation and solution would rank among the most important writings of our time. Unfortunately, however, detective fiction is judged by its subject rather than its execution, and the subject is admittedly light. On the other hand, the topic of love has been covered by mass-production writers of inferior standing (and judged accordingly), yet few would deny that other authors have produced outstanding literature based on this subject. The same principle applies to any theme: it can be handled artistically and turned into significant literature, or it can be generated by the thousands without any imagination. It may be the most obvious commonplace, but the distinction between 'high art' and 'entertainment', the latter being always tainted with the brush of mediocrity, should in my opinion be obsolete. Undoubtedly, 'trash' in literature exists, but the quality of a text is neither determined by its subject nor by the self-important criticism of a chosen few. A literary canon that excludes any literature on the grounds of popularity and calls it trivial commits the fatal error of narrow-mindedness. Entertainment, light reading, easy listening is not necessarily equivalent to inferiority. In their time, both Shakespeare and Mozart (to name only two) have been accused of triviality, yet today they are considered among the greatest. Who is qualified to decide what is 'good' and what is 'bad'? Learning and culture consist of all aspects they creatively produce, and time and a continuity of reception is the only criterion for their quality. Some works of art, fiction or music survive despite (or because of) their alleged triviality, and a lasting success, more than anything else, elevates the product into significance.

In the case of detective fiction, its prosperity as a genre remains undiminished until this day. Yet some of its authors enjoy a longer stay on the bookshelves than others, and some have to be counted among the outstandingly great. A list of persisting winners, covering the first one hundred years since the genre's 'invention', would have

to contain (in chronological order): Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Wallace, Dame Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. I would consider these the six pillars of detective fiction between 1841 and 1940 (excluding the American school of 'hard-boiled' detection) and would add, as supporting figures, E.C. Bentley, Dame Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham and Josephine Tey.

The 1920s are considered and called the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. reducing the list above to these years, an overwhelming dominance of women writers becomes apparent. Apart from E.C. Bentley, whose novel *Trent's Last Case* (1913) is regarded as the first 'classic' of the Golden Age, and Edgar Wallace, who was very much in the tradition of earlier detective fiction, the most important writers of that era are women; among these, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers are indubitably the most prominent. Looking at the genre at that time, this fact impressed me as significant, and almost immediately, the question formed itself why this should be so. What are the factors that enabled women to invade and conquer the genre at that particular time? Throughout its history, detective fiction had been dominated by male writers, particularly in Great Britain. The first recorded woman to write a detective novel under her own name, in 1874, was an American, and her novel was not a success. But Christie, Sayers, Allingham, Marsh and Tey, the 'Quintet of Muses' of the Golden Age, were successful, both at their time and today. Why should this be so?

To answer that question, I have examined the two earliest and most prominent writers of the 1920s: Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. The basic assumption behind the present study is that the social situation of women, its changes through the war years, and the rising emancipation of women are the moving factors underlying the rise of the female detective novelist after the First World War. This general development, however, encases various components that bear little superficial significance to each other. In the following treatise, I will try to answer the question of women's success in the field of detective fiction by taking three fields into consideration: Socio-historic developments, the two authors' biographies and the literature they produced. I have eliminated the other three writers of the 'Quintet of Muses' on the grounds that their respective careers, launched in the late 1920s and early 1930s, were already influenced by other socio-politic factors than the First World War.

In the first chapter, I will take a look at the situation of women between 1900 and 1925. Before, during and, to some extent, because of the First World War, the position of women within society, their rights and options, changed dramatically. By the end of the war, it can be said with little exaggeration that a woman had emerged who was vastly different from the generation before her. All five prominent women writers of the Golden Age were born between 1890 and 1905; they developed as individuals at a time when their sex struggled against centuries of oppression and gained historical victories in their fight. I maintain that this development cannot have failed to form the authors discussed here.

To emphasise this point, I will examine two writers who remain outstanding among their prosperous contemporaries: Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. First I attempt to relate their individual lives to the situation of women in the larger society, then I will compare the two authors and highlight their similarities and differences. Finally, and most importantly, I will investigate how this development is borne out in the literature.

Before I briefly outline the core of my thesis, I would like to point out that the area of overall interest covers the years from 1900 to 1925, while the study of relevant literature only begins in 1920, when Agatha Christie published her first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. I also have to, in all fairness, admit my own bias in favour of Dorothy L. Sayers, whom I always thought the more appealing, more diverse, more readable of the two authors, or any other author of contemporary detective fiction. I will elucidate the reasons for this bias in the course of the treatise.

The argument I will present in the following pages is based on two different aspects, the first of which is again subdivided into two parts. The reasoning is comparable to a number of single threads, relatively meaningless by themselves but, if woven into a throng, forming a rope. It is not straightforwardly simple, but rather mosaic in character, and I have attempted to exhibit the strands separately before braiding them into the conclusion.

The two aspects of the argument consist first and foremost of the hypothesis that the emergence of the female detective novelist after the First World War was caused by each author's individual development. Alleging what I consider a general truth, this, in turn, involves a personal and a socio-historic side, as any person is formed by two influences, namely her or his biography and her or his exposure to society in general.

The socio-historic basis is the first to be examined in the following treatise, and I will relate how social, political and historical changes affected the role and status of women in British society, of whom Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers were undeniably a part.

As a second step, I will then summarise the two author's biographies, separately first and then combined under the aspect of significant similarities and differences. In their individual evolution, their accumulation of experiences and disappointments, their consecration into values and beliefs lies the second driving force behind their literary career.

The second part of the argument rests on the literary reflection of the socio-historic and biographical aspects of the thesis and thus constitutes the evidence to justify the basic notion that the first two aspects, taken together, enabled these women to produce detective fiction that outshone their male colleagues' and achieved world-wide success.

Finally I would like to warn all readers that I could not prevent giving away some plots.

1 Some Definitions

The nomenclature available to categorise detective fiction is prodigious. To clarify my own usage and differentiate between several common terms which are often used collaterally, I will briefly define at least those categories I have come across in the course of my research.

To begin with, there seems to be little dispute about the term 'crime fiction' as a headword; it covers virtually every text, short story, epistolary novel, prose composition or even drama that concerns itself with the commitment, the obscuring and/or the detection of criminal activity. This includes, as sub-categories, the detective story (or 'whodunit'), the suspense story, the police story, and the spy story. The detective story deals with a crime that is "[...] committed by one of a group of people; the puzzle of the criminal's identity is finally solved, through a process of investigation, observation, and deduction, by an expert detective [...]"¹. The expert detective may be

¹ The Oxford Companion to English Literature, 5th Edition, Oxford, 1985, p. 269

a policeperson; in this case, since all the complications of a democratic legal system (search warrants, habeas corpus etc.) gain importance, it is usually called a 'police story'. The detective story includes the focal point of the following study, the classic detective story, but also the hard-boiled detective story, with its scion, the penny dreadful, and the modern psychological crime story. The spy story, in turn, with such prominent representatives as John le Carré, Tom Clancy, Ian Fleming or Jack Higgins, is "[...] concerned with a battle of wits and violence between two sides known to the reader from the start [...]"². Finally, in the suspense story, "[...] it is generally the innocent who are attempting to escape from the criminals."³ The terms 'thriller' and 'mystery', though employed in the following, have no distinct definition any more and are used in a most general sense, side-by-side with 'crime novel'.

Classic detective fiction, the central concern of this treatise, is normally defined as the crime fiction predominantly produced in the so-called Golden Age of Detective Fiction, which starts in 1913 and ends in the 1930s. However, classic detective fiction was and is produced beyond that date. The classic detective story features a highly intelligent amateur detective of independent means who solves the crime exclusively by ratiocination. The criminal whose identity needs to be disclosed is a single person, usually almost as intelligent as the detective; the 'rules' of the classic detective story demand that she or he is rationally motivated, single or, at most, equipped with one accomplice. Since ratiocination is the detective's prerequisite, readers are expected to follow her or his train of thoughts. To facilitate this, the author must ascertain that all the clues available to the detective are also available to the reader. Therefore, clues are artfully hidden in plain view. In classic detective fiction, the "[...] rules of fair play between author and reader in the game of puzzle-solving were formulated, and generally adhered to [...]"⁴.

² *ibid.*, p. 269

³ *ibid.*, p. 269

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 270

II Social and Historical Developments

The first thread of argument to be unfolded here concerns the social and historical situation of women between the turn of the century and the years following the First World War. These years saw the advent of the female detective novelist, and I propose that the changes gradually brought about in the first twenty-five years of the century had an impact on this development. After a concentrated presentation of the socio-historical conditions I will therefore, in final paragraph, embed the results into the question that is central to this study: What enabled women to begin writing detective fiction.

I will restrict myself to a very limited description of the general social, political and historical developments of those years and focus on those aspects that relate to the status of women. Twenty-five years, including one of the greatest upheavals of the century, are bound to contain many complex processes and deserve (and have received) in-depth analysis elsewhere. The following chapter is a compact summary of the events as they concern the situation of women, particularly their emancipation and enfranchisement, and of the social and political changes that affected them and those they effected. It has to be borne in mind, however, that all changes before, during and after the First World War are set in a continuity of reforms, and that their consequences and their origins reach far beyond the rather arbitrarily selected period of time. For reasons of brevity and relevance, then, the description is by necessity circumscribed.

1 The Edwardian Era

The nineteenth century in Britain was dominated by one of the most powerful figures in its history; when Edward VII ascended the throne in 1901, few of his subjects had known anything else but the reign of Queen Victoria. The new century was destined to bring two World Wars and a torrent of change unknown to previous eras. Social, political and technological revolutions, some of them begun in Victoria's reign, determined and continue to determine the twentieth century. On the eve of the First World War, however, few of these changes were evident enough to unnerve the great majority of people, and especially if not only

in hindsight, particularly in contrast to the atrocities of the war, the Edwardian Era was pleasant, old-fashioned, prosperous and happy for almost everyone.

As is usually the case with nostalgia, only some of these perceptions were borne out by facts. The country on the whole, its economy, its colonial expansion, its industries both at home and overseas, was faring well; the wealthy profited from the economic affluence and tinkered with a new toy, the motor car; the upper-middle-class could afford to enjoy itself almost as unhindered as the rich. Income tax was low, cost of living reasonable, luxury articles relatively easy to come by.⁵

"The 'rich', defined by economists of the time as those with over £700 a year, were less than one in every thirty of the population - and yet they received more than one third of the national income. The 'comfortable', with between £160 and £700 a year, who were about one ninth of the population, received one seventh. So that [...] some 14 per cent of the total population [...] received nearly half the national income."⁶

The rest of the population only dreamed of splendour, and a quarter or a third existed on or under the poverty line.⁷

During the Victorian Era, industrialisation had led to increased migration from the countryside to urban centres. In the first decade of the twentieth century, this urbanisation had reached its peak and more or less remained there, with 75-80% of the population accumulating in towns.⁸ Advances on the fields of medicine and hygiene had reduced the death rate, and a population that had numbered less than nine million people in 1800 had grown to almost fourteen million by 1837 and to thirty-two million at the beginning of King Edward's reign.⁹ Both the increase in urban population and in industrialised workers resulted in the growth of urban slums, and the congregation of large numbers of people in factories facilitated the rise of unionisation.

The economic prosperity inherent to the Edwardian Era was almost exclusively confined to the upper stratas of society, but it was in some, though few, ways reflected in the lower classes as well. Trade Unions had contributed to a rise in real wages, and campaigns against so-called sweated industries had made working conditions easier to bear. Many of these improvements, however, were confined to men, who enjoyed a greater degree of union organisation. Throughout the first two

⁵ Barker, T.C. 'History: Economic and Social' in: Cox, C.B. and A.E. Dyson (eds.) *The Twentieth Century Mind: History, Ideas and Literature in Britain, Vol. 1: 1900-1918*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 51-99, p. 52

⁶ Crow, Duncan *The Edwardian Woman*, London, 1978, p. 23

⁷ Barker, op. cit., p. 70

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 79

⁹ Borer, Mary Cathcart *Britain - Twentieth Century: The Story of Social Conditions*, London, 1966, p. 4

decades of the twentieth century, 25 per cent of the female population were employed in one of the 400 trades and occupations available to women.¹⁰ Even though these included professions such as medicine, teaching, nursing, architecture and engineering, only a handful was occupied in any of these. Almost three quarters of the female working population were employed in domestic service, in dress manufacture and the production of textile fabrics.¹¹ Information on the average weekly wage (in 1906) varies between 7s 6d¹² and 15s 5d¹³, but the fact that women earned much less than men, usually not even half as much, is unquestioned. Working conditions were exhausting with long hours in badly lit and badly vented rooms, and worst probably for those who worked at home. Even those employed in white-collar trades, such as shop assistants and clerks, suffered the hardships of sweated labour, for their hours were just as long and circumstances just as adverse. Whatever monetary advantage they had over factory and home workers was likely to be swallowed by the demands a socially 'better' position entailed.

Nevertheless, the Edwardian Era saw the faint beginnings of an overall improvement of opportunities for women. The typewriter, telephone and telegraph had opened the way for professional secretaries, almost invariably female. Compulsory elementary education as well as an increase in secondary and tertiary colleges for women had equipped them with the intellectual tools to gain employment in the professions. All this endowed women with a pecuniary independence that would have been unthinkable 50 years earlier. Working as a shop assistant or in an office was still considered an interim state with the ultimate goal of marriage, but the foundations were laid for later generations. It was certainly not £500 and a room of her own, as Virginia Woolf demanded, but it was a start.

By 1902 women were recognised as potential consumers not only of traditional household goods such as clothing and food, but of entertainment products.

"This exploitation of women as a market was not matched by a similarly significant change in their 'civil life'. Women, especially married women, were no longer, it is true, without civil rights as they had been when Victoria came to the throne, when a woman's legal existence was suspended on marriage and became incorporated into that of her husband [...].¹⁴ [...] [L]egislation was

¹⁰ Crow, op. cit., p. 137

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 141

¹² *ibid.*, p. 95

¹³ Borer, op. cit., p. 78

¹⁴ Crow, op. cit., p. 13

passed giving some women certain political rights, as, for example, the right to fill a number of public posts, [...] and, from the late 1880s, the entitlement to vote in the majority of municipal elections."¹⁵

The Divorce Act of 1857 made divorce obtainable without a special Act of Parliament, and the "[...] Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1882 and 1893 successively granted married women [...] full rights over their own earnings [...] and [...] over all their own property [...]".¹⁶ During the Edwardian Era, however, these reforms grated to a halt, despite vociferous calls for social reforms from the Women's Suffrage movement, and the enfranchisement of women was still twenty years away.

After the first parliamentary debate on women's suffrage in 1867, the attitude towards the movement changed from hostility to ridicule, a sign, according to Crow, of its ineffectiveness. Hopes had been raised when women's suffrage were granted in New Zealand in 1893 and in South Australia in 1894, but in Britain "[...] the enfranchisement of women was always guaranteed to raise a laugh in political debates."¹⁷ On the socio-political side, enfranchisement met two strong opponents: the Paulines who claimed that God according to St Paul had decreed that woman was subject to man, and the political parties who concluded with infallible logic that women, given the vote, would indubitably vote for the respective opponent. This did not prevent any of the two, later three political parties to employ women in conducting elections, canvassing and clerical work. Women's organisations were created, "[...] their sole purpose being to clutch the women to the parties as unpaid helpers. There was no question of their being invited to give their views on political questions or to help in initiating policy. They were not wanted for any intellectual abilities they might have, but solely for the help they could give in the practical matters of fund-raising, canvassing, converting, disseminating propaganda, and keeping up registers."¹⁸ These activities, however, provided women with an opportunity to meet, to organise themselves, to discuss and to gain experience of political methods and, most of all, to "[...] explode the old idea that politics was a male preserve."¹⁹

By 1901, the "[...] record of parliamentary approval for women's suffrage [...] was not impressive."²⁰ Various bills were rejected, and opposition to

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 14

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 14

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 80

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 82

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 84

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 85

enfranchisement was abundant in all parties as well as in the broad spectre of male society. The Boer War, which was fought to grant British "Uitlanders" representation in the Transvaal parliament, was turned into an asset by the suffragists: if "[...] England could fight the Boers to give Englishmen the vote, surely English women had an innate right to the vote at home."²¹ While contending that the government, at that specific moment, had a priority duty in fighting and winning the war, this point was driven home at every turn.

In the meantime, the Manchester Suffrage movement linked its cause with the new Independent Labour Party. The Suffrage Society offered to encourage factory workers to support them in turn for Labour's promise to make enfranchisement a key point on their agenda.

"But this classic type of back-scratching failed to work. Labour was starting on its course to power; it could not afford to nail its proud red flag to the slender mast of Women's Suffrage. Talk about it in general terms, by all means; let platitude follow platitude; but for Marx's sake don't let's forget that the point of politics is power and the power won't come from the women - most of them would vote Tory anyway!"²²

The platitudes did not help; the suffrage movement became disillusioned with the Labour Party, and, led by Emmeline Pankhurst, formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) with a straightforward goal: Votes for Women. Its opposition to all political candidates who failed to credibly endorse women's enfranchisement, voiced loudly at meetings and in parliament, and its militant actions, made the WSPU the strongest, though not necessarily the most successful, contendant in the struggle for political equality between the sexes.

2 World War I

The outbreak of the first total war in the history of Great Britain (and mankind, one might add) entailed a disruption of normality in every sphere of life. What was considered in the beginning as a short offensive, supporting the French and Belgian allies after the German invasion into Belgium, turned out to be a conflict of unprecedented scale. By the end of the war in 1918, "[...] [t]hree-quarters of a

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 86

²² *ibid.*, p. 87

million men from the United Kingdom [...] had died"²³, and many more came home wounded, maimed, gassed, or shell-shocked. The patriotic enthusiasm that had fuelled the surges of recruits had been buried in the trenches. More than any other armed conflict, the slaughter of men that left so little of Europe unmarked had finally exploded the notion that there is anything heroic about war. Unfortunately, mankind tends to forget this insight over and over again.

On the 'Home Front', normality was equally suspended, at least after the initial estimate that the war would last only from August until Christmas. Commodities such as food and clothing became rationed. Industries changed to war production, and those that were deemed vital to the war effort were placed under a government control that formerly would have been unthinkable in a country dedicated to the idea of Free Trade.

The women's movement at that time consisted of many organisations with a vast range of objectives. The most vociferous, therefore best-known (though not necessarily most successful), was the militant Women's Social and Political Union. Its militarism stood out among the more moderate groups such as the NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) or the downright conservative Mother's Union.²⁴ No matter what their stance towards suffrage and equality between the sexes had been, however, women's organisations yoked themselves onto the war effort. The general sentiment seems to have been that in times of war, the government had more important matter to worry about than women's rights.

The government, on the other hand, welcomed the support; in the 1915 National Registration Bill, women were included as listed workers. In his study of *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, Martin Pugh relates how during the discussion of this bill, some "[...] MPs argued against the inclusion of women [...] on the grounds that as women were not voters they had no obligations to the state, but this was rejected [...]."²⁵ The women's movement apparently saluted their inclusion into the registration scheme as "[...] the first Government recognition of the fact that women can render effective aid to their country in wartime."²⁶ It was undoubtedly convenient for both sides to convey intensely altruistic motives for their strategies: The government gained resources of womanpower while at the same time showing their concern for women's

²³ Read, Donald 'History: Political and Diplomatic' in: Cox, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 2-50, p. 43; Borer (p. 95) claims 1,000,000 men dead

²⁴ Pugh, Martin *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, London, 1992, pp. 3-5

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 8

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 8

objectives, and the women's movements gained official recognition for women as capable of full citizenship while at the same time achieving a potential lever for their demands. With a view to the recesses and backlashes the women's movement suffered after the war, the unspoken (and often disclaimed) bargain appears to have been more favourable for the government's side.

