TECHNIQUES OF DETECTIVE FICTION IN THE NOVELISTIC ART OF AGATHA CHRISTIE

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by
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INTRODUCTION

NATURE OF THE MONOGRAPH, PROCEDURE, PREVIOUS WORK, PURPOSES AND SPECIFIC ELEMENTS TO BE PROVEN

I. GENERAL STATEMENT ON THE NATURE OF THE MONOGRAPH

When stating that the British detective novel and/or one British novelist of detective fiction holds an important position in twentieth century literature, one finds himself struggling with an almost reflexive impulse to defend this position. Desiring textual support for a study of a novelist of detective fiction from critical interpretations of the detective novel as an "honorable" genre, one is further distressed to find statements which describe the detective story as "the fairy tales of Western industrial civilization" and "a form of escape literature and unlikely ever to become anything else". However, a careful examination of critical material available revealed to this writer critics more in agreement with the views to be presented in the monograph; i.e., detective fiction, if only by numbers--numbers of volumes, readers, and writers--has made a commanding position for itself in contemporary literature which would make this fiction worthy of study.

Specifically, this monograph will be devoted to a study, using
textual support, to locate certain qualities or aspects particular to the works of Agatha Christie Mallowan, as well as a brief examination of those strengths and weaknesses of Mrs. Christie's techniques of detective fiction when weighed against definitions and rules for detective fiction which were collected mainly from Howard Haycraft's *Murder for Pleasure* and Julian Symons's *The Detective Story in Britain*. This paper will not be concerned with establishing a definition of the genre, although detective fiction has yet to be thoroughly classified, or identification of archetypes within the genre, although the detective of the thriller is perhaps the one twentieth century survivor of the hero of epic tradition.

Those techniques of the genre which will be examined in the works of Agatha Christie are her treatment of the "Master Detective", placement of clues before the reader, and use of motivation to promote plot in her novels. Those aspects which will be presented in this paper as particular to Agatha Christie's fiction will be her treatment of women characters within her novels, the discussion of detective fiction and writers of detective fiction which takes place in the Christie novel, and the presentation of class consciousness among the characters in certain of her novels.
II. PROCEDURE

The monograph will present chapters discussing segments of the study to be made. The comparison and contrast of Mrs. Christie's fiction and the chosen criteria for detective fiction will be discussed in the first chapter. Divisions of that chapter will be made from three chosen criteria, namely, the creation of the "Master Detective", use of misleading, if not "false", clues, and the choice of motive for the crime in the detective novel. Discussion will be made of Mrs. Christie's major creation, Hercule Poirot, as well as certain minor detectives, showing the evolution of the character throughout her fiction. Mrs. Christie's methods of misleading the reader by her introduction of numerous and extraneous details will be mentioned, admittedly with an attempt to justify their use. Finally, the choice made by Mrs. Christie for the motive for the crime used in her novels, particularly for multiple murders, will be examined in such a way as to reveal "old-school" values. These values, while adhering to established criteria for plausibility of motive, are more easily associated with Mrs. Christie's works than those of other writers of detective fiction.

Chapter Two will detail those aspects in Agatha Christie's fiction which the writer of this paper believes are worthy of comment: her use of class consciousness, the discussion of detective fiction writers and their works within the Christie novel.
and her treatment of women characters. Divisions of those three aspects will be made within Chapter Two to enable the writer of the monograph to show certain qualities of Agatha Christie's fiction which are of such social significance that they—and their creator—transcend the accepted levels of the spy thriller or detective story.

Chapter Three will contain a summary of the monograph's data concerning both detective fiction in general and Mrs. Christie's works in particular. The data will be used to reach certain conclusions about the place that detective fiction holds as a distinct genre and creation of the twentieth century and the position which Agatha Christie may be given as a practitioner of this particular genre. The intent of this monograph is not to establish support of detective fiction as verisimilar literature indicative of the sociological nature of twentieth century man, but to identify certain elements in the detective novels of Agatha Christie which are verisimilar to sociological conditions prevalent in the decades of her writing.

III. PREVIOUS WORK

As far as can be ascertained, there has been no direct scholarship concerning the distinct sociological aspects of Agatha Christie's writings. G. C. Ramsey, in Agatha Christie: Mistress of Mystery (New York, 1967), has performed a rather
ambitious study of Mrs. Christie and her works in which he discusses the career of the author with emphasis place on Mrs. Christie's personal life, a general description of Mrs. Christie's most famous detectives, Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, a brief discussion of the timeliness of the characters and situations appearing in her fiction, and a detailed analysis of one Christie work, The A.B.C. Murders. The Ramsey work seems closer in general form and detail to the intent of this monograph than any other Christie scholarship examined by this writer. The monograph will differ from the Ramsey work by focusing on fewer elements found in the writings of Mrs. Christie, using more complete details from the text of her writings, and avoiding any attempt to find details of Mrs. Christie's personal life which seem to correspond to the plots of her works.

Although there is an increasing amount of scholarship concerning the detective novel as a distinctive genre of literature in the twentieth century, this attempt at critical interpretation suffers from a lack of established criteria which is acceptable to all literary critics who would examine detective fiction. Haycraft and Symons excepted, many literary critics dismiss the detective novel as a not quite respectable work of art and spend much of their discussion of the detective novel decrying the limitations of the form's plot and character construction, or attempting to
define the form from existing works and establish rules for those
who would create others.

While Agatha Christie's works have been discussed in both
Julian Symons's *The Detective Story in Britain* (London, 1962)
and Howard Haycraft's *Murder for Pleasure* (New York, 1941),
neither used her fiction as their principal source for study.
Symon's work evolved as a discussion of the changes of the
detective story in Britain from the classical beginnings toward
the disorganized, disillusioned post-war crime novel. Haycraft's
volume represents a rather ambitious encyclopedia of the develop-
ment of the detective story from its inception (Haycraft establishes
the American writer Poe as the creator of the genre in 1841) to
the post-depression boon of detective fiction, sets down rules
for the writing of the form, lists what he believes to be corner-
stones of detective fiction and predicts future possibilities
for the genre as well as possible sub-developments of the type.
Although the writer of this monograph has used Haycraft's and
Symons's works extensively, particularly to establish criteria
for the detective novel from which to examine Christie's fiction,
the intent of the paper is not to organize facts about detective
fiction but to present and examine facts about the detective
fiction of one writer and to make rather indirect inferences
as to her position in the field of detective fiction and the
position which that field has in British literature.
Insofar as specific aspects of the writer are concerned, and insofar as aspects of sociological significance are concerned, there has been no thesis or monograph, which this writer has been able to locate, written on Agatha Christie's literary treatment of women, class consciousness, or motivation.

IV. PURPOSES AND SPECIFIC ELEMENTS TO BE PROVEN

The purpose of this monograph is to examine certain elements in the detective fiction of Agatha Christie in the light of somewhat established criteria for the genre and to discuss, by use of textual evidence, certain sociological aspects which transcend the genre. By use of this procedure, the writer of this paper intends to prove that Agatha Christie's writing goes beyond mere formula to produce detective fiction which is both creative and significant. By use of this procedure, the writer of this paper intends to prove that Agatha Christie's writing goes beyond mere formula to produce detective fiction which is both creative and significant. Having shown this hypothesis provable by a textual examination of her works' use of the "Master Detective", presentation of clues, and choice of motivation, the monograph will then attempt to show social significance in Mrs. Christie's presentation of women, detective writers and their works, and social position in her novels.
Chapter 1

AGATHA CHRISTIE AND THE RULES OF DETECTIVE FICTION

I. THE MASTER DETECTIVE

Perhaps the most recognizable portion of the detective writer's craft to the average reader is his creation of the "great" or "Master" detective. Since Poe's Tales of Mystery and Imagination introduced Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, mystery writers have been creating, with more or less success, master detectives of similar bizarre characteristics. Although Dupin was more eccentric in methods of thought than in physical qualities, perhaps the most famous of the master detectives, Sherlock Holmes, became a model for the great or master detective who maintained a complete and assorted set of idiosyncrasies through many adventures and often employed this eccentricity to entertain the audience when the chase became boring.

Unfortunately for the reader, in inept hands, the master detective can become a caricature¹ which may lead to detective fiction's critics making the charge that detective fiction lacks

depth of characterization. However, many supporters of the detective story feel that at the heart of the genre is the rather shallow master detective, who appears in a chain of fiction and is nearly always more famous than his creator to the average reader because his peculiarities are so readily identifiable. Ronald Knox was quoted in the before mentioned work by Julian Symons, addressing the writers of detective fiction on the problem of the master detective:

It is personality that counts. You are not bound to make your public like the Great Detective...But he must be real; he must have idiosyncrasies, eccentricities...he must smoke those appalling cigarettes, and get his English idioms wrong.

Agatha Christie certainly seems to have followed Knox's advice in her creation of her master detective Hercule Poirot and, to a lesser extent, Miss Jane Marple.

Indeed, one might find support for the adherence to Knox's advice from the success of Agatha Christie's master detectives in the book stores. An appraisal of numbers of both volumes and sales will reveal that Hercule Poirot easily doubles Miss Marple in both areas while quadrupling her idiosyncrasies. However, even the sweet spinster, Jane Marple, cannot escape the curse of the master detective, i.e., multiple eccentricities, as she knits

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and "forgets" her "scatty" way to crime detection because she can remember some ancient nursery rhyme or the actions of a lady's maid some twenty years earlier. Agatha Christie has reportedly found many of Hercule Poirot's affectations, as well as the character himself, rather ridiculous in recent years; and there is textual support to the supposition that in later novels she has greatly decreased emphasis on his idiosyncrasies. One must note, however, the importance of Poirot as the embodiment of the numerous peculiarities of the master detective and reflect on his seemingly undiminished popularity. With the master detective, Hercule Poirot, this monograph will begin the study of Agatha Christie's adherence to the technical elements of detective fiction in the body of her works.

Naturally, the easiest of the master detective's qualities to note are those which may be perceived through the senses. Just as his mental powers of detection must be extraordinary, traditional detective fiction has physical appearance usually presented as even more bizarre than his mental prowess. Hercule Poirot is no exception to this pattern of detective fiction. However, one may note that his physical peculiarities, especially

\[Ibid., p. 27.\]
those which refer to his head's shape and countenance are function-
ally useful to one so accustomed to the use of "the little grey

cells" for the detection of wrongdoers:

I looked up angrily. Over the wall, to my left, there
appeared a face. An egg-shaped head, partially covered
with suspiciously black hair, two immense moustaches,
and a pair of watchful eyes. 4

The preceding description, presented by a character whom is revealed
to be the criminal later in the novel--by the master detective,
of course--creates the impression of an eccentric and vain
individual while minimizing, through ridicule, those qualities
of mind which imply powers of concentration necessary for detection.

Agatha Christie's ability to create the master detective
who possesses those qualities of peculiarity which seem to be
necessary for the sleuth of fiction, while using these peculiarities
to lend verisimilitude to the detective's ability to entrap his
quarry, is shown repeatedly in interpretations of Poirot's
idiosyncrasies of dress and behavior given by those
characters who Poirot often suspects correctly:

A ridiculous-looking little man. The sort of little
man one could never take seriously. 5

In a manner similar to the mistaken assumption of Poirot's ability
shown in the previous quotation, Mrs. Christie lends believability
to the powers to detect shown by Poirot. By showing that the
idiosyncrasies of the Belgian master detective

4Agatha Christie, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (New York:

5Agatha Christie, Murder in the Calais Coach (New York:
are interpreted by other characters, including the guilty, as indicative of gullibility and ineffectualness, Mrs. Christie uses the common stock of the master detective character for her own purposes of plausibility.

So frequently, in fact, do the characters in Mrs. Christie's fiction mistake Poirot for a mountebank from his physical appearance, that the author at times reminds the audience that this is not the case. Of course, the suspicious reader of a Christie novel, who has learned from experience that he must suspect everyone, sometimes tends to view the character who values Poirot correctly as having more knowledge than appearance would indicate as himself suspicious:

"Is he as much of a fool as he looks?" asked Sarah.

Dr. Gerard said gravely: "He is not a fool at all."

However, the writer of the monograph does not wish to get too far sidetracked into a discussion of the suspicions of Dr. Gerard that this statement would arouse in the avid Christie reader. The preceding quotation should suffice to show the manner in which Agatha Christie is able to use the strangenesses of her master detective to create false impressions in the minds of suspected characters which other characters may be introduced to dispel. This believability of the false impression promoted by Poirot's idiosyncrasies lends to the credibility of her novels as--

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one would more readily accept the premise that the criminal's false impression of the master detective leads to his giving himself away to Poirot.

As was the case in physical appearance, Poirot's choices of dress and comforts lend an air of the ridiculous to the detective's character. Other characters in the novels, particularly Poirot's long-suffering "Watson", Captain Hastings, (whose sojourn in the Christie creations will be discussed later in the monograph), view Poirot's habits of dress and personal adornment with rather stereotyped English feelings of disgust tinged with amazement:

Disregarding my protests, Poirot proceeded to don a fawn-coloured overcoat and wrap his neck up with a white silk handkerchief.7

The tendency to over-dress evidenced by Poirot in most of the Christie novels allows both the criminal and the reader to view the small Belgian as rather dandified and ridiculous. However, the reasons for his unfortunate customs of dress: extreme discomfort in the chill of the British countryside and an often-admitted desire to appear as "foreign" as possible to his suspects, allow the reader to sympathize with the character as well as to approve his deceptions while the master detective becomes increasingly familiar to the reader through these peculiarities.

Often mistaken for a hairdresser (a happening which Mrs. Christie mentions in more than one of the Poirot novels), Poirot

reflects an obsession with dress and appearance that is as much a
problem to his friends as to his enemies, the culprits. Ariadne Oliver,
who will be discussed as an alter-ego for Agatha Christie later in
the monograph, offers rather unwelcome advice to the master
detective on his choice of footwear, including a comment on the
nature of the man's eccentricity:

"...you oughtn't to wear patent leather shoes in the
country...You mind more about your clothes and your
moustaches and how you look and what you wear than
comfort...."

While one must note that Poirot's fetish for fashion does seem
to be mere window-dressing, particularly in Christie's earlier
novels, this consciousness of appearance by Poirot is applicable
to an interpretation of the character as also astute in other
matters requiring orderliness which the detection of crime would
require.

