

Universidade de Lisboa
Faculdade de Letras



A Man's Job Agatha Christie's Miss Marple with
Special Reference to Murder at the Vicarage

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Mestrado em Estudos Ingleses e Americanos
Especialização em Estudos de Cultura

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Tese orientada pela Professora Dra. Adelaide Meira Serras

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Acknowledgment

This dissertation has taken me longer than I ever expected to be complete due to all the problems I had to face and try to solve in recent years. It turned itself into a sort of ‘crutch’ that helped me to limp all along and at the same time helping me to stay focused. Agatha Christie’s stories are my favorite readings while on holidays, although my perspectives have obviously changed. This paper was done in my spare time, when everything else came first even taking the dog to the vet. At first, all the information I had gathered looked like an enormous puzzle, but little by little it began to make sense; the bits started to piece themselves together and suddenly sentences became chapters.

I want to thank all the love and support I have received from my daughter, teachers especially from Professora Adelaide Meira Serras, who has been my mentor, it was she who challenged me to do this dissertation, and friends who gave me ideas, critics, advice and a helping hand when everything seemed to go wrong, not knowing a better word I simply say to You all: Thank You.

Abstract

This dissertation is focused on only two of Agatha Christie’s earlier works on detective fiction featuring her second most famous sleuth Miss Marple namely: *Thirteen Problems* (1930) which was published in the United States of America under the name of *Tuesday’s Night Club* and *Murder at the Vicarage* (1932).

From 1900 to 1930 goes a time span of just thirty years, but they were crucial to Humanity. They were days of development and devastation, of suffering and enjoyment as the world had to deal with one World War and its aftermath.

In order to better understand the character Miss Jane Marple several events of Agatha Christie's own private life were taken into consideration. Agatha Christie places her character in the tiny village of Saint Mary's Mead to make her look credible and between these two elements there is an interchange that helps in the characterization of both. In the end Miss Marple reveals herself, she is far more than the frail, old spinster who enjoys snooping and has a knack for murder, is the embodiment of Englishness.

Key Words: Agatha Christie, Miss Marple, Detective-fiction, Victorian times, Englishness.

Resumo

Esta dissertação baseia-se nas duas primeiras obras de Agatha Christie em que o personagem principal é a famosa detective Miss Jane Marple, nomeadamente *Thirteen Problems* (1930) que foi publicado nos Estados Unidos da América sob o título de *Tuesday's Night Murder Club*, e *Murder at the Vicarage* (1932).

De 1900 a 1930 vão apenas trinta anos que, no entanto, se revelaram cruciais para a Humanidade. Dias em que o mundo assistiu a progressos e devastação, a sofrimento e alegrias, e se viu confrontado com a Guerra Mundial I e as suas consequências.

Com o intuito de conseguir compreender melhor o personagem Miss Jane Marple vários acontecimentos da vida pessoal de Agatha Christie foram tomados em linha de conta. A autora coloca o personagem na minúscula aldeia de Saint Mary Mead, a fim de a tornar credível e entre estes dois elementos há um entrecruzamento que ajuda à caracterização de ambos.

Miss Marple acaba por revelar-se muito para além da frágil e idosa solteirona, que gosta de bisbilhotar e tem uma queda para resolver crimes. Na verdade, ela encarna o espírito inglês da sua época.

Palavras-chave: Agatha Christie, Miss Marple, Ficção Policial, Era Vitoriana,
Englishness

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Chapter I – Introduction

At head start anyone dealing with detective fiction faces two major issues: is it Literature?

Can it be included in literature? Is it a genre?

Until quite recently detective fiction books could be found on the bottom shelf of any good library and none of its authors up to the present has been awarded any 'canonical' prize. In spite of their enormous popularity and huge sales, they seem to be ignored by those, who look upon themselves as producers of 'real literature'. Only their peers seem to recognize their talents, in a close circle, similar to the settings so much in use during the Golden Age.

Firstly one must consider, if just briefly what is literature, the ambiguity of the term becomes immediately patent, since it is used to advertising matter and any kind of imaginative writing however bad. (A. A. Hill: 1998, 243).

The term itself can be misleading, putting aside oral literature and getting hold only of the written word. Basically it is a form of human expression, but not everything is literature. Those writings that are primarily informative are excluded by some critics of its 'realm'.

Literature can also be defined as a body of written works. Traditionally, the name has been applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose, distinguished by the intention of their executors and the perceived authentic excellence of their authors. In this sense Lisbeth Goodman in her work *About Gender* (2004) defines literature as: a body of writing that aims to be creative. It includes poetry, prose, fiction and drama, but usually excludes shopping lists, business letters and newspaper journalism. As such, literature may be classified according to a variety of systems including: language, national origin, historical period, genre and subject matter.

The debate whether detective fiction may, or may not, be considered literature is an old argument. Detective fiction authors are still kept at bay and their place in literature remains uncertain. One thing is sure, detective fiction belongs to the great branch of fiction, its main theme the fight between Good and Evil is the corner-stone issue of all Literature; its form, nowadays, mostly the novel format, began under the short-story form and only later it expanded itself to the novel. Even under the wide fictional category does it belong to the center or to the margins of Literature? This is another

problem far from being solved. Johanna M. Smith in her article entitled *Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction: Gendering the Canon* (1991) states:

“Allowing some popular fiction into a Literature canon would maintain the hierarchical division between these categories that assumes Literatures relative autonomy from the realm of ideology and places popular fiction in that grubby milieu.... We need to rethink center and margins so I might teach detective fiction as a canon in its own right”. (Smith: 1991, 16)

Theme and form do not exclude it from the realm of Literature. Quality is also guaranteed. A huge number of writers and readers are a reality, so why are there still so many critics reluctant in considering it Literature?

Maybe the answer is linked to its origins. Detective fiction was born for the delight of the lower classes and has not forgotten its roots, or been allowed to forget them. It was branded ‘low-brow’ and so it seems to remain by those who represent the highest authority in the literary field Marjorie Nicholson (1894-1981) in her work *The Professor and the Detective* (1929) opposes detective to literary fiction of her time and gives testimony of the appeal the first had on the latter by providing an escape:” An escape from literature itself “. “ The same people who spent their days reading Joyce were reading Agatha Christie by night”. May be this is the secret that keeps detective fiction alive and well. (Nicholson: 1929, 14)

Today academic writers of detective fiction are consciously crossing over literary borders, the high and the low culture and at the same time showing that it can claim literary status. There is a complex articulation between biographical and detective fiction and its implications for our notions of selfhood and for the subjective authority both claimed and renounced by the narrative vices of our times. Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003) wrote in his work *The Book to come?* (2000):

“A book does not belong to a genre; every book depends exclusively of literature. Genre is precisely one of those links through which the book connects itself with the universe of literature” (Blanchot: 2000, 133).

So, once detective fiction is accepted as belonging to literature, the question of its genre arises in more than one perspective.

Basically, *Genre* is a French term that denotes types or classes of literature. The word itself ‘*genre*’ derived not only from the French, but also from the Latin meaning ‘a class’, ‘kind’ or sort. It is an ‘umbrella’ concept because it allows for many disparate and often related concepts to be conveniently divided and subdivided. So, *Genre* can be viewed as a literary type or class. However, works can be classified by subject – thus *carpe diem* – each subject may eventually be said to constitute a genre, but the more usual classification is by form and treatment. Some of the recognized genres are: epic, tragedy, and lyric. From the Renaissance through the 18th century, the various genres were rigorously distinguished and were governed by set of rules which a writer was expected to follow. Recently, however, criticism has become less directly prescriptive and less concerned with distinctions among them, although they are still considered useful. (Beckson: 1961, 45).

So, the Classical classification into the already mentioned three recognized genres – or poetic kinds – as they were then called, were widely thought to be fixed literary types through the Renaissance and much of the 18th century. They were also commonly ranked in a hierarchy. Actually, it was in the course of the 18th century that the emergence of new types of literary productions and the *querelle* between Ancient and Modern Literature, as depicted in Swift’s (1667-1745) *The Battle of Books* (1697) and also presented in

Fielding’s prefaces helped weaken the belief in the stability and fixity of the literary genres. In result of all the turmoil, nowadays genres are conceived to be more or less arbitrary modes of classification, whose justification is their adequacy in terms of aesthetically, that is, in literarily, presenting a subject. (M. H. Abrams: 1999, 67).

When trying to approach Agatha Christie’s work, and especially *Thirteen Problems*, with her detective Miss Jane Marple, a feminine character in a usually male dominion, the gender issue becomes of the utmost importance.

Gender in common usage refers to the differences between men and women.

Encyclopaedia Britannica notes that gender identity is ‘an individual’ self-conception as being male or female, as distinguished from actual biological sex (1993). Although gender is commonly used interchangeably with ‘sex’ within the academic fields of cultural studies, gender studies or the social sciences in general, the term ‘gender’ often

refers to mainly social rather than biological differences. Some view gender as a social construction rather than a biological phenomenon. People whose gender identity feels incongruent with their physical bodies may identify themselves as gender queer or transgender.

In addition to age, gender is one of the universal dimensions on which status differences are based. Unlike sex, which is a biological concept, gender is a *social construct* specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow. According to Gerda Lerner (1920-2013) in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), gender is

“the costume, the mask, a straightjacket, in which men and women dance an unequal dance” (22). As Alan Wolfe (1942-) observed in *The Gender Question (The New Republic)* published in 1994.

“Of all ways one group has systematically mistreated another, none is more deeply rooted than the way men have subordinated women. All other discrimination is pale by contrast.” (Wolfe: 1994, 25)

Lerner takes this argument even further and blames the ‘subordination of women’ responsible for all the other ‘isms’:

“Subordination of women preceded all other subordinations and to rid ourselves of all other ‘isms’ – racism, classicism, (...) it is sexism that must be eradicated.” (Lerner: 1968, 75)

All societies seem to recognize the existence of different sexes and therefore group them according to it for several reasons. (Reskin & Padavic: 1994, 42) Every human being borne under Western culture immediately belongs to a specific sexual category. For the Greek philosophers man is the creator of law and order, while woman is linked to chaos, disorder, an inferior being by nature. The Enlightenment’s speech pretends to put an end to the differences of sex and race, but the truth is that in a somewhat perverse way it ends up by justifying women’s inferiority. She is seen as ‘The Other’. The French Revolution with its quest for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity went on considering women as men’s property. She is nothing more than ‘la femme du citoyen’, with no legal identity. Sandra Bem (1994-) in her book *The Lenses of Gender* (1993) says that in

spite of all the changes brought by the first and second wave of Feminism, differences between men and women remain. She goes on saying that certain concepts are so deep rooted in our society, that we still see it through three different lenses, which can be identified:

“The lenses of androcentrism, gender polarization and biological essentialism systematically reproduce male power into different ways. First, the discourse of social institutions in which there are embedded automatically channel females and males into different and unequal life situations. Second, during enculturation, the individual gradually internalizes the cultural lenses and thereby becomes motivated to construct an identity that is consistent with them.”
(Bem: 1993, 23)

Judith Butler (1956-) in her work *Gender Troubles* (1990) argues that feminism had made a mistake by trying to assert that ‘women’ were a group with common characteristics and interests. “That approach”, says Butler, “performed an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations – reinforcing a binary view of gender relations in which human beings are divided into two clear cut groups, women and men”. Rather than opening up the possibilities for a person to form and choose its own individual identity, feminism ended up by closing the options down. Even so it had the merit of rejecting the idea that biology is destiny, but then developed an account of patriarchal culture, which assumed that masculine and feminine genders would inevitably be built upon ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies, making the same destiny just as inescapable”. There is no room left for choice, differences or resistance. Butler favors “those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts.”(1990, 143) In other words rather than being a fixed attribute in a person, gender should be seen as a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and different times. Butler goes on saying that:

“The very fact that women and men can say that they feel more or less ‘like a man’ or ‘like a woman’ shows.....the experience of a gendered (...) cultural identity is considered an achievement.” (Butler: 1990, 143).

Judith further argues that sex (male and female) is seen to cause desire ‘towards the other gender’ is seen as a kind of continuum. Her approach – inspired in part by Foucault – is basically to smash the supposed links between these two, so that gender and desire are flexible, free-floating and ‘not caused by other stable factors’. But she goes on saying: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender.... Identity is performativly constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results”. In short, gender is a performance. It is what you do at particular times, rather than a universal ‘who you are’. She sustains that we all put on a gender performance, whether traditional or not, anyway, and so it is not a question whether to do a gender performance, but what from that performance will take. By choosing to be different about it, we might work to change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. (Butler, 1990, 25)

Historically, in the 18th century, John Locke (1632-1704) firmly challenged the patriarchal model of the English family with his theory of the development of human society, in which marriage like any political institution was seen as a contractual relationship rather than a divinely ordained institution. Marriage became a partnership in which the natural abilities of each sex and an agreed contract determined the relative power and functions of each one. William Hogarth (1697-1764), with his critical eye and brush, left us an image of this situation in a set of six paintings known as ‘Marriage à la Mode’. They are not only a moralistic warning showing the results of an ill-contrived marriage just aiming in profiting from one’s social status and the other’s wealth, but a rather realistic, though satirically depicted, portrait of this alliance between gentry and rich merchants eager of obtaining social recognition that would create a peculiar kind of society’s stratum, to flourish later on in the Industrial Revolution period known as ‘gentility’.

Almost a century later John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and his wife Harriet Taylor (1807-1858) in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), among others, argued against the legal basis of male domination: the property laws, which gave husbands control of their wives property; the definition of assault which allowed husbands to discipline their wives physically, and the laws of divorce which prevented women from escaping unhappy marriages, and it effected, would part them of their children.

Miss Maple belongs to the upper-classes, just like Agatha Christie, who describes her as an old lady in her very first presentation to the reader in *Thirteen Problems*. In accordance with her social status she has a small income and is the proud owner of her own cottage.

True to her Victorian upbringing she has lived a long and sheltered life, meaning that she could always rely on the aid of some family gentleman, or someone of her circle (i.e. a solicitor, or such a person) to help her either with financial problems, or in any legal difficulties, but she is not ignorant of all the evil that surrounds her and even grows in her little world, of Saint Mary Meads. She always expects the worst of people and she is right most of the times. She claims that her knowledge came with the years and to the fact that she always pays attention to her fellow creatures' attitudes. Miss Marple's knowledge is based on experience giving her a very British trait of character.

Nonetheless, crime fiction is the genre of fiction that deals with crimes, the detection of their criminals and their motives. The vast majority of crime novels, though not all of them share a common structure. First there is the crime, usually murder; afterwards there is the investigation; and finally the outcome or judgment, often in the shape of the criminal's arrest or death. (M.H. Abrams, 1977, 153)

Thus, this dissertation aims to present Agatha Christie's contribution to the relevance of the detective story genre, as well as her world vision in a period of such turmoil. It will also focus on her creation of a female detective as protagonist of her plots, especially in *Murder at the Vicarage* (1932). The importance of political feminine initiatives in order to change women's status will be taken into consideration on account of its association with the appearance of a woman in such a field of activity. Social conventions and ways of life in a period known by multifaceted changes can be traced in Christie's work, that is, in her character's observation of reality. Finally, Christie's legacy up to the present will prove her merit in the establishing, or widening of readership habits, both among the elite and the less educated social groups.

Chapter II – Detective Fiction

In spite of Abrams (1912-1999) more comprehensive definition, the genre evolved into specific themes and formats with their respective unique features. There is such a huge

variety within the genre, which has evolved into several sub-genres including detective fiction, legal thriller, courtroom drama, hard-boiled drama, etc. These subgenres mixture thriller with detective fiction, in which the major characters are lawyers and their employees, providing a frame-work similar to the works focused upon police procedures. Among the several kinds above mentioned, this work will focus primarily on detective fiction.

Detective fiction stands a branch of crime fiction centered upon the investigation of a crime, usually a murder, by a detective either professional or amateur. It is closely related to mystery fiction, but generally contains more of a puzzle element that must be solved generally by a single protagonist, male or female. The investigator is generally unmarried, with some source of income instead of a regular job, and who displays, as a rule, some pleasing eccentricities, and has a less intelligent assistant to whom the mystery is explained at the end of the story or more specifically, aiming at the detailed elements, which compose the detective fictional narrative.

(<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/detective>).