The major change that the war effected in the lives of working women as well as middle-class women was that the government and industries required their support in the war effort. With two out of 10.6 million working men enlisted by January 1915, the labour market during the war became needy of anyone who could ensure the smooth running of production, transport, and services, and the only ones left in sufficient numbers to fill the gaps were women. The Treasury Agreement between government and trade unions that allowed unskilled labourers, mostly women, into the skilled jobs formerly held by men opened better-paid jobs in so-called heavy industries, particularly the munitions factories. This agreement later became law as the Munitions of War Act.²⁷

Paradoxically, the first few months of the war brought an actual shortage of work as those industries who traditionally had employed women, such as dressmaking and jewellery, became redundant. Domestic servants, primarily women, were dismissed, so that in September 1914, an estimated 44.4 per cent of all women workers were unemployed. Relief funds were organised; no-one had any idea that within weeks, there would be an actual labour shortage.²⁸

In her study of *Women Workers in the First World War*, Gail Braybon analyses the way in which women replaced men for the duration of the war. She claims that it is impossible to compare the work done by men before the war directly with the work done by women during the war. 'Substitution' was the catch-phrase of government, trade unions and industries alike, but changes in both the productive processes and the products themselves entailed different jobs, different skills, different machinery and therefore different work descriptions. Women did not replace men, at least not in industrial jobs, they filled the general gap in the labour market and were employed in newly defined areas of industrial labour. Which, incidentally, was a perfect reason for employers to deny women the same wages men would, and did, draw.

According to Braybon, almost all women who became employed in industries open only or predominantly to men before 1914 were recruited from other

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 19

²⁸ Braybon, Gail *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience*, London, 1981, p. 44

industrial jobs; they were working-class women who took the chance to earn the higher wages that 'heavy' industries offered. Even though they were still paid less, sometimes not more than half the wages of men, working in a munitions factory (one of the chief wartime industries employing women), in the aircraft industry, or in other parts of the industrial process that were previously performed by men was nonetheless an attractive alternative. Apart from the financial advantages, women gained independence and self-respect in the skilled or semi-skilled trades that were closed to them before the war. Government, industries and trade unions, each for different reasons, were still trying to convey that this was a very temporary emergency solution to the labour shortage caused by mass enlistment. They also alleged that women were less qualified for the jobs they were doing, day-to-day experience in the factories to the contrary, but it seems that their arguments were no longer convincing. True enough, some work, particularly when it involved handling great weights, could not be done by women; most of the work could, however, be adapted to the physical abilities of women, for example by using forklifts. Traditionally, the notion that women could not set and adjust or repair machines or perform other skilled 'male' jobs remained undisputed because women were never permitted to prove otherwise. Wherever women were allowed to acquire the skills and qualifications, there is no evidence whatsoever that they failed.²⁹

Other branches of employment where the war left a hiatus that could be filled by women were transport and clerical work such as banking and accountancy. They were not allowed to hold managing posts, but the sight of women behind bank tellers, women as conductors and drivers, window-cleaners or street-sweepers, even as firewomen³⁰, became very familiar between 1914 and 1918. There was a significant increase of women working in all areas of industrial and non-industrial employment with the notable exception of those trades traditionally held by women, namely the textile industries.³¹

Braybon states that within the working-class, the number of women employed after the beginning of the war compared to the numbers before the war did not increase significantly. According to her study, the new recruits in industry in general and the munitions industry in particular "[...] was accounted for by the

²⁹ Obviously, some women did not achieve the necessary qualifications even when offered, or lacked enthusiasm; however, the same applies just as obviously to some men.

³⁰ This is an area of employment where up to this day women are rarely found, the reason stated that they are not physically strong enough.

³¹ Pugh, op. cit., p. 20

transference of women from slack to busy trades, the return of married women, the movement of workers from low-paid industries, the entrance of some older women or girls straight from school, and a very few middle- or upper-class women [...]."³² It is important to note that the transference of women into the better-paid industrial jobs, alongside the decline of traditionally female work such as dressmaking, was one of the most consequential changes that the war brought about. For a brief time of almost four years, women were not considered as secondary workers substituting their husbands' income (this notion being rather outdated to begin with as women more often than not supported the whole family with their wages) but as vital pillars of industrial production. The demand for workers was such that government, in words and deeds, and the industries, in deeds only, had to acknowledge the importance of working women.

Middle- and upper-class women, on the other hand, were predominantly new to the trades they occupied. From the 1870's onward, women had been reluctantly allowed into some professions such as medicine, and the reforms in education implemented during the last decades of Victoria's reign had opened secondary schools, tertiary colleges and universities to women students. Nonetheless, they had been exceptions rather than the rule. Now these women were needed in offices and banks, and not just as typists or telephone operators, but as tellers and civil servants. The number of women employed in non-industrial jobs doubled from 1.1 million in 1914 to 2.19 million in 1918. By 1918, there were almost as many women in professional occupations (119,500) as there had been men in professions (127,000) in 1914.³³

The impact of the First World War affected working-class and middle-class women differently. For working-class women, industrial labour had always been normal, though it was considered to be a transitional phase before marriage. For them, the important changes were the improvements of working conditions and the employment available. Even though they still earned less than a man doing a comparable job, wages were higher, and the situation of the workplace more comfortable; it was, after all, better to handle TNT while sitting down for a limited number of hours than to serve at all times of the day in someone else's house. As industry by necessity adapted to them, washrooms and crèches were provided, and the machinery became more manageable to accommodate the physical abilities of women.

³² Braybon, *op. cit.*, p. 47

³³ Pugh, *op. cit.*, p. 20

The majority of middle-class women, particularly those from the upper middle-class, were traditionally not expected to seek employment; to them, entering the work force was an excursion into unknown territory. Many

"[...] entered occupations which they would have never dreamt of pursuing in normal circumstances, [and] some were encouraged to seek a long-term career. Their families increasingly accepted the desirability, or even necessity, of their finding some means of supporting themselves after the war, fearful, perhaps, of a dearth of marriage partners [...]." ³⁴

No matter what the families' reasons might have been, the predominantly young women who were called to work in order to support the war effort seemed to have enjoyed the experience. They achieved both economic autonomy and social independence, and despite the backlash that occurred even before the end of the war, when female clerical staff was reduced, "[...] middle-class women were apt to regard the emancipation of their sex as an accomplished fact by the inter-war period." ³⁵

War propaganda on the home front continually emphasised the equalising force of women working in the war effort; the myth remained alive that women came "[...] from domestic service and the dressmaker's room, from the High Schools and the Colleges, and from the quietude of the stately homes of the leisured rich..." ³⁶ Even though employment during the war did attract women from all social backgrounds, spheres were as class-divided as they had always been. Blue-collar jobs were dominated by working-class women, white-collar jobs by middle- and upper-class women. This is noteworthy and will be elaborated in the next paragraph, because the alleged unity of women working during the war fuelled another myth, namely that women's goals and aims could be unified. With a view to the backlash on women's achievements after the war, this misconception helps to explain why resistance to certain cuts was so relatively lame and support for reactionary policy widespread among women themselves.

While employment in general followed the dividing line between the classes, some occupations drew female recruits from all social backgrounds. The two most male-dominated areas of employment which were thus replenished or expanded were the armed forces and the Metropolitan police. The military or para-military structure, the hierarchy (female officers and NCOs were addressed as 'Sir' and held

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 22

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 22

³⁶ L.K. Yates, as quoted by Braybon, *op. cit.*, p. 48

male-equivalent ranks), and not in the least the uniforms seemed to have appealed to women throughout society. Here, the aspiration to penetrate in particular those jobs that were regarded as strictly or predominantly male is most transparently manifest. While women in the army remained confined to semi-civilian jobs such as transport and ground personnel (the WRAF was nicknamed 'the Penguins' because they did not, or rather were not allowed to, fly), or restricted to traditionally 'female' occupations such as secretarial work or nursing, women in the police force were more widely employed. The rationale behind female constables on patrol was still firmly entrenched in the double morality standards; working 'girls' were considered susceptible to immoral behaviour and therefore had to be guarded closely by members of their own sex. Nonetheless, women constables patrolled, interfered and arrested just as their male colleagues did, and even though hostility towards women in both armed forces and the police was palpable, it was a popular job, with 900 patrols in London by 1915³⁷.

All in all, women from all classes became gainfully and voluntarily employed in a broad variety of occupations which were formerly seen as male prerogatives. Considering the wages available, this is hardly surprising, but it seems to have been invigorating beyond the financial aspects for women to thus expand their horizons. In *On Her Their Lives Depended: Munitions Workers in the Great War*, based mainly on oral history and worker's writing, Angela Woollacott talks about "[...] the excitement of operating powerful equipment, [...] the creative satisfaction [...]"³⁸ of welding; she describes the woman munitions worker as "[...] a powerful symbol of modernity."³⁹ This attitude can be safely transferred to other areas of employment; working women, at least during the war, were modern in a very positive sense of the word. Without neglecting facts such as wage inequality, male resentment of working women, the exclusion of women from most professions and the non-existent advances towards full suffrage, the image of women emerging from the First World War is one of self-sufficiency, independence and strength. Contemporary voices of the anti-feminist movement deplored working women as 'masculine' and 'boyish'. For anyone who assigns a traditional division between the spheres of each gender, this was threatening indeed, particularly as the men returning from the war were lacking vitality, were weak and 'feminine'.⁴⁰ The

³⁷ Pugh, op. cit., p. 32

³⁸ Woollacott, Angela *On Her Their Lives Depended: Munition Workers in the Great War*, Los Angeles, 1995, pp. 2

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3

⁴⁰ Pugh, op. cit., pp. 76-80

evident fears of women's 'masculinisation', however, only proves the extent of independence they achieved.

3 After the War

When news of the armistice reached Great Britain in November 1918, the predominant desire was to return to normality as soon as possible. After four years of war, however, the renaissance of the perceived comfort of the Edwardian era was bound to fail. The destruction of men (9% of the male population between the ages of 20 and 45 had been killed, and twice as many wounded) and material had wrought changes in the social and political structure of Great Britain that were impossible to reverse. Anyone born between 1900 and 1910 was exposed to the destructive influence of war at an age when circumstances are most formative; a generation had grown up that knew little or had forgotten most about stable peace. Air raids, rations, veterans who lost limbs or lungs, war propaganda, corpses of boys returning from the trenches, had shaped the image of these people's world. Patriotism, though strong throughout the war and well after, was not blind anymore, and feelings were mixed as to the price a nation and its individuals had to pay for it. 1914 and 1918 had ceased being mere dates; they had the word 'before' and 'after' attached to them that marked the incision between eras.

On the other hand, the urgency to return to the status quo was strong and influential enough to impede the flow of changes that the war had started or at least furthered. By the end of the war, the Labour Party, and therefore its aims, had so much risen in influence that the government was a coalition of Labour, Conservative and Liberal party⁴¹. Trade Union membership expanded, with 45% of those eligible for membership being unionised in 1920.⁴² Its successes before the war and its co-operation with the government during the war stabilised the Unions' influence. While taxes were raised to cover the budget necessary to transfer Great Britain from war to peace, real wage earnings rose steadily until 1922⁴³. At the same time, mechanisation and mass production routinised industrial labour, a

⁴¹ Mowat, C.L. 'History: Political and Diplomatic' in Cox, C.B. and A.E. Dyson (eds.) *The Twentieth Century Mind: History, Ideas and Literature in Britain Vol. II 1918-1945*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 1-25, p. 3

⁴² Stevenson, John *British Society 1914-1945*, London, 1984, p. 195

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 117

process started during the war when the enormous demands for war-related products induced the industry to maximise efficiency. Even though this meant the slow decline of individual craftwork, the concentration of labour in factories also enabled greater organisation in Unions.⁴⁴

Despite the upheaval that the turmoils of the First World War caused, society was loath to change; quite on the contrary, there was a strong desire to rewind the clock to the allegedly blessed times of the Edwardian era. The class system was still rigidly in place, and although the importance of aristocracy diminished in favour of businesspeople, a title was still the highest aim one could strive for. The gentry had always relied on land to elevate their status, but the 1920s saw the peak of what begun in the 19th century with the land depression: ownership of land and estates no longer secured the wealth that the aristocracy depended on, it became a downright liability. Yet titled persons still held a large proportion of government offices, and the 'top' professions were filled with people from aristocratic background. However, distinctions became blurred. The upper and lower middle-classes expected to be able to aim for positions formerly monopolised by the aristocracy, and a white-collar job came within range of every enterprising working-class person. Generally speaking, the middle-class and its sub-divisions were on their way to expansion and success. The elite was no longer recruited on the grounds of a title alone; money and the appropriate education, which in turn became more widely available, became the most influential, sometimes the only decisive factors for an ambitious career.⁴⁵

The situation of women after the war deteriorated again; an anti-feminist reaction set in, fuelled by the demobilisation of men who flooded back into the labour market. Women were no longer needed to secure the economic stability on the home front, and tendencies to send women back to being full-time mothers and wives, never altogether extinct during the war, returned in full force. Working women were once again a serious threat to male employment, their financial and social independence was frowned upon. A strong propaganda machine was set into motion to recapture pre-war male domination and separation of spheres. Working women became associated with moral and sexual laxness, irresponsibility and un-'femininity'. Even though studies during the war had shown that gainful employment outside the home was advantageous to the health of both women and their children as financial stability provided better nourishment, and self-respect

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 187

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp.330

underscored mental tranquillity⁴⁶, the argument was resuscitated that working mothers neglected their families and endangered the future of the nation. The term 'flapper' was coined by the media and used to denote the prototype of the giddy, irresponsible, morally loose working 'girl'.

Here again, the situation differs depending on the social background; working-class women, whose participation in the labour market had always been taken for granted suffered less from society's sudden return to pre-war values. Although the opportunities available for them in the factories were reduced, there were almost no comments on their continued presence in the lower-paid industrial jobs. The derision for 'flappers' was mainly aimed at middle-class women who flocked into clerical occupations; their chances of prestigious, interesting and well-paid work were slim as well, and additionally they were the target of society's scornful attitudes.

The granting of women's partial suffrage in 1918 is not necessarily contradictory to the anti-feminist reaction. On the one hand, the Representation of People Act gave the vote only to women over the age of thirty, when most women were expected to be married, responsible mothers, and on the other hand, it was closely linked to the electoral rights of their husbands. The bill enfranchised about eight and a half million women, or 36.9% of the total 21.4 million electors.⁴⁷ With a ratio of 12 women for every ten men, the denial of full suffrage ensured that women's political muscle would not overpower male structures. The standard woman who was given the vote was "[...] likely to be married, to have children and to have no lasting interest in employment or a career. In short she appeared to be a stable element in a changing world, one who was unlikely to seek to promote radical, feminist issues in parliament if enfranchised." These women's "[...] inclusion within the political system would tend to strengthen rather than destabilise it."⁴⁸ If there remained a residue risk, it was finely calculated.

The Representation of People Act and the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 only partly removed sex inequality, and it was greeted with less than enthusiasm by feminists. The National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, NUSEC, formerly NUWSS, was hopeful but far from satisfied, and kept equal pay, equal franchise, equal guardianship over children and equal access to the professions and the civil service on their agenda.⁴⁹ Both Acts helped to satisfy the

⁴⁶ cf. Woollacott, op. cit., Chapter 3

⁴⁷ Pugh, op. cit., p. 34

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 42

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 51

majority of Britons who were agreeable, in a very general way, to the move for equal citizenship while those who tried to keep women in their 'proper' places did not stand much to lose.

It is worth elaborating that there is a difference between emancipation and suffrage; while both are results of the same overall feminist movement, they are, to a certain extent, separable in the context of the early 1920s. The parliamentary advances were almost entirely independent from the backlash on the labour market, or rather, one softened the blow of the other. The total numbers of women working outside the home remained relatively stable throughout an extended period of time. Between 1911 and 1931, around 30% of the workforce were women. What changed quite dramatically after the war were the areas of employment; with higher education available in almost all universities, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act opened some of the professions to a slightly higher percentage of women. After the war, more than twice as many women were occupied in clerical jobs compared to pre-war figures. On the other hand, women working in teaching or nursing and women factory employees were reduced in numbers.⁵⁰ Apart from the numerical shift within occupational areas, however, the most striking disparity between men and women was the character of female employment. Not only did they earn an average of below fifty per cent compared to men's wages, they were largely excluded from occupations that involved career opportunities. During the war, industrial and non-industrial promotion was possible whenever the position had been vacated by a man enlisting in the armed forces. After the war, these higher positions were regained by male employees, and women were again relegated to menial tasks. Despite the legal advances for women, equality was still further away even than it is today.

The feminist movement in the nineteen-twenties faced a partial victory that made its leaders look towards wider goals; while "[...] feminists for whom the vote was essentially symbolic grew complacent, thinking the struggle for women's emancipation over but for details"⁵¹, for many it was still obvious how much was lacking. With roughly eight million women entitled to vote and the opening of Parliament to women, one way to achieve the goals of sex equality was through political instruments. The militant tradition of the WSPU became obsolete with the advents of certain, limited political rights, and the parliamentary course of NUSEC and the Women's Citizen Association (WCA) seemed more promising. There

⁵⁰ cf. *ibid.*, p. 91

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.43

remained the problem of defining the exact goals of the women's movement after the war; as always, women's needs and aims were as heterogeneous as each individual's situation, and while the issues themselves were fairly undisputed, the weight of each point was open to debate. To avoid schisms along the lines of priorities which would have weakened the organisations, parts of the feminist movement abandoned its non-party policy and tied its cause to one of the three major political parties, according to their supportiveness; other feminists used the new electoral rights to nominate independent candidates, with limited success. All in all it seemed more feasible, though not necessarily easier, to gather the different aspects of the feminist movement under the umbrella of a political party, and since a women-only party was unlikely to be successful, only the established parties remained. Their support was less than enthusiastic, and with the integration into larger political agendas, however inescapable, the struggle for emancipation lost a lot of its momentum.⁵²

Furthermore, the women whose welfare was the supposed aim of the feminist movement were far from unified; neither the combined effort on the home front during the war nor the acquisition of partial suffrage could mend the largest split, the class barrier. The class distinction in the factories during the war, where middle-class women supervised working-class women, was, contrary to official proclamations, firmly in place, and the Representation of People Act did nothing to alleviate the difference. Thus the loyalties of women were much more firmly based along the boundaries of class than on the boundaries of gender.

"Subject to the discipline by middle-class welfare supervisors, the control and authority of the women police, the out-of-hours interference by women patrols and the proximity of a handful of members of the privileged middle and upper class at work on the factory floor, the class identity of women was confirmed on all sides during the war. In the postwar world, with women over thirty newly enfranchised as voting citizens, women's political allegiances were even more important than before the war. [...] In the politically polarized atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s, class identity overwhelmed any gender bonding among women of different classes."⁵³

In addition to obstacles interfering from the outside, then, women's way to emancipation was also encumbered by frictions within the movement, its participants and beneficiaries. The obvious heterogeneity of a group exclusively defined on the basis of gender (which, after all, comprised more than fifty per cent

⁵² cf. *ibid.*, Chapter 3

⁵³ Woollacott, *op. cit.*, pp. 186

of the whole population) was difficult to reconcile and also probably often neglected.

On the whole, however, the feminist movement gained further ground in the inter-war period, a trend already apparent in the first few years after the war. This progress was possible despite the official nods towards equality between the sexes rather than because of them, but the movement's rebuffs did not outweigh its successes. The machinery, once set in motion, acquired a certain amount of self-perpetuating energy, and after attaining something approaching equal citizenship, other achievements were bound to follow. The women's movement has a long tradition of successes and backlashes, but on the whole, its history is one of constant progress.

"Whether in science and technology, in politics and industrial relations, [...] in diplomacy and foreign policy, or in matters such as social welfare and education, the contrasts between the Edwardian age and the post-war were smaller than the similarities; war accelerated what was already in train. [...] None the less, change was to be seen in almost every aspect of life within this period [...]. Over the whole period continuity is at least as marked as change; changes were gradual, and large only when their cumulative weight was seen in retrospect."⁵⁴

The First World War had brought political and social changes that advanced the women's movement to a new level. Most importantly, however, it had a significant impact on women's mental make-up; they had become conscious of their abilities to perform almost any given task as well as men could, and this knowledge was hard to curb, though its suppression was, and is, tried over and over again.