Finally, this monograph would not attempt to deny that
Agatha Christie follows the formula for the master detective as
outlined by Ronald Knox to such an extent as to limit the inter-
pretation of her art as highly creative. However, although
Hercule Poirot may be seen to have the usual number of idiosyncrasies
assigned to a great or master detective, even "those tiny cigarettes
which it was his affectation to smoke"; the paper should have
demonstrated some of the ways in which Agatha Christie has been able to

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8Agatha Christie, Hallowe'en Party (New York: Pocket Books, Inc.,

9Agatha Christie, Evil Under the Sun (New York: Dodd, Mead and
use these eccentricities and idiosyncrasies to add to the believability of her character. One might wish to quote Hercule Poirot on the matter of idiosyncrasies of dress. He seems to be speaking in defense of his own peculiarity as well as defending the creativity of his author by the statement which could be used to justify the detective story as literary art: "Taste is one thing," said Poirot coldly. "Brains are another."10

The writer of this monograph wishes to use the preceding quotation by Poirot as analogous to a summary of the points intended to be shown concerning Agatha Christie's transcendence of mere formula for detective fiction. Applying the term "taste" in a literal sense, one may note that the audience of detective fiction demands the master detective to be easily identifiable through his eccentricities and idiosyncrasies; such rules or formula seem established just as other literary genres possess recognizable criteria. However, the intelligence or "brains" of the reader or the author are not impaired by adherence to these demands of the genre. Through her use of both intelligence and creativity, Mrs. Christie seems, from this writer's point of view, to have surmounted the rules, formular or "taste" of detective fiction by her creation of the master detective, Hercule Poirot. The Belgian master sleuth uses his peculiarities in matters of taste to disguise his superiority in matters relevant to intelligence.

to disguise this superiority from those he does not wish to be placed on guard by their knowledge.

Agatha Christie uses Poirot's readiness to accept his own ideas and preferences over those of others as another point of credible idiosyncrasy. Poirot is more than eager to inform the reader, often through other characters' words, that he is quite marvelous. Other characters may find his self-opinion somewhat offensive and comment upon his conceit, but his actions within the novel usually support his pride in his own abilities. By his acceptance of the fact that he is "the best detective in the world," Poirot gives credibility to the simplicity with which he solves the most puzzling cases as well as adding to his list of recognizable peculiarities which the master detective should possess.

Poirot, himself, admits to having an "un-British attitude" concerning his immodesty in his abilities. Although this attitude might be used to support the theories of class consciousness in Mrs. Christie's fiction, which will be discussed later in the monograph, one may also use this immodesty as representing the credibility which the author manages to give to her master detective.

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11 Agatha Christie, Make Mine Murder!, p. 120.
12 Ibid., p. 177.
13 Ibid., p. 63.
While created in the formula-mode of the master detective with unlimited idiosyncrasies, Poirot's self-confidence is psychologically conducive to his abilities to accomplish the seemingly impossible, and his "foreignness" allows the reader to be more tolerant and gullible in accepting his idiosyncrasies.

One might mention at this point that, although Poirot is definitely presented as a non-British character, Mrs. Christie still embodies the detective with certain old-school attitudes regarding crime and values which are not reflective of a cosmopolitan attitude. Poirot takes a very staunch attitude toward crime, particularly toward murder:

The victim may be one of the good God's saints—or, on the contrary, a monster in infamy. It moves me not. The fact is the same. A life taken! I say it always—I do not approve of murder. ¹⁴

While one may view the attitude shown in his preceding statement as in keeping with the standard formula for the master detective, Mrs. Christie's ability allows the reader to approve as well as appreciate her creation's adherence to such ideals which would make his rare abilities for detection necessary.

However, Mrs. Christie will not allow Poirot to be too idealistic in his pursuit of his occupation. A lofty, unyielding attitude concerning crime is one matter; practice concerning the detection of crime is quite another. Captain Hastings, 

¹⁴Ibid., p. 86.
in those earlier novels in which he appears, is always ready to apply a rather stringent code of conduct to the Belgian detective's methods of pursuing an investigation:

Some people might have scrupulously removed themselves from earshot of a private conversation. But not Hercule Poirot. He had no scruples of that kind.¹⁵

From the preceding quotation one might surmise that those idiosyncrasies necessary for the master detective—according to Knox—are not always qualities which would be considered admirable in another character. However, by balancing those qualities of character, good and bad, Mrs. Christie creates a detective who is neither saint nor sinner, but rather a mixture of both, and, therefore, believable since all men are composed of such mixtures.

In Poirot's attitudes toward theories of criminal psychology, Mrs. Christie reveals an old world concern for the simplicity of good and evil. Poirot does not fancy himself a criminologist; his work is not to understand the psychological make-up of the criminal, but to confront him with his crime:

Possible. It (criminal psychology) is an interesting subject for after dinner conversation—are all criminals really madmen? There may be a malformation in their little grey cells—yes, it is very likely. That is the affair for the doctor. For me—I have different work to perform.¹⁶

¹⁵Agatha Christie, Evil Under the Sun, p. 36.

Once again, Agatha Christie has returned to less modern values for her master detective. One cannot argue with the fact that in the later Poirot novels many of the ideas of psychology, particularly concerning youth, are mentioned in some detail; however, one will notice that Poirot's attitudes are still quite believable for an individual of his age, rank, and experience and are not contrived from his idiosyncrasies.

From the works of G. C. Ramsey and Julian Symons, one learns that Agatha Christie has become increasingly tired of Poirot and/or his idiosyncrasies as her career has progressed; however, Poirot still lives and works—in the Christie novels—after fifty years as a "retired" detective in those Christie works. Whether the public would allow the aging detective a real and conventional retirement can only be surmised. However, one may find textual evidence for the idea that Mrs. Christie would be more than delighted to officiate his demise from the rather barbed comments she allows certain characters concerning Poirot:

..."Oh, yes, I heard of him. But I thought he was dead. . . . Dash it, he ought to be dead..."

When one considers the fact that this quotation was found in a novel written more than thirty years ago, but some twenty years after Poirot was introduced in Mrs. Christie's fiction, he might

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18Agatha Christie, Evil Under the Sun, p. 43.
be inclined to accept the concept that even though she has worked for and beyond the limits of the master detective formula, Agatha Christie still finds the directives of detective fiction concerning the master detective somewhat stifling.

One might further find evidences in her works to support the theory that Agatha Christie would like to permanently retire Poirot in several of her works which have Poirot announcing that this will probably be the last case which he ever investigates. However, one can find proof of Mrs. Christie's disenchantment with the formula for detective fiction in more concrete terms in her dismissal of Captain Hastings very early in Poirot's career. Mrs. Christie has even been quoted as saying that she found Hastings "too ridiculous" to be kept in her novels. Whether she found her creation, Hastings, or the entire concept of the "Watson" figure too contrived and limiting is only a matter for speculation. One might find data for his speculation by examining the role of the "Watson" figure in general and Mrs. Christie's Captain Hastings in particular.

The concept of the "Watson" figure seems to have evolved from the idea that a limited observer of the master detective at work could best relate the action to the audience. This

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20Howard Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, p. 33.
would seem the simplest logical process, at least on first examination. Since the rules of the game in detective fiction demand that the reader suspect everyone while stating that no clue should be allowed to the detective that is not given to the reader, one can see the necessity of having a character who is not only a non-suspect but is also privy to the master detective as he makes his investigation. Such a figure is found in the Dr. Watson of Sherlock Holmes and the Captain Hastings of Hercule Poirot. Why then, one might wonder, would Agatha Christie grow tired of this character device so early in the Poirot novels? A textual examination may answer this question.

First, the monograph will deal with the reasons for the "Watson" figure. A character who is part of the central action of the novel but who is not a central figure in either the crime or its detection may tell the facts to the reader without the involvement of the criminal, detective or victim(s). Thus, through the "Watson" figure, the reader may view the data or clues in the same detached manner as the Watson himself. Although one would not assume that an account of the brilliance of his detection would bother Poirot, the "Watson" figure, Hastings, is in a position to glorify the detective by merely stating all those facts which were totally mystifying to him and, hopefully, to the audience as well, but not to his superior,
the master detective. Mrs. Christie cannot resist having one of her characters remark on this relationship between Poirot and his Watson:

"One should not keep a dog and have to bark oneself," agreed Nick with mock sympathy, "Who is the dog, by the way? Dr. Watson, I presume." 21

From the preceding quotation, one may note the "mocking" tone of disrespect for the bumbling Captain Hastings. The character seems to echo Mrs. Christie's feeling that Hastings is just "too ridiculous" to be taken seriously.

Even Poirot shows a great deal of disrespect for the Watson figure. In the much discussed The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, 1926, Poirot seems about to replace the departed Hastings with a new Watson figure. He tells Dr. James Sheppard that he misses the "stupidity, naiveté, and imbecility" 22 of his lost--Hastings has been figuratively banished to Australia in an earlier work--comrade. While Dr. Sheppard fulfills his Watson role well by being totally mystified by the great detective and proceeds to write an account of his adventure in which he "barks" admirably for Poirot; however, the good doctor does a most un-Watsonlike act and is revealed as the murderer of Roger Ackroyd at the novel's close.

As might be imagined, this set off a furor of denouncements from those who believed that "fair play" for the reader had been violated. Since Mrs. Christie's adherence to the rules of fair

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play concerning placing all the clues before the reader will be
discussed later in the paper, the preceding quotation will be
considered at this time only to the extent that it shows one
use of the Watson figure by Mrs. Christie, which quite effectively
eliminates the character from further novels.

This "stupidity, naiveté and imbecility" that Poirot and,
apparently, Mrs. Christie find so ridiculous in the character of
Hastings is outlined in great detail by the detective. Although
he is addressing Captain Hastings as he makes this remark, the
list of flaws cited seems almost a monologue on the ineptness of
the character since Poirot offers no time for rebuttal:

"You have an extraordinary effect on me Hastings.
You have so strongly the flair in the wrong direction
that I am almost tempted to go by it! You are that
wholly admirable type of man who is invariably taken
in by any scoundrel. You are the type of man who
invests in doubtful oil fields and nonexistent
gold mines."23

One might remark that from the description of Hastings in the
preceding quotation that the reason for Mrs. Christie's disgust
with the character is easily discerned. Agatha Christie, who
uses Poirot's idiosyncrasies to create such a credible, if
extraordinary, character, would not likely be satisfied with such
stock characterization of the individual who seems closest to the
master detective.

23Agatha Christie, Make Mine Murder, p. 185
To the question, "Why cannot Agatha Christie develop Hastings to the level of credibility which she has attained for Poirot?", there seems no answer to be found in the text of her works. In the matter of Hastings, one may only surmise that Mrs. Christie could find no manner or reason with which to justify to the reader the existence of such a figure. This should not be taken to mean that one cannot find examples in the text of those novels in which Hastings appears of statements which seem to give credibility to the character. For example, one area of justification for Poirot's association for Hastings seems to lie in the character's complete loyalty to Poirot:

"He is, as you have perceived, honest. But he is also faithful. His loyalty to myself is absolute." 24

From the preceding quotation, one may deduce that the loyalty mentioned by Poirot is one attempt to justify the character's remaining with the detective even though his attempts toward detection are ludicrous and received by Poirot as such. However, this attempt cannot be said to succeed as there is no plausible explanation for this loyalty offered to the reader.

Other justification for the character of Hastings may be found in Poirot's reaction to the character. Although this justification seems rather weak, Poirot offers one explanation

for the use of the Watson figure, not only for his own purposes, but also for the detective novel in general:

"What I particularly missed was your vivid imagination, Hastings," he went on dreamily. "One needs a certain amount of light relief." 25

Perhaps the preceding quotation offers one of the best arguments for use of the Watson figure to be found—since Poirot is basically representative of the world of order, justice, and the classical hero, one needs the bumbling of a Watson or Hastings to relieve him from the rather serious adventures of the Master Detective.

However, comic relief or not, the Watson figure, Hastings, allows the master detective once more to present his admirable qualities to the reader. The eccentric old-school crime fighter would never use his underling's stupidity for his own ego bolstering. He magnanimously states in one novel that he would never amuse himself by deliberately contributing to Hastings's confusion. 26

Unfortunately, for the continued existence of Hastings in the Christie novels, the author seems to have decided that the few justifications for allowing the Watson figure to remain in the framework of her detective novels were not sufficient and, therefore, removed him from their structure quite early in her career. Consequently, the writer of the monograph suggests that the preceding discussion of Captain Hastings points to the


ability of Agatha Christie to transcend formula writing for her detective fiction. One should notice that when using the detective fiction directives—such as the character with idiosyncrasies for the master detective—Agatha Christie devises within that framework qualities of characterization and plan which make that device credible and artistic; when confronting those directives or formula, such as the Watson figure, which she finds cannot be elevated to the realm of believability, she eliminates those problems from her fiction.

The writer of this monograph does not intend to reflect on the importance of Mrs. Christie's other master detective, Miss Jane Marple, from the fact that she is discussed last or from the brevity of this discussion. On the contrary, the writer of this paper, as well as Mrs. Christie, must admit a preference for the elderly spinster over the dandified Belgian detective. However, having used Poirot to establish the belief in Mrs. Christie's ability to function artfully within the limitations of the detective novel which the writer of this monograph wishes to promote, the discussion of Miss Jane Marple will be used in this paper merely to reinforce this theory, and, therefore, will not be as necessarily detailed as the Poirot discussion.

Miss Marple appears in fewer than half the number of volumes allotted to Poirot. For this reason, possibly, Miss Marple has

been called the "second" string of Mrs. Christie's literary bow. One does not wish to take the term "second string" too idiomatically; apparently, the critic was commenting on quantity rather than quality. Notwithstanding the admonishment to the would-be writer of detective fiction that boys and women do not make worthy great detectives, Miss Marple has been created as the master detective in the highest sense of the terms. Her idiosyncrasies are fewer and milder than those of Poirot—possibly because Miss Marple appeared later in Agatha Christie's career, probably because the character's station in life makes her more prone to milder activity than Poirot. However, those eccentricities which are allotted to Miss Marple are quite as believable and, in this writer's opinion, more captivating than those granted her male counterpart.