“Detective story is a narrative in which mystery, frequently murder, is unraveled by a detective. The story itself generally contains at least some of the following conventions: the seemingly perfect crime; the police; the detective’s confidant, who lacks his associate brilliance but who always asks the right questions to clarify the situation; the suspect who appears guilty from the circumstantial evidence but who is latter proved innocent; the sensational denouement in which the detective explains in minute detail who killed whom and how. The method of discovery is off course, deductive, for it is generally axiomatic that the sleuth should be in possession of clues which the reader is unaware. By ingenious plotting, the writer of the detective story invites his reader to match wits with the detective and it ceased to be strict puzzles; instead they emphasize the psychological implications of a crime or the violent adventures of the protagonist. (Bergson, Ganz: 1961, 47)

There are at least two subgenres of detective fiction, namely the ‘village mystery’ and the ‘historical mystery’ both of them dominated by women writers. They were put aside as a sort of cannon was established by the Detection Club (1928), of which Agatha

Christie (1890-1976) was a founding member together with Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957). The members of the Club used to swear an oath, which came out of the latter's pen:

“Do You promise that your Detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them, using those wits which it may please You to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on or making use of Divine revelation, feminine intuition, mumbo-jumbo, jiggery-pokery, coincidence or the act of God?.”

(<http://www.cbu.worldpress.com/2007/09/10/oath-of-detection>)

Detective novel has a profound English nature and heritage. It demonstrates, perhaps the last identifiable place where traditional, genteel, British fashions, assumptions and methods triumph in the 20th century novel.

Detective fiction can also be defined as a distinctive modern creation linked to the development of the legal and scientific progress; detectives follow clues, forensic procedures have evolved to forensic science providing the sleuth with the necessary clues which lead to evidence and ultimately a presentation of their case before the law. Solving a crime works to reinstate social order, and classifies murder occurrences according to a well-established determinate number of motives: passion, money, madness. At the same time it reassures the reader that all these phenomena can be explained, and ultimately solved by rational scientific thought.

The Poetics of Prose (1971) chapter ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’ Tzvetan Todorov points out that the narrative theory that governs the classic detective fiction is straightforward. There is the discovery of crime, the pursuit of the information by the detective, the climatic revelation of the solution or explanation of the solution. According to its structure he divides them in: Whodunit, thriller and the ‘Suspense type’ (Todorov: 1971, 57). He separates whodunit type into two stories within a narrative, which he calls story and investigation. The first story is that of murder that is completed at the beginning or even before the story begins. The second story is the story of the investigation told chronologically and this takes up the greater part of the novel or short story. It ends with the symbolic murder of the criminal, while the reader may know who committed the crime. The focus is on the detective's ability to uncover the murderer.

This is an opinion shared by George Burton (1851-1925), who, just like Todorov, considers that there are two ‘murders’ of which the first committed by the murderer is merely the occasion for the second, in which he is the victim of the pure and beyond punishment murderer, the detective and that the narrative superimposes two temporal series: the days of the investigation, which begin with the crime and the days of drama which lead up to it. In Burton’s own words:” all detective fiction is based on two murders”. (Burton: 1940, 135)

Burton’s analysis of detective fiction’s structure is similar to Todorov’s. Both authors agree that solving the crime works to reinstate a social order that has been disrupted in society that believes murder occurs for a determinate number of reasons mostly money and that each can be solved by rational thought. Todorov also agrees that the detective fiction allows the writer to explore cultural tensions and anxieties posed by a world in transition, turning itself into a useful weapon for anyone, who wants to assimilate or meditate social change and he ends by leaving a warning when it begins to be subservient to the authorial morality tale and literary improvements it ceases to be detective fiction and becomes literature:

“detective fiction has its own rules, doing ‘better’ than they demand, is at the same time doing ‘worst’; Whoever tries to embellish it ‘does’ literature, but it ceases to be detective fiction”

“Detective fiction, for excellency is not the one that crosses over the rules of the genre, but the one that obeys them”. (Todorov: 1971, 61)

A message is delivered through the exposure of the criminal and also more covertly through the story of the investigation. The genre subscribes to a specific set of narrative conventions, known as The Ten Commandments, written by Ronald Knox (1888 – 1957) and formulaic patterns, conforming also to the belief that what we see can be known and what is known can and must be explained.

(<http://www.classicalcrimefiction.com/commandments/htm>)

Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) in *The Simple Art of Murder* (1944) sees the detective novel as an evolution of the country-house literary tradition, though it is a house based on capital riches and not in landed wealth. He evaluates it as enclosed not only in setting

but also in social terms as lower-classes are ruled out and if they do take part in any crime they are not to blame. This is true in Christie, in *Thirteen Problems* (1930) which standardly evolves within a middle class, or high middle class close milieu. Even when in *Tuesday's Night Club* the maid poisons some sweets called hundreds and thousands killing the lady of the house, the idea of doing it was not hers, it was the master of the house's, she was only the hand that did the deed.

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) wrote that: "The original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual's traces in the big city world" in *On the Concept of History* (1940), thus highlighting the annihilation brought about by the massification of society in tandem with industrialization process. The association between crime and urban life and the unveiling of the former had also been pointed out. Chesterton (1874-1936) makes a 'striking' account of detective fiction as poetry of the city inscribed in urban hieroglyphics. He was one of the very first to write about it. In his book *A Defense of Detective Fiction* (1901), he held that detective fiction acted as the modern urban equivalent of historical epic romances. It required important conventions moral and generic. In 1920 and 1925, respectively, he wrote two more books on the subject. Thus, he sees the detective as a knight errand of modern times and idea echoed forty years later by Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) in *The Simple Art of Murder*.

It is obvious that this genre places constraint upon the crime writer, who seeks to produce his work in accordance to the established rules. To work within such narrow lines allows authors to play with the conventions and to produce works that do not absolutely comply with them and somehow subvert the traditional detective paradigm.

Moreover, writers have learned that the formula is adaptable. That it will take more realism, more humor, which was introduced by Christie, for instance, a wide class range and more psychological depth. The 'whodunit' is not dead, on the contrary, it is very much alive and well. Which new paths will crime fiction undertake in the future no one can tell, but there is no future without a past, it is important to remember and to believe in a fruitful age yet to come.

1. Origins and Roots of Detective Fiction

The origins of detective fiction can be traced far back to classical times, if we choose to consider *Oedipus* as a sort of detective narrative. However, it was only in the eighteenth century, with the consolidation of an urban style of life, marked by the rise of huge cities with all the activities developed in relation to transatlantic commerce, and in the metropolis, that the significant increase in a wealthier middle-class with more time for leisure took place. These new conditions brought about also a larger number of readers, especially among the new members of this immense 'middle sort'. So, in those days literature is suffused with crime, but it takes it in a different perspective. There was no reliable system of policing or of the detection of criminals and it seems that people had not much faith, either, that something effectively could be done. Yet, new city-dwellers were fascinated, and at the same time afraid of crime. Criminals were vilified and romanticized along with those who fought them. The usual *locus* was Newgate, London's main prison and the public executions were held at Tyburn, where a numerous and heterogeneous multitude watched the "performance". At the market, ballads and true 'narratives' relating criminal's lives and often 'fabricated' last confessions, constituted a love rate discourse between the condemned and the public.

The reading public's appetite for stories of crime and sometimes punishment grew along with the literary market. More affordable accounts of crime and violence, nicknamed 'shilling shockers' and 'penny dreadfuls' continued to appear throughout the century especially after the abolition of the 'knowledge tax' upon paper and printed material'. Some of these stories were published all together in different volumes known as the *NewGate Calendar Stories*, 1733 giving it a more mass-produced expression. Yet the idea of the detective is non-existent. Along with the stories of criminals were handed out stories of shipwrecks, pirates through the busy streets of 18th century London spun by competing authors. Taverns and coffee-shops served as meeting places for debate and political discussions. There the client could sip his drink leisurely while reading a

newspaper or even a book. In fact, the ‘new’ coffee-shops of today are just a revival of the very early ones. Another volume of *Newgate Calendar Stories* was published between 1830 and 1847. The stories bound together in these volumes form a bridge between 18th century crime fiction and the Victorian detective story in particular in the hands of Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) and Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873).

Charles Rezapka is in favor of this argument. In his book entitled *Detective Fiction* (2005) he sustains that the appearance of detective fiction is linked to several changes that took place in the 18th century, such as: the appearance of the big city, since never before had cities been so big; there was a spreading in literacy due to the improvement in education, even if the three Rs system, as it was called, was basic; there were innovations in publication as well as in distribution; there was a shift in law and enforcement methods and public executions were forbidden. The populace – as Matthew Arnold called the working class in his well-known essay *Culture and Anarchy* - had to be entertained in any other way, crime fiction became a way of ‘filling’ that void. (Arnold: 1979, 77) Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of a Prison*’ (1991) shares this view, as he writes:

“We have moved from the exposition of facts or the confession to the slow process of discovery..... The literature of crime transposes to another social class the spectacle that had surrounded the criminal. Meanwhile the papers took over the task of recounting the grey, unheroic details...” (Michael Foucault: 1991, 69)

At the same time, there was a development in sciences and history. The word ‘scientist’ was coined in the 18th century. Its first meaning was natural philosopher. It became fashionable to assemble collections, so those who could afford it began collecting stuffed animals, porcelains, or rocks. History was also developed: people began to have doubts about the age of the earth, as geological proofs were found that it was much older. These two branches of knowledge resemble detective fiction as they too try to add something new to our understanding of the past, or the environment.

In the 19th century the role of the newly fashioned detective as a reliable agent of security is both commercially and ideologically central to the subsequent project of popular crime writing. The Bloody Code was lessened in its severity of punishment, giving way to an emergent trust in the efficiency of administering justice, needed in a

growing urban settlement. In this way conditions were favorable to the birth of the detective hero. In the classical sense, a detective is a person that is called in when a crime occurs and the police are at loss to solve it. The detective can be private or not, professional or amateur, and each one of them has a particular way of bringing the criminals to justice. Alison Light (1955-), in her work *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991), classifies detective fiction as: ‘a formerly marginal curiosity of the Victorian imagination’ which ‘blossomed in the Twenties and Thirties into a huge national craze’ (273).

Earl Bargainnier was one among the first to take a serious look into detective fiction, when he in 1980 published *The Gentle Art of Murder* (1980) already suggested several roots for detective fiction namely: morality plays, Renaissance pastoral, Restoration comedy, the fairy tale, comedy of manners and melodrama because in all of them the good and the innocent are rewarded.

Among those who gave a significant contribution to the establishment of the genre are: Eugene Vidocq (1775 – 1857) who was the first head of the *French Suret * created by Napoleon. Before he had been a soldier, a privateer, a smuggler, an inmate, a secret police spy, Vidocq published his *Memoirs* (1828) in four volumes. It was a hit soon translated in English, influencing for example, Charles Dickens (1812-1870) in *Great Expectations* (1860). Vidocq introduced the figure of the detective, as well as the idea of detention. The very word detective appeared in 1843 with the specific meaning of a plainclothes policeman, but within a short-time it was enlarged to: one whose occupation is to discover matters artfully concealed... (<http://www.classiccrimefiction.com/htm>)

In England, the Metropolitan Police was established in 1828 as the result of a movement concerned with the rising of crime, potential revolutionary activity and an overly harsh legal system, known as ‘The Bloody Code’. It is popularly known as Scotland Yard because it stands, where once stood a 13th century palace used by the kings and queens of Scotland when on state-visits, hence the name. It has been their headquarters since 1829 when it was brought to life by Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850) in order to replace the former police force, the old Bow Street Runners. At first people were against the

creation of a police force as they feared for their rights. As to the figure of the ‘private eye’, it seems it was set by Alan Pinkerton (1819-1884), a Scot who fled to America and opened an agency whose logo was ‘We Never Sleep’. He published in later life the ‘dark’ secrets of his profession.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) in *Murder in the Rue Morgue* (1841) and other Dupin’s stories built the foundations of this emergent type of narrative from 1840 to 1845. All these stories have an anonymous narrator, and their hero succeeds in the investigations where the regular authorities have failed.

These features led Martin Priestman to believe that detective fiction became a ‘selfconscious’ genre with the creation of the ‘whodunit’ beginning with Poe’s *Murder in the Rue Morgue* (1841).

The ‘whodunit’ is primarily concerned with the unraveling of past events, which either involve a crime or seem to do so. The presentation is largely static and major attention is given to the detecting activity itself, which may be performed virtually by anyone – police or amateur – who enjoys finding the approval of the Law.

“From then on until today the basic formula of this single short-story has been endlessly reworked in a literary genre of extraordinary stability and continuing popularity.” (Priestman: 1998, 164)

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) main contribution to the genre was the creation of his character Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* (1852 /1853). It seems that this character was depicted on a real detective belonging to the newly created Metropolitan Police Force, as Dickens used to accompany a night patrol through the streets of London; he witnessed the day to day running of police stations, attended magistrates, courts and was present at murder trials and public executions. This is how Dickens describes him:

“With his attentive face, and his hat and stick in his hands, and his hands behind him, a composed and quiet listener. He is a stoutly built, steady-looking, sharp-eyed man in black of about the middle-age.... There is nothing remarkable about his figure.” (Dickens: 1853, 79)

It seems that some features were kept since the very beginning. No wonder that Agatha Christie, in her *Autobiography* (1977), admits that *Bleak House* was her favorite work

by Dickens (1834). Miss Marple is also introduced to the reader as a rather inconspicuous figure: she dresses in black in the very first description we are given of her in *Thirteen Problems* (1930), has a piercing look and looks just like a common old 'spinster'.

Notwithstanding the previous contributions to this genre, critics often credit Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) with the invention of the English Detective novel. He was Dickens's friend, who was twelve years his senior. He collaborated on articles for the periodical *Household Words*, edited by the former. Furthermore, he was the first author to use a literary agent and was involved in the initial formation of the concept of intellectual rights for authors, a cause he championed until his death. In 1844 he helped in the foundation of Society of Authors. More to the point, Wilkie Collins is important to the genre because of two of his works: *Moonstone* (1868) and *Woman in White* (1862). *Moonstone* makes very effective use of post-gothic atmospheric and tropes insanity, mistaken identity, drugs, this last factor being a problem, Collins knew first-hand as he was an opium addict. So, he features the negative aspects: imprisonment, stolen inheritance, family intrigues and vengeance among others. In this work he anticipates Christie in sixty years by writing in the first person and by turning the narrator into the criminal. His character, inspector Cuff suffers from an eccentricity: his love for roses and eccentricity, in one way or another, would become a conventional trait in many fictional detectives. The heroine, Rachel Verinder is a subtle, yet powerful and compelling character, because she is willful and manlike in her tenacity, though feminine in her feelings. In *Woman in White* (1860) he seems to make use of a real life incident – his first encounter with Caroline Graves (1830-1895), a widow, who became his life-companion.

Collins's heroines set new standards for the literary portrayal of women and their problems, in an attempt to present them as they really were, breaking away from the stereotype and revealing how well he observed women. In *Moonstone* Marion, his feminine main character, struggles to protect a fellow woman from male domination and attacks masculine denigration of female character and intelligence "No, man under heavens deserves these sacrifices from us women" (Collins: 1860, 225)

Collins was merely writing standard mid-Victorian melodrama. It happened that, in order to thrill and mystify his readers, he employed many situations and devices which

have since then become stock in trade for anyone attempting to write a detective story. He has a long list of credits in that area: the first dog detective; the first lady detective; the first application of epistolary narrative to detective fiction; the first humorous detective story; the first British detective story; the first full-length detective novel in English. As a matter of fact, his skill consisted in using of applying fairly well-known literary tools in what was to be a detective story, even if he was not fully aware of his originality.

If Collins was able to introduce suspense and thrill to the emergent detective narrative, the contribution of Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) as the famous author of Sherlock Holmes (1887) and his famous friend and companion Dr. Watson to the genre stems from another root. He was born in Scotland and became a medical doctor thanks to the influence of Dr. Joseph Bell, his professor of clinical surgery to whom he eventually dedicated his character Sherlock Holmes, mentioning that it was the doctor's love for reasoning and order that inspired him in its creation. As a matter of fact, Doyle aimed at the reader's ability to reason upon the data presented to him to discover the murderer as the logic conclusion of one's reflections on the case. Alison Light supports the relevance of Doyle's work relevance to the field:

“It was his work, which elevated detective fiction to a new distinction by the success it achieved as it offered a sort of intellectual challenge that made it acceptable to the highly educated becoming even addictive.” (Light: 1991, 273)

Although Edgar Allan Poe provided him with some material, Doyle is the unquestionable founder father of the genre while refocusing the theme, and displacing the hyperbolic emotion by the rational games of both reader and author.

Between 1920s and 1930s there is a boom in detective fiction, the so-called detective fiction Golden Age, a time when four women writers took the lead and became known as

‘the Queens of Crime Fiction’: Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982), and Margery Allingham (1904-1966) .

The term Golden Age was used for the first time to classify the period from 1918 to 1930, but this period is far from being uniform, as different types of crime fiction were

produced. Yet there are common elements, such as multiple suspects as part of the parcel and plot. It became a genre of crime fiction best named for its central mechanism as the clue-puzzle, Christie's favorite. Murder becomes an essential. Words like: murder, blood and death are now compulsory and the setting becomes a more or less secluded countryhouse. Alison Light believes that writers of the period between-the-war learned from

Trent's Last Case (1913) the value of the breezy, light-hearted approach to detection. This story was written by Edmund Clerihew Bentley (1875-1956), who is better known as E. C. Bentley. Murder was now presented as a matter of amusing diversion rather than of tragedy and horror, often making the victim unlikeable (Thompson: 2007, 275).