4 Embedment

These actual and psychological developments, then, constitute the first factor that enabled women to gain entrance into a literary field that had been previously dominated exclusively by men. The socio-historical situation of women in Britain after the war differed significantly from conditions before the war, as almost all sectors of public life were penetrated by a large number of women who were formerly considered incapable of performing 'male' jobs. I suggest that detective fiction was just one male-dominated sphere that now lost its exclusively male nature. Additionally, women had an advantage here inasmuch as writing, particularly the writing of novels, had a long and strong female tradition. Female

⁵⁴ Mowat in Cox II, p. 2

novelists had stood their ground for more than a hundred years before the emergence of the female detective novelist, so that any woman aspiring to write detective fiction could pervade the genre from the firm basis of an established and accepted form.

III Biographical Aspects

On first sight, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers have very little in common. They both loved music and were talented musicians themselves; and they both wrote detective fiction. Beyond that, a surface study of their respective biographies reveals few similarities. However, their fiction and the close proximity of time in which it was published provides sufficient connection to justify linking the two women in a study. They were, and are, the two most popular women authors of detective fiction.

In her *Unpopular Opinions*, Sayers once said that an author's work should be judged fifty years after it was written; more than seventy years have passed since the first two novels of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers were published, and their ongoing success both in sales figures and in appreciation designates them as hallmarks of the genre. Whereas many detective novels and short stories equally popular in the nineteen-twenties have sunk into obscurity and are known only to the most ardent devotee, Christie and Sayers are still household names. The era of their budding productivity has become known as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, and in hindsight if not by contemporary standards, this era was dominated by those two authors and, to a lesser degree, by Margery Allingham, Josephine Tey and Ngaio Marsh.

As the most influential and earliest representation of that ever-growing group of female detective novelists, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers occupy the central place in a study of early women writers in that field. Taken both separately and jointly, they necessarily enlighten the emergence of the female detective author. To some extent, they were products of their time, and their literature, as a reflection of their personalities, is also a product of their time. As I have pointed out above, the significance of their personal development cannot be ignored. In the following, I will therefore summarise the biographical material available on each author. In the next paragraph, I will then compare the two seemingly so different women with regards to their individual and literary development. Finally, the salient points of the chapter are again embedded into the overall inquiry into the factors that enabled these particular women to rise to the height of fame at that particular time writing novels and short stories of that particular genre.

The abundance of biographical material makes it almost impossible to spread attention equally amongst the published works; I have therefore concentrated on extracting quotes only from a limited number of biographies, ascertaining as I went that authors largely agree on the salient points.

1 Agatha Christie (1890-1976)

Agatha May Clarissa Miller was born on September 15, 1890, in Torquay, to Frederick and Clarissa Miller. Her father was an American with a sufficient income from his family's business, so she was essentially brought up to be a middle-class lady. She did not attend school until she was sent to Paris at the age of sixteen, but was taught by her mother and a number of governesses. Frederick Miller died when his youngest child was eleven, and the family's prosperity diminished somewhat, but her mother, brother and sister were still able to live comfortably. After finishing school, Agatha Miller accompanied her mother on a three-months' trip to Egypt; she was described as an attractive young woman, with plenty of admirers and suitors in the circle of eligible bachelors of Cairo, but since she was "[...] her mother's only comfort and companion [...]"⁵⁵, she took none of the proposals of marriage seriously. She returned to Torquay and lived with her mother, even then using her spare time to write short stories and poems, the latter of which were lyrical enough and won a few prizes, but her efforts seemed to have been undistinguished otherwise. Even so, her first novel, *Snow upon the Desert*, was sent to Eden Philpotts, a contemporary popular author, who encouraged her and recommended her great feeling for dialogue. Philpotts literary agent, Hughes Massie, though critical of *Snow upon the Desert*, advised her to "[...] begin another."⁵⁶

On Christmas Eve 1914, Agatha Miller married Archibald Christie, a Captain in the Royal Flying Corps. They had a daughter, Rosalind, born in 1919. While Captain Christie went to war two days after the wedding, Agatha Christie began working at the Torquay Hospital, first as a nurse and then as the dispenser; it is noted by all her biographers that her work in the hospital's dispensary gave her the accurate knowledge of drugs and poisons that she later used to so much advantage in her detective fiction.

⁵⁵ Osborne, Charles *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*, London, 1982, p. 9

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 10

Christie's first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, though published only in 1920, was already written by the end of the war. From 1916 onwards, prompted by her older sister Marjorie, she plotted, outlined and wrote her first attempt at the genre, a novel which was to introduce Hercule Poirot, the Watsonian Hastings and the method of 'the least-likely suspect', thus comprising as early as then almost all the ingredients of her unequalled success. All in all, she was destined to write at least one full novel every year for the rest of her career, sometimes two and a number of short stories, and though her work included five thrillers, her straightforward detective puzzles, classical 'whodunits', were the core of her work. According to the Oxford Companion to English Literature, her "[...] prodigious international success seems due to her matchless ingenuity in contriving plots, sustaining suspense and misdirecting the reader, to her ear for dialogue, and brisk, unsentimental commonsense and humour. Her style is undistinguished and her characterization slight, but sufficient for the exigencies of the form."⁵⁷ This is already obvious in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, where she rules out the most likely subject very early in the novel, thus making him the least likely subject, only to explode his alibi in the end.

She achieved the undoubtedly most successful misdirecting of readers in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*; in fact, the ingenuity of this novel's plot, conceived as unequalled and brilliant by her admirers and as foul play in the highest degree by her critics, rocketed her then moderate sales and gave her the publicity necessary to launch her career in earnest.

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd hit the bookstores in 1926, the same year in which her marriage with Archibald Christie broke up. Following her husband's revelation that he intended to marry someone else and his request for divorce, Agatha Christie vanished "[...] in mysterious circumstances worthy of one of her crime novels."⁵⁸ Her disappearance lasted almost two weeks, and outshone the publicity that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* had reaped. She was found in a hotel in Harrogate, registered under the name of her husband's lover, and no unequivocal explanation was ever produced. It seems most likely that she needed a break from her crumbling marriage, that she "[...] was in a condition of considerable mental turmoil [...]" and "[...] staged her disappearance in such a way as to cause the maximum distress to the man whom she loved and who had caused her such

⁵⁷ The Oxford Companion to English Literature, 5th Edition, Oxford, 1985, p. 196

⁵⁸ Osborne, op. cit., p. 38

anguish."⁵⁹ He, in the best tradition of detective fiction, was covertly suspected of having murdered his wife; if the assumptions about the reason for her disappearance are correct, this may have given her a certain amount of satisfaction. The most unlikely explanation for her disappearance would be her desire to create publicity. On the one hand, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* provided her with plenty of that, and on the other hand, she was unanimously described as very shy, shunning public appearances and avoiding the spotlight whenever she could. Be that as it may, she resurfaced a fortnight later, and the separation from her husband went through.

Christie's divorce did not interrupt her writing career for very long; in 1929, another thriller, *The Seven Dials Mystery*, was published, and from then on, every year saw at least one of her novels hitting the bookstores. With *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, her name had become familiar enough to make every single one of them a financial success, though few are as ingenuous as this. In 1930, two people entered Agatha Christie's life; she met the archaeologist Max Mallowan, fourteen years younger than she was and determined to marry her. And, in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, she introduced her readers to Miss Jane Marple, who is "[...] inquisitive, has a good memory, a rather sour opinion of human nature (though she would deny this) and a habit of solving problems by analogy."⁶⁰ Even though Miss Marple features in only twelve full-length novels and thus always takes second place to Poirot's eminence, she is better remembered than the limited amount of her cases suggest, for she is almost as popular as Poirot, maybe even more so. She is definitely more human, and apparently easier to cast on celluloid; or rather, when choosing an actor to play her role, there is a tendency to ignore her physical description, that is even more pronounced than the disregard Poirot's portayal suffers.

Through her marriage to an archaeologist, Christie became a traveller. She had always been fascinated by foreign countries, and now she accompanied Mallowan on his expeditions and gathered a lot of local colour for novels such as *Death on the Nile*, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, two Poirot mysteries, or *They Came to Baghdad*, one of Christie's few thrillers. The union was apparently a very happy one, and Mallowan was enough of a celebrity in his own field not to envy his wife's success; he was, after all, a fellow of All Souls, a Professor Emeritus of Western Asiatic Archaeology at the University of London, a Trustee of the British Museum

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 42

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 53

and a knight of the United Kingdom.⁶¹ He accompanied her on opening nights and anniversaries of *The Mousetrap*, and when he died in 1978, two and a half years later than his wife, he was buried next to her.

Christie's productivity did not cease until the age of eighty-two, four years before her death on January 12, 1976. By then, the body of her works had reached a staggering amount of 83 novels, short story compilations and plays. It has been translated into 103 languages, and a curious statistical information instructs us that almost half of all the passengers travelling on United Airlines carry an Agatha Christie novel.⁶² By 1977, the number of hardcover versions of her novels sold in the United States since 1923 had reached forty-eight million, and the number paperback issues exceeds this manifold.⁶³ Her novels were the alleged favourites of Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth II, and the Queen Mother, and in 1956, her career reached one of its peaks when she was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. She died as the undisputed First Lady of Crime, and there is no indication that this title might be successfully challenged in the foreseeable future.

In some respects, Christie's life was a very conventional one. She was raised as a middle-class woman typical of her time. Though her older sister profited from her mother's enthusiasm for education for girls and went to what was later known as Roedean High School in Brighton, Agatha Miller never had any formal education. Her mother had changed her mind and decided that no child "[...] ought to be allowed to read until it was eight years old."⁶⁴ Christie learnt to read when she was five, but only through her own effort. In time, she also learnt to write, and her father taught her basic arithmetics. All in all, Christie grew up as though academic openings for women were still non-existent. Her musical talent was very much advanced, and at one time she contemplated a career as a professional singer, but her voice, though fine, was not strong enough for the stage. An equally considered career as a concert pianist was discouraged on the grounds that her nervous constitution and her shyness would not carry her through the efforts of public performances.⁶⁵

When the war reached Great Britain in earnest and all its seriousness and severity became apparent, Christie joined the throng of women who went into

⁶¹ cf. Gilbert, Michael 'A Very English Lady' in Keating, H.R.F. (ed.) *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, London, 1977, p. 62

⁶² Lathen, Emma 'Cornwallis's Revenge' in Keating, op. cit., p. 82

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 81

⁶⁴ Christie, Agatha *An Autobiography*, Glasgow, 1978, p. 24

⁶⁵ Gilbert, Michael, op. cit., p. 51

voluntary nursing, and eventually worked in a hospital dispensary. This was her only excursion into regular wage labour, and since nursing is a traditionally feminine sphere of employment, her experience is in no way unusual or progressive; working as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse in a hospital, even as a dispenser, is very much in keeping with contemporary conventional ideas about women's place in society.

Her private life, too, did not deviate much from the regular. Married at the age of twenty-four, she may have been a little on the older side, but she was never in danger to suffer that dreaded fate of being an old maid. The marriage, through little fault of her own, lasted only twelve years, and when she married again, her husband was fourteen years her junior. The discrepancy of age caused her to hesitate before accepting his proposal, and it was perhaps only her own standing as a well-known author as well as her forty years of experience that helped her overcome her doubts. It is certain, anyway, that she resented the allusion that her age was the main attraction to Mallowan, and she certainly never quipped that 'the older the body, the more attractive it becomes to an archaeologist.'⁶⁶

Yet this conventional middle-class lady was, and still is, one of the best-selling authors of detective fiction world-wide. Her novels have been translated into more languages than Shakespeare's dramas, her plays and the movies based on her works are box-office hits. It is difficult to imagine any show that will outrun *The Mousetrap*, a play continually filling theatres in London's West End since 1952. She is universally acknowledged as "the First Lady of Crime". Her success, at least, is anything but conventional.

2 Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)

Dorothy Leigh Sayers was born on 13 June, 1893, in Oxford; her father, Henry Sayers, MA, was then chaplain to Christ Church College and headmaster of the Cathedral Choir School. Her mother, Helen Mary Leigh Sayers, is described as a lively, self-educated and "[...] a woman of exceptional intellect [...]"⁶⁷. Dorothy was their only daughter, and the family's move to the desolated Fenlands in 1897 deprived her of any playmates equal in age. Consequently, she transferred her energies towards inventing her own friends or procuring them out of the pages of

⁶⁶ cf. Ramsey, G.C. *Agatha Christie: Mistress of Mysteries*, London, 1968, p. 30

⁶⁷ Coomes, David *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life*, Oxford, 1992, p. 28

books. She could read by the age of four, and her parents and a series of governesses instructed her in Latin, French and German; with Latin, and later Greek, came classical history, and in a family where both parents were religious, though not devout, and highly musical, this part of Sayers' education ensued almost naturally. Her familiarity with literature and her delight in language, be it English, French or Latin, her deeply religious and scholastically argued theology, have their roots in this rather haphazard early education.

At the age of sixteen, Sayers' parents sent her to Godolphin Boarding School in Salisbury. Academically, the other students there were no match for her, but her isolated youth, her intellectual superiority (of which she was rather too aware) and her non-conformist interests in, for example, medieval romantic literature, singled her out and made her a social failure. Sayers' biographers agree that she was predominantly unhappy during her two years at Godolphin. Being the school's outsider, however, furthered her difference into eccentricity; she obviously considered it preferable to be seen as consciously setting herself apart rather than being outcast against her will. Thus her taste in dress became, and remained, quite exotic, her manner and speech more pronouncedly arrogant, and her musical and literary interests as unusual as possible.

Her role as the odd woman out, though to some extent suitable to her personality, clashed painfully with her need to be accepted and liked. In the conformist atmosphere of a girls' boarding school, her chances for social approval were slim if not non-existent. All this changed when her academic achievements secured her the coveted Gilchrist Scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford, where she read Modern Languages. Even though Oxford University, at that time, did not award degrees to women, she was, as a scholar, obliged to take a degree course and to read for honours, thus qualifying in theory for an award that was, in practice, inaccessible to her. When, on the other hand, women were finally admitted as full members of academe, she was one of the first women to receive a University degree. As a matter of curious fact, she obtained two degrees in a matter of minutes, for she qualified for both the Bachelor of Arts and the Master of Arts titles.

More importantly, however, Oxford suited her in every possible way; academically, she excelled as usual, and socially she was for once an eccentric in a group of people comprising an almost infinite variety of eccentricity. She joined various college and University activities, such as the Bach Choir, founded the

Mutual Appreciation Society, staged the Going Down Play, found friends which were to remain with her for the rest of her life, and always referred to Oxford with the loving, longing sentimentality that also echoes through her greatest tribute to the university, her novel *Gaudy Night*.

The blissful happiness of life in Oxford could not last long, however. After three years, Sayers went down in 1915 and took up a teaching post in Hull. Teaching and the constrained atmosphere of a girls' high school irritated Sayers, but she tried to make the best of it for almost a year. When Basil Blackwell, an Oxford printer who had just published Sayers' first volume of poetry, offered to apprentice her, she returned to the town she loved so well. She rejoined the Bach Choir and met again her University friends, while at the same time learning the publisher's business from every conceivable angle. As one of her biographers put it:

"She must have been happy; otherwise, not even Sayers would have marched down the High, singing 'Fling wide the gates, for the saviour waits'."⁶⁸

During those two years, she continued writing poetry, translated a French poet's twelfth century work and submitted short stories and essays to various magazines. She also fell in love with a young man named Eric Whelpton, invalided out of the army. With undergraduates flooding Oxford once more after the end of the war, accommodation became a rarity, and employment followed suit. Whelpton left Oxford to teach in France, leaving Sayers miserable, and Blackwell dismissed her as he abandoned his poetry line and concentrated on the publication of school books. Just as the future looked bleaker than it ever had, Whelpton offered her the post of his administrative assistant at Les Roches. Working together seemed to have dampened their relationship to a certain degree, but when Whelpton got engaged to somebody else, it was a devastating blow to Sayers who did not, perhaps could not see that he had only, at most, a passing fancy for her. She went down with mumps and a recurrence of alopecia; she could not stay in France, nor could she return to Oxford "which had failed her as do all revisited haunts of youth."⁶⁹ Instead, she moved to London, a city she later described thus:

"To the person who has anything to conceal - to the person who wants to lose his identity as one leaf among the leaves of a forest - to the person who asks no more than to pass by and be forgotten, there is one name above others which promises a haven of safety and oblivion. London."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 63

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 75

⁷⁰ Sayers, Dorothy *Unnatural Death*, London, 1989, p. 190

After going up to Oxford briefly to receive her degree in 1920, she settled in London and began seeking employment. Despite her brand-new academic credentials, however, this proved to be more difficult than she had expected, and she had to take up minor teaching posts to survive. While thus marking time, she also started her first detective novel, creating Lord Peter Death Bredon Wimsey, unaware that he was to be her ticket out of financial insecurity. Before *Whose Body?*, originally titled *The Singular Adventure of the Man with the Golden Pince-Nez*, was published, however, Sayers had eventually found permanent and surprisingly satisfactory employment at Benson's, then Britain's largest and most progressive advertising agency. Her life and work at Benson's, salaried at a stable though unimpressive four pounds a week, is reflected in her 1933 novel *Murder Must Advertise*. Through Lord Peter Wimsey, she describes a copywriter's daily work:

"The copy department on the whole worked happily together, writing each other's headlines in a helpful spirit and invading each other's rooms at all hours of the day. [...] he found the department a curiously friendly place. And it talked. Bredon had never in his life encountered a set of people with such active tongues and so much apparent leisure for gossip. It was a miracle that any work ever got done, though somehow it did. [...] The atmosphere suited him well enough."⁷¹

Actually, Wimsey states that this atmosphere reminded him of his Oxford days, and it is fairly safe to assume that this sentiment stems from his creator.

Whose Body? was, as first novels rarely are, a financial success. With publication in the United States and the serialisation in *People's Magazine*, money was not an existential problem any more, and the continued success of her novels cemented Sayers' financial security. In private life, things did not turn out to be as safe. She had a devastating relationship with a Russian-American novelist who left her in October 1922. In April 1923, Sayers became pregnant by a still unidentified man; their relationship appears to have been entirely physical, and even though the father refused any share in responsibility, Sayers' religiosity prevented her from aborting the child. John Anthony was placed, after his birth, with Sayers' friend and cousin Ivy Shrimpton, and her pregnancy and deliverance were successfully kept secret. Her motherhood became known only after her death in 1957, and even then only to her closest friends. Sayers visited her son off and on and provided all his

⁷¹ Sayers, Dorothy *Murder Must Advertise*, London, 1985, p. 33

financial needs with scrupulous regularity. She never lived with him, and when she married the journalist Oswald Atherton Fleming in 1925, he strictly refused to share his home with another man's child.

Her marriage failed just as all her previous relationships had; she had a tendency to choose men who could not invest as much emotion into her as she was prepared to invest into them. Sayers was Fleming's second wife, and their shared professional interest in writing and crime (he was special correspondent for motor-sports and crime to the *News of the World*) might have provided sufficient common ground for the marriage to be happy. In the continuing depression, however, he lost his job and succumbed to alcoholism. He saw his situation as further aggravated by his wife's on-going professional success, and his descent into failure accelerated consistently until his death in 1949.