Miss Marple, particularly in Mrs. Christie's earlier novels, took a very minor role in the evolution of the plot. She was sometimes presented to the reader when the novel was more than half completed. With her Victorian propriety and her spinsterish passion for knitting, she is quite opposite Poirot in her concept of self-importance to the investigation of the crime.

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29Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, p. 231.
However, there are certain points of similarity between Mrs. Christie's two master detectives. For example, both Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple desire method and order in their lives. While Poirot cannot tolerate even the slightest detail of his personal surroundings to lack the "symmetry" he so desires, Miss Marple's everyday life is just as balanced in construction:

"It was an unusual hour for her telephone to ring. So well ordered was the prim spinster's life that unforeseen telephone calls were a source of vivid conjecture."  

The preceding quotation may serve to support the theory that Mrs. Christie uses the idiosyncrasies of her master detectives to create believability in her fiction. The "well ordered" life of Miss Jane Marple not only enhances the idiosyncrasies usual in the master detective but also adds qualities of personality necessary for a sleuth of her ability and a lady of her age and station.

Reminiscent of Poirot's employment of "the little grey cells" is Miss Marple's power to connect seemingly trivial past experiences to the solutions of present crimes:

Miss Marple had attained fame by her ability to link up trivial village happenings with graver problems in such a way as to throw light upon the latter.  

The preceding quotation may also be seen as supporting an opinion of Mrs. Christie's art as transcendent of formula detective fiction.

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32 Ibid., p. 17.
While creating a female master detective who possesses the elements of the bizarre favored by the formula of detective fiction, the author has been able to maintain those qualities which are most in keeping with a credible representation of the Victorian spinster.

One may find a number of other similarities between Mrs. Christie's best known creations, Marple and Poirot. For the purposes of brevity, the writer of the monograph will only mention those volumes in which certain of these similarities are found rather than offering quotations from the text of these volumes. Miss Marple's adherence to Poirot's view of crime and the nature of evil may be noted in the recent Christie novel, _Nemesis_. In this work, Miss Marple obeys the death wish of a character she had collaborated with in the earlier _A Caribbean Mystery_. She fulfills his desire for justice by unraveling the true solution to a long-forgotten crime. She revels in the work's title, _Nemesis_, using the term as a synonym for herself. As Poirot, she "does not approve of murder" and enjoys being the downfall for those who would attempt to escape detection. In works too numerous to mention individually, she follows another of Poirot's habits by referring to those cases she has previously solved in either concrete or elliptical terms. Also, even in the Poirot novels, the avid Christie reader may notice certain characters who are
reminiscent of Jane Marple in qualities of either mind or body. Usually one may find Poirot leaning heavily on information obtained from the local gossip who, in most cases, will be the shrewd elderly spinster of the Marple mold.\textsuperscript{33} However, as a concession to the monograph's need for brevity, this section on the master detective will be closed by repeating the theory that Agatha Christie is capable of using the directives of detective fiction to create master detectives who are both credible and entertaining.

II. CLUES BEFORE THE READER

To a certain extent, Agatha Christie stands out among other authors of detective fiction as most skillfully flirting with the rules of fair play in her presentation of evidence, or, as the procedure is referred to in critical studies, placing the clues before the reader. Briefly, the ways by which Agatha Christie comes closest to disobedience of the rules of fair play may lie in her numerous uses of false clues or "red-herrings", conversation among suspects, and the "least-likely" person motif. Although this is not the disobedience most noted by critics of Mrs. Christie, this writer believes her most numerous mistreatment of the rules is found in the author's use of the false clue. Practically every clue given by the Christie novel can be interpreted in a variety of manners. Since Mrs. Christie usually has

\textsuperscript{33}Agatha Christie, \textit{Dumb Witness}, p. 316.
a character on hand to state an interpretation/misinterpretation for each important clue, one might find the author coming very close to guilt of using the false clue—a strict taboo for detective fiction.\textsuperscript{34} Conversation, particularly of a gossipy nature, which appears in the Christie novel, is almost always misleading for the uninitiated Christie reader. When the Marple-like character is involved, the reader may make an exception to the preceding statement; however, the old rule for all methods of characterization—consider the source—is extremely appropriate in the Christie novel, for with the twists and qualification of the plot, there is a great probability that the reader will be misled. Finally, although the "least-likely" person motif is considered passé by most critics of detective fiction, Agatha Christie's novels seem very close to this motif from her choice of criminals unless one discounts all description of one character in the novel made by another as misleading.

The "least-likely" person motif seems rather obvious in many of Agatha Christie's earlier novels. In a 1943 Miss Marple mystery, the following description of a character by another is given close to the beginning of the work:

\textit{Symmington was the acme of calm respectability, the sort of man who would never give his wife a moment's anxiety. A long neck with a pronounced

\textsuperscript{34}Haycraft, \textit{Murder for Pleasure}, p. 255.
Adam's apple, a slightly cadaverous face and a long thin nose. A kindly man, no doubt, a good husband and father, but not one to set the pulses madly racing.\textsuperscript{35}

While the preceding passage is a far cry from the foul play of deliberately keeping information from the reader or a deliberate misrepresentation of fact, one must note the manner in which Dr. Symmington is kept undistinctive and seemingly should be dismissed from a list of probable murderers. The reader who is not accustomed to the supreme rule for readers of the Christie novel, i. e., suspect everyone, is easily led into forgetting that the character who others assume would never give his wife a moment's anxiety could be forced to murder said wife in order that he might marry another whose beauty is not likely to be won by his mediocre appearance. Naturally, Miss Marple would never trust any one, especially from gossip alone. She is the epitome of the suspicious Victorian lady, thereby the master detective who believably deduces the guilt of Dr. Symmington. However, very few Christie readers can be expected to be either the Victorian or detective that Miss Marple is, and are, therefore, easily misled by incorrect appraisals of one character by another.

Quite often the statements which are made by one character concerning another's actions are of a nature which are designed to arouse suspicion. So clever is Mrs. Christie at

\textsuperscript{35}Agatha Christie, The Moving Finger, p. 21.
concealing her culprits, that the experienced reader may become
inclined to ignore statements of suspicion as too obvious:

"Jinny's been very queer lately....And lately
Jinny has been very queer indeed. She frightens
me sometimes. She-she doesn't always know what
she's doing."\textsuperscript{36}

Since a murder has taken place in the novel from which the preceding
statements were taken, these comments would seem to implicate
the character, Jinny, as having committed the crime while not
in complete control of her faculties. However, this would never
be the case in a Christie novel where insanity—at least in a
form which would render the culprit irresponsible for his actions—
does not occur. The experienced reader would tend to dismiss
Jinny completely from a list of possible suspects—unless he
had other reasons to suspect that the insanity was being used as
a sham to excuse certain behaviors—and would tend to suspect
the person making those statements which seem to cast suspicion
on another.

Quite often the statements which are made by one character
concerning the actions of another are of a nature designed to arouse
suspicion; also quite often in the Christie novel, the murderer
is hidden in a list of victims or possible victims. One should
not need to elaborate on the effectiveness of this method in
concealing the identity of the culprit from the reader. This
device was one manner in which Captain Hastings was useful, but,

\textsuperscript{36}Agatha Christie, \textit{Make Mine Murder!}, p. 39.
of course, after the readers began to comprehend the role of Hastings as that of a dupe, they soon discounted his ideas and tended, as Poirot, to look in the opposite direction from his suspicions. No matter that Hastings was removed from Agatha Christie's fiction, another character may lead the reader astray just as effectively:

"Doesn't she strike you as the type of woman who is marked out by fate to be a victim? You know, I should never be surprised if bits of her turned up in a trunk at Margate or somewhere!"  

From use of the preceding, a casual comment on the nature of a character by another, Mrs. Christie has been able to plant in the reader's mind the possibility that the character is, indeed, a victim, not a suspect. Therefore, when the character, Bella, is found dead of an overdose of a sleeping draught, the reader says to himself: "I knew she would be the next victim. Obviously, her husband used the drug to silence her concerning his other murder."

However, one must remember that one character's appraisal of another cannot be trusted, especially in the Christie work. Actually, Bella had committed suicide when she realized that Poirot was close to exposing her as the murderer. The writer of the monograph wishes to note that in this instance there is no violation of the rules of fair play, as all clues have been presented to the reader who should have been aware of the dictate of detective fiction to distrust everyone.

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The only circumstance in which the reader may find reliable indication as to the character of the culprit may be found at those times in which a gossip of the Marple-mold appears in the novel. Unfortunately, for the reader, this message is quite often cryptic or even misleading. For instance, in one Christie novel, a woman of the Marple-mold, Mrs. Dane Calthrop, makes the statement that girls with brains are "so liable to turn into morons." Since there is a repeated emphasis in the novel concerning the intelligence of several female characters, the reader is likely to take the statement as insignificant or dismiss it altogether. However, when Miss Marple solves the crime, one finds that this statement is quite important to the revelation of the criminal who counts on the susceptibility of young women to power and position. In another Christie novel, the village witch reveals to Poirot that "pussy's in the well." This message, which seems meaningless at the time of introduction, is revealed to be a quite literal statement concerning the disposition of the prime murder suspect who is actually a victim. If all this contradictory textual support is becoming a bit confusing to the reader of the monograph, he should consider that confusion is the effect most desired by the writer of detective fiction. The writer of the monograph will conclude this section on the misleading nature of conversation in the

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Christie novel with a restatement of the theory that foul play in the detective novel only occurs when the information given to the reader is deliberately misleading and/or differs from that knowledge granted to the detective; therefore, although conversation in the Christie novel is most likely to be misleading as to the identity of the culprit, this information is a credible representation of the manner in which one character may be misled by another and is the same as is given to the detective.

The majority of what might be considered misleading clues in Agatha Christie's fiction, when carefully examined, are not actually "false" clues which attempt to deliberately misinform the reader, but are those which lend themselves to misinterpretation by the reader through the comments of other characters or from their position in the novel. Again Mrs. Christie's justification may lie in the supposition that the reader of detective fiction ought to suspect everyone. As an example of the use of the misleading clue, the monograph will include Mrs. Christie's most well-known and most criticized work, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*'s use of what critics have considered the misleading, if not "false" clue. One of the milder instances of the misleading clue may be found in the before mentioned novel when Poirot questions Dr. Sheppard's sister, Caroline, concerning those patients who visited the doctor on the morning of Ackroyd's murder:

"There was old Mrs. Bennet, and that boy from the farm with the bad finger, Dolly Grice to have a
needle out of her finger; that American steward off the liner. Let me see—that's four. Yes, and old George Evans with his ulcer. And lastly...Miss Russell!" 40

By including the mention of the seemingly unimportant character, the American steward, in a lengthy list and, moreover, by becoming so emphatic about the fact that a member of the Ackroyd household was also a patient, Mrs. Christie easily misleads the reader into forgetting that Poirot has declared that when he finds the identity of the telephone caller who announced the murder to Dr. Sheppard, he will know the identity of the murderer himself. By becoming so involved in Caroline's supposition that Miss Russell is in some manner involved in the murder of her employer, one fails to notice that the steward from the American liner presents the perfect opportunity for the murderer to arrange for a telephone call which, he assumes, can never be traced.

An instance of the "false" clue in the novel, a practice which is a bit more accusable, is that which involves keeping information from the reader. Only once in the novel (before the denouement) is mentioned the fact that is necessary to deduce the method of the crime:

"There was a young man who came of Wednesday, sir"... From Curtis and Troute, I understood he was..." 41

"...that is not the kind of stranger the gentleman means." He turned to Poirot. "Mr. Ackroyd had some idea of purchasing a dictaphone," he explained. "It would have enabled us to get through a lot more work in a limited time. The firm in question sent down their representative, but nothing came of it. Mr. Ackroyd did not make up his mind to purchase." 41

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41 Ibid., p. 63.
Although in the preceding quotation, Mrs. Christie does place the concept of the dictaphone before the reader, the brevity of the citing is hardly laudable. One can scarcely term the mention a clue at all, in the strictest sense of the term, for Mr. Raymond clearly states that the dictaphone was not purchased by Mr. Ackroyd. Poirot does find from questioning the company that Roger Ackroyd did purchase the machine as a surprise for his secretary, but this knowledge is not given to the reader before Poirot explains how he solved the puzzle. Unfortunately for the purpose proposed for the monograph, this omission seems a clear violation of the rules of detective fiction cited in the paper.

However, although there seems no justification for the failure to place information before the reader in the preceding instance, the writer of this paper finds simple justification for the most criticized violation of rules in the novel. Most readers and critics were ready to figuratively (considering the fanaticism of some afficionados of detective fiction, perhaps literally) tar and feather Mrs. Christie for violating the rule of the "least-likely" person motif by having the narrator of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd proven the culprit. This objection may be met by repeating the idea that the object in detective fiction is to suspect everyone and showing that, at least in the account of the murder written by Dr. Sheppard, no clues are kept from the reader:
The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread.\textsuperscript{42}

Although the criminal is concealed in a--pardon the pun--novel way in the novel, one cannot deny that the murderer-narrator does present the facts of his crime, if without the needed interpretive punctuation, clearly to the reader. One may argue that Mrs. Christie's "fair play" has not been violated in the novel by showing that Dr. Sheppard clearly indicates ten unaccounted for minutes in his interview with the (his) victim.

Dr. Sheppard also, in a similar manner, indicates to the reader of his narrative his activities upon his pseudo-discovery of Roger Ackroyd's body:

\begin{quote}
Ackroyd was sitting as I had left him... Parker hurried away... I did what little had to be done. I was careful not to disturb the position of the body, and not to handle the dagger at all. No object was to be attained by moving it. Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Of course, the reader should have been helped greatly by use of the ellipses shown in the preceding quotation in Sheppard's original account; however, one may not deny that Dr. Sheppard did relate an accurate account of his activities to the reader.

Another clue given to the reader concerning the omissions of the exact nature of Sheppard's involvement in the murder may

\textsuperscript{42}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 30.

\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 34.
be found in Poirot's comparison of his writings concerning the investigation of the crime with those which Captain Hastings had done:

"Not so did Hastings write," continued my friend. "On every page, many, many times was the word 'I'. What he thought--what he did. But you--you have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly--though you have shown yourself becoming reticent as to your own share in them."