Crime was then announced with levity, probably providing an escape from the grim surroundings of those days. Youth had been sacrificed to the monster of war and from then on, it has been cherished and valued as something precious and moment lasting. The kind of society that followed is utterly different. From then on everything began to change at a much quicker pace than ever before. Even beauty patterns changed on this account.

The 'S' figure of a lady in her forties was no longer the 'beauty'; she was replaced by a 'young silly thing', as Christie calls her female young characters. Actually, our society still hangs to this image of 'ever-lasting' youth compelling men and women alike to try to stay young, no matter what.

The reasons leading to this explosion of readership might be: the strong desire to put behind one's back the four dreadful years the war had lasted leaving a trail of three million dead, mostly young men, while unemployed and ex-military men wandering in the streets became a common sight and a sense of recrimination replaced the former feeling of patriotic euphoria. The average middle-class family was amusing itself within the comfort and privacy of their home. These new activities ranged from jigsaw puzzles to board games, from dress making to cross-word solving. This new culture of private recreation brought the consumption of standardized 'light' reading. Alison Light calls it:

“Formerly a marginal curiosity of the Victorian imagination, crime fiction blossomed in the Twenties and Thirties into a huge national craze.” (Light: 1991, 273)

The classic Golden Age novel is hermetically sealed, its typical location is in a country house and in terms of structure it consists of the discovery of a body, a sequence of red herrings, a parade of suspects and the announcement by the detective of who, and how it was done. The amateur sleuths are persistently unreal and there is also total absence of any forensic or proper police investigations. Socially speaking, it is also enclosed: the criminal usually comes from the same social background as the victim. Servants and lower classes perform minor roles and are very rarely found guilty. The same happens in Christie's, who sticks to this pattern: even if a servant acts as the criminal hand as it happens in *Tuesday Night Club*, the first story in *Thirteen Problems*, (1932) he/she is never the brain. The most striking traits of the clue-puzzle narrative are the multiple suspects and the rational analysis of determinedly circumstantial evidence.

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) was among the first women to graduate at the University of Oxford, in 1915. Her detective novel *Whose Body?* (1934) introduced her detective, the gentlemanly, dashing scholar Peter Wimsey and his faithful valet Bunter. The two men make a pair similar to Sherlock Holmes and his friend Doctor Watson, or Hercule Poirot and his friend, Colonel Hastings. In this case Bunter served bravely under his lordship's command during the World War I and afterwards remained at his service, revealing himself a precious help.

Agatha Christie (1890-1976) became a writer due to a bet with her older sibling Marge, but she also did it for the most common of reasons among women writers: the need to help with the family budget. During the Wars she worked as a volunteer. In World War I she was a young woman recently married to Archibald Christie working in Torquay's hospital as a nurse, and later on, already married to Max Mallowan, in a London's hospital dispensary. This is how she came to know so much about poisons, a knowledge she will display on many of her novels featuring Hercule Poirot, her most famous sleuth, who made his entrance in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1916). Curiously, he is the only fictional character who was entitled to have his obituary on the *Times*. Common citizens put on black ties or bands as a way of paying him their condolences.

Almost ten years later, Miss Jane Marple made her debut in *Thirteen Problems* or *Tuesday's Night Club* published in 1927 by *Sketch* magazine. She is the elderly spinster, who likes to gossip by the picket fence, turning her image into her best disguise.

Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982) was born in New Zealand and became an actress and theatrical manager before she took to writing. Her novel *A Man Lay Dead* (1934) introduced her most famous detective, Roderick Alleyn. Educated at Eton and with some training for the diplomatic career, he is firmly rooted in the 'Gentleman's School'. Alleyn is a wellcrafted character showing strength and determination, but he also has a deep humane, emotional side, an aspect new at the time. Until then detectives were not supposed to display emotions, their single purpose was to catch the criminal and bring back peace and order. Ngaio helped to raise the status of detective stories to the level of a respectable kind of literature by writing books that combined an elegant literary style with cleverly contrived puzzles involving sharply drawn characters against credible social settings, usually the theater or the art world, two spheres, she knew so well. The country house murder is considered, her forte. Despite her living for some time in New Zealand, the vast majority of her novels is set not only in England, but also in such a kind of house inserted the ambiance of the English country village life.

Margery Allingham (1904-1968) was born in a family of writers, as both parents lived on writing. Her detective, Albert Campion, is based on the flesh and bone Duke of York, future King George VI. Campion is a scholarly detective of noble birth, who moves himself at ease either among those of his own rank, or in the shady world of criminals. He has a servant, called Luigi, who is an ex-burglar. Her best work is perhaps *Tigers in the Smoke* (1952), which is more a character's study than a crime novel, focusing on a serial killer named Jack Havoc. In this case, Campion plays a small part. Her thrillers are intelligently written and noted for their adroit characterization and literary style.

In 1929 Ronald Arbuthnot Knox (1888-1957) published his ten commandments of crime fiction in the 'Introduction' of *The Best Detective Stories of the Year 1928*, where he stressed the importance of the writer playing fair concerning the reader and forbade death rays, poisons unknown to science, supernatural agencies, fortuitous accidents and especially no 'Chinamen'. Here is the list of Knox's Ten Commandments:

- 1) The criminal must be mentioned, but his thoughts are not given;
- 2) No supernatural;
- 3) No more than a secret room or passage;
- 4) No previously undiscovered poison;
- 5) No 'Chinamen' (a common plot by the time);
- 6) No accidental solution;
- 7) Not the detective himself;
- 8) No clues unrevealed to the reader;
- 9) The Watson should not conceal his thoughts; 10) No twins or doubles.

Josef Skovercky (1924-2011), a Czech living in Canada, who was nominated for the Nobel Prize of Literature, took upon himself the task of breaking all the rules in *Sins of Father Knox*'(1973), but although the stories are an interesting exercise to Knox's implicit challenge, they end up by supporting more his thesis than to refute it. Agatha Christie used to break at least two of them in any of her novels or short-stories, but the main line was observed.

Those who appeared in the aftermath of the Golden Age were influenced by another kind of fiction, closely allied to the *noir thriller* of the American hard-boiled type. The main threat of violence at the time seemed to come from the rise of aggressive continental ideologies. Eric Ambler (1909-1998) is such an example. *A Coffin for Dimitris* (1939), which is considered by critics as his best work, turns him into one of the pioneers of political sophisticated thrillers. He alludes to the political situation in the Balkans adding considerable authenticity to the basic tale. The production of such works suffered a considerable decline in the immediate post-war years. The vast majority consisted of imitations of American "tough spy and gangster" stories, written 'under-cover', using pseudonymous. They were published by small editors that sprang up to feed the growing paper-back market. The years from 1939 to 1944 witnessed the production of an astonishing array of short low priced crime paperbacks written at speed, printed in rationed paper and unashamedly aiming at the mass market.

Around 1950s the focus was set on 'police procedure' novels, giving extensive details of official investigate methodology. The shift from the private detective hired by a wealthy family to someone belonging to the public administration, that is, someone paid by

society in a broad sense, answered the times of massification and democratization of every human action, including crime and its punishment. Maurice Procter (1906-1973) is one of these new wave writers. For more than nineteen years he was a policeman and decided to describe how the police used to act, thus attracting thousands of readers. His best work is *Hell is a City* (1954). Presently this trend has incorporated the computerized and profiling techniques necessary to catch criminals.

This type of story goes on being used, as for instance, in Ian Rakin's case (1960-). His main character, Inspector John Rebus, appeared for the first time in his novel *Knots and Crosses* (1987). He is a rough-edged military man serving in Scotland's territorial police force. His investigations are played out in classic police procedure style. The action usually takes place in Edinburgh, a city which emerges as a vibrant and textured place full of secretive corners and strange historical echoes.

The Cold-war, which resulted from the rising of the Soviet and American super-powers, also influenced the genre. In 1960s, although highlighting the espionage factor, Ian Fleming (1909-1964) was enchanting readers with another kind of thriller: his James Bond 007, an agent and investigator at her Majesty's service: "My name is Bond...James Bond" It seems that he used his own life as a source of inspiration for his 'hero's adventures. His works were labeled as thrillers. However, Fleming was not alone under the spotlights; P.D. James (1920-) and Ruth Rendell (1930-) who, as Barbara Vine, turned to another aspect of the genre writing psychological thrillers, and became famous on her own right.

Following the vogue of historical novels in 1970s, there appeared the firsts detectives placed in a far-away past, for example, in Roman times. Today the tendency is to explore a more recent past. There are detectives for almost every era. Peter Lovesay (1936-) and his sergeant Cribb, are just an example. Cribb is a Victorian-era police detective based in London. His novels and short-stories fell mainly under the category of entertaining puzzles in the Golden Age tradition. Ellis Peter, who in fact, is Edith Mary Pargeter's pen-name, with her medieval herbalist, Brother Cadfael is another example. Her character is a crusader who became a monk. The stories mingle historical facts with a dollop of detection and add a touch of romance. The action of her narratives are set in the tumultuous days of king Stephen of England, a period marked by

disorderly behavior, both in political affairs and in the population's ways of dealing with each other.

Around the 1980s, there appeared stories with gay or lesbian victims and protagonists, whose authors shared the same sexual orientation as their creations, using the crime story to address specifically same-sex issues. Nowadays there are dozens of lesbian or gay detective novels, forming a counter canon of their own. It is the so-called trend of L.G.B.T. (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual) which began in 1990s. At first these types of stories were published by small Feminists editors who shared the same sexual orientation as they did, but today they suffer no constraints having been accepted by the public in general. Val McDermid, born in 1955, is one of such writers, a Scot who happens to be a lesbian. Stella Duffy (1963-) is another lesbian crime writer. At the same time, a new wave of crime writers appeared deeply influenced by their American fellowwriters. Yet, they are distinctively British in tone, style and settings and no-longer massmarket imitations. In spite of their lightness of tone, they offer serious criticism of British society and politics.

Presently crime novels focus much less on puzzles and more on social drama issues. Writers have become interested in the human factor and in the motives that may turn any one of us into a criminal. Detective fiction allows authors to observe and comment upon a world in which they find themselves exploring cultural tensions and anxieties in a way not very far from the path formerly chosen by Dickens or Collins. Michael Foucault, in

Discipline and Punish – the Birth of a Prison (1971) writes: “the infraction launches the individual against society as a whole.” The punishment of a crime is no longer the revenge of a ruler, but of society. John Locke (1632-1704) had already said that to live in society the individual gives up part of his personal liberty in exchange of security. His freedom becomes restraint by others, who in turn offer him protection (Locke: 2003, 44).

Detective stories can be a way of examining contemporary social issues including the nature of contemporary gender ideologies. Detective fiction may make a society look at its own foibles, at the ideological discourses which structure social practices and individual interactions, the construction of social institutions and individual subjectivity.

Agatha Christie did exactly this. She wrote and criticized the only social class she really knew, her own, the upper-middle class.

There are several theories associating the rise of detective narrative to former literary formats. W. H. Auden (1907-1973) in his work *Guilty Vicarage* (1948) considers the detective story timeless on account of its resemblance to Greek tragedy. A link to Greek tragedy can be the unity of time, as most 'classical' works of detective fiction only last a day, a predicament for this kind of fiction but its main interest, he claims, lies in:

“...the dialectic of innocence and guilt. Since the murderer’s actions implicate a whole society, the detective’s task to locate and expel the particular cause of general guilt. The expulsion has a cathartic effect, liberating the reader’s own latent *hubris* and guilty desires”. (Auden: 1948, 78)

Others, like Bargainner or Sabine Vanacker, point out detective fiction’s similarity with medieval drama. Morality Plays, that is, dramatized *allegories* of a representative Christian life presented a plot in form of a quest for salvation, in which the crucial events are temptations, - personified as vices – and alluring the usual protagonist, Mankind and Everyman, to sin; among the other characters there were personifications of virtues to help him overcome the Evil presence up to the climatic confrontation with Death and Divine Justice.

Bargainnier classifies Christie’s works as morality plays and finds them optimistic “Murder is an act against Man and God and whoever commits it must be removed from society” (1980). Even the author herself saw her books as such in the beginning of her career “Very much a story with a moral” and Max Mallowan (1904-1978) shared his wife’s idea, as a matter of fact, Sabine Vanacker also links morality plays to the Marple’s stories beginning with the light heartedness of *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) and ending with a darker type of detection fiction, which has a ‘passion’ behind it like: *Nemesis* (1970) or *Sleeping Murder* (1976).

The connection between detective fiction and the comedy of manners has also been highlighted by several analysts of the genre. Usually the depiction of the manners and affectations of a contemporary society is defined by its satirical, witty and cerebral form, very much in tune with the puzzle-clue format of the detective narrative. It is

concerned with social custom and the question of whether or not characters meet certain social standards. Often the governing social standard is morally trivial but exacting. The plot of such comedies usually is concerned with an illicit love affair or similar scandalous matter. Generally the plays also adopt a brittle atmosphere, witty dialogue and pungent commentary on human foibles. Comedy of manners usually contains an explosion of the socially undesirable which insures the continued happiness of those remaining, a goal it shares with detective fiction.

Although quite ancient, going back to Ancient Greek authors, like Menander (c.342 – c.292B), in the 17th century Molière (1622-1673), revived it. In England it began with Shakespeare's (1564-1616) *Much to Do About Nothing* (1598) and was particularly active during the Restoration. Then it was classified as high comedy, due to its sophisticated wit and talent in the writing of the script. Charles II (1630-1685) restored the theatre by granting several key theatrical figures licenses to produce plays. For the first time women were allowed to step on stage and become actresses as it already happened in France, where the king had lived after leaving England. This brought a new spicy interest to the performance since the main theme was the game of love. William Wycherley's (1641-1716) and William Congreve's (1670-1729) plays are replete with social jokes that actor, author and spectator could share. Later, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Noel Coward (1899-1973) and Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) in last centuries helped to revive it.

Notwithstanding, this genre would reach the peak of its popularity with the advent of the 'yellow-backs' editions, so-called because of their distinctive yellow covers, cheaply produced and thrown away to publication. Today they are quite hard to find, because being produced with poor quality paper to keep the price low, they were not made to last.

The first notable of this particular format was *Recollections of a Police Officer* (1856).

In common with detective fiction it has this aspect of exclusion. In 1660s the metropolitan upper-class had been through two grueling decades: their king had been executed, their estates had been sequestered and they had ended by becoming usual 'hang-on' of continental courts. So aristocracy built a new wall around them to keep realities out, to create an artificial world of aristocratic elegance, where the 'outsider' was ejected from the circle.

Detective fiction is in fact a form of fiction hedged with rules and conventions, providing at the same time, the common reader with a 'world' where the outsider could be cast out of the charmed circle, by means of murder or judicial execution. An aspect that attracted those who had the intention of getting away from the leftovers of war, while empires crumbled and Europe was threaten by a new political system: the Bolshevik Republics, later known as U.S.S.R. during the so-called Golden Age.

George Grella in his text *Murder and Manners* writes that in his opinion detective fiction, especially *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) by Agatha Christie is closely related to this kind of comedy. In his opinion detective fiction should be called a thriller of manners, where the sleuth is the comic hero often distinctive and prepossessing enough to earn the title of great detective. He compares Miss Marple to a kind of universal fairy godmother, a sort of female Poirot. An opinion shared by Mary Jean Demarr in her work *In the Beginning: First Novels in Mystery Series* (1995) writes: "Vicarage.... Is a marvelous comedy of manners; containing the usual clever Christie whodunit plot". (Demarr: 1995,

86) Alison Light writes: 'the relish of household secrets and their exposure betray the affinities between the two.' (Light: 1991, 278)

In his book *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and their Audiences* (1971) Colin Watson (1920-1983) also remarks that the intensive nosiness and domestic snooping, two of Miss Marple favorite activities, give evidence of the affinities between comedy of manners and detective fiction. However it was Jane Austen (1775-1817), who gave the novel its distinctly modern character through her treatment of ordinary people in everyday life. She ended up by creating the comedy of manners of middle class kind of life.

Another source of influence signaled in the detective fiction genre comes from the Gothic novel. This is a kind of prose fiction which was inaugurated by Horace Walpole's (1717-1797) work *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic story* (1764). When the gothic style flourished – the word originally referring to the Goths, as synecdoche for Barbarians – elements of the medieval period, such as the setting, mate with other elements of gothic art in a negative way. The locale is generally a gloomy castle, full of dangers and secrets, where a cruel villain lives and tries to impose himself on an

innocent heroine, all this involved in a dark atmosphere. Their contribution was to bring into fiction the perverse impulses and nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the orderly surface of the civilized man.