Sayers' private turmoil, on the other hand, was not mirrored in her professional life. Her novels and short stories continued to attract a large number of readers, and maybe her work provided a refuge from emotional disappointments. She quit Benson's in 1930, becoming "[...] effectively that rare bird, a self-supporting free-lance writer [...]"⁷² Opinions vary on what her best novel is, but in summary, the list of contenders consists of *The Documents in the Case*, *Murder Must Advertise*, *The Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night*. Since each of them embodies characteristics of plot and style, background and cast entirely different from all the others, single and combined, it is almost impossible to compare them analytically, so the choice of favourites is more a question of personal taste than an approximately objective evaluation. All of them, as well as most of her other novels, are "[...] among the classics of the genre, being outstanding for its well-researched backgrounds, distinguished style, observant characterization, and ingenious plotting [...]"⁷³ She contributed more to the development of the genre towards 'serious' literature than any other writer, and her last full-length novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, is so much more a comedy of manners than a detective story that Sayers subtitled it 'a love story with detective interruptions'.

Having provided her detective with a love interest and eventually a wife, she abandoned Lord Peter Wimsey in 1939 with two final short stories, 'The Haunted Policeman' and 'Talboys'. To say that she then turned towards religious playwriting would imply a shift of interest towards a field entirely unrelated to her former work of detective fiction, whereas it is much more apt to say that her religious plays are

⁷² Kenney, Catherine *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers*, Kent, Ohio, 1990, p. 6

⁷³ The Oxford Companion to English Literature, op. cit., p. 870

a natural extension of her novels. Religiosity permeates even that allegedly light genre of detection, and the success of her plays is based mainly on the experienced handling of story-telling that made her novels so popular. Even though her biographers do not dwell on her sales figures or the number of languages into which her novels have been translated (they are probably negligible compared to Agatha Christie's), she is nonetheless remembered as one of the most eminent authors of detective fiction in its history. The Oxford Companion to English Literature points out that "[...] her learning, wit, and pugnacious personality made her a formidable theological polemicist"⁷⁴, and these qualities, additional to her "[...] fertility of invention, ingenuity and a wonderful eye for detail"⁷⁵, should be held responsible for her success in either field. Even though her religious plays are almost forgotten today compared to her novels, at the time of publication, usually through the BBC's broadcasting, they were smash hits.

3 Similarities and Differences

For the purpose of this treatise, it is necessary to take a comparative look at Christie and Sayers. The first striking correspondence between these women is the fact that they are the two earliest female authors of detective fiction whose fame outlasted almost any other detective novelist of their time, but also of earlier and later authors. On the basis of this distinction, the question underlying this study, namely what enabled women to emerge as eminently successful authors of classic crime novels after the First World War, developed; therefore, some aspects of their respective biographies have to be analytically merged to explain this phenomenon.

The first striking similarities between Christie and Sayers can be found in their childhoods. Both authors are described as being comparatively solitary girls; in modern times, where a large number of peers are thought to be necessary to provide a healthy and satisfactory environment for children, Christie's and Sayers' childhoods would be described as lonely. They both had few friends of their own age and spent their time either in adult company or with themselves.

Then again, loneliness may be called solitude, and the negative connotations of a state of isolation may be changed into a positive image of a quiet sanctuary. While playmates of one's own age are an important requisite for the process of

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 870

⁷⁵ Ruth Rendell, as quoted on most of the Coronet Crime editions of Sayers' books

growing up, solitude can increase self-sufficiency, introspection and imagination; at least, it did for Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. In their autobiographical work, they both describe that they compensated their lack of playmates by filling their days with imaginary friends. For Christie, it was first *The Kittens*, then *The Girls* in her fantasy school, and for Sayers, it was a wide range of fictitious characters, including some taken from novels such as *The Three Musketeers*. Their vivid imagination and extensive reading of almost everything within their range is sufficiently akin that it is worth mentioning in the context of this treatise.

The undeniable drawback of a solitary childhood is the lack of exercise in the art of social interaction; here, yet again, the two women resemble each other. Both were shy as children, though they developed different techniques to handle their timidity. Christie "[...] sought to avoid any publicity whatsoever, and would not even let her publishers print her portrait with her books."⁷⁶ Sayers, on the other hand, defended herself by becoming extroverted, boisterous and eccentric in order to mask noisily what was in fact "[...] an essentially shy woman [...]"⁷⁷

However, I suggest that solitude did, to some extent, contribute to their respective choice of careers. Obviously, other factors influenced that choice, as many children are solitary and imaginative without becoming world-famous authors of detective or any other fiction. Aside from those elusive concepts like 'calling' or 'talent', one of those factors might be an early propensity to creating characters and to telling stories. This partiality to story-telling is also common to both Christie and Sayers, and the early training proved helpful in later life.

Imagination, bred by seclusion or not, and a talent for inventing stories may be prerequisites for any writer's career, but the range of available genres would still be open and attractive for anyone with this inclination. In the case of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, then, it is necessary not only to look at some aspects of their development towards writers, but to search for those similarities that made them authors of detective fiction.

As I will analyse in more detail in chapter IV, the detective story in its classical form is essentially conservative. It creates what has been termed 'Mayhem Parva' by students of Christie's fiction. Fundamentally, Mayhem Parva is the epitome of order; in the context of Agatha Christie, it is a village or any other closely confined community, regulated, law-abiding, peaceful and stable. This community is interrupted by crime, preferably murder as the most extreme kind of crime,

⁷⁶ Ramsay, op. cit., p. 27

⁷⁷ Coomes, op. cit., p. 26

whereupon a detective enters the scene, investigates the crime and restores order. (This restoration of status quo is a very important concept, and I will elaborate its significance later.) In a wider sense, this system applies to Sayers novels as well, though her settings are less physically regulated. Christie's world of fiction is "[...] shut off from the political and social preoccupations of the day. It cares little about what happens in London, and Europe might not exist for all it cares. It is a world on which the nineteenth century has made little impact, and which accepts the twentieth century only slowly and grudgingly."⁷⁸ Sayers includes almost everything of contemporary interest (indeed, this is one of the characteristics that make her so enjoyable), from modern advertising to *Bright Young People*, from education for women to the League of Nations, from free love to Communism. The order of her world is represented in the elements of the puzzle, not so much in its outside circumstances. Hers is "[...] a view that endorses the traditional values of order and civility, as well as the concepts of personal responsibility and justifiable limits to human behavior."⁷⁹

In that sense, Christie's outside and Sayers' inside 'Mayhem Parva' was "[...] a flat representation of a community blessed with contentedness and regulated by what people who do not much care for explorative thought call 'common sense'. It featured neither dramatic heights nor chasms of desperation, just the neat little hedges of the maze, the puzzle, whose centre awaited a mysterious figure labelled Murderer."⁸⁰ In both cases, the disrupted order is restored by the end of the novel, and although "[...] the great detective, as an amateur, generally works outside the law, he does not work against it or seek to rend the basic social fabric. This essential conservatism informs most detective fiction, at least in England."⁸¹ A detective is "[...] dedicated to the righting of wrong (the trade of our national saint, no less) and to the defence of property and social order."⁸² The return to stability is the basic notion that underlies the classic detective story of this genre's Golden Age. In that sense, it supports a very conservative value system.

For different reasons and with a different background, both Christie and Sayers were essentially middle-class women. Christie's father, living on money earned by a family estate and later ruined by his trustee's mismanagement of financial affairs, emerges in her biographies as a prototypical gentleman of leisure. He attended his

⁷⁸ Barnard, Robert *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, London, 1980, p. 34

⁷⁹ Kenney, op. cit., p. 15

⁸⁰ Watson, Colin 'The Message of Mayhem Parva' in Keating, op. cit., p. 110

⁸¹ Kenney, op. cit., p. 15

⁸² Watson in Keating, op. cit., p. 99

clubs, played croquet and never needed to work for a salary. The only time he tried, shortly before his death in 1901, he failed because of his lack of qualification. His wife is described as a sociable, intelligent and bright woman who might have, in later times and with more education, taken up any career she chose. Being a Victorian, however, she dedicated her wits to the education of her children, garden parties and social welfare work - again, typical upper middle-class occupations. Thus Christie grew up within precisely that conservative value system that characterises the detective novel, and she remained within that system, embracing it with full conviction and dedication, throughout her career. In her fiction, particularly in her early thrillers which she always claimed to have enjoyed more than the meticulous plotting of straight 'whodunits', the impression is given "[...] that the modern world has caught up with their middle-middle-class characters, but that *they* have scarcely caught up with it. Their attitudes and ideals are still aggressively Edwardian."⁸³ And so, one might add, are the attitudes and ideals of their creator.

Sayers' background was slightly different. Her father was a scholar, a teacher and a clergyman, thus existing fully in the realms of the gentry; church and the universities were always accepted, prestigious professions for those whose social class was high enough to render any trade demeaning. Though his income, typically, could not cover the life-style necessary to maintain upper-class standards, the Sayers's provided themselves with as many paraphernalia of nobility as possible. Servants, nurses, governesses were just as normal for the upper-class gentleman Henry Sayers as thorough classical education for his daughter was for the scholar. More importantly, however, and quite independent from her class background, Sayers, as "[...] the only child of an Anglican minister, held deep religious convictions, and once was almost as well-known for her religious plays and translation of Dante as she was for her mysteries."⁸⁴ This is the most relevant legacy of Henry Sayers to his daughter; it is the backbone of her value system, which is traditionalistically Christian (without being unduly dogmatic), deeply religious and conservative.

It is necessary to add in this context that the term 'conservative' in connection to Christie and Sayers does not so much denote a political orientation, though that, too, is to some degree espoused by both. More relevantly, however, it denotes an identification with traditional values such as Christianity, responsibility, integrity,

⁸³ Barnard, op. cit., pp. 21

⁸⁴ Lewis, Terrance L. *Dorothy L. Sayers' Wimsey and Interwar British Society*, Lewiston, 1994, p. 113

lawfulness and justice. As indicated above, these are, sometimes more, sometimes less, the foundations on which a detective story, for all its suspense, light-handed style and clear 'fun' is essentially based⁸⁵. Again without excluding anyone lacking Christie's or Sayers' background from producing first-class detective fiction and without eliminating other reasons for their choice of genre, I would propose the conservatism of their respective upbringing as an important factor in that decision.

Additionally, the war years had thoroughly opened the publishing market for enterprising women. Since many male writers were, as other men, enlisting in the armed forces, publishers suffered from a lack of possible authors. More women could penetrate beyond the critical eyes of the editors who were seeking material for circulation. By the same token, the want of novels by established male authors forced those concerned with the dissemination of printed works, such as book-sellers, but also critics to turn their attention towards other possible sources. Thus it is, for example, equally significant, at least for Sayers whose financial situation when commencing her writing career was less than satisfactory, that detective fiction sold.

No matter how much weight one attaches to the similarities between the two authors, the differences must not be overlooked. Agatha Christie, after her conventional childhood, continued to lead a comparatively conventional life. Apart from the admittedly vast extraordinariness that came with her success as a writer, her private life remained well within the boundaries of custom.

Sayers' life, on the other hand, constituted anything but ordinariness; her talent for and accomplishment in foreign languages, her academic achievements, her son born out of wedlock, the lateness of her marriage and her turn towards writing Christian plays for radio broadcasting earmark her, from a very early age until her death, as a more than unusual woman. She was, though to some degree more by necessity than by choice, an eccentric.

I propose that the two authors' difference is mirrored in their fiction, or rather, in the attitude that each expressed towards it. Christie always called her novels and short stories an exercise of craft, and though she was unparalleled in the execution of this craft, she never had any claims to literary ambitions, and rightly so. Her

⁸⁵ For further elaboration, cf. IV, 1.2, p. 48

stories, long and short, are pure puzzles, and though they are humorous and remarkable for their dialogues, they are memorable mainly for their ingenuous plots. Re-reading them, one might marvel again at Christie's dexterity in working out an intricate crime, hiding all the clues in plain view and then startling her audience with a breathtaking solution, but, provided one had memorised the identity of the murderer, the lack of the original suspense leaves one with a rudimentary, well-written but uninspiring story.

"But none can gainsay that at her frequent best Agatha Christie is easily one of the half dozen most accomplished and entertaining writers in the modern field."⁸⁶

Sayers, while summoning almost as much ingenuity when plotting her novels, takes great care to flesh her fiction with three-dimensional characters, social comment, genuine human relationships and, above all, literary style. She remained avowedly modest about her achievements throughout her life, but her detective fiction is much closer to a comedy of manners than to the pure puzzle. Provided one does not despise Sayers for her increasing disregard for the importance of the whodunit, re-reading her remains pleasurable no matter how familiar one is with her crimes and their solution. Her tendency towards a novel outside the genre of detection culminates in her last full-length Wimsey mystery, which is 'a love story with detective interruptions'. Here, indeed, the identity of the murderer becomes so secondary that one is tempted to forget it altogether; fortunately, Sayers provided the long-standing solution that is so easy to remember: the gardener did it. What remains memorable in her novels more than the identity of the criminal are her penetrating descriptions of even minor characters, be they lovable like the Dowager Duchess or Miss Catherine Climpson (in various books), the Dean of Harriet Vane's college (in *Gaudy Night*) and the Reverend Venables (in *The Nine Tailors*), or antipathetic like Helen of Denver, Wimsey's sister-in-law (she, too, recurs frequently).

"No single trend in the English detective story of the 1920's was more significant than its approach to the literary standards of the legitimate novel. And no author illustrates the trend better than Dorothy Sayers [...], who has been called by some critics the greatest of living writers in the form. Whether or not the reader agrees with this verdict, he can not [...] dispute her preëminence [sic] as one of the most brilliant and prescient artists the genre has yet produced."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Haycraft, Howard, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*, New York, 1968, p. 133

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 135

Thus the major distinction between Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers emerges as the difference between craft, however unparalleled, and art. In second rank, there is also the distinction between talent and education, for where Christie created from an intuitive sense for the right form or word, Sayers brought all her academic training, her classical schooling and her intoxication with language into her novels.

4 Embedment

Each author's individual development, then, is the second factor that qualified Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers to be the first two and most successful writers of classic detective fiction. To summarise the distinctive feature that shaped their characters and their writing, I venture to coin the phrase of the paradox of progressive conservatism. Basically, both authors are almost painfully conservative; in their value system, their religious beliefs, their - in the broadest sense - political convictions, they maintain a perspective of protecting the traditional, the Christian, the conventional. Yet in their fiction, in their unerring way to the highest echelons of detective fiction, in their attitude towards their own success and their attitudes towards their fictional women (as I will show later) they are effortlessly modern. They both take their achievements in a field that only ten years earlier had been a male domain as a matter of course, assuming equality and independence against a society that still tended towards the reactionary. They acknowledged the opposition, but it did not really deter them from their convictions, and the one thing they probably never doubted was their own obvious right to produce precisely the kind of fiction that made them so famous, despite the fact that almost all their colleagues were male, that the genre itself was male-dominated. They not only held their ground but surpassed every single contemporary author of detective fiction. Though seemingly contradictory to their essential conservatism, I contend that in this particular aspect, they asserted their very own, emancipated, independent and manifest progressiveness.

IV Literature

The emergence of the female detective novelist after the First World War is primarily a literary development. The impact of the socio-historical changes and the authors' biographical evolution cannot be denied, but it is the literature that differentiates authors from, say, politicians or athletes. In a study of the emergence of the female politician, the focus would have to be on her political strategies, alliances and beliefs. In a study of one particular aspect of a genre and a form, the central interest must rest with the literary production of that aspect. I have therefore assigned the following chapter which constitutes almost half of the overall treatise, to the discussion of the literature.

Beginning with a short outline of the various forms of detective fiction as they evolved in the first one-hundred years of the genre's existence, I will then continue with a theoretical discussion of the patterns underlying the classic detective story as produced by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. For this analysis, I could not refer to particular examples of secondary literature to quote. Instead, the examination is based on an overall study of the material available. For reference, the entire general bibliography (cf. VI, p. 86) has to be summoned.

In the next paragraph, I will examine the role of women within that pattern and characterise the types of women that occur in the novels. I am aware that the detailed typification unfolded in chapter 2.2 is extensive and descriptive rather than analytical. Nonetheless, I have deliberately chosen to present the data first in an undiluted form before synthesising. I maintain that, in this case, merging description and analysis would have confused the issue. The mosaic character of the thesis determines this approach: the characterisation of women forms one set of threads to be eventually woven into the rope that I trust will prove my thesis. I suggest that it has to be laid out singly in order to clarify the components of that thesis.

In the final synthesis, I will then commence to mesh some strands of literary, biographical and socio-historical aspects. The full composition, however, is postponed towards the conclusion.

1 Theory

As seen in the abundance of term assembled in the introduction of this thesis (cf. p. 7), the categorisation possible under the headword 'crime fiction' varies greatly. Roth⁸⁸ for example does not distinguish between the spy thriller, the hard-boiled detective novel, early detective fiction and classic detective fiction. He emphasises the difference between analytical and hard-boiled detectives but subsumes them under one genre. Others unfold crime fiction into many different sub-genres, where not only the environment, such as spy background, country house setting, American street toughness or the fogs of Baker Street are separated, but also the qualifications of the protagonists, whether they are medically trained or church-affiliated, whether they are aristocrats or professionals, and so on. I have outlined those distinctions I think relevant to the stratification of the genre, and with regard to the patterns discussed in the following, I have confined (or enlarged, as the case may be) the categories to a broad differentiation of four major groups.

1.1 General outline

The development of the detective story, be it in the form of a novel or a short story, has produced a variety of different patterns. In this general outline, I will summarise the four most prominent systems, beginning with the short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and the fiction written by Arthur Conan Doyle or Wilkie Collins, then working through the classics of the genre and the so-called hard-boiled school up to the modern type of detective fiction. The description of techniques employed will be very brief, with the exception of the classic detective story, which receives detailed treatment in section 1.2. The purpose of this outline is to distinguish the fiction relevant to this treatise from other forms of the genre, provided those are strong enough to be comparable to the classics. Important but smaller movements, such as the recent development of lesbian detective fiction, police novels or psychological crime fiction, have been excluded for reasons of space.

The earliest detective fiction of E.A. Poe or Arthur Conan Doyle employed an omniscient detective in direct contrast to an unknowing reader. Its suspense and interest was derived from the setting of an intricate, sometimes scary plot where only the detective was able to understand the mechanisms behind the crime. The reader was kept in the dark until the end of the story, when a dazzling display of

⁸⁸ Roth, Marty *Fair and Foul Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction*, Athens/Georgia and London, 1995

the detective's genius solved the case. Throughout the narrative, the author provided the detective with clues and information that the reader could not access or evaluate, and the success of any given publication relied on the reader's admiration for the detectives and their intellectual brilliance as well as on the degree of surprise in the startling ingenuity of the solution. In some aspects, this type of detective fiction is very close to the Gothic novel; but whereas the Gothic novel remains supernatural throughout, the detective story's initial mysteriousness is solved by ratiocination and reveals itself to be independent of supernatural forces.

In the fiction of authors such as Conan Doyle or Wilkie Collins and, later, Edgar Wallace, who followed the early tradition of the detective story, the fundamental antagonism lay between a single, albeit almost superhuman detective and a rich, powerful, sinister, ruthless and brilliant opponent. Sometimes this opponent would be a single person with unlimited resources of wealth, influence and cunning, sometimes there would be a group of collectively omnipotent villains. Always, the opposition could serve as an epitome of unsurpassed evil, whereas the detective was the essence of brave morality, single-handedly defeating a superior force. Knight imputes this type of fiction with a form of "[...] active male narcissism [...]"⁸⁹ as the hero is an intellectually or physically invincible he-man.

In the classic detective story as it emerged from 1913 (with E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*) onwards, the villains of old became, at worst, ordinary criminals, sometimes even fairly sympathetic. The scale of the cases investigated was drastically reduced; while Moriarty and his fellow-villains would strive for universal power or similar megalomaniac endeavours, the classic detective story confined itself to a manageable amount of murders, usually as few as one, rarely more than a handful. In turn, the detectives became much more human. Even though they still possessed qualities beyond those of ordinary mortals, their overall design was closer to what any reader could believe and relate to. The detectives became fallible, though they were still victorious in the end, and they became prone to a few emotional weaknesses. More often than not, they were just as eccentric as Sherlock Holmes had been, but their creators usually maintained an ironic distance to their follies. Compared to earlier examples of the genre, the story and its characters were almost painfully realistic.