When Poirot adds, rather pointedly, that Sheppard's narrative has helped him a great deal in his search for the murderer, the practiced Christie fan should comprehend the culprit's identity from those clues which have been placed before him.

In her most famous nursery rhyme-inspired novel, which is also this writer's favorite Christie work, the author is able to completely puzzle even the most astute mystery reader while placing all clues before him. The original title of the work when published in Britain, Ten Little Niggers, became And Then There Were None and Ten Little Indians in the American versions to avoid the implications of racial prejudice. In this delightful brain teaser, ten people become marooned on a lavish, though deserted, island through various ploys only to discover that they have been lured there because a suspected murder in each of their pasts has marked them to be destroyed. One by one they are killed in the rhyme prescribed manners, while China figurines of Indian

\[44\] Ibid., p. 176.
boys disappear from the dining table until "then there were none."
Who was the murderer? The following excerpts from the novel should provide the answer to the astute mystery reader since Agatha Christie does, most skillfully, place all the clues before her audience.

Quite early in the novel, those trapped on the island death-trap begin to contemplate the nature of their crimes and the crimes of the others. Miss Emily Brent, an aging religious fanatic, seemingly accepts the fact that most of the others are guilty of murder and that their demise is what might be called an act of God. Everyone becomes a bit shocked by this, but the also aging Justice Wargrave explains:

"My dear lady, in my experience of ill-doing, Providence leaves the work of conviction and chastisement to us mortals—and the process is often fraught with difficulties."45

Of course, the others quickly forget the statement in their haste to determine the manner in which the second little Indian, Mr. Rogers, has been helped to "oversleep" himself.

Phillip Lombard, the ninth little Indian (whose over-abundance of admirable qualities for a victim will be discussed later in this section) remains involved in a deliberate study of the psychology necessary for the bogus Indian to systematically eliminate his fellows. He explains to Vera Claythorne the reasons for his choice of Justice Wargrave:

"That is to say, he's played God Almighty for a good many months every year. That must go to a man's head eventually. He gets to see himself as all-powerful, as holding the power of life and death—and it's possible that his brain might snap and he might want to go one step farther and be Executioner and Judge Extraordinary."\[^{46}\]

However, everyone has a difference in theory as to who the murderer might be; Vera Claythorne answers his statements with just as convincing an argument for the guilt of Dr. Armstrong. The devoted Christie fan may tend to support her argument from the rather weak assumption that doctors are quite often the guilty parties in the Christie fiction.

As the "Indians" keep being disposed of, one by one, the remaining members of the party become increasingly panicky and suspicious. When they meet to eye each other warily, Justice Wargrave discusses the problem of determining the murderer's identity:

"As regards actual evidence, such as is necessary in court, I admit that I have none. But it appears to me, reviewing the whole business, that one particular person is sufficiently clearly indicated..."\[^{47}\]

The others, particularly Dr. Armstrong, is puzzled by the preceding statement. Even though the "Indians" are forewarned of their predicament, they continue to fall prey to the murder.

\[^{46}\]Ibid., p. 101.

\[^{47}\]Ibid., p. 104.
Naturally, the reader of Agatha Christie is well aware of the author's fondness for "red herrings"; he should, therefore, be paying particular attention to the fourth little "Indian" who the rhyme states will be swallowed by afore mentioned fish. Unfortunately, the red herring constitutes, by nature, a clue that is misleading, and this fact, combined with the web of general suspicion and desperation that Mrs. Christie has created in the novel by the time of the fourth Indian's demise, easily leads the reader to misinterpret even a "red herring" clue:

"A red herring--that's the vital clue. Armstrong's not dead...He took away the china Indian to make you think he was. You may say what you like--Armstrong's on the island still. His disappearance is just a red herring across the track...."

However, when Armstrong's body is found by the two remaining "Indians", Vera Claythorne abandons her suspicion of the "red herring" clue and turns her suspicions and her wrath on "frizzling" her companion--as the rhyme directs. She then returns to the house where she "hanged her little self", again as the nursery rhyme has prescribed. If the reader then would consider the puzzle solved by default, he will be dismayed to find that the chair which Vera Claythorne kicked away to complete the directive was found neatly placed against the wall when the would-be rescuers arrived on the scene.

48 Ibid., p. 144.
Agatha Christie places one more clue before the reader before revealing the denouement of the crime. Two inspectors from Scotland Yard rehash the methods and order of the crimes. They too remain stumped as to the identity of the murderer, but they add certain pieces of evidence that the wary Christie fan should notice:

"Then there is Mr. Justice Wargrave. That's o.k. He was the judge who sentenced Seton. By the way, Seton was guilty--unmistakably guilty. Evidence turned up later after he was hanged which proved that beyond any shadow of doubt."\(^49\)

The preceding quotation might not arouse as much suspicion as is the case, had it not been included in a list of the offenses of other members of the party with remarks from the constables that also tend to eliminate their guilt. However, the Christie reader will remember that the other members were, in fact, guilty and that Justice Wargrave was one member of the party who never admitted any guilt.

Yet another clue, or rather repetition of a clue, is laid before the reader at this point. Inspector Maine recites the motive for the "Indian" murders:

Some fanatic with a bee in his bonnet about justice. He was out to get people who were beyond the reach of the law. He picked ten people--whether they were guilty or not really doesn't matter--\(^50\)

\(^{49}\)Ibid., p. 158.

\(^{50}\)Ibid., pp. 160-161.
Unfortunately for the Inspector, or rather for the clarity of the clue, the Inspector does not know what the reader should remember—all members of the party were guilty—all members except one. That one, Justice Wargrave, must then be the "innocent" member of the party who is guilty of ten murders. Of course, the method of the crime remains to be clarified, but the reader who was not misled as to the meaning of the "red herring" clue will be able to discover this method before Wargrave's posthumously located confession resolves the matter. Therefore, the reader of this monograph will be informed from this landmark Christie novel that the author is quite capable of misleading the readers within the boundary of fair play for detective fiction; i. e., she is more than able to place all clues before the reader without arousing his suspicions that they are clues.

Briefly, this monograph will now discuss another matter in which Mrs. Christie brushes the bounds of detective fiction. A matter of no great importance, but one method by which she consistently reveals clues subtly to the reader, is her use of lists for concealing the obvious. In the before mentioned work, And Then There Were None, a clue as to the identity of the murderer is to be found not in the list of indictments in which the reader would become involved but the lists of indictments themselves which are of a definite legal character.51

51Ibid., p. 35.
In another Christie novel, a list of the contents of the pockets and hand luggage of all passengers aboard an airplane at the time of a murder are given, concealing the distraction and disguise necessary for the completion of the crime—such facts as would make the identity of the culprit obvious if stated separately.\(^{52}\) Unfortunately for the reader, such lists are often so lengthy and detailed that one who does not know the exact evidence being sought, may easily forget the entire contents or focus on the wrong object as the most important clue.

Slight cases of disobedience of the rules may also be seen in those works of Mrs. Christie's which tend to indicate the abhorred "had I but known" school of writing. Occasionally Poirot will be guilty in following this train of thought as he pieces together bits of evidence:

Rather odd little comedy that I watch here, said Poirot to himself thoughtfully.

He was to remember that thought of his later.\(^{53}\)

The preceding quotation is clearly an indication of the "had I but known" school of writing as one could elaborate from the statement the solution of the crime. "Had Poirot but known" that the action he was watching (the infatuation of one married man for the wife of another) to the embarrassment of both their

\(^{52}\text{Agatha Christie, Death in the Air (New York: Popular Library, 1963), p. 65.}\)

\(^{53}\text{Agatha Christie, Evil Under the Sun, p. 12.}\)
spouses) was a comedy, then he could have foreseen that this action was intended to give motive for the murder of the object of the action which would cover the simple murder for profit crime which it was.

Another, very slight, instance of the "had I but known" school, mentioned here primarily because the example leads to a discussion of another seeming flaw in Agatha Christie's adherence to the rules, may be found in Mrs. Christie's description of the first member of the Wargrave party to die:

In it (a powerful sportscar), Anthony Marston seemed to be something more than mortal. Afterwards, more than one of those present remembered that moment. 54

Again, in the preceding quotation, Mrs. Christie has violated to a certain extent the dictate against this "had I but known" form favored by the modern Gothicists. However, these lapses are infrequent and do not reveal the plot to an extent that would be critical.

The preceding quotation does present one point on which Mrs. Christie comes dangerously close to violating the rules of detective writing according to Howard Haycraft's list of dictates. According to Mr. Haycraft, the detective author should distribute among the victims certain despicable qualities so that the reader is not overly concerned when these flawed

54 Agatha Christie, And Then There Were None, p. 24.
In the previously mentioned work, *And Then There Were None*, Mrs. Christie seems to come closest to forgetting this rule. The amoral Anthony Marston is described in terms so glowing that the reader must regret his demise as a terrible loss of natural beauty, if for no other reason:

...A car so fantastically powerful, so superlatively beautiful that it had all the nature of an apparition. At the wheel sat a young man, his hair blown back by the wind. In a blaze of the evening light he looked, not a man, but a young god, a Hero God out of some Northern Saga.56

However, Mrs. Christie does not completely forget the dictates of detective fiction, in the case of Marston at least, as she allows him the flaws of unconcern for his fellow man and overconcern for himself. However, physically, at least, Mrs. Christie has created a character too admirable for the lot of the victim.

In the same novel, there is an example of a character who is even more guilty of the too admirable character for victim status. Phillip Lombard seems to be worthy of being the hero of a few modern American crime novels or thrillers himself. While he does not possess the physical beauty of Anthony Marston, this lack is more than compensated for by his honesty and ruggedness which will not allow him to shield himself from the truth.

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about himself or others, even when this omission might make his problems easier to bear. He is willing to admit his guilt in the matter for which he is indicted in Wargrave's bizarre court:

Phillip Lombard grinned. "Story's quite true! I left 'em! Matter of self-preservation. We were lost in the bush. I and a couple of other fellows took what food there was and cleared out." 57

While the preceding quotation is not, by any means, conducive of sympathy for the character, there is some quality in the manner of Phillip Lombard which invites respect for his courage to be honest if not for those matters about which he is honest.

In addition to Lombard's honesty, Mrs. Christie presents the character as being the most courageous in actions of any member of the group. When others are losing their nerve, wits, and ultimately their lives, Lombard is still calm enough to make a joke of the matter:

"Dangerous? Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? I'll be dangerous when I get hold of him!" 58

Of course, at the time the preceding statement was made, the group still believed that the murderer was on the outside. However, when circumstances indicated he was not, Lombard is the one character who rightfully detected his true identity.

57 Ibid., p. 75.
58 Ibid., p. 133.
Furthermore, nowhere is Lombard more admirable than in his manner of accepting, while actually rejecting, his own death. He faces the crazed Vera Claythorne as she points a revolver toward his chest:

Nevertheless he was not beaten yet. He said authoritatively, "Give that revolver to me." ... All his life Lombard had taken the risky way. He took it now.59

In the version of the work from which the preceding statement was taken, Lombard was destroyed as much by his choice of manner of action as by Miss Claythorne. However, he remains one who has died as he has lived--recklessly--and is almost too admirable, in his role of the antihero for his fate as victim in the detective novel. For this reason, one may prefer the dramatic version of the novel also written by Mrs. Christie. In that adaptation, the character, Phillip Lombard, remains virtually the same as in the original, but he escapes death to eventually apprehend the culprit and may marry Vera Claythorne (whose character has been altered somewhat to make her more sympathetic in the new role). In any version, however, although one disposes of the character rather ruthlessly, one may find a character who is quite human and admirable with both good and bad qualities of personality--in short, a character who excites feelings of identification undesirable in the role of the victim. However, the writer of the monograph would like to

maintain that this is one further instance in which Mrs. Christie is able to create characters who are real and multi-faceted—thus, transcending the stock characterization aspects of most detective fiction.

Perhaps one may best summarize Mrs. Christie's placement of clues before the reader and her obeyance of the dictates of detective fiction fair play by borrowing a phrase from Hercule Poirot on the subject of clues. The master detective is reluctant to reveal his surmise as to the true identity of the culprit before he is ready to confront the criminal. He explains his reasons for keeping facts to himself in the following manner:

"Of facts, D-keep nothing to myself. But to everyone his own interpretation of them."60

Poirot's method seems to be quite similar to Mrs. Christie's. As this paper has intended to show, the Christie novel reveals all clues to the reader, but does so in such a manner as to allow misinterpretation. In the few instances in which Mrs. Christie seems to have most nearly strayed from the dictates of the formula for detective fiction, such as the characterization of Phillip Lombard, the result is additional depth and verisimilitude in the novel.

III. MOTIVES FOR THE CRIME

According to Howard Haycraft in his advice to novices of detective writing, the motive, like the method, must be strictly plausible. Agatha Christie’s fiction adheres to the plausibility of motives by usually presenting as many possible motives as there are possible suspects for the crime. Usually, the more obvious motives are the strongest, and Agatha Christie, particularly in the Miss Marple mysteries, uses the more time-honored motives as the true ones:

"We've got a choice of motives," said Colgate.
"There's jealousy and there's the money motive..."
Of course, in a way, a husband's the obvious suspect.  

In the novel from which the preceding quotation was taken, the husband was not the murderer, but careful interpretation of the clue reveals that the motive of greed, combined in the novel with elements of jealousy, create a unique love-triangle which proves to be the motive.

Although the motives used by Mrs. Christie in her fiction are plausible, she may present them in such a manner that the motive, as well as the murderer, seems the least likely—at least, the reader is likely to believe thus. However, Mrs. Christie’s characters are usually quite honest in appraising

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61 Haycraft, op. cit., p. 252.
62 Agatha Christie, Evil Under the Sun, p. 93.
their possible motives. They may make statements which aid the reader in consideration of motive:

...The motive cannot be obvious. If it were— why then truly the risk would indeed be too great to be taken!63

Thus, Hercule Poirot discusses possible motives for one of the crimes he investigates. The preceding quotation might serve as a commentary for many of the motives used in Agatha Christie's fiction, but the reader should remember that the author's skill is such that the most obvious of motives may be presented in a manner that makes it appear the least likely.