Ann Radcliffe's (1764-1823) *The Mystery of Udolpho* (1794) and Mary Shelley's (1797-1851) famous *Frankenstein* (1818) are just two examples of this literature of suspense and thrilling emotions. Jane Austen (1775-1817) in *Northanger Abbey* (published 1818, written 1798) would make good-humored fun of the more decorous instances of the Gothic vogue.

Notwithstanding the unreasonable devices applied on the gothic novel, its emphasis on mystery and suspense and the attempts to reach the situation's disclosure are akin to some of the detective fiction's ingredients. The 'Tom-peeping' factor, ever so present in the detective's work, frequently trespassing the boundaries that separate public from private life, found its roots in the sensational novel: "A new kind of fiction which appeared from nowhere to satisfy the cravings of an eager and expanding reading public possessed of suspect and downright depraved taste" as it was defined by a contemporary.

A novel form made of real life drama, where private affairs were turned public made its appearance. Its roots lie in a wide range of popular forms: penny magazines, street literature and stage melodrama. Its energy and excitement spring from the subject matter and conventions of popular lower class genres, which had grown side by side with the dominant forms of middle class fiction, but without its moral constraints; "making the literature of the kitchen the favorite reading of the drawing room", as Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) commented on the subject.

Sensation fiction is the product and symptom of quite profound changes not only in fiction itself but also on the fiction market in the mid-Victorian period. The resolution of the sensation plot is often achieved against the grain of both narrative and moral puzzles that build it up. Readers are left with the messy feeling that the supposedly civilized social surface of the ages of materialism and progress are neither civilized nor as natural as they are supposed to be.

The silver-fork novel, somehow complemented the frantic world provided by the sensational novels, highlighting the ways of belonging to the envied circle of high

society. By definition it is a kind of novel popular in Britain from the 1820s to 1840s, marked by a concentration upon the fashionable, etiquette and manners of high society. The term was used mockingly by William Hazlitt (1778-1830) critic of the time and has been applied to works by Theodore Hook (1788-1841), Catherine Gore (1799-1861), Frances Trollope (1780-1863), Lady Caroline Lamb (1785-1828), Susan Ferrier (1782-1854) and, of course, by Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873), who wrote the famous book called *Pelham – The Adventures of an English Gentleman* (1828). It was such a success that it not only changed women's evening fashion: the hero's mother, Lady Frances favors black in her evening gowns when dark blue was in, helping on setting a new fashion, as well as the genre's formula. However, Bulwer Lytton would eventually turn the silver-fork novel against itself. *Pelham* is a prophetic pre-Victorian story of a dandy's progress towards a responsible mature age of authentic seriousness in both marriage and politics.

Silver fork novels are arguably the first best-sellers in the modern sense of the term and the former ancestors of our perennial drugstore paperbacks. Most of them were published by Henry Colburn, who became instrumental in establishing what came to be known as the 'three-decker', the most common way in Victorian times of publishing a story. The story was divided in three equal portions each of them constituting a volume.

Dandies, rakes and women of the world were the typical inhabitants of its 'world'. By the time of the silver-fork hey-day, English aristocracy was already undergoing internal changes as well as a forced redefinition of its role and contribution to society at large. Ironically the genre provided a utilitarian function of the most basic kind: practical information about clothing and etiquette. Its mass audiences were primarily motivated by the vulgar aspirations of climbing on the social scale. The bourgeoisie's emulation of aristocratic behavior combined with the *embourgeoisement* of the aristocracy led to the redrawing of social standards. A compound of aristocracy and bourgeoisie, known, as 'gentility' came into being.

Female writers have been wiped out of detective fiction until they appear as 'queens' of detective fiction during the so-called Golden Age and in 1980s. Feminist critics discovered lost women writers such as Seeley Register or Anne Catherine Green,

although many others have remained unknown. In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf mentions them by saying:

“Those Shakespeare’s sisters who lie in unmarked graves silenced by a culture, which encouraged domesticity over more public and literary forms of activity.”
(Woolf: 1928, 124)

Many female writers have created the finest detectives, but most of them were male characters; it is the case of: Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham. The exceptions are Margaret Tyler Yates and Agatha Christie with Miss Marple, who is probably born old, as old age is synonymous of wisdom and experience, just as Dorothy L. Sayers beholds in one of her reviews, for the Sunday Times, from 1933 up to 1935.

In *Snobbery with Violence* (1971) Collin Watson gives credit to the connection between silver fork novels and detective fiction, as he writes:

“...Silver-fork novel is a fantasy of social elevation, by which the lower middleclass reader can identify himself with the sleuth, to whom is given ‘carte blanche’ to pry around bedrooms. In this relish for household secrets and thus exposure the detective genre betrays its affinities with comedy, even with bedroom farce.” (Watson: 1971, 143)

Miss Marple and Poirot like, in fact, to snoop. He has no prejudice in rambling through someone’s drawers in search of clues, or to listen behind doors or peep through keyholes, whenever it is possible, being caught several times by Hastings in the act. Miss Marple indulges in her hobbies, which allow her to be well informed about her fellow-villager’s activities. By the picket-fence gossiping, tending to her garden while on the alert about some conversation going on within her ear range, as it happens for example in *Murder at the Vicarage* Griselda the vicar’s wife comments: “Miss Marple always sees everything. Gardening is as good as a smoke-screen”. (Christie: 1930, 15)

1. Form

Detective fiction has been written mostly under the form of short-story, because it simply takes less time to do it than to write a longer work. Women writers, especially, had little time left after performing all their duties, as looking after the house and children was and still is a full time job. Alice Munro (1931-) in an interview in 1986 admitted: “I never intended to be a short-story writer... I started writing them because I do not have time to write anything else – I had three children”. (<http://theguardian.com/books/1986/fiction.patterns>).

However Elaine Showalter (1941-) opts to link the short-story to the female activity of quilting and piecing arguing that features such as multiplicity and open-endedness are a very feminine way of writing, although the detective story was seen as male. Quilting was done in community by different women sewing and piecing together the different fabrics, as there are in general, three different kinds. Although this kind of work can be traced back to ancient Egypt and China, the word comes from Latin term *culcita* meaning a stuffed sack, but the word came into the English language through the French *cuilte*. English women in the 18th century used to wear quilted petticoats and underskirts and men quilted waistcoats. Quilting is still commonly used for bedcovers and goes on being very popular in U.S.A. More important, the practice of putting harmoniously together different pieces of cloth gave women a particular expertise to build puzzle plots.

Following another perspective Grace Paley (1922-2007) calls our attention to the fact that story-telling and oral tradition were women’s turf. She goes further and calls it akin to gossip, anecdote and the throw -away line in *Just As I thought* (1998).

Thus Miss Marple’s knitting is closely linked to Showalter’s theory and also works as a metaphor of her role as a detective. She builds a piece stich by stich, while she develops her own theories, mentally evaluating the data she has in hands. The detective narrative typically uses numerical or geometrical structures made of doubles, triangles or quadrangles in order to portray interactional relations doubling for example the links between the criminal and the detective, as some knitting patterns develop their structures. It may be also important to take into consideration the fact that Agatha

Christie studied music until she was about twenty years of age, preparing herself in the *bel-canto* and playing the piano. There is a clear connection between music and mathematics, as the former is made up of mathematical equations. Maybe her musical knowledge helped her in writing her detective fiction, which may be called ‘animated algebra’. Karen Alkalay Guta (1945-) in *The Love of Clothes & Nakedness* (1999, 34) describes the women’s detection as quilt-making, because they piece together the clues to the mystery while Elaine Showalter considers it as a hieroglyphic or a diary of those same actions. (Showalter: 1993, 86)

Hobsbawm (1917-2012) in *Age of Extremes* (1994) considers that perhaps the most interesting development of middle-brow culture is precisely the boom of the detective puzzle story, book-length written, mainly British, and more ‘surprisingly’, largely female (192-193).

When in 1980 Bargainnier wrote a serious study on detective fiction it was relatively new initiative. He defended that although being a huge popular genre, it was worth studying, and Christie’s work had a large share of it. He also sustains that British detective fiction is rather of thought than of action, considering that two of its leading stars, are in fact, two arm-chair detectives: Poirot and Miss Marple. It was this aspect that made it appealing to intellectual readers. Both are above all observers of life and their secret weapon to solve the cases put before them is experience.

In the meantime detective fiction has established itself as a genre and currently knows many sub-genres: thriller, mystery, hard-boiled detective fiction, historical novel, and English murder. It is this late category that will hold our attention. From an early start detective fiction subdivided itself in two schools: the English one, called ‘cosy’ and the American one known as ‘hard-boiled’. In the first case, there are no violent descriptions of the murder that usually takes place off-stage; on the contrary, on the ‘hard-boiled’ school murders are violent and take place in ‘front’ of the reader, what Agatha Christie would call ‘messy’ as they imply blood everywhere on the scene of the crime.

In detective fiction motif is everything. Laura Thompson in *Agatha Christie: An English*

Mystery (2007) dedicates a whole chapter to what she calls ‘English Murder’ and supports this idea. The interest lies more in knowing the motif that led the murderer to

accomplish it than in discovering the murderer. Usually the murder takes place ‘backstage’, we do not see it happen, we are just told later on by the end of the story how it was done and mostly why. A propos, Bargainnier says: classic English mystery maybe romantic but, like the classic Western, it is sexless. (1980, 137)

In her *Autobiography* Agatha Christie explains why there are no sex scenes, something unimaginable considering her Victorian upbringing, but still a love interest.

“I myself always found the love interest a terrible bore in detective stories. Love, I felt, belongs to romantic stories. To force a love motif into what should be a scientific process went much against the grain. However at that period detective stories always had to have a love interest.” (Christie: 1977, 294).

Matthew Beaumont places detective fiction as a genre between high and low culture. He sees the use of the mansion-house for the site of the crime as giving in to the cultural predilections of the metropolitan working class of those days, a blink to low-brow readers. Yet he agrees that Christie tried to modernize the conventions of the genre turning it into a more sophisticated and more self-reflexive, than literary critics like to admit.

Detective fiction has played and goes on playing a complex and curious role in relation to the border fields of literature. It is considered popular and less subset of proper literature, but with its complex double narrative in which an absent story, that of the crime, is gradually reconstructed in the story of the investigation. The original social contextual frame of the detective story was the obliteration of individual traces in the big city crowd.

Under examination is a very specific kind of detective fiction: the English murder narrative. In this type of detective fiction what matters is not the crime, which is nothing more than an act of violence, but the human dynamic that led to it. In this kind of murder, the process is basically one of thought and not of action that is why we have ‘arm-chair’ detectives mainly Poirot and ‘my little grey cells,’ and Miss Marple. Here motive is always at the heart of the matter: money, passion or fear, the three most common ones. A propos Laura Thompson wrote:

“Agatha’s fascination was with human nature, she was not interested in murder. In fact money, revenge and passion are the three major reasons in Christie’s stories that lead to murder.” (Thompson: 2007, 389)

Chapter III – Agatha Christie’s Britain from 1900 to 1930

War and major disaster have always promoted change and paved the way to cultural changes unthinkable before these events. So, the inter-war period is a time of dramatic change from the gaiety of the Jazz-Age of the 1920s to the more sober reflectiveness of the 1930s. Among those belonging to the middle and upper classes, the War came to represent a complete break with a century-long tradition of gradual prosperity, progress, social reform and consolidation. The leisure and quiet of Edwardian days were killed off for good. The break was subtle, but erosion had begun. Philip Larkin (1922-1985) in *MCMXIV* repeats through the text, the sentence: ‘Never such innocence again’ reminding the reader that the Edwardian era would be killed by the guns of that coming August. The culture which emerged after 1918 was shot through, with this sense of trauma and loss and British writing of 1920s acknowledges this break with the past and the expression ‘the good old days’ comes to mean exactly those days before the war.

The world, which arose from the ashes, was a world of new technologies, especially transport and communications, and of new landscapes, a mass capitalist urban culture no longer based in the country but in the new cosmopolitan centers such as London, Paris, Berlin. In this new world it became impossible to write in the old way, so writers began searching for a new style, new modes of expression, while aiming to adjust to the pace of change.

The first decade of the twentieth century when Edward the VII (1841-1910), the eldest son of Queen Victoria became king, is known as the Edwardian era. It is a period famous for its elegance and luxury among the rich and powerful of the reign, but also for moral looseness and a sensation of general failure to prepare for some of the challenges about to burst, namely World War I (1914-1918).

Afterwards the Government had to deal with very difficult situations. Industry had to be reconverted, the number of unemployed was huge and women were sent back to their 'normal' tasks, so as to leave space for those men who had survived, but some of them did not wish to give up what they had achieved: a salary, more social and political freedom and independence. Hand in hand with unemployment came poverty. America's financial disaster known as 'The Crash' took down with it many enterprises all over the world. In Britain the Welfare State was put into action meaning that from then on the State assumed primary responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, as in matters of health care, education, employment and social security.

Society in Edwardian days was divided into upper, middle and working classes. The lives of the landed gentry and the grinding poverty of the working classes were much the same as before. In an average upper middle-class household income would be from £750 up to £ 1500 per year. (Johnson: 2007, 134) The master of the house could be a banker, merchant, solicitor, physician, surgeon or manufacturer. The staff would include from a minimum of three up to seven servants: a cook, a live-in maid, a gardener and a nanny for those who had small children. The family would belong to the Church of England and the patriarch would vote for the Tories. This was the kind of household Agatha Clarissa Miller (1879 -1976), later known as Agatha Christie was brought up in. All her life was spent among the likes of her. This was her 'milieu' and it was about them that she wrote, never trying her hand beyond this reality, because she did not know how they behaved or talked, in her own words 'it would seem phony'.(Christie:1977, 235)

A middle-class family could spend around £ 300 up to £ 800; the head of the family could be a doctor, lawyer or a clerk. A lower middle-class family could spend about half between £ 150 up to £ 500. In this case the man of the house would be a shopkeeper, an office-worker, a factory foreman, a teacher, a travelling salesman and small businessman, for instance. As staff they would have a char, a maid for all work. (Johnson: 2007, 135)

Class differences were reflected even in domestic taste in the early 1900s. Lower middleclass families often kept Victorian fashion long after upper middle class had

embraced new styles. Changes in taste affected everything from paint color to curtain fabrics, or even the flowers that were planted in the garden.

In those days 80% of the land was still in the hands of only 3% of the population, but when the Finance Act in 1909 increased taxation in all land revenues, a huge sell-off of farmland and estates was triggered. After World War I the estimation is that about eight million acres in Britain changed hands, far more than in any other time in the country's history. The 'sacred' inheritance handed over from father to son, was sold to strangers, as there were no heirs to carry it on, because many of them had died in the world conflict. Those who survived had to make financial options: some sold the house, for schools or institutions, and the park separately, others were simply brought down.

English high society was able to survive the war, but they never regained their former level of power and influence. Mainly after the war a new era of egalitarianism dawned and the days of country houses and aristocratic lifestyles became the stuff of rosy reminiscences. The ability to host the lavish social affairs of previous times was lost. At the same time staffs grew smaller, because the working classes had no intentions of returning to servitude after having fought side by side with their former masters and realizing that after all they were just human beings, like themselves. In result of these new perspectives and the death rate, especially concerning young men, after the Great War there was a shortage of servants in London. Electricity replaced the gas system and for the first time new electrical laboring appliances gave a hand in domestic labor as vacuum cleaners electric heaters etc. Christie's works record all this, in tiny bits of domestic information: how many servants there were in the house, how old they were. There are even a few who sustain that it is possible to write an accurate history of all those economic changes that took place during those years, just by paying close attention to the detail, she gives us, readers about domesticity in those days.

Society in 1900s was a rather complicated affair to deal with. Neither good birth, nor a title were any longer indicative of being accepted in the fashionable circles just as wealth did not meant one could buy their way up the social ladder and buy a way into its good graces. Even those who belonged to the king's restrict circle of friends known as the 'Marlborough House Set' could find doors shut to them if they failed to meet certain criteria. Frequently power stood in the hands of the political hostess. Aristocratic

English women upon their marriage were expected not only to run a large and extensive household but also to support their husband in their choice of career, especially in the political field. One could say that the throne and the halls of Westminster seemed to be ruled by women.

So important was the political hostess to her husband's career that a gentleman in pursuit of a wife would turn his attention to a plainer, but wealthier and better connected young lady, rather than a prettier one. Women were allowed to canvas for votes, make speeches even take public part in their husband's political campaign, but they could not vote. For example, Lady Randolph Churchill (1854-1921) campaigned first for her husband and later on for her son knowing that she was not allowed to vote. A husband's popularity and social success depended on his wife's temperament and talent.

By the late 1890s there had been in London a proliferation of clubs specifically for gentlewomen of rank and means. They were centers of leisure and recreation and, at the same time, they provided a London address to those who lived in the country for the most part of the year: the Albemarle Club, founded in 1874, was the first to open just for gentlewomen.