⁸⁹ Knight, Stephen *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, London, 1980, p. 107

Most importantly, however, the classic detective story followed a set of rules that enabled the reader, in theory at least, to be just as well-informed as the detective. By silent, implicit agreement at first, later following a written codex that was only superficially jocular, the authors of classic detective fiction were admonished to play fair with their audience. Clues were supposed to be available to those observant enough to find them; the accomplished author would hide them in plain view and construct a narrative that was in itself captivating enough to deter the reader's sleuthing instincts. Methods and motives were supposed to be understandable, everything had to be life-sized. The purest detective fiction followed the same principles as the immensely popular new adult game, the puzzle. (For further analysis of the classic detective story, cf. the following paragraph)

To generalise, these two types of detective fiction are based on the belief that the world as a whole is an ordered place infrequently thrown out of balance by a crime and immediately restored to order by the detective.

At roughly the same time, in the late 1920s, authors of detective fiction in the United States produced what is by now officially known as the hard-boiled private investigator. In this sub-genre, the early form of the detective story is, to a certain extent, resurrected. Again, there is a single person, the private eye, who faces the evils of the world. The detective is superhuman, though not in his intellectual capacities but in his ability to endure bone-shattering violence and deadly amounts of alcohol. He (and only recently have P.I.'s been allowed to be female) stands outside society, scorns the police and has a very individual notion of justice. In this, he resembles the detective of the early years. He solves the case by asking simple questions, dropping hints at the right places and stirring the criminals out of their hiding places. The murderers usually come to him after he has insinuated vociferously enough that he knows everything. The amount of violence he suffers serves as a clue to the criminals' guilt, and in the end he can hand the whole case over to the despised police. This pattern of detective fiction is based more on the thriller than on the early stories of E.A. Poe or Conan Doyle, and thus has its equivalent in Great Britain in the fiction of Sax Rohmer, Sexton Blake and others who navigate the borderline between detection and thriller. The British tradition, however, never quite lost the tarnish of cheap penny-dreadfuls, whereas the American fiction, in the hands of authors like Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett, achieved literary acclaim and distinction.

Common to all of the patterns described above is the presence of an amateur⁹⁰ detective as opposed to a professional police investigator. The police in these novels or short stories are relegated to subsidiary roles at best, dismissed as clumsy, stupid and slow, or depicted as hostile and corrupt at worst.

Recently, detective fiction has entered a phase where its stratification becomes more difficult, its characteristic features blurred. The straight-forward whodunit in the puzzle form has lost its tenacity. It still exists, but modern authors of detection successfully rely on a much broader variety of patterns. On the whole, it can be said that the superhuman detective has ceased to exist; today, investigators are usually just as confused as the readers. Here, the protagonists are either amateurs or members of the police force. Contrary to the first two patterns described, the world of the hard-boiled detective and the modern investigator is rather chaotic, complex and slightly threatening. If they're lucky, the detectives can find one corner in this perplexing world where order can be restored, namely within the confines of the crime investigated. Sometimes, even that satisfaction is denied to them, and the story elaborates exclusively on the protagonist's struggle against a system she or he cannot control.

These are, in a very condensed form, the four major patterns underlying detective fiction as it developed over the last 150 years. In the following, the classic detective story will be analysed in more detail.

1.2 The pattern of classic detective fiction

Classic detective fiction is conventional and repetitive; the pattern is always the same, and much of its quality is derived from the surprising, though more often than not incomprehensible solution. It has nothing to do with an actual investigation, and its characters have a tendency to be two-dimensional. These are the most common accusations held against the genre, and the critics imply that this divides the popular literature from art.⁹¹ I blasphemously suggest that the same could be said about Shakespeare, whose comedies, for example, are an endless

⁹⁰ I include private investigators as created by the hard-boiled school of detective fiction in this definition, because the decisive difference between an amateur and a professional is access to institutionalised resources and control of an executive force. Both are denied to the amateur and have to be provided by him or her by means of wit and/or money.

⁹¹ Roth, *op. cit.*, Ch. 1 and 2

repetition of the same pattern of love, intrigue, confusion, disguise, and solution; his characters are very much interchangeable, manifestations of idiosyncrasies rather than real people, and the applicability of *Macbeth* to the situation at medieval Scottish courts remains doubtful. Yet I would not dare deny that Shakespeare produced art. By the same token, however, I maintain that detective fiction has a potential to beget works of high literary quality. The difference between 'good' and 'bad' fiction is not so much the mechanism of repetition, but the surrounding flesh of the narrative.

Nonetheless, the patterns underlying a classic detective novel have an important impact on the development of the women writers who are under analysis in this treatise. I have argued that the essential conservatism of the genre relates to the individual conservatism of the authors (cf. III, p. 39). Its repetitiveness is one aspect of this overall conventionality, but more importantly, the pattern of the form and the construction of its contents expresses the adherence to a traditional value system.

The generic structure of detective fiction insists on various formalities; these are what readers recognise and expect. Within these, the authors can develop whatever claims on high art they may subscribe to, but the framework remains relatively inflexible. Thus the genre affixes itself in a scaffold where changes can be brought about only successively and slowly. Both Christie and Sayers, as will be elaborated later, partly escaped the cage of formality, and this is what makes their fiction outstanding, because it is precisely this quality that distinguishes repetitive mass production from first-class detective fiction.

In the following, I will outline the patterns that classic detective fiction follows in order to achieve its generic structure. It is important to point out that these are only the theoretical rules. While every detective story under scrutiny here adheres to the general pattern, small deviations from the law have a significant impact on the quality of the narrative. Basically, every detective story follows the same rule, and thus it might be argued that its devotees could save a lot of time and money if they read only one novel. In fact, readers look forward to and expect those slight differences that make each story unique. The creativity to stay within the form and at the same time stretch it to and beyond its limits is what makes the genre, or at least its better derivations, worth reading. The genre's laws, however, are what makes this exercise worth attempting.

The first principle that governs classic detective fiction is its limitation to rigid boundaries of the textual setting. The device of the locked room where the crime happens can be broadened to apply to the whole text. The narrative is set within very confined circumstances of time, space and/or persons. Be it murder at the country house cut off from civilisation by a storm, or a violent death in an urban flat, one or all of these vectors must be limited. Possible suspects must not, cannot exceed a manageable number, clues must not, cannot be spread out over infinite space, and apprehending the criminal must be an urgent priority. Time must be limited. Politics, society, historical events, the whole world outside these boundaries does not exist, or if it appears, it must remain peripheral. The limitations of the genre and of the actual book prevent anything that is not vitally important to the plot, and the story, to fulfil its purpose and the expectation of the audience, must confine itself to the essentials.

Yet in order to create the confusion that obstructs the readers' insight into the arrangement of clues, unnecessary sidelines must be followed and elaborated, false trails must be laid out and distractions arranged. Striking the balance between these two imperatives is one task that remains solely in each individual author's hand.

The second principle constant in detective fiction is the main character or the combination of the main character and her or his sidekicks. The detectives may or may not be full persons, normally they are not, but their characteristics are instantly recognisable and permanent. As the narrative itself, the detectives must remain within strictly defined boundaries, because they are the steady centre of the plot. Their peculiarities, methods and patterns of ratiocination provide the reader with a guideline to the story, and their type-cast personalities are one of the enticements to the aficionado.

Usually, the detectives are supplied with a set of mannerisms, speech patterns, hobbies, eccentricities, and weaknesses, and these are repeated in every sequel of a serialised fiction. Characters are not supposed to develop, they do not age, and they remain free from outside influences that may shape their personalities. Even their continuous exposure to crime and their experiences with criminals do not alter their perspectives. The only changes allowed to them are those that follow their creator's developments; sometimes, they grow more conservative, sometimes they get modernised with their age, but these changes are slight, they originate outside the text, and the characteristic oddities remain fixed.

Besides providing permanency to a series, the typification of the main character serves another purpose; for the authors, this mechanism releases them from inventing complex characters whose intricate personalities demand ever new twists and developments. Even given a short series of detective novels, such complications would prevent mass production and overpower most authors' imaginations. It is therefore rare that writers of detective fiction experiment with their main characters' dispositions; some do, however, while others avoid the stereotype by casting a new type with every novel or short story.

Normally, however, the author's creativity is channelled into the sidekick. The 'Watsons' of classic detective fiction are given much more space to develop and to succumb to outside influences; they may reflect on the nature of private investigations, they may fall in love, or even leave the series in rather unspectacular ways. All this is denied to the detective. Even though the sidekicks appear often and are almost as expected and demanded as the main character, their range of possible mutations is wider.

All the other characters of each individual novel or short story can vary; murderer and suspects can display any range of emotion, development, psychology, monstrosity or whatever else makes sense within the text. They are cast according to type, but the repetition supplies only the backbone around which the character can be shaped. Minor characters in detective fiction are formed according to their part in the play, and their basic core of stereotypical behaviour makes them to some extent predictable, at least along the lines of the readers' presupposed categories. Actions and utterances that deviate from their stereotypical mould increase the suspicion that the detectives, and the reader with them, might foster, and if the suspicion turns out to be false, other explanations must be found for the unexpected behaviour. At this point, sketchy but, depending on the author's skill, convincing characterisation comes in. The detectives, on the other hand, emerge from their creators' pens fully fledged and almost immutable.

The third principle that is essential to classic detective fiction is its fundamental value system; the world of the narrative is one of ordered stability, and without this permanency, the text would not function. In the fiction that precedes the written text, the community in which a crime is set is small and the individuals predictable, as elaborated above. It is an ordered world of stable relationships and, more often than not, class and caste distinctions, emphasised in some cases by the setting of

the plot in a rural community, where both the landscape and the social structures provide metaphors for that order.

Into this complacent world of a clearly stratified society, then, a crime is introduced. The rules of the narrative almost inevitably demand that the crime should be murder, as the killing of another human is the most hideous of transgressions. The murder, the suspicions, the riddle of the investigation, all this disturbs the order of the community at its very core. While everyone casts wary glances at everybody else, secrets are unearthed, unpleasant events from the past of each suspect uncovered, mistrust grows within the community until the detective solves the problem. During the investigation, the group of possible suspects is shaken out of its content stability, and the effect is one of shock. At the end, however, the pieces fall into place, everything becomes explicable, understandable, and suspicion ceases. The small world is yet again in order.

This sequel of order, disorder, and restored order is what the whole plot of a classic detective story aims for. The structure itself is what made the fiction so successful. The novels followed

"[...] the crucial ideological force of the clue-puzzle, which marshalled the simple skills of a respectable, leisured, reading public and applied them in their own personalised defence system, with an inquiring agent to represent the reader who could only aspire to such observing and ordering powers."⁹²

The ordering powers of the detectives constitute their attraction to an essentially conservative audience. All three principal patterns of the classic detective novel combine to create the stability that underlies the genre.

2 Literary Development

The two authors that form the backbone of this treatise, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, distinguish themselves from the abundance of writers of classic detective fiction not only by their lasting success, but also by their gender. They were the first two women to gain entrance into the male bastion of the genre and remain there unto this day while many male colleagues have vanished. Apart from the factors of socio-historical change and individual, biographical determinants that enabled these two authors to lead the way for many women to follow, the

⁹² Knight, op. cit., p. 107

literature itself, the genre and its form at that time, influenced the successful invasion of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers into the world of detective fiction.⁹³

First and foremost, one has to bear in mind that the genre itself was relatively new. Even given the earliest possible date, 1841 and E.A. Poe's *Murder at the Rue Morgue*, as its birthday, the detective story in 1920 was still young compared to, for example, a comedy of manners. With a less conservative estimate which places the first detective novel (as opposed to Poe's short story) in the year 1868 with the publication of Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, the genre was just over fifty years old when Christie's first novel was published. In extreme, it might even be said that the particular form Christie and Sayers adopted was brand new, as the first classic detective novel had been written just before the war. Thus the genre was relatively free of ossification, and even though all its shapes up to that day had been cast by men, there are no centuries of male traditions to compete with. In this genre, there were still possibilities to explore, developments to promote and new forms to discover; all that could happen within the only literary framework that had a strong female tradition, namely in the shape of a novel. It is interesting to note that both Christie and Sayers produced and published poetry before they embarked on their careers as novelists, and that both failed to become successful poets; it is also remarkable that, once their names had been established through novels, they both successfully attempted to write plays. Poetry and particularly drama were (and still are) male-dominated forms. As with the novel itself, the new form or, in this case, the relatively new genre, suggested itself to those who could not, because of their sex, feel free to compete with the generations of men who had shaped drama and poetry and set its rules. Thus the emergence of the novel saw an advent of great women novelists, and the birth of the classic detective novel brought forth a number of remarkable women writers of detection. The freshness of the genre was one factor that enabled women to succeed in their creative careers.

Another factor within to the literature Christie and Sayers produced that might have, before the war, deterred women from trying their hand at detective fiction was its very subject. Crime, and the violence inherent to it, would have been considered a more than unsuitable topic for women to explore on the rational, detached level that a detective story requires. To a certain extent, women had

⁹³ This paragraph would have fitted smoothly into the biographical study as well, but since it deals with genre-specific features that enabled women to write detective fiction, I have chosen to subsume it under the literary analysis.

already dealt with violence and blood, death and its gory details in the Gothic novels of the 19th century, but the logical, unemotional treatment that murder receives in a detective novel was a new field for women to explore. Additionally to the unseemliness of murder as a subject for a woman's pen, the educational climate of the Victorian and Edwardian era did not encourage the idea that a woman could think along the mathematical lines that the detective novel requires. Society had not credited women with being capable of logic, and the educational opportunities open to women just before and after World War I brought about changes in attitudes towards women (cf. II).

Finally, I suggest that the genre itself helped women writers of detective fiction to counter its critics even before they could utter their reproach. The classic detective novel and its success are based on a purely intellectual game, the puzzle. Elaborate mathematical riddles were the craze of the day, and the detective story as it emerged in the 1920's works on exactly the same principle. Thus the author remains detached from the product which is, after all, only a puzzle broadened to a novel. It is only a game, a pleasant pastime, and behind this entertaining characteristic, any author might hide. With this in the back of their minds, potential critics could be appeased.

3 Fictional Women

"[...] 'Why is it that respectable English women are so good at murder?' In an article about Dorothy L. Sayers, P.D. James, herself a respectable English woman who is extremely good at murder, said that this enquiry is one to which every female writer is accustomed."⁹⁴

As suggested in the chapter above, the classic detective story is, in itself, a very conservative type of literature. Regularity and order both in the form and in the content are the cornerstones of what I would term the 'ideological structure' of the text. Detective novels are, in their very essence, conservative; the attitude of the text, in turn, reflects the mind of the creator. The stories

"[...] not only create an idea (or a hope, or a dream) about controlling crime, but both realise and validate a whole view of the world, one shared by the

⁹⁴ Mann, Jessica *Deadlier than the Male: An Investigation into Feminine Crime Writing*, Newton Abbot and London, 1981, p. 9

people who become the central audience to buy, read and find comfort in a particular variety of crime fiction."⁹⁵

I find it easy to equate the term 'world view' with the expression 'value system' as I have used it above (cf. III, p. 39). The system was one approved by both Christie and Sayers, whose fiction forms the basis of this treatise. This, however, is not only a similarity in their biographical background; I also suggest that the conservative value system endorsed by authors and the form itself is one factor that opened the genre to women writers.

Knight⁹⁶ maintains that one of the reasons for Agatha Christie's success was her appeal to people of her own social and intellectual background, which were essentially women in an upper middle class situation with little formal education. For reasons elaborated in chapter II, these became an exploding reading public, with financial means to afford the novels and/or with access to an increasing number of public libraries. Middle class working women, shop assistants, clerks, secretaries, but also upper middle class women of leisure maintained the sales and lending figures. To these, any classic detective novel might appeal in its conservatism, but they may have "[...] no interest in the active male narcissism common to much crime fiction."⁹⁷ Hercule Poirot (and, for that matter, Lord Peter Wimsey) was a different hero; in fact, he was no hero at all, but a vain little man with a ridiculous moustache and an egg-shaped head, or a rather short man with a parrot face and a clipped speech pattern respectively. 'Effeminate' was one description frequently tacked to both detectives.

Besides the sex of the author, this attraction to the female reading public raises not only the question why respectable English women are so good at writing murder stories, but also why equally respectable English women enjoy reading about murder so much. I suggest that the most important reason is the way in which the hero on the one and the women on the other hand are depicted in the novel. The heroes, obviously, are positive figure; they may be vain, like Poirot, or a 'silly ass' like Lord Peter Wimsey, but they are, in essence, someone to be admired and liked, albeit for different reasons. Sayers has been accused of being actually in love with her protagonist, a notion supported by the introduction of an obvious alter ego in the form of Harriet Vane; if she was, the adoration is transmitted onto the page and similar emotions could be procured in the reader. I doubt that Christie

⁹⁵ Knight, op. cit., p. 2

⁹⁶ Knight, op. cit., pp. 107-134

⁹⁷ Knight, op. cit., p. 107

was in love with Hercule Poirot, but he is described as a trustworthy kind of father figure, which in turn provides the emotional closeness to the audience.

Yet it is not only the heroes that inspire confidence and emotional attachment; it is probably fairly difficult for a female reader to fully identify with a male protagonist. Rather, similarities and a sense of being represented arise from the characterisation of women in the novels. Even though most women do not achieve serial rights like the male detective and usually remain in supportive roles or as suspects, they form an important part in each narrative as well as in the overall work of the authors. They are, depending on the plot, positive or negative, and according to that distinction, to be identified with or to be distanced from.

The relationship between the women in the novel and women within the society that perused the novel is the theme of this paragraph. Plenty has been said about the detectives, but the secondary and sometimes insignificant women in the fiction remain largely neglected or are regarded only in their relation to the detective. Yet if detective fiction "[...] reflects [...] the society in which and for which it was written"⁹⁸, the characterisation of fictional women must bear some likeness to real women. Mann maintains that the crime novel does not try to alter society, and this is certainly true to some extent. However, I suggest that women's role within the novel in comparison to women's role within society is both a reflection of common attitudes and an endeavour to create utopia. This is, again, an instance of the seeming paradox that interlaces the entire treatise.

Since Christie and Sayers cannot be easily cast in the same mould, I will treat their women separately, and combine the findings in a short comparative section. As a matter of fact, another important distinction between the two authors has to be pointed out in this context. Christie, much more than Sayers, still adhered to a tradition of detective fiction based in the mechanisms of Arthur Conan Doyle. In her early detective novels at least, there are still traces of the omnipotent master criminal, of disguises and crime organisations that later became obsolete in classic detective fiction. This has some impact on the character types as they tend to fall short of realistic portrays. I have tried to alleviate the problem by concentrating on those layers that remain when the stereotypes of the genre are removed. I maintain that this does not falsify the analysis by transporting one sub-genre into a different time, but rather reveals a change, an interim state between two forms. Thus it is

⁹⁸ Mann, *op. cit.*, p. 58

noticeable that towards the end of the 1920s, her characterisations become less slight.

Additionally, while selecting only five of Christie's novels which I consider representative of her entire early production⁹⁹, I have chosen to treat Sayers's work as a body, taking eight full-length novels irrespective of the time of their first publication. I have decided on this for two reasons: On the one hand, an important part of a categorisation of Sayers's women will be those who appear more than once, such as Harriet Vane, to illuminate development or constancy respectively. Apart from Miss Marple, Christie has no recurring female characters; her novels' women therefore do not evolve over a continuity of years and books, but occur only once and remain relatively static. On the other hand, Sayers's detective novels end in 1937, a year not too remote from the First World War to blur the important influences, while Christie continued writing far into the 1970s.