In Murder for Pleasure, Haycraft discusses the "crime" element of the detective novel. He states that many critics and readers have a strong prejudice against mass or multiple murder, but he makes a distinction between additional killings used to pad the story or to extricate the author from a difficult situation and the deliberate series of murders which is the criminal's objective or to which he is logically driven in order to cover his tracks as the sleuth closes in. He also offers the theory that the novice writer should restrict his murders to three or four at the most, if only for the reason that undue repetition of any theme is poor art and brings its own penalty in loss of readers' interest.64 Often, particularly in her

63 Agatha Christie, Peril at End House, p. 170.
64 Haycraft, op. cit., p. 235.
pre-fifties fiction, Mrs. Christie follows this restriction to number of murders exactly. On more than one occasion, the reader will remember breathlessly following Poirot on a chase across the British countryside as he races to prevent another murder. 65 However, Agatha Christie does not tend to ignore the dictates of plausibility in motive for even a series of murders. Often fear of detection is offered as the reason for several crimes or the motive for the major crime in the novel:

"I never forget. Remember that. I've never forgotten anything—not an action, not a name not a face." 66

The preceding quotation was one instance where the victim stated a reason for one wishing to dispose of her. The character making the preceding comment was an old, particularly disagreeable, woman. Her control of not only her stepchildren's wealth but also of their lives seemed to present the most logical explanation of motive for her murder. However, her recognition of a criminal who had risen to high position is found to be the true motive for her poisonings.

From this novel, one may note that Mrs. Christie does create quite credible motives for her fictional crimes, but does so in such a manner that the motive is not immediately obvious

65 Ramsey, op. cit., p. 54.
66 Agatha Christie, Appointment with Death, p. 123.
or may be buried in a list of possible motives, as were her clues and suspects.

The fear of detection is not used as frequently by Mrs. Christie as the motive for the single-crime novel's major crime, but rather for the crime, or series of crimes, which take place after the fact of murder for another motive.

In Hallowe'en Party, the central crime appears to be the deliberate drowning of a child during a children's festivity. However, when Hercule Poirot arrives on the scene, he quickly discovers that the reason for this crime was the fact that the child had boasted of being witness to murder:

"...It was after they'd talked about my writing murder stories and Joyce said, 'I saw a murder once,' and her mother or somebody said, 'Don't be silly Joyce, saying things like that.' and one of the older girls said, 'You're just making it up,' and Joyce said, 'I did. I saw it. I tell you. I did. I saw someone do a murder,'..."67

Thus, the novel is only secondarily concerned with the motive and method of killing Joyce, and they are practically revealed in the opening chapters. The primary problem which the detective (and reader) must deduce is not only the motive for the original crime but what that original crime consisted. Naturally, Poirot knows the identity of Joyce's killer by the close of the first chapter. However, he does not grant this knowledge to the reader.

67Agatha Christie, Hallowe'en Party, p. 20.
until he is capable of unravelling the whole plot—original murder, subsequent murders, culprits and motive—at the close of the novel.

If one had to indicate any motive as a "favorite" in Agatha Christie's writings, there might not be any manner of so doing because of the variety and plausibility with which Mrs. Christie handles the basic elements of detective fiction. However, if forced to determine one motive more prevalent than others in the author's works, the writer of this paper would choose the simple motive of greed. Although Howard Haycraft writes that avarice must be on a very large scale to be considered a plausible motive for such serious action as murder,68 Agatha Christie is capable of creating characters and situations for which relatively small gains are quite credible motives. In one novel, one might find that although greed is not being used as the motive for the central crime, Mrs. Christie has one character give a rather lengthy discussion of one type of greed—avarice for power—in all its ability to destroy the human integrity:

"I am a doctor and I know that ambition—the desire to succeed—to have power—leads to most ills of the human soul....They (asylums) are filled with human beings who were unable to face being mediocre, insignificant, ineffective and who therefore created for themselves ways of escape from reality so to be shut off from life itself."69

68Haycraft, op. cit., pp. 252-253.
69Agatha Christie, Appointment with Death, pp. 35-36.
The preceding quotation states, in a sense, the manner in which Agatha Christie presents greed as a motive without being obvious to the reader. Most often when Mrs. Christie creates a novel in which greed is the motive for the central crime, the greed does constitute more than mere desire for the money of the victim. There is usually the further desire for the position or possessions which accompany the monetary gain or the wealth is sought only as a means to an unrelated but desired end.

Also, Mrs. Christie often uses greed as a subsidiary or false-suspicion motive. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the person most benefitting by Ackroyd's death is his stepson and heir, Ralph Patton. However, the greed for the smaller amount obtained from the blackmail of the intended bride of Ackroyd is the actual motive for the crime.70 In *Dumb Witness*, three rather impoverished relatives benefit equally from the death of Miss Arundell, their aunt. The two characters who would seem most greedy for the fortune are not as greedy for money as the third is desirous for the successes financial gains will allow her children to obtain.71 In *Peril at End House*, a young lady's property is not desired for the material gain it would offer, but rather for the value its position presents as a center

of espionage. In the previously mentioned *Hallowe'en Party*, greed as motive takes a novel twist. Perhaps some could justify considering the ultimate motivation for the series of murders in this work to be insanity; however, the insanity has as its objective to own a Greek Island on which to create a work of art in garden form, and this ownership cannot be obtained without the funds available from the commission of the murders. The well known *A. B. C. Murders* revolves around the then novel idea of concealing the motive of greed by making the actual victim appear to be one of a series of murders committed by a madman. From the preceding examples, the writer of this monograph has intended to show that the concept of the love of money as the root of all evil is one most extensively used in the Agatha Christie novels as motive. However, the author offers so many variations on the theme that the reader can never be certain the directions the greed may take.

Very briefly, the monograph will close the section on the choice of motive in the works of Agatha Christie with a consideration of the author's use of insanity as a reason for crime. From a study of her works, the reader of Christie novels will soon observe that insanity is quite seldom used in the novels as

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the true motive, and that in the few cases where insanity does seem to be a part of the murderer's psychology, this madness must have both method and order. In the 1949 novel, *Crooked House*, which, by the way, Mrs. Christie has stated was her personal favorite, a "bad seed" theme is employed. The child, Josephine, systematically disposes of her grandfather, her nanny, and almost herself because of slight dissatisfactions and childish play-acting. However, she does so in such a manner that the reader is left guessing to the end as to the identity of the culprit and finally is left to ponder the child's blameability in the murders.\footnote{Agatha Christie, *Crooked House* (New York: Pocket Books, 1969), p. 175.} In the previously mentioned, *And Then There Were None*, Justice Wargrave's confession reveals his knowledge of the mental aberration which has caused him to become both judge and executioner, but the manner in which he carries out his desires causes the reader either to think his motives justified or to feel revulsion and condemnation for his malevolence.\footnote{Agatha Christie, *And Then There Were None*, p. 165.} From the two preceding examples, one may notice the tendencies in Agatha Christie's fiction to avoid questions of guilt or innocence due to psychological abnormalities. She presents her criminals in such a manner that the reader is led to agree with Poirot's statements concerning criminal
psychology; i.e., the nature of the criminal's mental state is a matter for doctors; he does not approve of murder for any reason. This disapproval shades those motives which appear in Mrs. Christie's fiction; the motives of her criminals are usually quite plausible because they present rather time-honored prejudices against avarice and cruelty, leave the reader no feelings of discomfort from sympathizing with the culprit's mental aberrations, and allow the reader the mental exercise of attempting to uncover the true motive.

Since this page completes the discussion of Mrs. Christie's use of the rules of detective fiction, perhaps a synopsis of the ideas presented in this section is in order. The writer of this monograph has offered textual evidence to support the concepts that (1) Mrs. Christie does follow the dictates of Haycraft and others as to the accepted structure of the detective novel, and (2) Mrs. Christie manages to employ the techniques of detective fiction in such a manner that her novels transcend the form. The aspects of the detective novel which may best be seen as indicative of Mrs. Christie's ability to surmount the form are (1) Her creation of a master detective who is both believable and colorful, (2) her presentation of clues to the reader which are both plausible and honest for the deduction of the crime and various and elliptical enough in nature to be challenging to the reader, and (3) her choice of motives which
are also plausible for the commission of the crime as well as the sensibilities of the reader. On the preceding examples of Agatha Christie's ability to work within the framework of the detective novel, this writer finds justification for the assumption that the author has the ability to create novels which are superior in the area of novelistic art as well as in the narrower genre of the detective novel.
Chapter 2

ELEMENTS OF SOCIOLOGICAL COMMENT IN THE FICTION
OF AGATHA CHRISTIE

I. CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Agatha Christie occupies a rather unique position in the development of the detective novel in particular and in the realm of literature in general from the fact that her writing career has spanned more than a half century. That her fiction has never relied on devices or "gimmicks" which would date her fiction for today's audience will not be discussed in the monograph other than to state that this fact seems to have proven itself. However, there remain certain elements in the fiction of Mrs. Christie which are indicative of one who has maintained a career of high standing during five wars: two world confrontations, one police action, one cold war, and one undeclared slaughter, and has been confronted with the socio-economic fluctuations indicative of such upheaval. The ideologies, both political and social, which were present at various times in the career of Agatha Christie necessarily appear to some degree in her writings and will be examined in the monograph as indicative of the sociological ideologies which
would be most indicative of the upper-class British subject during these times in their history. The first subject which is to be considered in this monograph will be the class-consciousness apparent in Mrs. Christie's works at various periods of her writing career.

To be certain, one must admit that the class-consciousness shown in Agatha Christie's writings is somewhat limited in scope since, as is usual to good writers, she writes about those things with which she is most familiar—namely, the upper classes of England. One may notice fewer references to class distinctions, or at least fewer members of the upper classes in the roles of characters in Mrs. Christie's later fiction. One may find textual evidence to support the theory that Mrs. Christie disliked this passing of the higher classes and the ideals which they would represent. In Mrs. Christie's fiction, those of the upper classes may find sufficient motivation to commit murder, but their standards of family, honor and professionalism remain unimpeachable. In a 1941 novel, Mrs. Christie gives the following ideals of propriety to a character whose credentials seem indicative of the old guard of British aristocracy:

If you take on a thing and don't like it, then you get yourself out of it as quick as possible! Dash it all, there's got to be such a thing as good faith. If you marry a woman and engage yourself to look after her, well, it's up to you
to do it. It's your show. You've taken it on. I'm sick of quick marriage and easy divorce."

Of course, this anti-divorce stand is also presented in such a fashion in the Christie novel that it may be a possible motive for murder—"murder yes, divorce never"—however, those characters who maintain the preceding high ideals in the Christie novels are seldom found to be criminals. Even when such characters are proven to be the guilty parties, Mrs. Christie intimates that their characters have deficiencies of another nature and their ideals cannot be considered at fault.

In a 1937 novel, Mrs. Christie presents the character of a Victorian gentlewoman whose concepts of social importance are at odds with the generation's facing Hitler's rise in Europe. While Agatha Christie presents the weaknesses as well as the strengths of Miss Arundell, one finds those ideals which are prominent in the upper classes somewhat laudable in the changing social order:

She was, in every respect, a typical product of her generation. She had both its virtues and its vices. She was also intensely warm-hearted. Her tongue was sharp but her actions were kind. She was outwardly sentimental but inwardly shrewd. She had a succession of companions who she bullied unmercifully, but treated with great generosity. She had a great sense of family obligation.

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In the previous quotation, one notices a definite sense of order and balance in the character of the elderly Miss Arundell. One might find a sense of indictment of the ideals of the aging Victorian in the fact that her "great sense of family obligation" did not prevent a member of that family from disposing of her as a means to her wealth. There remains, however, an indication that the fault is to be found in the values of the younger generation rather than in the morals of their predecessors.

One might notice, however, that there seems to be a certain condemnation of the reticence of the Victorian to be totally honest in matters relating to family honor. Miss Arundell cannot share her views about family matters with others; thus, in a sense, she contributes to her demise at the hands of that family:

To herself, Emily Arundell admitted what she would never have admitted to another human being, her dissatisfaction with the younger generation of her family.79

One would not wish to carry the inference of the preceding quotation to great limits by stating that the quotation shows Mrs. Christie's criticism of the younger generation of Britshers and implies criticism of the older generation for their responsibility for the outcome of this generation, but;

79Ibid., p. 15.
one may find other instances in Mrs. Christie's novels which show the older generation possessing those values of dedication and honor which the younger generation seems to lack.

In fact, one of the problems of those members of the older generation who still maintain a rigid set of standards for the conduct of those members of the aristocracy is the fact that they have too great a sense of honor concerning the completion of one's duty:

A man may work towards a certain object, may labor and toil to attain a certain kind of leisure and occupation and then find that, after all, he yearns for the old busy days, the old occupation that he thought himself so glad to leave. 80

The reader may see the consequence which is implied in the preceding quotation. Those who maintain too high a sense of honor and dedication to duty will find that life, when devoid of duty, holds little meaning for them; consequently, Mrs. Christie maintains a large cast of characters in her novels whose retirements contain as much labor as the occupations from which they retired.

In the novels of Agatha Christie, no group is more concerned with the behavior of the upper classes than members of the rapidly diminishing lower classes.

With the passing of households which could support large

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numbers of servants. Mrs. Christie's characters who present the views of the lower classes have increasingly been relegated to members of the wage-earning employees rather than to a particular "servant class." In any case, these segments of the lower echelons of society are usually quite concerned that the upper classes adhere to those values deemed proper for that high position:

There are only two houses of any importance in King's Abbot. One is King's Paddock, left to Mrs. Ferrars by her late husband. The other, Fernly Park, is owned by Roger Ackroyd. It was felt, indeed, that there was a certain fitness in the thing (Ferrars-Ackroyd marriage). It is not too much to say that for at least fifteen years the whole village has confidently expected Ackroyd to marry one of his housekeepers. 31

Needless to say, the preceding quotation shows the concern of those in a lesser rank in society that those of higher position fulfill the duties of that rank. In fact, the amount of speculation mentioned concerning the affairs of Roger Ackroyd are as indicative of class-consciousness as the direction of the speculation concerning the proper mate for such a member of the upper order of society.