Wealthy ladies became gradually more uninterested in church-work, and some upperclass ladies chose to cultivate a hobby. Retail trade was quite unacceptable in society, even so a few society hostesses boldly disregarded 'conventions' and busied themselves in clothing trade, for example: Lady Buff Gordon (1863-1935) acquired a sewing workroom at Eaton Lodge to help alleviate the misery of some delicate village girls. There they could find good working conditions and an opportunity to develop their needlework skills. The Edwardian blouse, a profusion of lace and intricate details is a perfect example of conspicuous consumption and waste, the hallmark of these days.

Middle-class women did not earn a salary, but their duties were arduous and vital for the maintenance of their home 'juggling' sometimes with a tight budget, while labor saving devices were still scanty. Most women struggled to keep up appearances on a modest income, while they led rather empty lives. When the American born Gordon Selfridge (1856-1947) opened the department store in 1909 offering the novelty of freedom of stores, they found a new occupation by devoting themselves to 'shopping'. The electric tram-car made town travel cheap either to work or to go shopping. For working-class

women housework still required enormous physical effort. Very few women stayed in bed after day-break, even when they were sick or pregnant. They ran the house, made the clothes, cared for the sick and elderly, grew or processed most of what the family ate. Plumbing and electrical wiring were beginning to be installed. The typical housekeeper's laboring devices were her treadle sewing machine, the mechanical wringer she used to do the wash and the great cast stove, which she fired every morning to cook the meals and boil water. The sewing machine became a 'must' in low middle-class homes. In Jane Austen's days, for example, women used to take their sewing with them everywhere, keeping themselves busy. Now they could help with the family budget without leaving the house and had more spare time.

Moreover, the urban working-class woman went on being poor struggling to find work, money, a home, and food living in appalling conditions. Even so their diet improved during the 20th century. In 1900 some families sat down to tea of a plate of potatoes and malnutrition was common among poor children. Food was expensive. In 1914 a working class family would spend about 60% of their income on food; sweets being a luxury, but in 1937 it had become cheaper and ordinary families would spend only 35% of their budget. The first super-market opened in 1948, until then people did their shopping in small local shops as the bakers or the butchers. Purchases were delivered at home, usually by a boy riding a bicycle.

The twentieth century was the age of common people and dominated by the arts produced by them and for them. A change that is linked, if we take into consideration Hobsbawm opinion in *The Age of Extremes* (1995) with two objects that made the world visible as never before and able of documentation: reportage and the camera. Photo-journalism, discovered by some talented men and a few women, was *something* new. Common folks were led to believe that the camera could not lie.

Women status began to change years before the World War I due to social and demographic conditions, and they projected themselves with strong decision onto the political scene. There was a fall in birth rate due to birth control resulting from the spread of modern practices, which had begun in the 19th century and, at the same time there was an historic important decline in infant mortality. Strongly related with social

status of women was long-term ill-health due to inadequate care or advice before and after childbirth among the lower ranks

Employment for married women varied from place to place according to the notions of appropriateness of each one of them. However, in general, women's expectations of employment or career prospects were still low. From top to bottom, in all social classes, women longed for independence. Those belonging to the higher classes did voluntary work – philanthropy – the active promotion of causes. In doing so, they were laying the foundations of many of the professional social services occupations. The expansion of respectable 'white blouse' occupations in the public service sectors: teachers, nurses, typists, phone-operators, or behind a counter in a department store gave middle-class women a chance. They had benefited from the extending secondary education. Modern office offered women a new range of skilled, even if subordinate, jobs. Working-class women went on contributing to the family budget in any way they could: taking lodgers, dress-making, child-caring and by paying close attention to housewifery.

The fight for the vote is only the political aspect of a whole movement towards freedom and independence for women, reaching its peak in 1903-1914. Rate tax payers women could already vote in elections for Poor Law Guardians since 1834, but the struggle to be given the right to vote in parity with men provided women with a 'cause' for protests about a range of current gender inequalities. They were acquiring the sense that they could exert some control over their own lives. Freedom from repeated pregnancy and the physical and material problems it implied were more important for some of them than the vote. Men and women came to realize that smaller families could improve their living standards. In the meantime industrialization had changed the *forms* gender inequality took in certain respects, but not necessarily its *degree*.

Keeping up with all the other changes that took place fashion and dressing also evolved. In 1900 women did not dare to show their legs so they wore long dresses. In 1910 they were wearing 'hobble' skirts, which were so narrow that women wearing them could only hobble, hence the name. In 1913 Mary Crosby (1891-1970) invented the bra by joining two handkerchiefs with a ribbon. In 1915 lipstick was sold in tubes for the first time. In 1920s women were still wearing knickers, but they became shorter, knee up. In

1925 a revolution occurred when women began wearing knee length skirts and cutting their hair short. It was fashionable by then to look boyish. Moreover, all these changes in style allowed women freer movements, i.e., a viable way to live and work outside home without the old encumbrances. A decade later women's wardrobe became more conservative, though it did not revert to the older style. During World War I it was necessary to save fabrics, so skirts became shorter. Moreover, long skirts revealed themselves inconvenient to step in or out of a tram or train, and women were needed to perform the former men's jobs in every circumstance.

Smoking was firmly entrenched in the 19th century imagination as a specific masculine pleasure, an important element in male bonding. After the ladies had left the dinner table, men would put on their smoking-jackets, lit their cigars, while they talked of sex, money or the important events of the day. Fashion turned these jackets into the European smoking. It was unusual for women to smoke in public during the first decades of the 20th century. No wonder the New Woman who brazenly smoked in public, even in trains, was naturally disapproved of by men.

Leisure activities also changed, influencing what to wear in these exercises. The upper classes embraced leisure sports which led to a rapid development in fashion as more mobile and flexible clothing styles were needed. The corset, for instance, was modified.

In 1900 the average working-class week was 54 hours long. People had no paid holidays, except bank holidays. Yet, cinema going was the main commercial leisure pursuit of the period, an activity increasingly embedded in the rhythms of daily life for a sizeable portion of the population. Cinema was available at all times: morning, noon and night. There were few other sources of entertainment and it was cheap even for those who were unemployed. At first films were shown in theaters, but an increasing number of purpose built buildings appeared. The great age of cinema going was the 1930s, when a vast majority would go once or even twice per week.

Hobsbawm in *Age of Extremes* (1994) calls it 'The Age of Catastrophe' and sustains that as depression got deeper and the whole world was swept by war, Western cinema attendances reached their all-time peak. In 1927, the *Jazz Singer* was the first 'talkie' as talking movies were then called. Three years later color made its debut. The invention of crystal radio, led to regular broadcasting which began in 1922, when British

Broadcasting Company, BBC was formed. By 1933 half the households in Britain had a radio. Soap ads sponsored by advertising were very popular by then, but television debuted in 1936 being introduced once again by BBC. Another important role played by this very same company was to establish a pattern for a kind of pronunciation, which came to be known as BBC English: anyone applying for a job would take pains to speak it as it meant to be educated.

Another invention that led to mass marketed and instant music was the gramophone. Both the radio and the gramophone helped to popularize dance world-wide, ragtime developed into jazz and young people flocked to dance at halls and jazz clubs, although they also danced at home, at afternoon tea dances and in evening dance palaces. The Rumba, the Samba, the Conga, the Shimmy, the Charleston and the Black Bottom were all popular dances in this period. Evening dress changed accordingly, and the lack of corsetry helped the dancers to move easily and often the sleeveless clothes were unrestrictive. In the previous century the bourgeoisie had taken the lead over fashion in Europe; so, urban and rural areas dressing styles became distinct. It can be said that the gap between country and city caused by the Industrial Revolution did not leave fashion out. This differentiation went into two directions: either people from the rural areas adapted their dressing style to that of the cities or a totally new style of dressing emerged in some regions, eventually leading to the appearance of traditional costumes. The reform in dressing took place from

1850 until 1950 and was alike for both sexes. “Clothes make the men. Naked people have little or no influence in society”, said Mark Twain (1835-1910).

(<http://www.quotatioj.page.com>)

The most dramatic illustration of women’s belief that they could equal men was their decision to dress in masculine clothes, trousers mainly. In the 18th century there had been cases of women who dressed up as men to achieve a career or did it just to walk easily in the streets at night without being molested, but in an age which measured femininity by the circumference of a skirt, this was an extraordinary idea. By the turn of the century the difference in women’s dressing was notorious as the technological innovations and the social changes that resulted from them.

As middle class suburbia had expanded, countless families were served by new kinds of leisure industry in the comfort of their well-lit homes linking mass-production to private consumption. Apart from 'mass' entertainment venues such as cinema or football stadium, a transformation of domestic leisure was underway, one that brought standardized products and designs into the private sphere of hobby, pastime and diversion: whether listening to broadcasts from mass produced wireless sets, or to music from gramophone records, or playing the piano from music sheet, the average middleclass English family was amusing itself with pursuits that were increasingly similar to those of most other, from jigsaw puzzles to board games, from dress making to crossword solving. This new culture of private recreation had a vital element, namely the consumption of standardized 'light' reading matter.

Field sports were a central defining activity of the Edwardian gentleman and shooting was chosen by the wealthiest ones. Bicycles were a novelty and soon cycling became a characteristic pastime as cycle clubs popped up everywhere. This was based on the mass production of inexpensive good quality bicycles. Incredible as it may seem, cycling was widely transformative of women's lives offering them a new kind of freedom, allowing them to go where and whenever they wanted, by themselves, disrupting the old chaperon system. Cycling also changed dress style, language, exercise and education. The first bicycles for women were manufactured in 1890 and fifty years later it was a national craze and one third of all bicycles sold were women's models. The archetypal New Woman image is that of a healthy young person dressed in dark skirt and white shirt standing beside a bicycle which gave her freedom and mobility in the city and in the country alike.

The motor-car or automobile soon replaced the bicycle as the fashionable transport for the active woman belonging to the 'cream' of society. Like cycling, it developed its unique style of dressing. A long duster coat and a motoring hat with a large veil were essential to travel in the open cars. Motoring was a new kind of sport enjoyed by the very rich Edwardian ladies, in line, with golf, tennis, croquet, fencing, riding and cycling. Agatha Christie decided with her first revenues to buy a car and she enjoyed not only driving it but also the freedom that came with it, like many of her female characters do as she records their thrill while driving.

In later Edwardian years it was widely perceived that more exercise and better nutrition made girls “taller, stronger, healthier and more self-assured than their mothers”. (Light: 1991, 97) At first, success in sports and examinations was turned against them by a vast majority in public opinion, but in the meantime the social climate changed enough for girls to be in general allowed to play rough games and join competitions where strength and physical skills were needed.

By the time England had reached an 80% of literacy boasting a potential reading public of about 20 million adults, who read mostly newspapers and magazines. By the way, Miss Marple made her debut in the *Sketch* magazine with the stories that were later on published in one volume under the title of *Thirteen Problems*, known as *Thursday's Night Club* in the United States of America, two years before her appearance in *Murder at the Vicarage*. Sunday papers such as: *The News of the World* or *Evening Standard* provided the most regular and most formative relationship between the majority of the population and the written world. Newspapers could pluck obscure writers when they decided to serialize whole novels, plays, biographies and published poems and stories. The price of books was fairly high by comparison with wages. Like many other sectors of British trade and industry, this sector had forsaken the risks of open competition for the security of a controlled market. Therefore there was a noticeable stratification of the markets in three levels: highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow and for each of them there were different publishers and different types of bookshops.

Urban society in Western culture is one of nineteenth-century British defining factors. Big cities as we know them started developing in the 18th and 19th century triggered by transcontinental commerce and the Industrial Revolution. Provincial towns began growing in the 18th century by becoming also better organized; there was urban planning, a rather sophisticated architecture employing more stone and water-supplies were improved, they also became safer as fire-engines were acquired to provide help in case of fire. The cultural aspects of life were not neglected. New theaters, assembly rooms, libraries, free-mason lodges, coffee-houses supplied newspapers and shelter to gossip were sometimes used as a base for clubs, debating societies, or political activity. For all this towns became better places to live in.

During this time there was a housing boom. People began building semi-detached houses which still dominate present day suburbs. The semi-detached version of a cottage, which can be defined as a house with two units sharing a common wall, underwent a social transformation and was adopted by the middle-class. The very first one was designed by the Shaws, a father and son architectural partnership. The house of moderate size so common nowadays was the main type of dwelling to undergo a notable development in the British housing boom of the 1920s and 1930s spreading itself in the suburbs throughout the country.

Having better income middle-class families demanded for airy, larger homes that were especially commutable to the towns and cities, as they intended to show off this new found wealth. New suburbs sprang up on the edges of cities and towns in leafy outskirts close to the new railroad lines. Some of these new houses had flamboyant and elaborate external decoration. Carved woodwork adorned balconies, verandas and porches, multi paned sashes and casements with simpler leaded glass sat within deep bay windows and large paneled painted doors with Art Nouveau or New Georgian glass. Entrances were tiled on both walls and paths were applied, while reflecting the new reality. Edwardian houses tended to be shorter in height, because rooms for servants were no longer needed. They were built on larger plots to accommodate a larger front and back gardens.

The greatest overall change in settlement was, in fact, the massive urbanization that came along Britain's early industrial development. The Victorian population explosion added to urban sprawl putting a Victorian fringe around market towns or growing villages in one huge convulsion. Modern transport made possible the dormitory suburb. From an economic point of view the first years of the 20th century were stable while unemployment was quite low, but in 1920s mass unemployment was quite severe. Economy was struck by Depression in the early 1930s, but living standards in general were rising. Steam began to be replaced by electricity in plants and in the homes. Transport became petrol empowered engine.

When the War broke, industry started booming again, but the ground problems were far from being solved. By the end of the century traditional industries like: coal, mining, textiles and ship-building were declining rapidly and being replaced by service industries such as: tourism, education, retail and finance, which had a rapid growth and

became major sources of employment. Another important new source of employment was the chemical industry, which was in expansion. Early plastics were often used instead of basic metal and man-made fibers such as regenerated rayon, usually known as artificial silk, started to replace natural ones. Hobsbawm considers that the 19th century Western civilization came to its end with the break of World War I. In his opinion:

“The existing society was capitalist in its economy; liberal in its legal and constitutional structure; bourgeois in the image of its characteristic hegemonic class; glorying in the advance of science, knowledge and education, material progress; and profoundly convinced of the centrality of Europe, birthplace of the revolutions of science, arts, politics and industry, whose economy had penetrated, and whose soldiers had conquered and subjugated most of the world; whose populations had grown until (including the vast and growing outflow of European emigrants and their descendants), they had risen to a third of the human race; and whose major states constituted the system of world politics.”
(Hobsbawm: 1984, 125)

The world faced an economic crisis of such depth that it brought even the strongest capitalist economies to their knees. As economy tottered, the institutions of liberal democracy actually disappeared between 1917 and 1942, while fascism and its satellite authoritarian movements and regimes came forward. Even so, Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) and his regime were eventually defeated because capitalists and communists joined efforts during World War II the capitalist's USA and the Soviet's Union. Years later the fear of confrontation between two superpowers dominated the second half of the 20th century and became known as the Cold War. But poverty still ran in a sort of cycle: poor parents had poor children. When children grew up and found a job of their own things got better, but when it came to their turn of having their own families, the situation got worst and again in late life, as it was hard to find work and there were no institutions to support them in that age. When the father's family, the bread-provider died, got sick or unemployed things got rough as women, as still today, were paid less for the same kind of work.

Notwithstanding its drawbacks, this new economy provided consumer goods for the masses and began to market entertainment as leisure increased. Techniques of mass

production and mass advertising changed people's image and social habits. The first night clubs appeared in London around 1921-1922. Cocktails became fashionable. The introduction of the Penguin's paperback books encouraged common people to read and self-improve. Magazines aimed at women, who had found they liked working outside the home, began disseminating knowledge. Slowly women were breaking down old attitudes, but society accepted the working spinster but not the working wife. Yet domestic comforts epitomized in the cozy charm of cottages and their gardens as well as the pervasive ritual of afternoon tea went on figuring prominently in the English way of life.

Change was transversal in every field of human activity from fashion to literature. The most striking fact in the 20th century In the literary field writers of the immediate postWar years needed to find a new style and a new voice to speak of the new social, cultural and moral realities of this new emerging society, and had especially to cope with a new world of technologies, mainly in transports and communications, and of new landscapes, a mass capitalist urban culture, no longer based in the country, but in the new cosmopolitan centers like London, New York, Paris and Berlin.

So, English literary tastes witnessed contradictory movements, from modernism, and a new, more rational poetic aesthetics to low-middle-class more 'realistic' or escapist ways of expression. They both mixed slang with elevated language, but the poets belonging to, or appreciated by the educated elite experienced free verse, and often studded their works with difficult allusions and disconnected images thus building up the modernist aesthetics. Most the population, resulting from the massification process here briefly drafted, found other sources of inspiration and entertainment such as the English music hall. The yearning for heroic figures and fair happy endings were then as alive as they were in medieval romances with knights fighting for human and divine justice. Clearly, the detective story appeared in due time to fill the gap of these troubled and simultaneously wonderful period.