Obviously, a catalogue of character types falls prey to a tendency to over-generalise. In typification, I have undoubtedly dismissed nuances for the sake of clarity, and in naming the categories and deciding on its boundaries, simplification moved in. There is also a limit to the depth of the description; emphasising the salient points seemed to me more meaningful than covering the entire range of possible aspects. The need to exemplify types rather than individuals largely excludes the subtler shades of characterisation. Additionally, I have tried to be as brief as possible without omitting significant aspects, thus again distilling the information at the cost of detailed differentiation.

3.1 Agatha Christie

Due to the nature of her stories, the technique of her plots, the most obvious characteristic of women in Agatha Christie's novels is their mysteriousness. There is always the aura of a secret, of an enigma surrounding them. On first sight, this seems to be the fundamental similarity between all the female characters in the novels. However, it has to be borne in mind that the pattern of Christie's detective fiction requires, for one, a strictly limited number of persons, thus also a very limited number of women for each story. Secondly, the mechanism of her plots demands that there is suspicion cast about everyone. With the obvious exception of

⁹⁹ Referring to the first decade of Christie's literary career.

the detective and his helpers, every single character must at least seem to have something to hide. Thus no woman, on first sight, is who she appears to be, and in the course of the novel, various twists and turns further cloud the true nature of her character. It is only towards or at the end that she is fully explained, her actions put into perspective and her motives disclosed. While being essential to the structure of the plot, this device necessarily diminishes the likelihood of in-depth character study. The focus is so absolutely concentrated on creating the mystery that makes her a possible suspect that little energy remains for a detailed portrayal of the woman as she really is (as opposed to who she appears to be). However, in the course of the novels selected for this study, seven categories present themselves. These are, in no particular order, the 'adventurous young heroine', the 'loyal', the 'sacrificing lover', the 'gold-digger', the 'disguised', and the 'benefactor'. Another group of people hardly ever missing are the servants, but they are rarely subjected to the same attention as the other categories, which is why, without omitting them entirely, they do not actually merit a category of their own.

One more superficial layer that has to be stripped away to reach the underlying types is one of attractiveness; most women, indeed most persons in Christie's novels are handsome, beautiful or at least stunningly good-looking. However similar in their outward aspects, however, the manner of attraction, in combination with the mysteriousness, indicates the attitude of the author. Women can be dangerously attractive, sweetly attractive, blindingly attractive or exuberantly attractive. In the following compilation, the differences between the kinds of attraction and the inherent statement about their roles will be analysed.

A frequent figure in Christie's novels¹⁰⁰ is the 'adventurous young heroine'¹⁰¹. Both in the detective stories and in thrillers, but particularly in the latter, she is a central female character. Usually, she is not stunningly attractive, but rather unthreateningly pleasing and pretty. She is described as having "particularly good legs"¹⁰² or "beautiful eyes"¹⁰³, but rarely as exceptionally beautiful. She is plucky, self-confident, intelligent and independent. Her position in life varies, but normally her financial situation is indifferent, at least on the outset of the novel. When she

¹⁰⁰ Note that I refer only to the limited number of novels under analysis here.

¹⁰¹ Anna Benningfeld in *The Man in the Brown Suit*, Katherine Grey in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, Cinderella Duveen in *Murder on the Links*; apparently, the stereotype of the 'adventurous young heroine' is not taken too seriously, at least in its purest thriller form, for Anna Benningfeld, even in her own story, is equipped with her own parody, Pamela, of episodically cinematic fame.

¹⁰² Christie, Agatha *The Man in the Brown Suit*, New York, 1984, p. 70

¹⁰³ Christie, Agatha *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, London, 1964, p. 41

features as a heroine, her life is described as useful but rather boring until an extraordinary event changes her situation completely; she is released from her confinement as companion, dutiful daughter or the like and sets out to seek excitement. Sometimes she actively searches for the thrill of the mystery, but in the detective novels, it is more likely that the excitement she wants consists of travelling or a change of circumstances which in turn entails her involvement with the crime. Whatever the way in which she meets her adventure, however, she faces it courageously and either solves the mystery herself (in the thrillers) or ably assists the detective. In this position, she is invariably above suspicion.

In a supporting role, her situation is slightly different. Then, she is not crucial to the solution of the mystery but rather a part of the overall riddle, and thus, sooner or later, one of the suspects, though rarely the perpetrator. In both cases, however, she carries a very positive connotation and is a readily available identification figure. Since almost every man around her is bound to fall in love with her, she more often than not marries at the end of the novel. It is a common feature of the 'adventurous young heroine' that she will find the perfect husband in the course of the novel, and he will find her. Though this terminates her independence, she cheerfully relinquishes it for the sake of true, romantic, passionate love. Again, this motif is more pronounced in the thrillers than in the detective novels, but the love interest and its assumed perfection is never missing. Christie takes care, however, to suit the man to the 'adventurous young heroine', and he is normally an excellent match.

Another completely positive figure in Christie's early novels is the 'loyal'¹⁰⁴. She is loyal either to her husband, her son (though he is undesirable)¹⁰⁵, her fiancé (though she loves another)¹⁰⁶. Usually, however, she is a loyal spouse; though she may appear indifferent to her husband, seemingly believing rumours about his infidelity or any other misbehaviour of his, she is, in fact, ardently devoted to him and would go to any length to clear his name or save his life. The two representatives of this category, Mary Cavendish and Mrs. Renault, are indeed model specimen of the type. One's husband is suspected of having murdered his step-mother, and she rushes to his defence; the other's husband is a reformed criminal, and she helps him stage his own death and disappearance, at the cost of being herself suspected. These women possess a steely self-control which is put

¹⁰⁴ Mary Cavendish in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Mrs. Renault in *Murder on the Links*

¹⁰⁵ Miss Russell in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

¹⁰⁶ Flora Ackroyd in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

entirely at the disposal of their husbands, and their portray summons the reader's admiration. Even the detective exerts himself in protecting them and abetting their task - provided that the respective husband is not the perpetrator, which he invariably fails to be.

Similar to the 'loyal' though not as unequivocally positive is the 'sacrificing lover'¹⁰⁷. She is usually younger than the women of the former category, and more idealistic. Thus her sacrifice is more romantic, and sometimes less altruistic. Depending on her own attitude towards the sacrifice, her character is consequently more or less saintly. The most negative example of the 'sacrificing lover' is Ruth Kettering, whose self-abnegation serves her own end as much as her lover's purposes; he, in turn, is a thief and a villain, which furthermore stains her character. On the other end of the spectrum, women like Bella Duveen, who are prepared to be guillotined for her lover (as with the 'loyal's' husband, he must be innocent to deserve the sacrifice), call for unlimited approval.

A rather more ambivalent attitude is adopted towards what I have termed the 'benefactor'¹⁰⁸. She can be either interfering (Mrs. Fleming), gossipy (Caroline Sheppard), authoritarian (Emily Inglethorpe), motherly (Suzanne Blair) or positively helpful (Jane Harfield); whatever shape her assistance may take, however, she holds a firm hand over those dependent on her and can be easily accused of tyranny. Typically, she is wealthy and bestows both her financial and her spiritual aid upon those she favours while those she dislikes are slanted. She is independent and intelligent, though neither quality is depicted as unequivocally positive, since all her actions are determined by something akin to nepotism. Particularly the interfering and the authoritarian type do not receive the author's, and by interference the reader's, approval. In some cases, however, the 'benefactor' is impersonated by a formidable old woman, such as Amelia Viner, and then the author's esteem and respect is unrestrained.

Since one of the possible motives for murder in Agatha Christie's novels is money, a character type rarely missing is the 'gold-digger'¹⁰⁹. In its female shape, the 'gold-digger' is a greedy woman who is described as being capable of anything to bolster her finances. She is by no means poor which would render her greed

¹⁰⁷ Cynthia Murdoch in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Bella Duveen in *Murder on the Links*, Ursula Bourne in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Lenox Tamplin, Ruth Kettering and Zia Papopoulos in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*

¹⁰⁸ Emily Inglethorpe in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Mrs. Fleming, Suzanne Blair in *The Man in the Brown Suit*, Caroline Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Jane Harfield, Amelia Viner in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*

¹⁰⁹ Madame Daubreuil in *Murder on the Links*, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Mary Ann Harfield, Lady Tamplin, Mirelle in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*

understandable, but comfortably off or even wealthy, so that her goals are purely gluttonous. In the case of an inheritance to be gained from the murder victim, however, she might as well be after the male person who stands to profit, or might be in league with the murderer. 'Gold-diggers' are characterised as morally degenerate, sly and cunning, but, due to their beauty, successful in their chase of wealthy men. A typical profession for a 'gold-digger' is acting or dancing, which is rather too much of a cliché, but they also occur as multiply married and widowed (or divorced) middle-aged women with comfortable social status. Sometimes they are secretly associated with other immoral, male characters such as thieves or swindlers. In the structure of the novel, however, where evil is conquered and the good prevail, the 'gold-digger' is bound to fail in her ambitions.

At the lowest level of sympathy ranks the category of the 'disguised'¹¹⁰. While many female character types in Christie's novels are not what they appear to be, the 'disguised' hides her true nature or true motives for entirely immoral reasons. Her disguises are not necessarily physical ones, though costumes, false beards or similar camouflaging features can be part of her mendacity. Usually, however, her devices are subtler than that. She deceives the reader and her surroundings by being the hearty friend (Evelyn Howard), the saintly beauty (Marthe Daubreuil) or the loyal and dutiful servant (Ada Mason). Very often, she is in a position of trust, and the height of her perceived goodness makes her fall from grace at the hands of the detective even more despicable. Infallibly, she is either in close league with the murderer, or is herself the perpetrator. She is intelligent, audacious and perceptive, otherwise her disguise would fail, but there is absolutely nothing positive about her mental capacities. Though she may be a worthy foe for the detective, who is the only one to see behind her mask, she is, take her for all in all, rabble.

Last and least, there is certain to be a servant hovering in the background, a fairly nondescript person who comes in two different shades: the elderly, old-fashioned, stiff, correct and loyal domestic¹¹¹, and the young, fluttering, modern, irresponsible maid¹¹². She features frequently in either form, but her role is purely auxiliary. Unless she is a 'disguised', her main task is to carry internal information to the detective, as she is invariably aware of almost anything that happens in the household. She is often eavesdropping on the suspects' conversations, and her

¹¹⁰ Evelyn Howard in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Marthe Daubreuil in *Murder on the Links*, Ada Mason in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*

¹¹¹ Dorcas in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Françoise in *Murder on the Links*

¹¹² Annie in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Denise, Léonie in *Murder on the Links*, Elsie Dale in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Ellen/Helen in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*

familiarity with the routine of the house provide the detective with significant clues to the disturbances of that routine. Depending on her make-up, she is either haughtily superior to the detective or asininely excited by his investigation; he, in turn, always treats her either reverently or firmly authoritarian in order to endear or subject her to his purpose. Then, she eagerly provides all the necessary background information. Although her help is gratefully acknowledged, and her position in the household, at least for the old-fashioned domestic, assured and honoured, her portrayal is sketchy, and the prevailing attitude indifferent. As a servant, she is not really important.

3.2 Dorothy L. Sayers

Female characters in Dorothy L. Sayers's novels can also be divided into different categories. First there are those that recur frequently and perform, secondary to Lord Peter Wimsey, in leading roles; among these, Harriet Vane, Wimsey's love and later wife and the literary echo of Dorothy L. Sayers, takes first rank. But long before she was introduced, there were Wimsey's mother, the Dowager Duchess of Denver, his sister, Lady Mary Parker, and his amateur detective assistant, Miss Katherine Climpson. These are fully developed characters who escape, through their individuality and three-dimensionality, the stereotypical analysis I attempt to unfold here. Harriet Vane and the Dowager Duchess as the most prominent of these will be treated in a separate paragraph, together with the dons, students and scouts of *Gaudy Night*. Secondly, they are character moulds.

In the next two paragraphs, I will first examine the character moulds that can be summarised from eight full-lengths novels. I have arranged those into nine sub-categories, which I suggest cover the entire range of women in the novels, from any parlour-maid up to and including Harriet Vane. In the second section, I will then explore two of the recurring characters, along with the women of *Gaudy Night*. I have chosen to treat these separately because *Gaudy Night* is the one novel where men have practically no significance. Even Lord Peter Wimsey fails to appear properly before more than half the novel has unfolded itself. Thus it is Sayers' closest look at women, and offers the richest harvest in different characters. The rationale behind the separation into two parts lies in the difference between the moulds mentioned above and the individual characters: whereas the stereotypical

women fit into only one category, the individuals either amalgamate various moulds or develop from one mould to the other.

3.2.1 Character Moulds

The nine (as I have divided them) categories of character moulds employed in Dorothy L. Sayers's fiction echo a fairly comprehensive cross-section of personality types. It has to be borne in mind, however, that they are just that: types. No character fits exclusively into one category only, but most belong predominantly into one or the other. Some, however, have equal claim to a place in two or more categories. Their stereotypical cast is similar to the patterns utilised by Agatha Christie, though some categories differ (cf. 2.3). They consist, again in no particular order, of 'the formidable old', 'the sour', 'the intellectual', 'the shark', 'the devoted', 'the self-confident girl', 'the bird-witted', 'the sensible' and 'the spineless'. Though most of these categories, in their names, carry the attitude expressed by the author regarding their rank on the sympathy scale, 'the devoted' and 'the bird-witted' require further explanation. I have tried, again, to render the categories as self-explanatory as possible and will refrain from elaborate characterisations.

The term 'formidable old' is used here to denote a variety of women of advanced age who, though suffering from various ailments, call for admiration. While some of them are already deceased when their characters are recapitulated¹¹³ or are bed-ridden and unperceiving¹¹⁴, they are remembered with reverence and awe; those active in the respective novel¹¹⁵ speak for themselves. They are equipped with sharpness, self-control, intellectual and emotional integrity, fairness and/or honour. The label 'shrewd' is often attached to them, although they tend to be considered as difficult, either because they are slightly cantankerous, too voluble, tyrannical or in other ways exasperatingly idiosyncratic. To some extent, both Lord Peter's mother, the Dowager Duchess¹¹⁶, and his assistant sleuth, Miss Katherine Climpson, belong into that category. Sayers obviously harbours utmost respect for all these women

¹¹³ Agatha Dawson in *Unnatural Death*

¹¹⁴ Cremorna Garden alias Rosanna Wrayburn in *Strong Poison*

¹¹⁵ Mrs. Thipps in *Whose Body?*, Mrs. Wilbraham in *The Nine Tailors*

¹¹⁶ For a more detailed study of her character, cf. IV, 3.2.2, p. 67

and represents them, though not necessarily as agreeable, but with unflinching homage.

The second category, the 'sour' receive an entirely different treatment. Its exemplary specimen is Lord Peter's sister-in-law, Helen of Denver¹¹⁷. She is immersed in unfavourable epithets, and in the course of her short appearances in four novels (*Clouds of Witness*, *Strong Poison*, *Murder Must Advertise*, *Busman's Honeymoon*), she emerges as a snobbish, unsatisfied, spiteful and extremely reactionary woman whose most endearing feature is her loyalty to her family's name and reputation. Her worst aspect is her complete lack of any humour. Sayers refers to her with scathing wit, and leaves little doubt about her antipathy towards women of her kind. Equal disdain is exhibited towards spiteful boarding house women or rancorous village matrons. Suffice it to exemplify the species with its most prominent prototype, however. I venture to propose that Helen of Denver clarifies the point.

Easily the most likeable group of women are those I presumed to call the 'intellectuals'; this includes, as its most minute description, Harriet Vane, but some lesser characters have to be incorporated as well. For one, there are Vane's friends in *Strong Poison*, Eiluned Price and Sylvia Marriott¹¹⁸, for another, there is Marjorie Phelps, a friend of Lord Peter Wimsey and his key to artistic circles¹¹⁹. Most importantly, there is Miss Meteyard, who is a copy-writer at an advertising agency, a former Oxford student and thus another facet of Sayers's autobiographical reflection. The 'intellectual' is usually artistically inclined in a practical and moderately successful way. She is practical and sensible, intelligent and observant, with a sound education and a university degree. She is well-versed in the English language, its literature and poetry, and has a tendency to dress in a slightly eccentric though very becoming fashion. She is a feminist, though this is rarely an issue; her emancipation is complete, and male chauvinism can only scratch the surface. She likes or even falls in love with Lord Peter precisely because he is so untypically male, but her disdain for the normal man is equable. Harriet Vane, obviously, comprises a few more facets to this portrait, but as I will elaborate these aspects further in the next section, these are, in short, her chief characteristics.

¹¹⁷ Another fine example is Mrs. Gates in *The Nine Tailors*

¹¹⁸ In the opening chapter of *Strong Poison*, Miss Marriott is referred to as 'Sybil', but since for the rest of the novel she is consistently called Sylvia, I conclude that the first reference is erroneous.

¹¹⁹ Sayers, Dorothy L. *Strong Poison*, London, 1989, p. 73

One of the most interesting type of women in Sayers's novels are what I have called the 'sharks'. These are, by definition, dangerous persons, though their danger lies in various different aspects. They can be man-eaters¹²⁰, they can imperil by dragging people down into the abysses they already occupy¹²¹, and, in the extreme, they can be cool, calculating, ruthless murderers¹²². The lowest common denominator is that they are relentless in the pursuit of their respective aims. They are invariably highly intelligent; in later years, the murderer at least would receive a full treatment as a psychopath, but in the novels, their psychological characterisation remains sketchy. Though they appear but rarely, theirs is an interesting case. Despite all the caution and aversion with which the reader is supposed to approach them, there is a residue of grudging admiration in their description. I suggest that there is a factor of both shrewdness and courage even to their character that renders them more sympathetic than their behaviour should suggest. Here, at least, there's an enemy worth battling.

In clear contrast to that admiration, though on the whole a lot more positive, are the 'spineless'. These include, in the beginning at least, Lady Mary Wimsey, the sleuth's younger sister, but also various Bohemian types, usually not nominally identified. They occur in whole roomfuls whenever the hero intrudes into the world of strong coffee, bad food, stale air and art. Sayers seems to have had a penetrating insight into these circles, for her descriptions are astute and scathingly revealing. Apparently, the meeting places, cafés and clubs are also frequented by the 'intellectual', at least Harriet Vane's friends and fellow-'intellectuals' are at home in them, so it is deducible that Sayers herself had some experience with that particular group of people. It also follows that some aspects of the Bohemian life suited her very well, and some of its members are quite positively portrayed. On the whole, however, Bohemian types are usually described as being of dubious political persuasion, namely Communist, Socialist or other leftist orientation, to be a-religious and almost forcedly modern. They subscribe to free love and the extinction of the diatonic scale, they support the idea of the worker (a rather vague notion no one ever clarifies) in an unrealistic but passionate way and they are artists even if they have never produced any actual work. All in all, they are depicted as idealistic though misguided, but most of all easily influenced in their opinions, confused and, in one word, spineless. This is not necessarily negative,

¹²⁰ Simone Vonderaa in *Clouds of Witness*

¹²¹ Dian de Momerie in *Murder Must Advertise*

¹²² Mary Whittaker in *Unnatural Death*

since mistaken ideas can be remedied, as is the case with Lady Mary, and, if nothing else, they are always good for a hilarious afternoon for anyone who can stand their poems and their cigarette smoke.

The significant difference between Lady Mary and other characters of the 'spineless' type is that she evolves, beginning in *Clouds of Witness* and culminating in *Murder Must Advertise*. She then belongs to a category I have called the 'sensible', a rather large group that includes, interestingly enough, all the older female servants in Sayers's novels, particularly the cooks, but also various nurses and the women employed in Lord Peter's brain-child, the 'Cattery'. The most detailed descriptions of this type can be found with Mrs. Agnes Venables, the rector's wife in *The Nine Tailors*¹²³. As the name suggests, she is a clear-headed, practical person with both feet planted firmly on the ground. She has an enormous capacity for charity and a tendency to organise everything and everyone around her, and her environment is usually in desperate need for organisation. With a varying degree of education among the women of this category, their characteristic sense is nonetheless ascribed to a natural talent rather than to acquired skills. The group of 'sensible' women also includes Katherine Climpson, who thus represents the few women who belong to more than one category with equal legitimacy. The women are invariably positive figures, and there is a loving respect in their delineation.