The preoccupation with position of certain characters in Agatha Christie's novels is most pronounced in the concern for royalty or nobility. While this reader cannot locate any instance in which direct reference was made to any member of Britain's ruling family, there are several examples of characters

31 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
in Mrs. Christie's fiction who possess lesser titles. The appearance of a minor member of royalty in the body of the novel is usually met with concern by members of the lower classes that the individual's character and private life should correspond to their sense of propriety:

"She's a peeress, she is. But not one of the proper ones; she was only some chorus girl or other."  

The preceding comment was made in rather scornful tones by a member of the working class regarding the show-girl wife of a respectable and somewhat stuffy British lord. Other references are made throughout the novel as to the propriety of the union between those of similar rank and position; the master detective, Poirot, takes time from his investigation of the crime to arrange for the unsuitable peeress to divorce her husband so he may wed one who is his equal in rank.

In a 1942 work, Mrs. Christie presents the police as generally catering to the upper classes even as these individuals were considered possible suspects. There is no suggestion of condemnation for this pandering by the police; one would assume that this is quite the proper attitude:

Constable Palk gave way. His habit of giving in to the gentry was lifelong....true to his ingrained belief that gentry didn't let you down...  

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82 Agatha Christie, Death in the Air, p. 8.
Apparently, Mrs. Christie agrees with the preceding views of Constable Palk; very seldom does one find members of the upper classes who will "let one down" by being the guilty party—at least in her novels.

Hercule Poirot cites his own prejudices regarding class distinctions in a 1932 novel in which he rebukes Hastings for his tendency to be influenced by the appearances of suspects, especially those of the upper class:

Doubtless he has been to what you consider the right school. Happily, being a foreigner, I am free from these prejudices, and can make investigations unhampered by them.84

One will admit that the preceding quotation does present a factual presentation of Poirot's logic in most instances. The master detective does not eliminate any suspect on such flimsy grounds as his association with the upper classes; however, he seems to share the feeling of the lower echelons of society to the extent that he is particularly harsh with those criminals who, in his opinion, have not lived up to their class obligations of behavior. Naturally, such unacceptable behavior would include the commission of murder:

You are very full of an insular superiority, but for myself I consider your crime not an English crime at all—not above board—not sporting—85

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84 Agatha Christie, Peril at End House, p. 185.

Perhaps, the preceding quotation presents one of the more concise statements of the consideration of class obligations in Mrs. Christie's fiction. Quite often the reader is aware through Mrs. Christie's direction of the concept of noblesse oblige. The nobility or those of the upper classes in the Agatha Christie detective novel are expected by the detective, by members of the lower classes, and ultimately, by the reader to fulfill their responsibilities to the social order by possessing those qualities of character suitable for those of such rank and position.

Usually, especially in the later Christie novels, only characters who are rather aged make comments on social distinctions. These characters, as well as others, do tend, however, to be somewhat critical of the "classless" young—particularly of those who are also female. One young girl of no class consciousness is described as follows:

Pretty girl—scraggy, of course—they all were nowadays. What was the good of a woman if she didn't look like a woman?

The "scragginess" mentioned in the preceding quotation is one of repeated references in Mrs. Christie's novels to the unkempt appearance of those young members of a society who

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have failed to meet their obligations by distinguishing their class. The rather old-school disposition of women into a separate class and the tendency to incorporate certain modes of behavior as appropriate to that class is apparent in those references to young women made in the Christie novel which tend to criticize them for not living up to their implied obligations.

There is some blame for the classlessness of young women on the British system of education. Although the socially unconcerned young females in Mrs. Christie's novels usually do not have the important roles of either criminal or detective, but are usually relegated to being either victims or unwitting motives for the crime, these same young women are usually the source of discomfort for the aging upper classes:

"Too well educated, that's my opinion. You can't tell who are ladies and who aren't nowadays." 87

The preceding statements were made by one of Christie's women characters who seemed to have difficulties establishing her own role in the scheme of British class structure. The role of "poor relation", which may have been acceptable to the characters of an earlier decade, now

seemed to have negatively shifted in definition and sociological significance.

There is also a special criticism given in Christie's work to those young women of the highest social order in wealth and position. Quite often one finds these characters described in the Christie novel in the most uncompromising terms when they seem bored by the lives in which they exert no effort to fulfill the obligations of nobility:

She impressed me, I think, as the most tired person I had ever met. Tired in mind, not in body, as though she had found everything in the world to be empty and valueless.

The most obvious comment on the preceding quotation would seem to be that one must view as quite natural the fact that a classless or valueless society would produce an effect of emptiness in those whose responsibility of position no longer seemed to exist. This statement may be making too broad a generalization, however, since Agatha Christie's treatment of women characters in her novels tends to present them in a derogatory fashion. Therefore, there will be a more detailed interpretation of the significance of women in their roles as members of the British society included in the section of the monograph dealing with women in Agatha Christie's fiction.

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There may be one instance in which the role of class consciousness as influencing the roles of men's relationship to women in the Christie novel is more related to the structures of class values than due to the role of women. Remembering an earlier quotation concerning the concept that a man takes total responsibility for a woman when entering marriage, one may find the following excerpt an indictment of the changing mores of society rather than a fault of the socially unconcerned women:

"They don't seem to mind doing it (living on wife's money) nowadays. You and I are out of date, Emily. What I can't understand is what the child sees in him. Of all the namby-pamby young men!"

In the preceding quotation, one finds support for the position that the decline of the responsibility of women to maintain a separate social order results from the total change in the structure of class consciousness rather than from a lack of acceptance of responsibilities of rank on the part of the woman—at least in certain of the Christie novels.

A comment on the class consciousness of the British may be made in simpler terms from the examination of the treatment of Poirot's nationality in the Christie works. While the later Christie novels have tended to play down not only Poirot's foreign idiosyncrasies but also the reactions to them, one

finds a number of instances in the earlier novels of prejudice evolving from an inability to accept and a tendency to suspect anything that was not local in origin. One such example of prejudice is found in the following statement from an early Christie work:

...Frenchmen were all alike she thought, obsessed by sex.90

The preceding statement is doubly indicative of the state of class consciousness in Britain at this time (according to Mrs. Christie) since one is aware that the object of the criticism is Hercule Poirot, who is not only Belgian rather than French, but is also never revealed in any of the Christie novels to be other than celibate.

Of course, this consciousness of class distinction for those who are other than British in origin is emphasized in the earlier works since appearing as foreign as possible is part of the idiosyncrasies and methods of Poirot. In one instance from the novels, a bit of comic relief is provided when a coroner's jury returns an indictment of murder against Poirot without any evidence being presented against him other than a bystander's comment, "That little foreigner--mark my words--he done it!"91

He is also described by various uncomplimentary references to his nationality (usually mistakenly French) in novels too numerous to mention. In turn, Poirot

90Agatha Christie, Appointment with Death, p. 18.
91Agatha Christie, Murder in the Air, p. 41.
also voices various comments of a prejudiced nature concerning various peculiarities of the English. He finds their passion for gardening to be quite dull and poorly executed and many other elements of their culture to be rather stodgy. However, one must remember the quotation concerning the lack of "sportsmanship" of a murderer. He apparently does find certain qualities of the British culture which he can consider admirable.

Although one must avoid confusing the author with her creations, the writer of this monograph feels that there is sufficient evidence available in the Christie novels to support the view that she does not totally approve of the erosion of the social strata in the post-war British culture. Through her characters' words and actions, one notices a decided preference for those old-school values of duty and honor which she associates with those members of the older generation. In no other instance is the view of women so critical as that view presented of women of the younger order who do not adhere to the values of femininity prescribed by a past culture. Even while using certain class prejudices of rank and nationality to enhance her novels, there is a definite statement of the values inherent in the colonial attitudes of British responsibility and fair play. Therefore, one may view Agatha Christie as one of the few writers who is capable of
handling a dated concept such as class values in such a manner that they are acceptable to readers of any age or background.

II. STATEMENTS ABOUT WRITERS AND WRITINGS

Agatha Christie seems quite well-read to her audience when they stop to consider the number of literary allusions which appear in her works. She alludes to a gamut of sources in her works—from Shakespeare and the Bible to Mother Goose and lesser known writers of nursery rhymes. Mrs. Christie also frequently alludes to the body of detective fiction in her novels by including comments from her characters which concern the genre of detective fiction, the works of other well-known writers of the genre, and, apparently, to her own writing. Her references to detective fiction, her own and that of other writers, will be considered in this section of the monograph. Certain generalities concerning her allusions to detective fiction will be discussed; these aspects seem to cover the humor and sarcasm of statements concerning the merits of detective fiction, repeated reference to other characters in other works in later Christie novels, and the possibility that Mrs. Ariadne Oliver may be considered a plausible alter-ego for Mrs. Agatha Christie.

In the relatively recent Christie novel, Hallowe'en Party, one finds several examples of references to other characters and other novels from the ranks of Christie fiction. Several
characters who have appeared in other works by the author seem to pop up at Woodleigh Common, the scene of the Halloween party's murder. Most of these characters mention previous criminal investigations in which they were involved before they begin to study the crime on hand. Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, a noted author of detective novels is present at the request of an old acquaintance. She, in turn, requests her old friend Poirot's aid in solving the crime. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Oliver declares that she will never again arrange a "murder" as a party game. The prolific reader of Agatha Christie's novels will remember that Mrs. Oliver had performed this function for a party in Dead Man's Folly although she did not refer to the work's title in her allusion. Poirot was also called into the action resulting in the solution of the crime in that novel as is the pattern when Mrs. Oliver is involved in much of Mrs. Christie's fiction.

_Hallowe'en Party_ seems to contain an abundance of old friends from other novels. Even the school mistress of Woodleigh Common is an old acquaintance of Miss Bulstrode who appeared in the 1959 novel, _Cat Among the Pigeons_. Again, no title is ever used in reference to the work although mention of the characters involved in the 1959 work as well as Poirot's aid in solving the matter is discussed.

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93 _Agatha Christie, Hallowe'en Party_, p. 3.

94 _Ibid._, p. 63.
Once again, only the reader with knowledge of other Christie fiction would be aware of the accuracy of the allusion.

Another often used Christie character, Superintendent Spence, has conveniently made Woodleigh Common his retirement home. He inquires after the health of certain characters who were involved in another Christie work, *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*, omitting not only reference to the title but also to the actual names of the characters involved.95 Once more, the Christie fan finds himself rather admiring his own ability to identify these allusions which seem to be presented for the purpose of exciting his interest in either remembering other Christie works or in obtaining those titles with which he is not familiar. There are other allusions in this work which abounds with such references, for which the reader would not need to have read the complete works to recognize the titles associated with the remarks. Poirot finds himself reminded of his *Labours of Hercules* (title referred to by name although not italicized) when he visits the quarry garden in the present novel.96

Quite often, one may believe that allusions to other Christie novels are made merely as a practical method of increasing the credibility and establishing the reputation of the master detective. To perform this function, often characters

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96Ibid., p. 75.
mention other characters, plots or titles in only the vaguest of
terms, such as, "a murder was committed on the Blue Train and the
mystery, a complicated and baffling one, had been solved by Poirot
with his usual unerring acumen."97 Of course, as should be the
case with any allusion, knowledge of the novel to which the
reference is made would lend a better understanding of the point
to be made in the novel; however, this writer cannot find any
work in which the understanding of the plot totally hinges on
the knowledge of allusions to Mrs. Christie’s fiction although
references to other works of literature, particularly nursery
rhymes, are often used as clues to the solution of a crime.

Besides providing plausibility for the reader’s acceptance
of Poirot or others as the master detective, Mrs. Christie’s
allusion to her own works seem to be frequently used to introduce
a wry humor into the work. For example, the reader may note
that in one instance, at least, Poirot freely criticizes what
could easily be interpreted as Mrs. Christie’s record-breaking
play, The Mousetrap:

Poirot never ceased to complain (after Hastings has
taken him to a performance of the mystery) of
faulty psychology, and the hero detective’s
lack of order and method nearly drove him
demented. We parted that night with Poirot
still explaining how the whole business might
have been laid bare in the first half of the first
act.98

97Agatha Christie, Peril at End House, p. 104.
Clearly, if one does interpret the reference as concerning the Christie play, Mrs. Christie is capable of accepting criticism, indeed of even giving negative comment, for her work in the genre. Thus, one may note the humor of a situation in which the author’s best known character derides her best known work of drama.

As mentioned previously, one finds that quite often humor, a rather bitter humor, is used by Mrs. Christie’s characters to discuss detective fiction. These discussions may be directed at other writers, the genre itself, or her own writing. She tends to be most critical of the quality of unreality in much of detective fiction. One method by which she stresses the implausibility of detective fiction of a lower order is by showing the mental inferiority of those who are afficionados of the genre. Hastings, the Watson figure, who was often the subject of Poirot’s ridicule until Mrs. Christie abandoned the character, seems greatly affected by those aspects of detective fiction which are the most lacking in reality:

“You have a tendency, Hastings, to prefer the least likely. That, no doubt, is from reading too many detective stories.”\(^{99}\)

One may find the criticism of the least-likely person motif more humorous when he remembers that acceptance of the tendency criticized in Hastings's sensibilities is the motif for which Mrs. Christie's fiction has most often been criticized.

Indeed, one would do well to notice that those characters in Mrs. Christie's fiction who wouldn't be valued for their mental prowess are those most often given to reading detective fiction. In an early Christie work, one notices the gullibility of the middle-aged colonial's wife who attempts to solve a real murder case by applying her readings on fictional crimes to the problem at hand.\footnote{Agatha Christie, The Body in the Library, p. 9.} She goes one step further in her appraisal of detective fiction by mentioning those authors whose works she most admires:

"...I've got autographs from Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie and Dickson Carr and H. C. Bailey..."\footnote{Ibid., p. 53.}

If one would consider the preceding instances of allusion to detective fiction as indicative of Mrs. Christie's own appraisal of the genre, he would almost certainly conclude that the author considers such literature unrealistic and simple: a pastime for those of slight mental competency.