Along with a sense of moral disorder the War also brought: the impact of new scientific principles, like popularized notions of relativity and other uncertain principles, and the new discoveries in psychology made by Freud and Bergson. During the 1920s writers tried to cope with the implications of living in an age of uncertainty and relativism. A

decade later, in 1930s, they realized that faith was a necessity and one should find it irrespective of its ultimate truth. Questions of commitment and engagement became paramount. Realities of the working-class poverty and unemployment fell on their lap, as well as questions of individualism by opposition to mass identity. Each author gave his own answer according to his ideas about politics or social rules. Among mostly male voices, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) made herself heard. She called the public's attention to the need to acknowledge experiences and status of women with the texts: *A Room of One's Own* (1928) and *Three Guineas* (1938) and the result, a new and more sustained attempt to present a feminist agenda. A question labeled by Edwardian writers as the 'Woman's Question'.

Raymond Williams (1921 -1988) in *Culture and Society: 1780 -1950* is one of the critics who paid more attention to gender issues exploiting the social, political, economic, racial and psychic stakes in cultural productions – conditions that characterize modernity writers. In the 1939s writers had turned back to more realistic/empirical style, but modernist experimentation was labeled as a 'bourgeois' luxury, which only a few could afford like George Orwell (1903-1950), to whom Williams dedicates a whole chapter (285).

The Women's Pages in British newspapers for most of the 20th century owed their existence to the success of the Victorian's Ladies pages. Finally their various topics moved out of what many journalists called 'the woman's ghetto' and became feature pages in their own right; most of all Victorian Women journalists would have been thrilled as another barrier had been broken. Women painters came next, starting with water-colors and moving on to oil paintings. Their paintings naturally are small compositions about the family and their home. Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) can be an example: she wrote the texts and painted the water-color illustrations of her books, being writer and painter at the same time in spite of having no formal training. Moreover, her work on fungus presented to the Royal Academy of Sciences by one of her uncles was dismissed simply because the author was a woman, but years later the Academy formally apologized for the fact. Women painters represented themselves in domestic roles, but sometimes with a humorous or reflective twist. Those who were amateurs remained in the private sphere of their own homes. Crafts and minor genres of painting provided women with incomes and offered them an escape to their financial

problems. Other women were already daring to cross the line and participate in the professional sphere. Such was the case with women writers, namely, Agatha Christie.

Scientific and technological development is connected to the source of power which changed from coal to electricity and to oil along with the development of the internal combustion engine, allowing the construction of automobiles and airplanes. In the beginning of First World War aircrafts were used mainly to observe the enemy, when two enemy pilots crossed their way in the skies, they performed 'real' duels using their machine-gun placed on top of their planes in front of the pilot's seat, instead of swords. Their code of honor reminds us of medieval knights and a few of them became legends such as Manfred von Richthofen (1892-1918) known as the Red Baron, a German pilot. However, during the Second World War people realized the full potential of aircrafts, which in the meantime had evolved a lot: they were no longer the 'lone riders of the skies'. Dive bombers were now being used to support the army, each of them took at least five members on board, while other planes were used to bomb cities and destroy enemy plants. In 1944 jet engines were introduced in planes.

The telegraph allowed for messages to travel faster than human beings and at the same time turned possible the control of large organizations. This tool made possible to send messages at long distances using the Morse alphabet.

The years from 1910 to 1930 are not only signaled as witnessing major scientific and technological achievements, but also as one of the richest periods in English literary history. The First World War, or the Great War, as it used to be called, is rightly thought as bringing cataclysmic changes in life and thought and social forms. All the revolutionary innovations particularly in technology had already taken place in 1914, but the war greatly speeded their development. Similarly, many of the most radical manifestations of modernism in Arts belong to the immediate pre-war era. By the end of 1920s there had been many literary recreations of the War, ranging from straightforward autobiography and memoir to novels with a strong autobiographical content. With the establishment of the Welfare State and the emergence of a generation of young writers into a world lacking the huge social problems of the 1930s, although lacking the sense of something worth fighting for, the social novel, takes over from the pre-war satirical novelists as Huxley and Waugh, the theme of the impossibility of heroism in the modern

world. In a society of ‘I am all right, Jack’, a society of *nouveau riches* and complacent provinciality the sensitive young man ends up by feeling he has been cheated.

Women have left their imprint on the world, at times changing the course of History, and at others by influencing small but significant domains of life. Only in the last century however concerted efforts have been made to present women’s contribution more fully in history books and register changes in their status: the right to own property, to vote and to choose their own careers among so many others.

1. New Woman and Decadent Man

The debates on the Woman Question, which took up so many pages of leading British periodicals between 1830 and 1860 should not be seen as marginal to a male-dominated ruling class, increasingly threatened from below by an organizing proletariat. Caught between this and the need to accommodate a limited demand for equity from informed women of their own class, they were equally committed to the absolute necessity of maintaining social control over females and its corollary, the sexual division of labor. In an age characterized by the importance of the popular press as the place of ideological production and the spread of female literacy, it was of prime importance to warn women off questioning traditional sexual morality. Public-writing and public-speech closely allied were both real and symbolic acts of self-determination for women. In 1894 they were christened by Ouida, who extrapolated the now famous – once infamous phrase – ‘The New Woman’ from Sarah Grand’s (1854-1943) essay *The New Aspect of the Woman Question*. The press attacked Women considering that they no longer wanted to be wives or mothers and so on. This attack turned them into news, creating at the same time a space for them to counter-attack and at the same time creating a space for homosexuals.

The figure of the New Woman is very hard to pin down. The term used to describe women who at the end of the 19th century were pushing the limits, which high society imposed on them, the equivalent to today’s liberated woman or feminist. The media describes them as: young, well-educated, a lively force of relished independence that rejected the personal restrictions on dress, behavior and decorum placed on women by

Victorian society. The press described them as mannish and unattractive, over educated and hysterical, unsexed or oversexed. The very ambivalence of this image was often useful to their detractors. *The Punch* favored them with satirical rhymes and fanciful cartoons designed to undermine their claims to greater economic and social freedom. Not all late Victorian feminists saw themselves as New Women, but they had an interest in engaging with the figure presented to them and according to which they were judged.

The new Woman movement began when women decided to be in favor of the Abolition of slavery. They realized that they had almost as many rights as the slaves they were trying to help. In a way they ended up by helping themselves. They had no identity by Right, they had a master, who could either be their father, husband or even brother; they were confined to the house, they could not go anywhere on their own. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft published the famous text *The Vindications of the Rights of Women*, calling men's attention to the female status. She was in favor of women's education, which was from the start considered as the only way out of their subordinated situation. Social accomplishments, such as: dancing, drawing, playing the piano and embroidering were not in fact 'an education'.

“If she is not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will not stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice.... But the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out...the more understanding women acquire the more they will be attached to their duty”.

(Wollstonecraft: 1792, 29)

However, there are no historical phenomenon events in consequence of a unique cause. Politics, economics, philosophy and even fashion are bound closely to one another; it is impossible to single out an issue without mentioning the others. The New Woman Question is linked to the Feminist Movement and, at the same time, with the Woman's Liberation Movement. Their history is almost impossible to draw apart. Women were expected to be submissive and silent; their 'rebellion' was not only a reaction to the injustices they saw, but also a response to the increasingly suffocating Victorian image of the proper role of women and their sphere. The Feminine Ideal was typified in *The Angel of the House* (1854-1862) a long poem by Coventry Patmore (1823-1896), whose

image of wedded love in the title soon became the symbol of the Victorian Feminine Ideal.

So, the New Woman was a problem, a challenge to the apparently homogeneous culture of Victorianism, which could not find a consistent language by which she could be categorized and dealt with. She was a threat to the status quo and to the institution of marriage.

In the 1880s and 1890s there was the beginning of a major revision in thinking about women and sex, a process in which literature played an important role. This struggle was from top to bottom, meaning that those who had more means and education realized how badly treated they were by society at large, because those belonging to the working class had always worked side by side with men either in the fields or in the factory had no time to think about such matters. It meant more than a change of mentalities, it was necessary to change the Law, so it took a political side: the right to vote and at the same time it opened a wider radical debate about women's psychological and sexual freedom, disrupting the stable Victorian duality of male/female, public/private sphere. Women took different stands: for some independence meant sexual equality with men; a rebellious minority even defied conventions by opposing to marry; and then there were those who went even further and rejected not only marriage but also men.

Women's civil rights concerning marriage had improved between the middle and the end of the 19th century. The Married Women's Property Act (1882) gave property rights to married women, and in 1891 an Act was passed which denied men 'conjugal rights' to their wives bodies without their consent.

Notwithstanding, since the middle of the century there was a surplus of women. They were told to emigrate and provide wives for British men in the colonies, mainly in India. Those who longed for being independent were the most vilified. This surplus ended up by playing on their behalf, when the time came to count votes. In literature there were voices for and against. Elisa Lynn Lynton (1946-), for example, in *Wild Woman* (1891/92) conceives a character who stands against marriage vociferously demanding political rights and sought absolute personal independence.

The establishment feared that without conventional marriage and domestic arrangements the Victorian social fabric would crumble. Walter Besant (1890) declared: ‘the preservation of the family is at the very foundation of our social system...if there is no fidelity in marriage the family drops to pieces.’ (Ledger: 1997, 12)

The New Woman was also associated with free love and was considered a sexual decadent. The Legitimation League founded by Oswald Dawson in 1893 asked for equal rights for those born out of wedlock. The New Woman was always connected to the elite group – women belonging to the upper and middle-class or even the aristocracy. Those socially inferior had no leisure to think or struggle for such matters. They were too busy working in order to survive. Ian Watt established the idea that those women, who had too much time on their hands, engrossed the ranks of a leisured female group producing at the same time female authors and a female readership. A thesis that now looks questionable.

Education was considered from the very beginning the only way out for women’s servitude. In 1890, Henry Madsley (1835-1918), who was a medicine general physician wrote: ‘intellectual productions and exercise could injure woman’s functions as conceivers, mothers and nurses’. The first ‘jobs’ available to women were still in line with domesticity: nurses and teachers. They had been governesses from ever since and nurses too, but the profession had been dignified by Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), also known as ‘The Lady of the Lamp’ during the Boers war, the example of a perfect ‘rebel’ by the rules of own her days. From then on, besides working for low wages in factories or as domestic help, they aspired at working side by side with men in the more privileged areas.

The big city had created new ways of commerce with the appearance of the department store, the typewriter, the sewing-machine and the bicycle all combined offered women a range of new opportunities. Actually, it was the department store that gave young women belonging to low and middle-low classes the opportunity of working outside the home, even if for a short period, before getting married. The typewriter opened the door of offices to them. The sewing machine turned the fastidious task of sewing much easier, and the bicycle gave them a chance of liberty they had never experienced before.

Although distinct, but with some convergent goals, feminism and socialism, two political important movements – each with its specific agenda, but both aiming at the building of a fairer and based on merit society – played their part on the forging and acceptance of a new feminine status.

2. Feminism and Socialism

First wave Feminism had had strong ideological affinities with Liberalism. In the 18th century, especially by the end of the century, Wollstonecraft's ideas had been hugely influential and some women were beginning to ask for equal rights, or, at least, educational and social conditions that should pave the way for them to have equal rights. Due to the impact of the American Revolution (1765) and, even more, to the French Revolution (1789) they became a pressure group: they advocated women should have legal rights equal to men, that is, they should be liberated from their male dominators as the American colonies liberated themselves from the British empire, or the lower classes in France liberated themselves from monarchy and aristocracy: in both cases privilege/discrimination by birth was abolished, so should be gender discrimination. From their point of view, society based on property had come to its end, from then on it became based on 'Contract', so the sentence 'one man, one vote' was literally that. Feminism and Liberalism joined forces against traditional society.

This first wave, which rose during the nineteenth century, was mainly composed of middle-class women who had witnessed the victory of rights of men of every social standing, and basically longed for the same. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) wrote *Subjection of Women* on their behalf, influenced by his wife Harriet Taylor (1807-1858); some say, she was the actual authoress of most of the essay, since before getting married she had already published her *Enfranchisement* in 1851 about the gender inequities of the Law.

The opportunities for Feminism and Socialism to work together were not fully grasped.. Working-class women were getting involved in the suffrage campaign, when it began to have political affiliations. From 1880 to 1890, Feminism turned to Socialism, and

afterwards to the Labor Party and the Independent Labor Party seeking to strengthen its position through these alliances. In terms of ideology, Socialism had been adopted and defended by many of the contemporaneous most important figures, in the intellectual, artistic and political spheres; as for the Labor Party, its relevance among the members of the working urban class was fast growing and Parliament was in the process of negotiating better wages, and general living conditions. However, more often than not agreements were not respected, and loyalties changed rather quickly. For instance, in 1894 Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) joined the Independent Labor Party, but as the vote was granted she joined the Conservative Party and worked in favor of child welfare.

Some New Women, like Margaret Harkness (1854-), simultaneously a feminist and socialist, defended their social and political cause both in newspapers articles and in fiction, such as *City Girl* (1887), others shocked Labor morals, as it happened when Vera

Britain went as far as to compare middle-class women living on their husbands' incomes to prostitutes (parasitical women living on their sex alone)..

Although socialist views of society were a two gender cause, the masculine author's approach was frequently directed to class and property issues. William Morris's (1834-1896) Socialism, namely in *News from Nowhere* (1890) is based on the idea that women's oppression will end with the abolition of private property. His feminism, however, is still very narrow-minded and gender-biased, as his voice and gaze go on being very 'male' when considering the distribution of tasks, for instance. So the battle for equal rights had to go through several difficult stages, but, above all, had to be carried by the women themselves. The suffrage movement illustrates their resolution.

3. Imperialism and Feminism

Besides the political and party standing, women's status was also entangled with British external politics, and influenced by the imperial question. So Imperialism and Feminism constitute an equation worth of some examination.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the bourgeois woman in her home, largely idle living amidst the trappings of domesticity was increasingly dependent upon the profits of economic imperialism. The end of the century marked a dismissal of Britain's hegemony as a global economic power. The competition of both the United States of America and of Germany undermined Britain's position, until then called the workshop of the world: the Isles were staying behind in production and innovation.

Feminists and Imperialists had similar concerns as both were worried with motherhood as well as racial preservation, racial purity. This does not mean that they were all against imperialism; as a matter of fact, many women were hearty supporters of the Empire. What may now be viewed as inconsistent behavior, was not uncommon in times of transition and, sometimes contradictory aspirations, principles, and practices. Flora Shaw (1852-1929), for instance, was the colonial editor of the *Times* and anti-suffrage; yet, she undertook her work as a professional although it was considered unsuitable for a woman of her social background; she eventually married Lord Lugard (1874-1945), friend to Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902).

The Empire provided opportunities to middle-class white women to explore concepts of femininity, as the English woman abroad could be a many faced figure: from an intrepid adventuress defying racial and sexual boundaries to the heroic mother responsible for the preservation of the white race; from the devoted missionary overseeing black souls to the guardian of white morals; from determined pioneer and companion to the white man to a vulnerable piece of his property.

Emigration involved all women. On the one hand, it was promoted as a chance to achieve independence and employment, whereas charitable work was still mainly carried out 'at home'. On the other hand, it was also important to encourage women from all social ranks to follow their male companions to the colonies so that the white settlements were duly balanced, thus avoiding the "danger" of inter-racial marriages. Notwithstanding these emigration motivating policies, gender discrimination prevailed both in the metropolis, and in the colonies. A case in point is the Contagious Diseases Act 1864; it led to the detention of prostitutes with syphilis (considered as bad as AIDS is today), but the soldiers, who actually transmitted it were left undisturbed and were not compelled to treatment.

Last but not least, the empire was the basis of Britain as a multicultural and mobile society. People went to and came from the colonies, and the most successful were able to provide their children with a better life, not only in economic terms, but also in social status, women included, though usually in indirect ways. Moreover, it gave women a unique chance to travel a lot, getting acquainted with other ways of living, a new experience and an educational one, for that matter. So, the empire also offered some women the opportunity to gain a social conscience.

4. The Suffrage Movement

As already mentioned, the women's first fight was to achieve a place in public life, to share and behold power. It all began with vindications of social character lasting until Second World War. In between Women struggled to take part in the *res publica* – recognition of the female intellect – the power to create alongside with men, without staining their reputation. In this sense, Virginia Woolf is already able to separate her image as self-regarding woman from her image as the 'public' woman, the writer. Suffragists demanded not only the right to vote, but also the right to be on parity with men. So, a suffragette can be defined as a woman who took part in the militant agitation for the vote expanding itself to a wider and more radical debate about women's psychological and sexual freedom.