A rather less equivocal group are the so-called 'devoted'¹²⁴; these are women whose main feature is their capacity for blind obedience and loyalty to their husbands or lovers. The devotion is exclusively focused on their respective spouses, and they are often tainted with suspicion regarding the crime under investigation because they hide something from the detective that concerns the spouse. The hidden secret is without fail something they think would incriminate the man involved, while, when it is unearthed, it usually turns out to be vitally important to the case but rarely implicates the individual's guilt. While Christie implicitly supports devotion in all of her positive character types, Sayers's attitude is a lot more equivocal. The women of this category are depicted with a careful admiration for their loyalty while implying at the same time that even the purest devotion should have some limitations. Regarding the objects of their loyalty, these

¹²³ The category also contains Joan Murchinson and Bella Rumm in *Strong Poison*, Mrs. Ashton and Mrs. Tebbutt in *The Nine Tailors*, and, for one aspect of their character, the Dowager Duchess and Katherine Climpson.

¹²⁴ Vera Findlater in *Unnatural Death*, Mrs. Grimethorpe in *Clouds of Witness*, Mary Thoday and Suzanne Legros in *The Nine Tailors*, Annie Wilson in *Gaudy Night*.

women tend to dismiss their reason and sense, and this leads to a minor catastrophe. The concept of misguided devotion is most fully elaborated in *Gaudy Night* (cf. p. 68), and its dangers and disasters are most vociferously condemned.

On the whole, however, the 'devoted' do not receive even half of the aversion Sayers retained for the 'bird-witted'. These are chattering, empty women¹²⁵ with a high degree of refined or unrefined silliness (depending on their social background), and the author depicts them with scorn and, at best, condescending pity. They occur frequently in various guises, as village women or foolish young servants, as spinsters or mothers, as semi-genteel teachers or farmer's wives. Whatever their station or age, however, they are as a type exposed to derision and contempt.

Finally, there is the small but precious group of 'self-confident girls'. In essence, these are any of the positive character types as listed above in their youthful form. These girls are sometimes cheeky¹²⁶, sometimes quiet¹²⁷, they come from different social backgrounds¹²⁸, but they always represent a group of children or young adults Sayers seemed to have set great store in. They know where they want to go, and there is little doubt that their determination will take them there. This is particularly pronounced with Hilary Thorpe, who enjoys the most detailed description and characterisation. I suggest that her person, a young orphan from a family of impoverished gentry, bound for Oxford and ambitious to write novels, is, to some extent, a hint at Harriet Vane or, by implication, Dorothy L. Sayers in their respective earlier ages. Thus, though she appears rarely, the 'self-confident girl' takes place among the nine categories of women in Sayers's fiction.

3.2.2 The Dowager Duchess

While Harriet Vane is indubitably the most important woman in Sayers's novels, other significant individuals were introduced long before her. I will therefore relegate her to the end of this paragraph, as a last but by no means least. The first notable woman Sayers introduced her readers to was the detective's mother, Honoria Lucasta, the Dowager Duchess of Denver. All in all, she brightens four of

¹²⁵ Caroline Booth in *Strong Poison*, Aggie Twitterton and Mrs. Ruddle in *Busman's Honeymoon*, various guests at Denver, younger servants and other minor characters

¹²⁶ A young female identified as 'Esmeralda' in *Unnatural Death*

¹²⁷ Helen MacGregor in *The Nine Tailors*

¹²⁸ Esmeralda Rumm in *Strong Poison* and Hilary Thorpe in *The Nine Tailors*

Sayers's novels, *Whose Body?*, *Clouds of Witness*, *Strong Poison*, and *Busman's Honeymoon*, in chronological order. She is by far the most endearing character of all, a bright, sprightly old woman who rules her house with a tyrannical hand and a sympathetic heart. She has a tendency to ramble slightly, and she suffers from malapropism, but she is piercingly shrewd and invariably kind. She may not, on the spur of the moment, be able to recall whether she means angle or diagnosis when she asserts that someone's diagonal is probably correct¹²⁹, but in content, she is never mistaken. Her first description runs thus:

"She was a small, plump woman, with perfectly white hair and exquisite hands. In feature, she was as unlike her second son as she was like him in character; her black eyes twinkled cheerfully, and her manners and movements were marked with a neat and rapid decision. She wore a charming wrap from Liberty's, and sat watching Lord Peter eat cold beef and cheese as though his arrival in such incongruous circumstances and company were the most ordinary event possible, which with him, indeed, it was."¹³⁰

She is a practical, no-nonsense person, and despite the fact that there is never any formal education mentioned, she is brightly intelligent in a down-to-earth fashion¹³¹; she is also able to read people's characters and will not be deceived by outward appearances¹³². She is 'formidable' and 'sensible', and her drifts into being 'bird-witted' are either a disguise or an expression of an over-full mind. Referring to the categories in 2.2.1, she combines at least four character moulds.

3.2.3 The *Gaudy Night* Women

The *Gaudy Night* women are, obviously, as diverse as any group of almost three dozen nominally identified individuals can be. On the whole, however, they can be subsumed under four different headings: the Senior Common Room (SCR), i.e. dons, fellows and tutors, the students, the former students including Harriet Vane, and the scouts. The Senior Common Room consists of exclusively unmarried women of academic background who combine a range of characteristics and opinions. On the 'likeable' side, this range includes the slightly fussy Miss Lydgate, Harriet Vane's former tutor, the Dean, the inscrutable Miss de Vine, the

¹²⁹ Sayers, Dorothy L. *Busman's Honeymoon*, London, 1988, p. 31

¹³⁰ Sayers, Dorothy L. *Whose Body*, London, 1989, p. 43

¹³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 114-117

¹³² Sayers, Dorothy L. *Strong Poison*, *op.cit.*, p. 30; Sayers, Dorothy L. *Busman's Honeymoon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-32

formidable Head and the practical Science fellow. On the other end of the sympathy spectrum, there are the rather spiteful and gossipy tutors Allison and Pyke, and Miss Hillyard, on whose slightly warped person suspicion rests for some time. In between, in a kind of neutral space, are young Miss Chilperic, Miss Shaw and Miss Barton. This collection of academic women covers a fairly consummate expanse of attitudes on the core topics of the novel, namely intellectual integrity, marriage of equals, women's education and the consequences of principles. By means of these women, Sayers discusses the salience of these questions, with Harriet Vane, who drifts between SCR and students, both present and former, as the central catalyst. The Senior Common Room serves not so much as a collection of types but as a means of expressing different viewpoints.

The students, on the other hand, represent a group of people who are much more concerned with the practical problems of academic life and the disturbance Harriet Vane investigates than with the theoretical angles that occupies the SCR. Again, a range of temperaments is explored, from the earnestly studious, the resentful and the brilliantly academic to the frivolous. In the shape of individual students, a kaleidoscope of university experiences (as Sayers saw or remembered them) is unfolded, with gate-crashing and late-without-leave via illicit milk after the buttery is closed and punting on the Isis to long sessions at the Bodley library and midnight discussions about responsibility and art. The students' description reflects an atmosphere rather than a rational observation, and through them, Sayers offers a different perspective on academic life.

The former students as they appear incidentally with Harriet Vane's return to Oxford to attend the Gaudy delineate another aspect of the college. While the students contain all the possibilities and are, to some extent, unknown quantities, Vane's contemporaries have ceased to develop. They mirror Harriet Vane and what she could have but did not become: a happily married archaeologist, an impertinent (and single) American propagating the procreation of the intelligentsia, a close friend who has stopped growing intellectually and is almost unrecognisable as the former bright sociable student, a variety of failed or successful women. Most inspiring is Vane's encounter with a Mrs. Bendick née Freemantle¹³³, once a bright scholar, who has married a farmer in the erroneous belief that serving the land is worthier than an academic career, even if one is not fit for the former but could excel at the latter. "What damned waste! [...] All that brilliance, all that trained

¹³³ Sayers, Dorothy L. *Gaudy Night*, London, 1990, pp. 46-49

intelligence, harnessed to a load that an uneducated country girl could have drawn, far better."¹³⁴ The question is not so much which job is nobler, but which job one is more suited for. "However grand the job may be, is it *your* job?"¹³⁵ Harriet Vane walks away "[...] with a depressed feeling that she had seen a Derby winner making shift with a coal cart."¹³⁶ The appropriateness and suitability of training and choice of occupation is the central issue of this conversation. Thus the former students mirror all the possible Harriet Vanes, so to speak, and since Harriet Vane is a reflection of Dorothy L. Sayers, I suggest that their contribution to the overall picture of the role of women is salient.

The scouts, as a fourth category, coincide largely with Sayers's usual concept of servants; they are either capable and 'sensible' or 'bird-witted', with the notable exception of Annie Wilson, who holds the post as one of the two (and therefore rare) female perpetrators in Sayers's novels. She is worth mentioning in some detail. On the whole, Annie Wilson fits best into the category of the 'devoted', for her deeds are spurred by a desire to revenge what she considers an injustice to her deceased husband. She commences with a grudge directed at one particular member of the college, Helen de Vine, and develops towards a general hatred of academic women and the university as a whole. Her hostility is enlarged onto a pathological scale, and all the doubts and insecurities unravelled before she is apprehended are set into proportion through her cathartic outburst¹³⁷. She is so quite obviously psychotic that her accusations, however similar to the SCR's cautiously expressed opinions, are tarnished with the brush of madness and thus dismissed.

3.2.4 Harriet Vane

The most important female character in Dorothy L. Sayers's novels is, undeniably, Harriet Vane. She is first introduced in *Strong Poison*, where she is accused of having murdered her ex-lover, and continues to feature in three full-length novels (*Have His Carcase*, *Gaudy Night*, and *Busman's Honeymoon*) and two short stories ('The Haunted Policeman' and 'Talboys'). There is an implicit mentioning of Lord Peter Wimsey meeting her during his investigation in *Murder*

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 47

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 47

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 49

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 425-429

Must Advertise, but "[...] what he said or did on that occasion is in no way related to this story."¹³⁸ She is most easily subsumed under the category of the 'intellectual' as described above, which is why I will omit the basic fabric of her type. She makes her living by writing detective novels and is thus, along with Miss Meteyard (*Murder Must Advertise*), similar to the author. Sayers's biographers agree, and reading the novels confirms it, that Harriet Vane is the closest Sayers ever came to portraying herself in her work. She is a country doctor's daughter with a sound education in classics, an Oxford degree and a complex character. When the readers meets her first, she struggles not only against the legal system, but also for her existence as an independent writer. She is described as having been poor all her life until literary success provided her, though not with anything even resembling wealth, at least with a comfortable income. Exchange country doctor with country parson and leave out the trial for murder, and the portray matches Sayers's too closely to ignore the resemblances. I conclude therefore that almost anything Harriet Vane does, says, thinks or feels can be without much difficulty related to her creator. Consequently, it is necessary to take a closer look at her character in order to explain Sayers's attitude towards the women in her novels.

When Harriet Vane makes her first appearance, she is in the least enviable of circumstances: a prisoner at the bar, accused of having poisoned her former lover with arsenic. Lord Peter Wimsey is convinced that she is not guilty, and when the jury cannot agree over a verdict, he has a month to clear her. Almost the first question he asks when he sees her is whether Vane would marry him; she refuses and continues to refuse even after he succeeded in apprehending the real murderer. As a matter of fact, she remains quite adamant in her refusal for five years, while his appreciation of her changes from rather superficial infatuation to serious love for her. The reasons for her consistently negative answers to his proposals are twofold. First, she resents his self-confidence that allows him to take life, security and happiness for granted; she always had to fight to survive, and nothing was ever easy for her. Being tried for murder, though definitely her worst experience, was very much in line with the course of her life after her father's death, with "[...] that one didn't actually hurt and the next may be quite bearably, if only something beastly doesn't come pouncing out [...]"¹³⁹ She is shy and scared, trying to piece her life back together after the trial and her time in prison, and he barges in with his more than unwelcome attentions. Second, she feels that the gratitude she owes him

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 99

¹³⁹ Sayers, Dorothy L. *Busman's Honeymoon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 257

for saving her from being hanged was not a base for marriage. It would always seem as if she had only accepted him because of this service, and her principles prevent her from being put in that position. Being indebted for one's life to one's future spouse is not an enviable situation, but she fails to succumb to it. Only when this balance is restored in *Gaudy Night* is she prepared to view him in a different light.

To reach equality between the two partners is the aim of the development unfolded in the first three 'Vane novels'; the fourth, *Busman's Honeymoon*, describes the result of a marriage between equals. One of the anecdotes about Sayers's life tells us that she originally intended to get rid of Wimsey by marrying him off, only to find out that the cardboard two-dimensionality of her hero clashed so violently with the multifaceted character of Harriet Vane that she could not, without doing injustice to Vane, allow the two to marry. While it is true that even in *Strong Poison*, Harriet Vane is as far away from being a cliché as Lord Peter Wimsey is close to it, and agreeing to marry him then would have disagreed with Vane's disposition as described in the novel, the anecdote does not explain why Wimsey returns to his full caricature type in one novel later than *Strong Poison*, *Five Red Herrings*, or shows no change in *The Nine Tailors*. Be that as it may, Wimsey had to change from the 'silly ass' to a fully developed human being, and the balance between his self-assuredness and her scarred insecurity had to be levelled.

Aside from this elaborate statement on the necessity of a happy marriage being exclusively between equals, Harriet Vane also represents the author's attitude towards the novels' women. She takes an immediate liking to the Dowager Duchess and an immediate disliking to Helen of Denver. Her relationships with the academic women in *Gaudy Night* influence the reader's view of them. Her budding friendship with Miss Lydgate and Miss Martin, her respect for Dr. Baring, her careful admiration of Miss de Vine and her distrust of Miss Hillyard become the reader's sentiments. Thus through her eyes, which I suggest are Sayers's eyes, the academic world and the women who populate it are revealed.

4 Synthesis

This rather detailed classification of the characters as they occur in Christie's and Sayers's novels calls for an analytical application. I have tried to refrain from a broader merging between the descriptive and the analytical in the above in order to access the summary with a conclusive force rather than risk repeating myself.

In comparison, the most notable difference between Agatha Christie's and Dorothy L. Sayers's fictional women is a numerical, found in the categorisation process. This may be due to the number of novels examined, five in one case and eight in the other, but I am disposed to deduce that the actual variety of female types advanced by the authors diverges. I suggest that the reason for this difference lies in the systemic structure of each author's fiction on the one hand, and her respective attitude towards both fictional and actual women.

In the first instance, Christie operates with a strictly limited number of characters in her novels, who, in turn, are all suspect of having committed the crime. In contrast, Sayers fills her fictional structure with subsidiary figures who lend little or no aid to the development of the plot, are rarely suspects and function largely as reflecting surfaces for the author's beliefs, the detective's experiences, or the reader's disposition. Purists of the genre accuse Sayers of side-tracking the actual puzzle with these trivial persons, while others accuse Christie of minimalistic cardboard characterisation; as I have indicated before, I admit to belong to the latter. Within the framework of the fictional structure, however, either approach has its individual merits, and in the context of this study, the result is illuminating. It takes the issue into the question of the author's attitude towards the female character types she respectively portrays.

To begin with, one needs to compare the categories and examine correspondences and differences. With a margin of nuances, I propose that all seven of Christie's female types find their counterpart in the list of Sayers's characters. Thus the 'heroine' corresponds essentially with the 'self-confident girl', the 'benefactor' with the 'formidable old', the 'gold-digger' and the 'disguised' with the 'shark', the 'loyal' and the 'sacrificing lover' with the 'devoted', the servants with either the 'sensible' or the 'bird-witted'. However, there are no 'intellectual', no 'sour', no 'spineless' women in Christie's novels, and the attitude either author displays towards the representatives of each category varies.

The lack of three of Sayers's character types in Christie's novels is rather edifying. First of all, the absence of the 'intellectual' type is explainable by the lack

of university-educated women in Christie's life. Sayers and Christie, as documented by their biographies, moved in entirely different circles, and the intellectual woman, not as a fictional type as an actual person, was both Sayers's own reflection and, so to speak, her daily bread and butter, be it during her university years, at the printer's, at Benson's or during her life as a free-lance writer. She spent most of her adult life in London, in literary and educated circles, while Christie lived in the country, absorbing and reflecting rural life.

Secondly, I suggest that the absence of 'sour' and 'spineless' women in Christie's novels is due, not so much to the absence of that particular characteristic in her daily life, but rather to her disposition towards the literary representation of certain opinions. Sayers, though fundamentally reserved, never spared anyone's feelings; she was, to take the worst look at it, opinionated and arrogant, and the 'sour' and the 'spineless' are easily the most despised of her fictional type. I propose that Christie's upbringing and her controlled, middle-class nature prohibited an equally scathing attitude towards her fictional persons, particularly since there is nothing inherently immoral about either type. In the case of villainous characters, she is readily capable of aversion and even disgust, but then these characters deserve the scorn by their actions, while the 'sour' and the 'spineless' are condemned solely on the ground of their temperament.

The second concrete difference between the typification of women in Christie's and Sayers's novels is the attitude displayed to each variety. As I have pointed out in their respective descriptions, character types receive treatment according to the author's disposition towards their essential nature. Some of these likes and dislikes correspond, as with the 'gold-digger' or the 'disguised' and the 'shark'. Others, such as the 'loyal' or the 'sacrificing lover' and the 'devoted', differ markedly. Again, I contend that the different attitudes are grounded in biographical developments. Christie, though married twice, was only once disappointed in a love matter, while Sayers, married only once, amassed a number of very unsatisfactory lovers, to whom she was repeatedly and steadfastly devoted. However, her own behaviour never clouded her view of the mistakes she made, and she apparently held a very ambivalent attitude towards devoted love; both her life and her literature bear witness to the fact. This is also borne out by the observation that marriage, either its commencement between the heroine and a desirable young man or its preservation, is one significant feature of Christie's novels, while Sayers elaborates

only two marriages in a positive way: the wedding of Charles Parker and Lady Mary, and the union between her detective and her alter ego. In both cases, it is a careful match of equals rather than a match for the match's sake.

However, not only the differences, but also the similarities are significant to this study. The relationship between fictional and actual women can be exemplified in both the similarities and in the differences. I have accounted for the differences by correlating fiction with biography. Obviously, the degree of correspondence between types and reality is equal irrespective of their occurrence in only one or both authors' work, but while the differences are more elucidating of the individual writers experiences, the entire catalogue of types have to be studied to illuminate the connection between fiction and socio-historical reality.

While all the character types are common enough in their make-up nowadays and would probably considered rather old-fashioned, at the time of the novels, they bear an unmistakable relation to the changing image of women, their role and social status as well as their capacities. This is most obvious with types such as Christie's 'heroine' or Sayers's 'intellectual', but almost all of them, negative or positive, can be discerned as autonomous individuals. They are not defined by or through the men in the novels, they act independently of them or follow their own ends as much as theirs. Even the 'loyal spouses' or 'sacrificing lovers' who renounce one or several aspects of their independence are motivated by an individual decision, not a social phenomenon. I suggest that if a sacrifice for a woman's husband or lover were a directive of the surrounding circumstances, then the positive image of a woman who pursues her own adventure and self-determines her fate would necessarily be missing; however, it does not. Admittedly, the image is weaker in Christie's than in Sayers's novels, but it still exists. Even Christie's recurring motif of the heroine's marriage does not contradict this statement, as the woman marries a carefully chosen husband, carefully chosen, that is, by and for herself. Nowadays I suppose that the entire preoccupation with marriage would be considered hopelessly outdated, but one has to remember that these novels were written by women who grew up in a time when decent upper middle-class women were supposed to be only interested in marriage, and that the match had to be condoned by the woman's¹⁴⁰ parents. Even after the First World War (cf. II, 3, p. 21), a woman's job was meant to be a transitional phase between adolescence and

¹⁴⁰ It is noteworthy that even the word 'woman' is modern; at that time, she would have been referred to as a 'girl'.

marriage. At the receiving end of the novel's production, the audience, the same applied. The generation of independent women was only just emerging, and even for them, marriage was an important aim. Readers, to some extent even those belonging to the war generation, did not yet expect the same amount of self-determination that is commonplace today. From this point of view, the initiative that even Christie's fairly conventional young heroines display, their independence and discernment would have collided violently with the ideas of decorum and decent feminine behaviour expected by that part of British society that had been shaped by the pre-war years, and that includes at least anyone born before 1900, probably even anyone born before 1910. New ideas always need some time to take roots, and I propose that a woman who thinks and acts for herself was still a relatively new concept in the 1920s.