Mrs. Christie seems to emphasize in her fiction those examples of the genre which disobey the rules of
verisimilitude and fair play. The practical policeman, Detective Japp, who appears in several Christie novels, is bitterly scornful of detective stories and their writers. He is even capable of viewing a writer of detective fiction as the most likely suspect in a rather bizarre murder case solely because of the character's association with the genre:

These detective story writers, always making the police out to be fools and getting their procedure all wrong....Set of ignorant scribblers! This is just the sort of fool murder that a scribbler of rubbish would think he could get away with.102

The preceding quotation may be seen to voice the opposition which most critics of detective fiction feel justified; i.e., in detective fiction the methods and procedures for crime detection are too sensational to be realistic. Japp also makes an obscure reference to Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and, in a sense, indicates that he, too, is given to the vice of detective story reading, when he states that detectives are sometimes found to be criminals in story books.103

The unreality of the genre of detective fiction is stressed most often in the Christie novel by those who should be most knowledgeable of the field, namely by those

102 Agatha Christie, *Death in the Air*, p. 31.
103 Ibid., p. 48.
characters who are writers themselves. Those frowned-upon devices of detective fiction, the locked-door puzzle and the untraceable poison, are stressed as being the craft and credential of almost every detective novel:

"The essence of a detective story... is to have a rare poison—if possible something from South America, that nobody has ever heard of—something that one obscure tribe of savages use to poison their arrows with. Death is instantaneous, and Western science is powerless to detect it." 104

The preceding quotation is made by a character whose mental abilities are respected. In his appraisal of the nature of detective fiction, he obviously finds little in the art to recommend its originality. One may find further emphasis on the sensationalism of detective fiction from an instance of comment on the craft by a character who is a writer of detective fiction:

"You can't write anything too sensational," said Mr. Clancy firmly... "After all you don't want a detective story to be like real life? Look at all the things in the papers—dull as ditch water." 105

The wary reader will not be led too far afield by these remarks concerning detective fiction if he remembers the ways in which Mrs. Christie is able to keep plausibility in her novels while creating fiction that is anything but dull. Certainly, Mrs. Christie does not intend such criticisms of the genre to apply to her own work.

105 Agatha Christie, Death in the Air, p. 120.
Certain references to detective fiction seem to be more directly related to Agatha Christie's writings than to detective fiction in general. As Mrs. Christie has created the Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, Ariadne Oliver has a Finn as her master detective (whose habits and accents she admits she dislikes). Even the minor author Clancy has a master detective with a suitable number of idiosyncrasies:

He (Wilbrahm Rice) bites his nails and eats a lot of bananas. I don't know why I made him bite his nails to start with. It's really rather disgusting, but there it is. He started by biting his nails and now he has to do it in every single book. So monotonous. The bananas aren't so bad; you get a bit of fun out of them--criminals slipping on the skin. I eat bananas myself--that's what put it into my head. But I don't bite my nails.

While several parallels may be found in the preceding quotation's comment on the creation of Wilbrahm Rice by considering the master detectives of Mrs. Christie, the monograph is avoiding much general speculation by using the quotation only to indicate one instance of comment in the novels of Agatha Christie on the idiosyncrasies associated with the master detective of the genre. Apparently the quotation is intended to show the nature of the author in relation to his creation. He has become trapped by public approval into maintaining standards of behavior for his creation which he may find unacceptable to his own concepts of reality.

106Agatha Christie, Hallowe'en Party, p. 3.
107Agatha Christie, Death in the Air, p. 117.
One may find comments on detective writers, particularly Ariadne Oliver (a novelist of detective fiction created by Agatha Christie), as enlightening to Mrs. Christie's view of the role in society of the successful practitioners of the craft of detective writing. The novelists are often presented as having as many idiosyncrasies as their creations. Mrs. Oliver's preference for apples and peculiarities of dress are usually cited at the time of her introduction to any novel. Mrs. Oliver may, indeed, be found to have many of those qualities of personality which are mentioned by critics and interviewers in association with Agatha Christie herself. Other characters in a novel may find Mrs. Oliver to be a rather disorganized woman of the Marple-mold, who rambles about personal experiences while others are more busily engaged.

Hercule Poirot views the authoress in a somewhat different light than other characters, but he too finds her proposals for possible solutions to crimes to be rather far-fetched:

Some of them (methods of murder) I will admit suggestions of my friend, Mrs. Oliver, who can easily come up with about twelve different solutions to everything, most of them not very probable but all of them faintly possible.

He further laments those qualities of Mrs. Oliver's mental processes which make the authoress unworthy of his approval concerning orderliness of mind although he adds a compliment for

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109 Ibid., p. 2.
110 Ibid., p. 31.
her creative powers:

"It is a pity," he murmured to himself, "that she is so quiet. And yet, she has originality of mind..."\[11]

If one would consider the preceding observations as tongue-in-cheek statements on the characteristics of the female author of detective fiction in general and Mrs. Christie in particular, he would be forced to concede that there is something quite appealing and vital in such an individual. However, since there is almost too much of stereotyped characterization involved in the description of Mrs. Oliver, one must hesitate to accept such quotations as indicative of the character of an actual person.

However, one also finds certain comments of the role of the popular mystery writer in his society that seem to be of a more serious nature. In Hallowe'en Party, Mrs. Oliver discusses the creativity involved in her writing with her friend Poirot:

"...I don't put people in books. People I meet, people I know."

"You're quite right," said Mrs. Oliver. "you're really rather good at guessing things sometimes. It does happen that way. I mean, you see a fat woman sitting in a bus eating a currant bun and you see her lips moving as well as eating, and you can see she's either saying something to someone or..."

\[11\] Ibid., p. 13.
thinking up a telephone call that she's going to make, or perhaps a letter she's going to write. And you look at her and you study her shoes and the skirt she's got on and her hat and guess her age and whether she's got a wedding ring on and a few other things. And then you get out of the bus. You don't want ever to see her again, but you've got a story in your mind about somebody called Mrs. Carnaby who is going home in a bus, having had a very strange interview somewhere where she saw someone in a pastry cook's and was reminded of someone she'd only met once and who she heard was dead and apparently wasn't dead... There's only one thing that would ruin it... if I met her again in another bus, or spoke to her or she talked to me or I began to know something about her. That would ruin everything.112

After a natural consideration of the "run-on" quality of Mrs. Oliver's dissertation on the method for finding material for her writing, one should notice from the preceding statements the concept often repeated to novice writers that their powers of observation are of equal importance to their abilities of imagination. The quotation would also seem to answer the charge that writers of detective fiction find plots for their novels by killing off those acquaintances whom they have found offensive. On a more serious note, however, is the implication that detective fiction, as any other literary art, requires creativity; one does not want to know the characters of their fiction because this knowledge would not allow these characters to be their own creations. Therefore, the characters and plot used in detective fiction should, according to this Christie alter-ego, be drawn from a combination of the author's

112 Ibid., p. 79.
powers of observation and imagination, not from personal experiences or the daily news.

Finally, one finds in the previously cited novel a comment on the role that the popular novelist, or any well-known individual, has in society. Although the character who makes the rather sarcastic comments is proven to be the criminal at the close of the novel, his intellectual powers are never ridiculed in the work since he is an artist of great talent and creativity. His remarks concerning the publicity received by Ariadne Oliver are suggestive of reasons for the reluctance of many celebrities to grant interviews:

"Ariadne Oliver. A best seller. People wish to interview her, to know what she thinks about such subjects as student unrest, socialism, girls' clothing, should sex be permissive, and many other things that are no concern of hers."

The quotation is concluded by Poirot's interjection that most often the interviewers of Mrs. Oliver find out only that she likes apples; however, the comment does present an interesting view of the lack of privacy of the "best seller." The writer of this paper does not wish to indicate that the philosophy of the artist's having "no concern" in sociological matters is Mrs. Christie's own, but such a philosophy would have some bearing on the reluctance of the famous authoress to discuss matters unrelated to her work with interviewers.

\[113\] Ibid., p. 79.
In this section of the monograph, the writer has offered textual evidence of those instances in which Mrs. Christie discusses detective fiction and its writers. One finds that there is a tendency in these examples to be critical of the unreality and low-brow nature of the genre. There is also an element in the discussion which seems to be of a more serious tone. These comments present the view that the writer of detective fiction must possess an acuteness of observation as well as pride in the uniqueness of their creations as would any other artist. There is also presented the concept that the popular author's opinions on matters other than his craft are given a position of greater relevance than that to which they are entitled.
III. ROLE OF WOMEN CHARACTERS

While researching the comments concerning writers and their works for the previous section, the writer of the monograph found one reference which combined observations on both writers and the role of women in fiction:

"In novels, I have noticed, anonymous letters of a foul and disgusting character, are never shown, if possible, to women. It is implied that women must at all cost be shielded from the shock it might give their delicate nervous systems."114

The preceding quotation will serve to introduce certain qualities of a rather "old-world" nature apparent in Agatha Christie's presentation of women characters in her novels. There seems to be a tendency in the presentation of those female characters in her writings to show them as creatures of less than favorable characteristics. Even in those comments which would seem complimentary on the surface, the admiration is tinged with condescension. Physical attributes are often used as more indicative of worth in women characters than either emotional or intellectual aspects. In fact, women of great emotional intensity are usually relegated in the Christie novel to the role of victim or dupe, and those characters who show great intellectual prowess are either the deserving victims or the ruthless killers. In short, women are usually presented in a less than favorable

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manner in the Agatha Christie fiction.

Quite often Mrs. Christie will combine in a female character qualities that are of a high and admirable order, only seemingly to ignore these aspects while emphasizing less favorable tendencies in their characters. In the previously mentioned, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Dr. Sheppard's sister Caroline seems a competent and industrious woman; however, she is branded by the narrator as the stock character, the aging female gossip:

"Go and find out," if Caroline ever adopts a crest, I should certainly suggest a mongoose rampant... When she goes out, it is not to gather information but to spread it.

Caroline Sheppard manages the household for her brother in an efficient manner, is well liked by her neighbors, and does not possess any prejudices in her association with the decidedly foreign Poirot; however, she is regarded in the novel in her role as gossip and busy-body—her role as prescribed by man.

A few of the more admiring comments referring to the fairer sex in the Christie novels come from the chivalrous detective, Hercule Poirot. Although the detective, who has never been the object of any "meaningful" relationship with a member of the opposite sex (discounting his confession of infatuation

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with the Russian countess in *The Labours of Hercules*), would not seem to be the most qualified proponent of women, even his favorable comments are of a somewhat condescending nature:

Strange how women enjoy living an uncomfortable life. If is not always poverty, though they are good at making the best of straitened circumstances.\textsuperscript{116}

Apparently, Poirot finds women are often presented in the role of martyrs, whether of circumstance or of their own volition. The compliment concerning the ability of women to make the best of hardship must be viewed as somewhat reversed by the concept that women just naturally enjoy the role of martyr. Even the most universally sacred role of woman, the role of mother, is not completely safe from ridicule in the Christie novel:

Mrs. Boynton devoted herself entirely to her family. She just shut out the outside world entirely. Now, I don't know what you think, Dr. Gerard, but I don't think that's always a very sound thing.\textsuperscript{117}

In the preceding quotations, one may notice a pattern emerging for the presentation of women in the Christie novel—whatever admirable qualities these women seem to possess, they are either negated in view of other qualities which are less favorable or are attributed to motives which seem not particularly noble when scrutinized by the male character.

\textsuperscript{116}Agatha Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 125.

\textsuperscript{117}Agatha Christie, *Appointment with Death*, p. 28.
Hercule Poirot states rather cryptically in one novel that the only qualities important to a woman are goodness and brains. Apparently, these qualities do not often combine in the female character of the Christie mode. Those women who are presented in completely favorable lights in the novels are likely to be those women who remain in the background of the action and conduct themselves as foils for other characters:

Adelaide Jefferson had the power of creating a restful atmosphere. She was a woman who never seemed to say anything remarkable but who succeeded in stimulating other people to talk and in setting them at their ease.

Such a woman as is described in the preceding quotation may be said to have both qualities which Poirot found most admirable in the female of the species; however, her intellect seems overshadowed by those qualities of "goodness" which cause her to conduct herself in such a manner that she is functional only as a means of comfort to those around her. Incidentally, Adelaide Jefferson had only a minor role in the action of The Body in the Library.

Although Poirot has stated that only goodness and brains are important to a woman, there is much material in the Christie novels which is devoted to showing the significance in the female's physical appearance. Captain Hastings is always shown to be taken by any appearance of beauty and devotes great sections

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of his narratives to the description of beautiful women and their effect upon him.

As she flashed around the corner of the stairs, I caught my breath. For a minute I caught a glimpse of a Winged Victory, deathless and incredibly beautiful, instead of a conscientious nursery governess... Along the pavement toward me there came a floating goddess. There is really no other word for it. The perfect features, the crisply curling golden hair, the tall exquisitely shaped body. And she walked like a goddess, without effort, seeming to swim nearer and nearer. A glorious, an incredible, a breath-taking girl.

Unfortunately, even the easily impressed Hastings often finds flaws in the perfection of the female character:

... and the magic died completely before the flat, competent voice... I fell to reflecting what would have happened if the gods had given Helen of Troy exactly those flat accents. How strange that a girl could trouble your inmost soul so long as she kept her mouth shut...

From the preceding quotations, one must assume that those qualities which Poirot found of greatest importance for women to possess, goodness and brains, are not those most recommended by the rest of the male society. Seemingly, physical appearance is paramount to a woman's acceptance in this society and the standards for obtaining admiration on these grounds are quite exacting.

121 Ibid., p. 23.
The concept that physical attractiveness is of the highest importance to the female character is stated on various occasions in Mrs. Christie's writings. The idea that intellect and emotional maturity are of equal stature with physical beauty may be found in the following remark made by an aging female character of the Christie novel. One finds her observations to be of a rather knowledgeable, if sarcastic, nature:

"Christine Redfern was a school teacher, I believe. She's the kind that thinks that mind has a pull over matter. She's got a rude shock coming to her."122

By combining the preceding quotation's concept with those statements presented by Hastings, one might conclude that women achieve recognition and acceptance in a man's world chiefly through their physical attributes and those attributes must be of the most complete and highest order if the female is to maintain a position of importance to the male.