The English social reformer and philosopher John Stuart Mill agreed to present a petition on behalf of the Kensington Society to Parliament for women's enfranchisement. His speeches in Parliament in favor of women's liberation were nicknamed by his fellows in office as the 'crochets', an attempt to put him and the issue to ridicule. Many more petitions followed and various women's suffrage societies formed across the country; amongst the movements leaders were Dame Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929) and later on Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) and her daughter Christabel (1880-1958).

Many political demonstrations were held and suffrage plays staged. In 1870 the first *Married Women's Property Act* and another one far more reaching, in 1882, gave women their first taste of economic independence. Afterwards, they began taking up posts in provincial administration, sitting on school boards or even working as factory inspectors. By 1870 they had entered the Post-Office, and seven years later on they won

the right to enter in the medical school. Political experience and confidence developed during the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864) gave a hand to the fight. Campaigns had begun by breaking down some of the absurd conventions about women's purity and sexual ignorance undermining the rigid separation of women in good or bad, prostitutes or ladies.

Women's movement had long ceased to be a joke. Suffragists, a term coined by the newspaper *Daily Mail* had worked patiently and in orderly fashion in the cause of Women's suffrage, but in 1903 the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by Emmeline Pankhurst developed new tactics getting hold of everything they could to call attention: from violence to breaking the Law. Their slogan was 'Votes for Women' and they organized demonstrations in public-meetings, deputations to Downing Street, interruptions in the House of Commons, anything that could call attention to their cause even a scandal would do. After 1908 their tactics increased in violence. Suffragettes chained themselves to the railing of the gallery in the Commons; trials and going to prison for incitement to riot led to hunger strikes and these to forcible feeding.

Under Christabel Pankhurst's (1880 -1958) leadership, women's actions almost get out of control. They even resorted to arson – the setting of fires in mailboxes or public buildings, including churches. Many false alarms were turned in, pictures slashed in the National Gallery, destruction in the British Museum and 'anything else' these women could think of. Perhaps the ultimate suffragette activity was reached in the action of Emily

Wilding Davison (1872-1913) in darting out in the path of the king's horse on Derby Day, in 1913, as the horses were sweeping around Tottenham Corner on Epsom Downs. She died a few days later. Police forces did not know how to handle these insubordinate women, most of them belonging to the middle-class. In a few years women's ingenuity and daring had challenged all the prevailing assumptions about womanhood rendering obsolete gender stereotypes.

The bravery and endurance shown by some suffragettes when arrested, won them the admiration, not only from women, but also from men of all classes. In 1914, Lord Lytton, brother to Lady Constance Lytton, spoke in favor of the suffrage bills. While dressed as a vulgar seamstress, Lady Constance Lytton was arrested and forced fed; in

consequence she contracted serious health problems after that episode which lasted for the rest of her life. Labor women firmly believed that the vote was necessary to secure social reforms: better pay, housing and education along with school meals for their children, nurseries and medical services. Their militancy also had contradictory effects. For those against the movement, their campaign was nothing more than an outlet for their energies, a hysterical reaction, as there was a vast majority of unmarried or childless women among them. The Electoral Reform Bill was not passed until January 1918 granting the right to vote only to women who were aged thirty and over. Ten years elapsed before they did gain equality in voting rights.

When after the war Government tried to shuffle women to their 'earlier' tasks they were caught off-guard by the large number of women, who wanted to keep on working, and Government had made no provisions in that sense. Working class women, who had performed men's professions, questioned female subordination on the job. Their number rose in the unions. Notwithstanding their arguments, the fact that these men had sacrificed their lives to save the country deprived women of a large part of public support, and even fed familiar disagreements. So, the post-war period of the 1920s in Britain was marked by a feeling of anti-feminism not only publicly, but also privately.

The suffrage movement raised issues of class and gender relationships in quite personal ways, as well as in public political spheres. It probed deep into the intimate hierarchies of gender relations. Not only women of differing classes worked together in the campaign, but there was an ethos of common sacrifice which could defy class privilege. Nonetheless in the context of British class structure the very existence of such cross-class collaboration was something extraordinary.

Christie was never a feminist quite the opposite. She believed that women were giving up a status that had taken them centuries to achieve with these ideas of independence and equality. She had been raised in a matriarchy, and her grannies used to say that men were needed just to conceive a child, which was the most radical position of the earlier feminist, so she declared in an interview to an Italian magazine in 1962. Yet, she proved to be an independent woman as she enjoyed driving her own car and even travelled by herself to Baghdad. In her *Autobiography* wrote:

“The position of women over the years has definitely changed for the worse..... It seems that having established ourselves so cleverly as the ‘weaker sex’ we should now be broadly on par with the women of primitive tribes.

You’ve got to hand it to Victorian women, they got their menfolk where they wanted them..... Such is not in *my* recollection..... Mind you, they admired their men enormously...” (Christie: 1977, 146)

She stresses that such is her opinion based on her own recollections, stressing ‘my’ as it is written in italic. In fact, she is reproducing an idea common in her social circle, the one to which she strongly hold to all her life, in spite of her talent and success proving otherwise. But in *Thirteen Problems* (page 276) she whispers to another female character:

“What I do realize is that women must stick together”.

5. The New Woman, the Decadent and the Dandy

As it has been said before, the New Woman was a threat to the classical Victorian definition of femininity, while the Decadent and the Dandy – as representations of the British male – were an equal threat to British masculinity with its brand of robust and muscular Barbarians descendants, rephrasing Matthew Arnold. The press was responsible for putting these two types together, but the men so labelled never figured out what they had in common, the only and most obvious link being the fact that they overtly challenged Victorian sexual codes. Oscar Wilde’s (1854-1900) trial for homosexuality was a blow to the New Woman’s standing since part of the media portrayed them both as similar phenomena. In 1895 *The Speaker* wrote: “even the New Woman, are all more or less the creatures of Mr. Oscar Wilde’s fancy.” (Ledger: 1997, 94)

Even more damaging to the New Woman’s acceptance was its association with same-sex love. Doctors like Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) and Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) were responsible for linking the modern movement of emancipation to lesbian attitudes

and lesbianism. The categorization of lesbian sexuality was done by Havelock Ellis and his partner, Doctor Richard Kraft-Ebing (1840-1902). It was considered by most feminists as a hindrance and not as a help, frequently regarded as a most negative phenomenon.

At first, lesbianism was not taken as 'abnormal'. A romantic friendship between two women as even considered as a preparation for marriage. In the 18th century 'respectable' women were 'doormat' where sex was concerned. So, there were no laws against romantic friendships on the feminine side, but between males, the penalty was death and they were called sodomites. This was a subject Queen Victoria would not even hear about it. Only much later was lesbianism seen as pathology. In *Orlando* (1928) Virginia Woolf approaches the issue of lesbian sexuality, but still in rather subtle tones, disguising it as androgyny, a legacy for twenty and twenty-first century criticism to unveil.

6. New Woman in the Modern City

The New Woman was nothing if not modern. She was also largely an urban phenomenon, a significant presence in city landscapes of the second half of the 19th century. The 'flâneur', the stroller, is characterized by his freedom to move about in the city observing and being observed, but never interacting with others'. In Alan Wolfe's essay on the gendering of modernity is predicted on the assumption that it is impossible to identify a female 'flâneuse', because such character was rendered impossible due to sexual division of Victorian days, when women were often exploited and oppressed. Wolfe says that modern city-escape was definitively masculine. The emergence of women in the modern city was a threat to the patriarchal construction of the Victorian metropolis as a masculine public place. Prostitution also played a part in all this, as it had come out of its confinement in half-hidden brothels to the streets doing its trade, many feminists, who before had been sexually and morally quite liberal, on the last two decades of the 19th century started adopting a more repressive stance: closing brothels, cleaning the streets, as prostitution spread itself.

7. New Woman Modernism and Male Culture

The rise of mass culture – in result of the industrialization process and the subsequent gathering of a large working force in urban centers – it is also associated with ‘the woman question’. It appears to have reached a crisis point in 1880-1890, when cultural debates over the relative merits of realism and romance tried to recapture both fictional modes for a masculine aesthetics. The masculine romance of the period took form of an adventure story with championed action over and above reflection. Men focused upon the harsh economic and sexual realities of life in the late 19th century. Such new form announced itself as ‘serious’ literature, a type of fiction beyond the pen of women writers. The masculine romance and the new realism shared the goal of conquering the feminine literary market.

The lives and fictions of Victorian women writers, especially those who were largely ignored, and remain so, by feminist critics, reveal endless contradictory perspectives about the woman’s question, exposing their own conflicted beliefs about a woman’s proper role. The New Woman novel dating from the end of the 19th century is the most apocalyptic feminist type of all. For example, Sarah Grand with her book *Ideala* (1889), defending that is preferable to put an end to a hypocritical marriage, and devote oneself to charitable works, than abide to social rules. Generally speaking, by the 1860s the novel enjoyed an enormous popularity, and two trends began to distinguish themselves: a popular one, and another which was labeled as more ‘serious’ literature.

New Woman writers began writing about their wish for increased women’s rights, creating a distinct body of literature, which reflected their concerns about their role in society. Although not agreeing on solutions, their texts engage with common themes such as: marriage reform, social activism, motherhood, equality in education, sexual freedom and greater career opportunities. They became aware of their own bodies, acknowledging their sexual desires, challenging the expectations that all women must be mothers, emphasizing the importance of healthy active bodies and real appetites in girls. In short, they created a new identity through the construction of this new female body

In the late Victorian period, they were openly committed to the social questions of their time and fought back those who sought to deny them a voice. Some worked tirelessly in

the cause of social equality, while others insisted on the innate differences between sexes.

Many recorded the 'real' lives of uneducated women who failed to marry, and had to apply for a suitable employment. A few offer a more romantic account of the special qualities brought by the woman of genius to the writing of fiction.

Many New Woman writers, classified as proto-modernists, owe a huge debt to 'realism', immensely popular at the time, which led most of them to regard their literary output as part of a wider, real feminist campaign. However, novels had developed as a 'low-form' in the 18th century, supposedly because they were easier not only to read than any other form, but also easier to write. To think of women as having a special aptitude for writing novels was, therefore, something of a backhanded compliment, as Jane Austen (1775-1817) complained to her sister Cassandra in one of the many letters exchanged between the two (1959,)

Besides reworking the form of the realistic novel, they took an interest in utopian writing, detective and science fiction. On the one hand, utopian writing and science fiction lend themselves to an interrogation of the existing social and political order, and the possibility of transformation. On the other hand, romance and detective fiction seemed more concerned with re-establishing social norms. At the end of the 19th century, New Woman was mostly a journalistic phenomenon, a product of discourse. She is entangled with such cultural problems of the 1880s and 1890s as decadence, socialism, imperialism, and emergent homosexual identities. As above-mentioned, the New Woman materialized alongside the decadent and the dandy, in spite of having nothing in common, they became a pair forged by the press.

These 'New Women' overtly challenged the dominant sexual codes of the Victorian era. Yet, they were usually firm supporters of heterosexual marriage, and had little or no conception of female desire, let alone lesbian sexual desire, and often shown a considerable investment in eugenics and other imperialist discourses. Their concerns revolved around employment and education for women, the competing demands of wage earning work, motherhood, sexual morality and freedom, the interrogation of socialism and other political creeds. Decadent male writers write about sexual inverts, and female writers have the tendency to write about romantic friendships. New Woman

was committed to change and to the values of a projected future, she belonged to the modern vanguard without doubt.

The wide range of New Woman fiction published in the last two decades of the 19th century is far from revealing a recognizable position with which contemporary feminists could identify. The texts end up by pointing in the direction of a more complex, often tangled web of positions, of questions about women's potential and the social forces that continued to shape their experiences. New Woman's writings clearly demonstrate their commitment to the social questions of the times, and record the ideological trappings that sought to deny them a voice. In fiction they choose 'marriage' as just an escape to the tedious duties and constraints of the life of a middle-class girl, who generally stayed at home looking after her parents in old age when she remained single.

Taking a sample from a few of those writers and their works their recurrent themes become patent: Jessie Fothergill, in *Kilt and Kin* (1881), introduces to us Judith Conisbrough, the heroine; she rejects a marriage that would lead her to financial stability and instead seeks out a career that allows her to earn her own money. Also Vernon Lee (1856-1935) – Violet Page's pen name – *Miss Brown* (1884) provides the authoress with the opportunity to promote her own ideas on gender, power, art and society. Mona Caird (1854-1932) in *The Wing of Azrael* (1889) writes 'marriage is the most hypocritical form of woman-purchase', the book being an attack on the patriarchal ideology of feminine submission. Catherine Louisa Perkins (1841-1910) is an even more striking example with her novel *The Experiences of Loveday Brook, Lady Detective* (1894) since it had an important influence upon later female detectives, but also due to the heroine's triumphs over gender stereotypes and expectations.

These women writers would rather write under the form of 'short-stories', because it offered more freedom from the traditional plots of the 'three-decker' Victorian novel, whose typical structure was as following: in the first volume the heroine was in conflict with the male authority; by the second guilt had set in and in; and in the third the heroine is punished, repents and is drained of all her former energy. Another factor was that being shorter, it made allowances for the author's lack of time to dedicate to their art, and improve it; it could be achieved in between 'female' activities. Women needed to rescue their sexuality from the decadent's images of romantically doomed prostitutes

or devouring Venus and bring forward female's desire as a creative force in artistic imagination as well as in biological reproduction. Issues such as: sexual fantasies of seduction, cross-dressing and androgyny are common to them all.

New Woman writers were pessimistic about their chances of finding a New Man, who would be supportive and understanding. Through the suffrage movement they were confronted by a number of challenges and threats, by the specter of violence, the ruthlessness of female authoritarianism, in the form of mother and daughter Pankhurst, who maintained an internal military discipline awarding medals of valor and demanding unquestioned obedience, while fighting back the government. In the famous text *A Room of One's Own*, by Virginia Woolf proposes women to find a space just for themselves that according to Elaine Showalter's reading is, at the same time, sanctuary and prison.

Curiously women painters used to call their studios 'my room'.

Bestselling forms of fiction took significant new commercial impetus in the period between the wars as conditions changed for all of them. Regardless of how many women wrote detective fiction in those days, it was still considered to be a masculine form mainly read by men. Somehow detective stories constituted a way of intruding someone's home, making society look at its own foibles, at the ideological discourses which structure social practices and individual situations, the construction of social institutions and individual subjectivity.

8. About the Philosophy of Gender

The political struggle brought along gender issues, which were raised mainly by women philosophers such as: Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1968), Judith Butler (1941-) or Elaine Showalter (1941-). All of them call our attention to the fact that what we know about history was recorded by men and to their glory only. A woman gets mentioned in History books, only if it is impossible to leave her out, otherwise she is totally erased. Still today a woman, who achieves the higher ranks in her working place is surely smarter than the men around her and has worked twice as much as her male 'colleagues'.

Simone de Beauvoir belongs to the liberal feminism and preaches that: “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” (Beauvoir: 1953, 69) She states that in all cultures, in every society men are defined as actors or subjects, while women are defined in relation to men

‘He is the subject (hunter, farmer, soldier) she is the Other (mother, wife, mate). Women ‘are less individuated as men’ their personalities are based on relation and comments with flexible rather than rigid ego boundaries’ wrote Chodorow (Ch.:1974, 44, 58). Daly the previous year had written:

“The masculine stereotype has been said to imply the possession of dominating and manipulative attitudes towards persons and the environment and the tendency to construct barriers between the Self and the Other.” (Daly: 1973, 15)

Beauvoir was not alone in her comments, but she was the only feminine voice in the group advising her fellow-women to become economically independent, just as Virginia Woolf told them to be in *A Room of One’s Own* “a room and five hundred pounds per year would do the trick”. (Woolf: 1928, 56) Beauvoir states that economic independence would mean a job and the capacity to perform it meant education. At the same time, independence would also mean freedom, and hand in hand with it came responsibility. She named her book *The Second Sex* and stresses that Women are ‘the Other’ because they are defined, and differentiate themselves with reference to man and not as absolute subjects:

‘Man is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other’. (Beauvoir: 1953, 145) Therefore, her ultimate definition of an independent woman is that of ‘a childless, unwed professional’. (Beauvoir: 1953, 176) Miss Marple can fulfill two of these conditions: she is unmarried and childless, but she is no professional; in fact, she stresses several times that she is nothing more than an amateur. But this same idea has suffered a lot of criticism along times. We must bear in mind that Simone was talking about French women in the early 20th century belonging to the upper and middle-class. She frames the issue of women’s subordination in terms of existential notions of subjecthood, embodiment and freedom remaining remarkably powerful as does her phenomenological account of women’s experience. But Beauvoir was able of identifying an important factor: women’s complicity in their own subordination. In

those days girls were educated for domesticity, thus lacking the knowledge and the intellectual exercise needed to raise a conscience.