Again, I make some exceptions concerning some of Agatha Christie's female characters, who still conduct themselves according to Edwardian ideals. Yet the war's influence is evident in many of them. Cynthia Murdoch (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*) works in a hospital dispensary (as Christie did during the war), is knowledgeable about drugs, has passed the appropriate exams and generally performs according to the changes brought about by the absence of men during the war years. Anna Benningfeld (*The Man in the Brown Suit*), too, is schooled in palaeontology by her father, and is sufficiently firm in the subject that she can pretend to be in search of scientific data when she attaches herself to a group of people travelling through the south of Africa. Though academic women fail to feature in Christie's novels, women who consider themselves equally capable of logical deduction and the solution of a crime puzzle are not infrequent (Katherine Grey in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*).

On the negative side, one might also argue that Christie gave her women more leeway towards the possession of a criminal nature. Murderers are necessarily almost as cunning, as perceptive, as sharp as the detective. Indeed, the murderer, if anyone, equals the detective's overall capability. While Sayers refrains from female

murderers most of the time, and portrays the two she produces as mentally deranged though cunning, Christie has no qualms whatsoever to provide them with plenty of criminal energy and the intelligence necessary to deceive the detective for the better part of the novel. The latter is the crucial part here, for criminal energy in itself is obviously not a sign of women's emancipation. In a detective story, however, the crime is not a brutal unplanned slaughter but a highly logical, complex puzzle work intended to mislead anyone but the necessarily brilliant detective. He is superbly structured, mathematical, logical and perceptive, otherwise he would never solve the riddle. But the riddle in turn has been engineered by the murderer who is, sometimes, a woman. The mental capacity to be a worthy opponent to the detective, and to survive his investigation until the very end of the story indicates that Christie, probably quite unconsciously, regarded women as equally capable of that logical, mathematical, structured process. These qualities, however, have been solely attached to the male brain until the First World War.

This complex argument aside, the socio-historical changes in Sayers's novels are much fuller represented. Here, emancipated women are commonplace and generally receive a much more favourable treatment than the more old-fashioned types of women. This is most obvious in the roles of Harriet Vane and other 'intellectuals'; they are, both in their presence and in their number, the strongest indication and reflection of the movement of women towards political, social and individual enfranchisement. However, the author's individual development has to be taken into account before one can state unequivocally that Christie's women are not modern while Sayers's are. Conventionality is a relative term that can only be defined in connection to contemporary ideals. I have shown that on the whole, Christie was a significantly more conventional than Sayers, but conventionality has to be seen in perspective to the prevailing attitude surrounding it. Christie was both older and more traditionally middle-class, and less exposed to socio-historical changes than Sayers due to the different places of residence, countryside as opposed to the 'big city'. While Sayers is more progressive in comparison to Christie, Christie is reasonably progressive compared to the rural standards she had probably internalised. Sayers, in turn, tends to pass muster even with late twentieth century feminist and may thus be exempt from being criticised as too conventional - at least as far as the representation of women is concerned.

Generally speaking, then, Sayers treats her women (and her character in general, I might add) with more respect, more care and more love than Christie does. They are more diverse, more understandable and more detailed in their description. The rigid differentiation between moral and immoral behaviour is missing in Sayers's novels, even though she makes just as many judgmental statements about right and wrong. Criminal behaviour, however, is often explained as a consequence of mental disturbance rather than pure greed, and the most despised of characters type are essentially harmless. The wider range of fictional women distracts from the pure logic of the puzzle however, and that, for the devotee, is a cardinal sin. Still, in her aim to evolve a detective novel of manners, the more detailed characterisation is a minimal requirement, and the task is one of which she has acquitted herself with honour.

Be that as it may, the range of fictional personalities offers a fair representation of everyday character types, and the women who bought either Christie or Sayers were sure to find themselves as positive figures and their individual sympathies and antipathies reflected on the page. I suggest that the circle of readers differs between the two authors, but that, as a whole, all aspects of middle- and upper middle-class society are covered. Christie, as I have pointed out above, unfolds a landscape of rural tranquillity disturbed by a crime; Sayers often places her crimes in the outward upheaval, clamour and confusion of a big city like London. Interestingly enough, the difference between country and city is so inherent that any urban setting in Christie's novels still resembles a small village, while Sayers takes her fictional metropolis even into the desolation of the fens. Within these systems of the external and the internal 'Mayhem Parva' (cf. p. 38), however, typical female readers of classic detective fiction could choose among an approximately complete set of identification figures. The fictional women reflected actual women.

The role of women within society, as regarded by either author, and its description, varies according to the author's own perception of society. Working on the assumption that literature is a mirror of society as seen by the author, and that in turn a mirror of actual society, a picture emerges that is curiously twofold. On the one hand, both Christie and Sayers present strong, independent, intelligent women, negative and positive in connotation, women who take their destiny into their own hand - progressive, emancipated, feminist women. Their status as fully liberated members of society is not seriously contested in the course of any novel;

it may be questioned, but the answer is unequivocal. Normally, however, the problem simply does not arise. They have achieved at least the same if not a higher degree of enfranchisement as their actual counterparts. With the additional differentiation that the society each author sets out to describe, rural in Christie's case and predominantly urban in Sayers's case, and thus by inflection more conservative or more progressive, these women take "[...] the emancipation of their sex as an accomplished fact [...]"¹⁴¹. On the other hand, the structure of the genre and the individual disposition of each author limits the amount of progressiveness endorsed. Christie, being the more unmitigatedly conservative of the two, depicts a segment of society that omits the academic woman altogether, yet still her women, in all their Edwardian nature, are very much a product of the war generation. Sayers, with intimate knowledge particularly of academic and literary-artistic circles, omits that broad expanse of rural upper-middle class women who, though affected by the socio-historical changes, maintain an appearance of pre-war sex attitudes. Thus the classic detective novel as produced by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers creates a world of traditionalism and the conservation of conventional values while its representation of women is comparatively advanced. It is a paradox of progressive conservatism.

¹⁴¹ Pugh, Martin *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, London, 1992, p. 22

V Conclusion

I have attempted to explain the emergence of the female detective novelist by means of two different sets of circumstances which enabled the two first female representatives of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction to penetrate the male bastion of detection so successfully. Leaving aside personal talent as almost impossible to capture though indispensable for any literary career, I have hypothesised that two seemingly contradictory factors form the basis of these two women's rise to the highest rank among writers of detective fiction both at their time and today.

The first factor is constituted by the general emancipation of British women between the turn of the century and the mid-1920s; this period correlates with the first thirty-five and twenty-eight (respectively) years of Agatha Christie's and Dorothy L. Sayers's lives. The socio-historic changes brought about by the political, economical and social upheavals of the First World War liberated many women, working-class, middle-class and upper-middle class, to perform and excel at jobs and professions previously exclusive to men. In the socio-historical climate of these changes, barriers against the conquest of male-dominated areas were low both in a practical and in a psychological sense. The practical side is that during the war, women were in high demand as workers, but also as, for example, writers. The psychological side is that many women then possessed an ingrained comprehension of their own abilities and were assertive of the fact that there remained few things a woman was less capable of doing than a man. Thus the socio-historic background favoured an atmosphere of **progressive** thinking that cannot have failed to influence the individual career choices of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers.

The second factor, apparently antonymous to the first, is the two author's individual development. Both women came from upper middle-class families of slightly different grain. Agatha Christie's background is rural, Dorothy L. Sayers's academic, but as far as the essential values, beliefs and mental categories are concerned, there is a significant similarity in their traditional adherence to basic Christian views, moral integrity, lawfulness and the clear differentiation between 'good' and 'evil'. With slight variances that I have deduced to be grounded in the difference between a rural middle-class upbringing and an academic middle-class

upbringing, the value systems of both author's are essentially identical. It is this fundamental **conservativism** that predominantly augmented the two women's production of detective fiction.

In the final section of the treatise, I have ventured to prove the thesis that socio-historic changes and individual development permitted the emergence of the female detective novelist by implementing the correlation between actual women, fictional women and the two authors. Maintaining that my thesis is borne out in the literature, I have accumulated the authors' fictional women into categories and then synthesised them in relation to actual women on the one hand and Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers on the other hand.

All in all, I claim that for the emergence of the female detective novelist, the individual author's development commenced from a conservative childhood and adolescence which continued into a formative time of progressive socio-historic turbulence to complete itself in the production of a genre that lends itself perfectly to the conservative attitudes of a progressive (relative to the era) female novelist. Thus the paradox of progressive conservatism is solved.

VI Appendix

1 Abandoned Research

In the course of my research for this treatise, I have tried to pursue another line of inquiry apart from those unravelled in the preceding chapters. I attempted to examine contemporary critical reaction with a view to establishing the reactions of an - admittedly limited - audience to the emergence of female detective novelists. Unfortunately, Berlin was the only possible venue for direct library research, and the material available was either insufficient for my line of query or, where it was accessible, did not provide any information on the subject. I have canvassed the Berlin Staatsbibliothek, the Universitätsbibliothek of the Freie Universität Berlin, and the libraries of both the Institut für Englische Philologie and the Institut für Publizistik. The relevant print media, namely British newspapers throughout the years 1920 to 1930, were largely absent. Those obtainable, such as the Times and its Literary Supplement or the Daily Telegraph, provided anything but a broad survey, which made their examination redundant; to conclude a wider critical opinion from a few lines in the Times Literary Supplement, or the absence of any reviews in the Daily Telegraph seemed strained. Thus research in Berlin came to an end.

The idea of visiting the London papers' archives in person, though it did occur to me, had to be abandoned for reasons of time, money and the appropriateness of means. I then referred my investigation to the Internet, contacting the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, the Agatha Christie Society, the Marion E. Wade Centre which stores material on Dorothy L. Sayers, and a private person who writes her doctoral thesis on the subject. The only positive reply came five weeks before my thesis was due and suggested I applied for a photocopy request form to be posted to me which, completed, would have enabled me to require photocopies of almost ten folders of reviews priced at \$0.25 per page, plus \$5.00 for every 25 pages, plus postage and handling. All this would have necessitate the use of the regular postal system between Germany and the United States, since none of the files is available for downloading via e-mail. Since it took the Marion E. Wade Centre more than a month to answer my e-mail, I concluded that the complicated transfer of photocopied files would probably take me well beyond my deadline, so I

abandoned this promising path as well. Nonetheless, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who kindly and promptly responded to my request; in particular, my gratitude goes out to Jasmine Simeone, who went several extra miles for me.

Two lines having failed, I then tried to find a compilation of critical reactions to either female detective novelists, but apparently there is no such thing, at least not in Berlin or in the library catalogues available for long distance loan.

All in all, I could only conclude that, short of travelling to Great Britain and the United States, I would have to leave the interesting question of critical reaction to Agatha Christie's and Dorothy L. Sayers's work unanswered. Maybe this will be someone else's profitable topic for a scholarly discussion.

2 German Synopsis (Deutsche Zusammenfassung)

Die Geschichte des Detektivromans beginnt 1841 mit dem Erscheinen der Kurzgeschichte *The Murder at the Rue Morgue*. Autor dieser Geschichte war Edgar Allan Poe, der seitdem als Begründer der Detektivliteratur gilt. Zwischen 1841 und 1920 wird der englischsprachige Detektivroman insbesondere von männlichen Autoren dominiert. Frauen, die sich an dem Genre versuchen, sind extrem selten und vor allem nicht erfolgreich.

1913 tritt ein entscheidender Wechsel in der Form des Genres ein; während vorher die Romane und Kurzgeschichten im Stile E.A. Poes, Arthur Conan Doyles oder Wilkie Collins' den Markt beherrschen, wird mit E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* das sogenannte "Goldene Zeitalter der Detektivliteratur" eingeläutet. Im Unterschied zur frühen Detektivliteratur unterliegt die "klassische" Detektivgeschichte seitdem den strengen Regeln der Rationalität. Es herrscht "fair play" zwischen Autoren¹⁴² und Lesern. Letztere mußten zumindest theoretisch immer in der Lage sein, die gleichen Schlüsse zu ziehen wie der jeweilige Detektiv, und zu diesem Zweck mußten die Autoren alle Hinweise offen zugänglich machen, diese aber gleichzeitig, um die Spannung zu erhalten und das Buch überhaupt lesenswert zu machen, sorgfältig verstecken - sozusagen direkt vor des Lesers Nase.

¹⁴² Bei allgemein gehaltenen Bezeichnungen von Personen, Gruppen u.ä. beziehe ich selbstredend auch immer die männliche Form mit ein.

Diese Blütezeit der Detektivliteratur wird nun beinahe ebenso ausschließlich von Frauen dominiert wie vorher die klassischen Kriminalgeschichte von Männern. Besonders zu nennen sind Agatha Christie und Dorothy L. Sayers, aber auch Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham und Josephine Tey. Obwohl eine Vielzahl von männlichen Autoren zur gleichen Zeit ihre Werke veröffentlichten, haben heute Namen wie E. Philips Oppenheimer oder John Dickson Carr untergeordnete Bedeutung im Vergleich zu dem "Quintet der Musen", wie die obengenannten Frauen manchmal genannt werden. Viele männliche Autoren sind sogar ganz in Vergessenheit geraten. Daher stellte sich mir die Frage, warum gerade zu dieser Zeit so viele Frauen sich ausgerechnet der Detektivliteratur zuwandten und Meilensteine dieses Genres schafften.

In meiner Arbeit "Das Aufkommen von weiblichen Detektivromanautoren in Großbritannien nach dem ersten Weltkrieg" habe ich untersucht, welche Umstände diese Entwicklung begünstigten bzw. verursachten. Ich habe die These aufgestellt, daß zwei unterschiedliche und auf den ersten Blick widersprüchliche Faktoren Agatha Christie und Dorothy L. Sayers befähigten, ihren jeweiligen Karrieren so erfolgreich nachzugehen. Diese beiden Faktoren habe ich zusammengefaßt unter dem Schlagwort des Paradoxon vom progressiven Konservatismus.

Im ersten Teil der Arbeit habe ich zunächst die gesellschaftlich-historisch Entwicklung der Situation der Frau in Großbritannien in den Jahren 1900 bis 1925 untersucht. Diese Zeit zeichnet sich durch umwälzende sozio-politische Veränderungen aus, die ihren Gipfel im ersten Weltkrieg finden. Für britische Frauen bedeuteten diese Jahre einen entscheidenden Schritt zu ihrer Emanzipation, der sich nicht nur im Wahlrecht für Frauen und dem Gesetz zur Aufhebung sexueller Diskriminierung (beide 1919 erlassen) niederschlug, sondern vor allem in den veränderten Umständen auf dem Arbeitsmarkt und in dem dadurch gewonnenen Selbstvertrauen. Nachdem Industrie und Politik in den Kriegsjahren den Mangel an männlichen Arbeitskräften auszugleichen suchten, indem sie Frauen in Berufe zogen und ihnen Positionen öffneten, die vorher ausschließlich Männern vorbehalten wurden, schufen sie ein Klima des Selbstbewußtseins, das auch die Rückstufung und die anti-feministische Reaktion der Nachkriegsjahre nicht trüben konnte. Frauen hatten gelernt, daß sie all das leisten konnten, was ein Mann leisten kann, und trotz fortgesetzter Versuche fällt es bis heute schwer, diese einfache Wahrheit zu unterdrücken. Aus diesen Entwicklungen, die auch Christie und

Sayers nicht unbeeinflusst gelassen haben können, ergibt sich der **progressive** Teil des oben erwähnten Paradoxons.

Im zweiten Teil der Arbeit erläutere und vergleiche ich die individuellen Biographien der beiden Autorinnen. Beide stammten aus gutbürgerlichem Hause, Christie aus ländlichen, fast landadeligen Umständen, Sayers aus einer akademisch-klerikalen Familie. Zusammengefaßt verbindet sie, daß sie in einem Umfeld traditioneller Werte, christlich-religiöser Überzeugungen und einer eher konventionellen Weltanschauung aufgewachsen sind, so daß sie auch in ihrer Literatur einem Grundgerüst von christlichen Wertvorstellungen, moralischer Integrität, Rechtschaffenheit und Gesetzestreue sowie einer klaren Unterscheidung von Gut und Böse anhängen. Für dieses Wertesystem eignet sich die Detektivliteratur, die zumindest in ihren frühen und klassischen Formen diese Konstruktion untermauert (der Verbrecher verliert, der Detektiv gewinnt), besonders gut. Aus diesen persönlichen Erfahrungen und Unterweisungen ergibt sich der zweite, **konservative** Teil des Paradoxons.

Im dritten Teil der Arbeit untersuche ich schließlich die Literatur als Spiegel dieser beiden Faktoren. Zunächst habe ich die Gattung in all ihren Ausformungen grob kategorisiert, um dann eine Darstellung der Muster, die dem klassischen Detektivroman zu Grunde liegen, anzuschließen. Daraufhin habe ich die Literatur von Agatha Christie und Dorothy L. Sayers bezüglich der dort vorkommenden Frauen analysiert, die Frauentypen kategorisiert und in einer Synthese in Zusammenhang zu sozio-historisch existenten Frauen und den beiden Autorinnen gestellt. Ich glaube, an Hand der Verknüpfung dieser drei Teile belegt zu haben, daß gesellschaftspolitische Prozesse und persönliche Entwicklung das Aufkommen von weiblichen Detektivromanautoren begünstigt bzw. verursacht haben und das diese beiden Komponenten in der Literatur reflektiert sind.

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World War I altered the world for decades, and writers and poets reflected that shifted outlook in literature, novels and poetry. WWI helped usher in the modernist movement. The disillusionment that grew out of the war contributed to the emergence of modernism, a genre which broke with traditional ways of writing, discarded romantic views of nature and focused on the interior world of characters. Woolf's novels reflected this emerging tone, as did the works of Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) and James Joyce (*Ulysses*). T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," considered to be one of the most significant poems of the 20th century, presents a haunting vision of postwar society, with the opening lines "We are the first men of a Future that has not materialised. What had blocked that future was war—the Great War," as its stunned contemporaries called it. Not for nothing did the poet and novelist Robert Graves call his 1929 war reminiscences *Good-bye to All That*. In the whole of the previous century, from the Napoleonic Wars to the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, Europe had lost fewer than 4.5 million men. Now, at least 8 million had died in four years, while more than twice as many had been wounded, some of them crippled for life. Government control of the war economy—known in Germany as *Kriegssozialismus*, or war socialism—was also a general phenomenon that left a permanent mark, especially encouraging economic nationalism. But the poignancy of the First World War comes from present experience, too. For much of the latter half of the 20th century, Britain was fortunate to know peace. Our engagement in military conflict seemed to be a thing of the past. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Arab nationalism, the emergence of Soviet imperialism and its attempt to build a new Russian empire—these are all outcomes of the fighting that, in many ways, remain unresolved. It could be argued that the First World War feels closer to us as an experience than it ever has done since the end of the Second World War. The lost lives that we commemorate tomorrow have added meaning in light of the troubles we know today.