However, one does find that the truly beautiful women in Agatha Christie's fiction are usually given roles of rather minor importance. They may be used as motives for the commission of a crime, but they are very seldom of enough ability and/or significance to be considered worthy.

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122Agatha Christie, Evil Under the Sun, p. 27.
criminals or victims. The more powerful women in the Christie novel are those who possess qualities which would be considered rather masculine:

The doctor's sister, who rejoiced in the singularly inappropriate name of Aimee, had all the positive assurance her brother lacked. She was a handsome woman in a masculine weather-beaten way, with a deep voice.\(^{123}\)

Such women as mentioned in the previous quotation are the characters in the Christie novel whose observations are significant and whose roles are central. However, such women are usually disliked by their peers and may be shown as quite capable of committing the most ruthless of crimes should their positions be threatened.

Age for female characters seems to be as important for total male acceptance as an attractive physical appearance. One Christie character remarked on the quality of youth to the acceptability of the female in the following manner:

"Because alas! I cannot judge. To me nowadays, anything young is beautiful."\(^{124}\)

However, one finds that more often in the Christie novel the young women are treated as unkindly, if not more so, as their older counterparts. If the female must possess qualities of beauty in either mind or physical appearance, the young woman is shown, quite often, as possessing neither.


\(^{124}\)Agatha Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 166.
Quite often in Agatha Christie's fiction there appears the seemingly stereotyped figure of the ugly schoolgirl:

Megan was a tall awkward girl, and although she was actually twenty, she looked more like a schoolgirlish sixteen. She had a shock of untidy brown hair, hazel green eyes, and thin bony face, and an unexpectedly charming one-sided smile. Her clothes were drab and unattractive and she usually had on lisle-thread stockings with holes in them.\(^{123}\)

Those qualities of unattractiveness presented in the preceding quotation are often used by Mrs. Christie in combination with attributes of dislike for the other members, both male and female, of a society which places such high values on physical attraction.

Mrs. Christie, in her later novels especially, presents the schoolgirl in a somewhat different light although she still emphasizes those qualities which are considered unattractive. The following is a rather pathetic comment on the younger female's desire to be found acceptable in a society oriented toward placing great value on physical beauty:

"All the girls can think of is to push their skirts higher and higher, and that's not much good to them because they have to put more on underneath--body stockings, tights..."\(^{126}\)

Once again, one notices a presentation of the female character as rather inferior. The Christie novel seems to present the view that women must have those characteristics of physical


attractiveness to be considered relevant in a male-dominated society, but the poor creatures cannot actually hope to succeed amid changing criteria for attractiveness and their own changing appearance. One might find the "cruelest cut of all" in the following appraisal of the value of women of unpleasing physical appearances:

"...In fact, a great many women would be better poisoned. All women who have grown old and ugly..."

Indeed, one may surmise from the preceding quotations that the lot of those women in the Christie fiction, with few exceptions, is rather bleak. Physical appearance is of paramount importance to the female character; however, these attributes do not guarantee a major role in society and are easily marred by slight flaws and rapidly fade with time.

The concept that there is really no way for the female character to achieve the same level of importance as her male counterpart is apparent in Mrs. Christie's treatment of the few dominant women in her fiction. Such characters are usually ruthless criminals or are murdered with implications made that their fate was somehow justified from their unfeminine actions. In Hallowe'en Party, for example, the female character Rowena Drake, is definitely a

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127Agatha Christie, Appointment with Death, p. 54.
dominant woman as described by Ariadne Oliver:

"It seems the only thing you are interested in is whether people are nice or not. Rowena Drake is the bossy type--likes running things and people. She runs this whole place more or less, I should think. But runs it very efficiently. It depends if you like bossy women. I don't much--" 128

Indeed, Mrs. Oliver's dislike of the dominant woman figure in this case seems to be justified. Mrs. Drake is shown to have, in a most efficient manner, taken part in a series of murders for profit which involved the ruthless murders of two children. Apparently, the role of the woman as sympathetic and motherly has no part in the makeup of the dominant female.

More often than not, in Christie fiction at least, certain dominant women or those who have adopted modes of conduct other than those strictly deemed acceptable for members of the fairer sex, tend to be the victims of their own over-bearing natures. Madame Gizelle, a victim in a Christie novel, is described in the following manner:

"...a woman who enjoyed power--she had power. She was a keen woman of business. She was the type of hard-headed French woman who would never allow sentiment to affect her business interests..." 129

While the woman described in the preceding quotation would command respect from the liberated females of our day, in

129 Agatha Christie, Death in the Air, p. 50.
the Christie work, she is murdered for the wealth she has acquired, and there is the implication that were it not for Poirot's strong dislike of murder, no one would consider her killing as a crime at all.

A statement concerning the view of the unnaturalness of the dominant woman figure is given in still another Christie novel in which the powerful female is destroyed by those who find control by women most unsavory. Dr. Gerard presents a chauvinistic comment on the nature of women and power:

"Too much power is bad for women,"...It is difficult for a woman not to abuse power."130

In the novel from which the preceding quotation was taken, the truth of the statement seems doubly reinforced by the fact that not only was one woman destroyed to a degree by her own need to possess power over others, but her killer was also a woman who found the victim a threat to her possession of position and dominance. Apparently, the female who possesses any degree of control is incapable of allowing this power to slip from her grasp.

In order to define more clearly Agatha Christie's concept of women in her fiction, one may examine the roles presented

130Agatha Christie, Appointment with Death, p. 16.
as proper for women in their relationships with men. Quite often, Christie characters view the male in as unfavorable a light as his female counterpart in such combinations. Men are often seen as not only the weaker or dependent sex: "Men always think they can impose upon women," but are also likely to be deposed by those women on whom they depend:

"but, I think that there's a limit to what women ought to put up with! If I were Nadine, I'd put it to young Lenox straight, either he sets to and proves what he's made of, or else--" Furthermore, the men in the Christie novel, especially those of prominent age and position, are usually shown to be less adventuresome than their wives:

"Arthur's being rather difficult. He seems to think I shouldn't enjoy myself about it [murder] at all." Often, their wives tend to dismiss them jokingly for their lack of high spirits and to forgive other weaknesses in their mates as only natural phenomena:

"No, he really isn't. He just--sometimes--is a little bit silly about pretty girls who come to tennis.... There's no harm in it. And why shouldn't he? After all, I've got the garden." Even with all of the before mentioned weaknesses of the male characters, the women in the Christie novel are usually

131 Ibid., p. 53.
132 Ibid., p. 29.
134 Ibid., p. 39.
shown accepting the traditional role of male dominance:

In Miss Arundell's day, women took second place. Men were important members of society.\footnote{Agatha Christie, Dumb Witness, p. 11.}

And, finally, women do tend to take advantage of their relationships with men by obtaining favors through flattery, which men easily accept as due from their concepts of superiority:

"One can't do anything without a man. Men know so much and are able to get information in so many ways that are impossible to women."\footnote{Agatha Christie, The Sittaford Mystery, p. 65.}

In all of the previously mentioned examples of the male-female relationship, one finds that the traditional role of women is stressed. Although men may not live up to the ideals of strength and superiority which are to be expected of them, women are expected to take a secondary position to the male. They seem to be considered successful in their roles in the Christie novels only if they can work within the limits of the framework of accepted women's positions and do not acquire those qualities of pride and self-determination reserved for the male.
Agatha Christie's fiction emphasizes in several instances the concept that surface appearances are not often indicative of true meaning. There is usually a strong suggestion that the "weaker" sex may actually be stronger in their enjoyment of the excitement of crime:

"But you enjoy it, dear lady, you enjoy it (murder). You disapprove, you deplore, but there is the thrill. I insist, there is the thrill!"\(^{137}\)

Indeed, the female characters in the Christie novel often react in the manner prescribed by the preceding quotation—the ladies, especially the older and more sedate women, respond to a murder in their midst as though the occasion were a combination of a county fair and an illicit love affair.

Also, the physical appearance of the female character cannot be used as a true indication of the qualities of personality possessed by the character. In fact, as with the sedate ladies' excitement over murder, one usually finds appearances to be opposite to their indications. For example, one often finds the more physically attractive female shown in the Christie fiction as the more morally deficient individual:

She seemed everything that was adorable and sweet. And all the time she was what she is now—vulgar, vicious, spiteful, empty-headed...."I can't even see her loveliness now."\(^{138}\)


\(^{138}\)Agatha Christie, *Death in the Air*, p. 98.
As in the preceding quotation, most women are presented in the Christie novel as somewhat less than admirable. With a seemingly chauvinistic tendency toward stereotyping, the Christie novel shows the female to possess the less favorable characteristics of man.

Women tend to whine:

Her voice had that faintly complaining note in it which is about the most annoying sound a human voice can contain.\(^\text{139}\)

Women tend to be weak:

In an emergency she would always behave like a frightened child.\(^\text{140}\)

Women tend to take advantage of men:

Griffith was too good a chap to be played fast and loose with. Women really were devils.\(^\text{141}\)

Women tend to be ruthless:

She likes to have control over other human beings and she likes to make them suffer.\(^\text{142}\)

Women tend to be silly:

"I think girls are rather silly nowadays." ... "Don't you think they always were."\(^\text{143}\)

In a sense, one should not use the preceding quotation to provide

\(^{139}\) Agatha Christie, \textit{Murder at Hazelmoor}, p. 58.

\(^{140}\) Agatha Christie, \textit{Appointment with Death}, p. 42.

\(^{141}\) Agatha Christie, \textit{The Moving Finger}, p. 89.

\(^{142}\) Agatha Christie, \textit{Appointment with Death}, pp. 34-35.

\(^{143}\) Agatha Christie, \textit{Hallowe'en Party}, p. 10.
a concrete statement concerning the women in the Christie detective novel; the female characters may have all of the before mentioned undesirable tendencies, but they might have none quite as easily. However, one may use a quotation from Poirot's remarks concerning the nature of women as it seems to be somewhat indicative of the role of the female in the Christie novel:

"Les Femmes."..."I know something of them. They are capable of complicating life unbearably. And the English, they conduct their affairs indescribably."144

From the preceding quotation, the writer of the monograph wishes to make a more definitive statement concerning the role of the female character in Christie fiction. The woman character may, if rarely, possess characteristics which are admirable and significant. More often, these characters are less than admirable and insignificant. Therefore, the primary function of the woman in Christie fiction is to complicate the plot of the novel. Through qualities of personality, either weak or strong, the female character becomes involved in the action of the novel by her ability to influence the male in his completion of his role.

144 Agatha Christie, Evil Under the Sun, p. 51.
Chapter 3

SUMMARY

From the textual evidence cited in the monograph, the writer of this paper has intended to establish respect in the reader for the complexities of Agatha Christie's art. In the opinion of this writer, Mrs. Christie's powers of creativity while maintaining credibility in her work have transcended the form of detective fiction. From examining the manner in which Agatha Christie adheres to the few established formulas for the craft of detective fiction, one should notice the manner in which the author has been able to work within the limits of each of these "rules" to create characters and plots which not only correspond to the criteria established, but create plausibility for both. Although some aspects of the author's craft may seem weaker than others, Mrs. Christie's ability to use the idiosyncrasies of the master detective to create a more believable and identifiable character, her capacity to show motives for crime which are plausible in their time-honored tradition, and her tendency to use clues that are "honorable", according to the form of detective fiction, but completely puzzling to the reader combine to create a sense of acceptance in the reader for both her plausibility and ability to entertain.

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Also, even in the less admirable aspects of her work such as her tendency to create women characters who are weak and/or unsympathetic or her tendency to use rather time-worn ideals of class responsibilities, one finds that she is able to use the flaws to give the reader a sense of acceptance for the credibility of her work. Furthermore, her talent in mentioning writers, their works, and her own fiction in such a way as to not offend the reader but, rather to establish believability for her characters and to add humor to her novels tend to add respect for her craft.

In fact, the writer of this paper wishes to state that this ability is the major premise for the view of Agatha Christie as an author of detective fiction who transcends the form to a level of high art for the novelist—in all the areas of her fiction discussed in the monograph. Mrs. Christie seems to be able to create characters and plots which, although corresponding to established criteria for the genre of detective fiction, maintain the reader's interest and establish the novel's credibility.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. SELECTED WORKS OF AGATHA CHRISTIE


B. PERIODICAL CRITICISM


C. CRITICISM DEVOTED TO DETECTIVE FICTION


APPENDIX

ORIGINAL TITLES AND DATES OF PUBLICATION

WORKS BY AGATHA CHRISTIE USED IN THE MONOGRAPH

The A. B. C. Murders, 1935.
And Then There Were None, (Ten Little Niggers), 1939.
The Body in the Library, 1942
The Boomerang Clue, (Why Didn't They Ask Evans), 1934.
Cards Upon the Table, 1936.
Cat Among the Pigeons, 1959.
Crooked House, 1949.
Dead Man's Folly, 1956.
Death in the Air, (Death in the Clouds), 1935.
Dumb Witness, 1937.
Easy to Kill, (Murder is Easy), 1939.
Evil Under the Sun, 1941.
Funerals Are Fatal, (After the Funeral), 1953.
Hallowe'en Party, 1953.
A Holiday for Murder, (Hercule Poirot's Christmas), 1938.
Make Mine Murder, (Collection), 1962.
The Man in the Brown Suit, 1924.
The Moving Finger, 1942.

Mrs. McGinty's Dead, 1952.

Murder at Hazelmoor, (The Sittaford Mystery), 1931.

Murder at the Vicarage, 1930.

Murder in the Clouds Coach, (Murder on the Orient Express), 1934.

Murder in Mesopotamia, 1936.


The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, 1926.

Murder She Said, (4:50 from Paddington), 1957.

Murder with Mirrors, (They Do It With Mirrors), 1952.

N or M, 1941.

Ordeal by Innocence, 1958.

The Pale Horse, 1961.

Peril at End House, 1932.

A Pocket Full of Rye, 1953.

Sad Cypress, 1940.

The Secret Adversary, 1922.

The Secret of Chimneys, 1925.

Seven Dials Mystery, 1929.

So Many Steps to Death, (Destination Unknown), 1954.

They Came to Baghdad, 1951.

The Third Girl, 1966.

Thirteen Clues for Miss Marple, 1966.

Towards Zero, 1944.