Martin Reid claims that Simone de Beauvoir has little knowledge concerning works by women. In Beauvoir's opinion female literary production, mainly of her contemporaries seems to be just a few romantic, well-elaborate novels, celebrating marriage and children. She fires at all these topics. Beauvoir herself considers writing a male activity, although she demands for an ontological equality, and believed she had gone beyond the discourse of difference. "The free woman is about to be borne" she wrote in *The Second Sex* and further on: "when she has conquered her liberty, and her financial independence, she can dream of herself in equal terms with men and so become in the realm of creation" (Beauvoir: 1953, 232)

Reid believes that Beauvoir gave in to male assumptions of geniality without trying to support women 'colors'. Only a very few names have been consecrated by critics, who are all male. Beauvoir, in the second chapter of the above-mentioned book entitled "Myths", takes into consideration some literary works and judges male and female characters. Women have been encouraged through times not to write, because they would spoil their lovely hands with ink and they could turn into 'something else', but oral tradition is their domain. Women who write have insisted on their own problematic conditions and of their peers and on the need to get an education, but they have not done in a systematic order.

Beauvoir wrote: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (Beauvoir:1953, 175), because of this statement Nancy Holmstrom believes that the authoress saw women's reproductive functions as an obstacle to their realizing the radical freedom existentialists suppose human beings are entitled to, and how to determine their own essence. Relying on Hegel's master-slave theory, she contended that men were able to define women as 'the Other '. Women's increasing freedom consisted, first of all, she maintained, in escaping 'slavery' assigned to them by their reproductive role. The only possible way to gain equality and realize their human potential was to transcend femaleness and lead the kind of life men do. This was exactly what worried Wollstonecraft when she argued that too much education would 'masculinize' women.

Feminist readings and evaluations of Beauvoir's work have obviously varied by place and generation. Yet, she formulates the question of women's oppression within a framework that owes a debt to Sartre's existentialism which is the case of woman's otherness, but she stretches it 'beyond and above' suggests Michèle Le Doeuff (1948-), (Doeuff:1991, 55). Beauvoir, unlike Sartre (1905-1980), distinguishes self-other relations between equals, where reciprocity is possible, from those between men and women, where structural inequality results in relations of domain and oppression.

Along with Alison Jaggar (1944-) and Iris Marion Young (1949-2006), who belong to the second wave of feminism and insist that the unpaid care giving and homemaking tasks women are expected to perform are indispensable forms of labor based on sexual differences, and, as such, are exploitative, because they assign to women the most part of domestic work. Women end up by performing a 'double-shift' as they work in and outside their homes. Likewise they are against economic dependency, and declare that it is insanity to be a stay-at-home woman and an injustice the low salaries give to child-care workers.

Postmodernists and poststructuralist feminist analyses tend to use the dichotomous distinctions between 'the One' and 'the Other', or 'Subject' and 'Object'. They still consider Women as the Other, but instead of interpreting this condition as something to be transcended, they proclaim its advantages.

Judith Butler, Elisabeth Spelman and Maria Lugones (1950-) belong to the third wave of the feminist movement, the so-called radical feminism. They claim that their predecessors never took into account the ways in which gender is influenced by, and interacts with sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, age and ability upon the needs of diverse groups of women. This is an issue the three of them agree upon in their own works.

Butler says that sex and gender are two different realities, smashing the link between them. She recognizes that there is no pure biological sex, an idea that is not new, on the contrary. Greeks and Romans had already pointed out the similarities between the sexual organs of both, even if concluding that men's were better, as they were fully developed. Only in the 18th century were those differences put forward and the

distinction between male and female firmly set. Gender is a social construct, a performance. (Butler:1990, 79). Gendered identities do not express some inner 'core', but are the dramatic effect of our performances, Butler takes it further and says : 'Gender created anatomical sex'. She rejects the meaning of human nature as a partly biological concept. She agrees with Simone de Beauvoir that we are molded male or female by society.

Butler comes to the conclusion that gender is a set of signs internalized, physically imposed on the body. Gender is a performance, but had not Shakespeare said it long before? 'And one Man in his time/plays many parts (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, scene 7). Anyone of us can build an 'image' to show others that bears the faintest resemblance with who we really are, Hamlet's most famous line: 'to be or not to be' might be interpreted in that way: we are 'social' creatures, who need to live in a community, so we build a social image. To reinforce her opinion that gender is a social construct she gives the example that boys are supposed to play with balls, cars, and weapons, while girls are supposed to play with dolls and mimic their mothers. Society molds us into male or female.

Presently, it is common knowledge that, biologically speaking, we are not 100% male or female. A male has a huge percent of male hormones and a smaller quantity of female ones, and in a female the vice-versa occurs. Hormones can be used to turn us in a man or a woman, which is the case of a transgender, who voluntarily changes sex. Maybe we were once hermaphrodites, maybe that is what the story in the Bible about Adam's rib is all about, maybe that is why we speak of 'our other half' or of 'our soul mate', but one thing is certain: sex has to do with our body, whether we have female or male genitals. Gender is what society turns us into. The link between the two is smashed to pieces by Butler, who calls our attention to the problems gender poses to language. 'He/she duality is too slim'', she says, to cope with reality, as queers do not fit wither side. Not knowing who they are verbally, leads to mental confusion and fear of exposure. For example: imagine that You are a shop-assistant. How do You address someone who is gay? Madam? Sir? Butler reminds us that very basic actions like going to the wash-room imply making a choice of gender and are a way of showing who we are. She ends ups by coming to the conclusion that labor divided on sex basis leads to gender

stratification and proposes in order to achieve a reduction of gender inequalities, that there should be a reduction of gender differentiation.

Judith Lorber (1931-) in *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* (2010) agrees that gender is socially constructed, an institution that is embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organizations. Gender difference is most of all a mean to justify sexual stratification and universally used to justify inequalities (Lorber: 2010, 34). Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West in their work *Doing Gender* (1987) also take the stand that sex belongs to the field of biology and gender is an achieved status, an emergent feature of social institutions. (West: 1987, 89)

Detective fiction is structurally gendered as feminine, as it explores the 'Other' side of the Law and it makes sense if we bear in mind the definition that feminine is the dark other to the masculine western tradition of privileging reason, intelligence, order and rationality.

Rosie Bradotti (1954-) in *Nomadic Subjects, Embodiment and Sexual Differences in Contemporary Feminists Theory* (2011) observes that a new generation of feminists grew frustrated with Beauvoir's sweeping generalizations about 'women' as the 'Second Sex'. The political and theoretical emphasis since the seventies has been shifting from the asymmetry between the sexes to the exploration so the sexual difference embodied and experienced by women.

Miss Marple does not strike us as a feminist and yet she is an endearing example of an independent woman competently running her own life, with no marital bonds. Still, she makes the following comment: "Women must stick together – one should, in an emergency stand by one's own sex." (*Thirteen Problems*).

Chapter IV – Female Detectives

There is a slight irony when we acknowledge the fact that the first female detective characters were created by male authors. Mrs. Gladden in *The Experiences of a Lady Detective* (1864) was introduced by Andrew Forrester Junior. She has abstruse areas of expertise such as interpreting boot marks, has a dog to keep her company and her deductive methods and energetic approach anticipate Sherlock Holmes' methods. She has a dog to keep her company. In the same year, 1864, Stephen Hayward published *Revelations of a Woman Detective* featuring Mrs. Paschal, a widow aged forty, who carries a colt revolver, which she knows how to use. She claims that her sex gives her certain advantages, because criminals do not recognize her as a detective. Mrs. Paschal is brave, independent and undisturbed by emotions. She is adept of disguise but so is Gladden. Mrs. Gladden and Mrs. Paschal are police officers, not private detectives.

The first woman writer to introduce such a character was Anna Catherine Green (1864-1935) in *The Affair Next Door* (1897) whose heroine is Amelia Butterworth. In Britain, Mary Elisabeth Braddon (1837-1915) writes in 1862 *Lady Audley's Secret* featuring a female villain and a male detective, providing an early example of misdirection as an innocent looking woman plots and executes crime.

Notwithstanding these experiments, it was Catherine Louisa Perkins who, in 1893, first published, from February until July in *The Ludgate Monthly*, the adventures of her 'lady' detective called Loveday Brooke (1894). She is described as a little over thirty not tall, but not short; neither dark nor fair; neither handsome or ugly: her features are nondescript, her one noticeable trait was a habit of dropping her eyelids over her eyes till only a line of eyeball showed, and she appeared to be looking out at the world through a slit. Her dress was invariably black and was almost Quaker like in its neat primness. Brooke had been thrown upon the world penniless and without a friend. She had defied conventions and had chosen for herself a career that had cut her off sharply from her former associates and her position in society. Ebenezer Dyer was the one responsible for giving her a position, after her contribution to solve an intricate case.

Loveday is one of the earliest professional female detective in English literature history. Her career is marked by conflicts with territorial male officers and the ever-present

pressure to keep her detective work ‘inside the home’. She emerges at a historical moment, when the current notions about matters so distinct as women, criminality and law enforcement were rapidly changing in the British Isles. Perkins’ stories offer an interpretation of these intersecting cultural shifts, which is surprisingly different from her contemporaries’ works. She challenges the conceptions of deviance and reveals the existing poverty of those days, opening a new, sociological explanation for crime as well as for gender discriminatory situations. In the Sherlock Holmes universe women can never act as detectives, not even Irene Adler, the woman he most admires his equal in disguise and in logical thought, is allowed to put her gifts into action.

The English detective novel began and still is a woman’s affair beginning with the sensation novel, which in turn plunged Victorian novel into more troubled waters. In 1930s Agatha Christie adjusts a formula that can surmount any obstacle: she turns the detective novel into something cathartic and therapeutic; the secrets and agonies of a society are revealed. The novel becomes a game and the reader is invited to play along with the detective. Miss Marple embodies the nostalgic dream of ‘cups of tea’ and of ‘maids that knew their business’, corresponding to the times of glory of the Empire, when the sun would never set upon British possessions.

The Golden Age detective fiction, which codified so much of the genre’s structure reaffirmed the old rules of women’s behavior and kept the priorities firmly in place. The genre still confined women to the ‘home’. Yet, some of Christie’s characters defy conventions, when for example they know how to drive and enjoy it, as much as she herself did.

The detective novel written by a woman can be dark or amusing, bringing in itself the problem of genre or of the masculine and feminine social boundaries, exploiting the margins of tragedy and renewing with value the scenario, is alive and well for many years to come. Despite their important presence, women writers have consistently received less space in review columns and fewer nomination awards for their work.

From early works belonging to the genre, female characters have played many different roles: either victims or suspects and actual criminals, to more secondary positions, such as: accomplices, or omnipotent or limited narrators and onlookers to the most important role of detectives. Women’s traditionally attributed elusive nature is cleverly explored

in Lady Lucy Audley character, an early example of misdirection: an innocent-looking woman is, after all, the plotter and executioner of a crime. Her better known 'sister in crime' is the character Irene Adler, Sherlock Holmes, nemesis, who not only blackmails his client, but also successfully wades him.

Although the lived experiences of middle-class women in Britain and United States of America offered concrete evidence of their ability to perform in traditional male roles, detective fiction tended to follow the widespread post-war attitude, which supported subordinate female behavior.

Detective fiction remains a major field in popular literature both for authors and readers. Many trends and subgenres have emerged in literary detective fiction during the last twenty years, both redefining and broadening the genre: historical fiction, set outside the traditional locations is such an example. The genre seems to be changing into several distinct genres, each of them with its own style and method of gripping the reader's attention.

Marty Roth in *Foul and Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction* (1995) asserts that the detective story is essentially a masculine genre, even when written by women, or when the detectives are female. So when Christie created Miss Marple, it was something daring. Detection was still considered 'an unsuitable job for a woman', the title of one of P. D. James's books, published in 1972 precisely about detective fiction.

The Golden Age of detective fiction, which codified so much of the genre's structure reaffirmed the old rules of women's behavior and kept the traditional, patriarchal priorities firmly in place. Authors were willing to sacrifice the genre's usual form to experiences of controlling the reader's public perceptions of women. Even ordinarily imperceptive readers would not have failed to notice how few golden opportunities women detectives and similar independent professional women really had.

1. Form: from Short-Story to Novel

The short-story so typical of Victorian prose only allowed a single puzzling event and a single villain. When multiple suspects were introduced in the plot it was necessary to

change the form, so it took to the novel, which became the classic form of the clue-puzzle and the multiple suspect plots, and proved to suit it rather well, according to the reader's reception, though there may also be other thematic causes for its popularity. The three-decker form of publishing in Victorian days, was supposed to be the most suitable to the whole family and the three volumes symbolized in a way exactly this: father, mother and child hinting at precedence in the reading in the familial triangle. When it collapsed in 1890s, a sensational plot was one of the viable forms for the newly popular one-volume novels.

In the meantime, the short-story did not disappear. Most of the between-the-wars writers produced short-stories along with their novels, remaining especially popular among women-writers. Alice Munro in an interview given in 1986 said: 'I never intended to be a short-story writer....I started writing them, because I do not have time to write anything else – I had three children'

Elaine Showalter associates the short-story to the female activities of quilting and piecing, arguing that features such as multiplicity and open-endedness are a very female way of writing although detective stories are seen as male. Moreover, Grace Paley draws our attention to the fact that telling stories has been for ages a female activity. Women have kept the oral tradition alive. It is something that is in our female genes and is akin to gossip. Many fairy tales are, in fact, based on true facts that have been dressed up, so to say, by centuries of oral tradition, changing according to the customs of the land. Simple folk have recorded exceptional happenings this way. One may add, that since women were the children's caretakers, it fell on them the task of transcending the collective memories of both family and community, albeit the fantasized elements.

Nonetheless, the Novel undoubtedly dominated the literary scene in the nineteenth century and early twenty century. The Novel developed as a 'low-form' in the 18th century and was not only easier to read than poetry, but also suspiciously easier to write. The English novel was essentially bourgeois in its origins throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. If the characteristic theme of earlier times was the relation between gentility and morality, in the 20th it was the relation between loneliness and love. From its start the novel displayed an interest in psychological subtlety or, at least, in the increase of

the apparatus of psychological diagnosis. George Elliot (1819-1880) in *Belle Lettres: Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* acknowledges this proliferation of novels written by female writers for lady readers. (Elliot: 54) To think women as having a special aptitude for writing novels was therefore something of a back-handed compliment given the low status of the product, which as Jane Austen (1775-1817) complained tended to be thought of as 'only a novel'. G. H. Lewis sustains that domestic experiences, which form the bulk of woman's knowledge find an appropriate form in the novel.

A propos Lady Mary Montagu in her *Letters* writes: "I doubt not that at least, the greater part of these, are trash, lumber... However they serve to pass away the 'idle' time'. She herself was an avid novel reader asking her daughters to send her lists of novels copied from newspaper's advertisements. Nevertheless, a great increase in feminine leisure certainly occurred in the early 18th century, which gave rise to a wider reading public, although this phenomenon was probably mainly restricted to London, its suburbs and the larger provincial towns. Household duties were still many, and women were expected to keep on fulfilling these manifold and time consuming tasks.

In due time, it seems that novel took its revenge, and from a low-brow kind of writing it came to dominate the literature of the world. Ellen Moers in *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976) sustains:

"Nor can the two phenomena be separated: the rise of the novel and the rise of women to professional literary status. And ever afterwards the makeshift novel, last-born of literary genres, has dominated the literature of the world." (Moers: 1976, 143).

The novel's lack of status and tradition derived from the supposition that it demanded less intellectual rigor than other forms of writing. So, it seemed accessible to feminine weaker minds, but instead it opened up new possibilities for women to understand the world and humankind, and they took them both as readers and creators. Because the novel's genesis lay partly in forms of writing familiar to women such as: the diary, the journal, letters, they could write at a sitting-room or dining-room table and all

negotiations with the publisher could be performed by letter or even conducted by a father or a husband. Jane Austen's writing is the living proof that to write novels it was not necessary to go further than Bath.

Roughly speaking the novel started with autobiographies written by women in the 17th century. The novel is a woman's opportunity to talk about herself, to reflect on matters she considers of importance to exercise an introspective and social analysis of her very reason of being." It is the prime example of the way women started to create themselves as social subjects under bourgeois capitalism' asserts Julia Kristeva (1941-) in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980)

According to Juliet Mitchell (1940-) in the novel's development together with the consolidation of bourgeois capitalism are associated with the creation of a new meaning of the term 'woman'. As Mitchell writes:

"The novel is the prime example of the way women start to create themselves as social subjects under bourgeois capitalism – create themselves as a category women."(1966, 43)

She is also interested in the way they subverted the male dominated forms, and gives Mary Shelley's (1797-1851) *Frankenstein* (1818), as an example. Mitchell reads this particular work as 'a violent attack on the symbolic order' and as part of a tradition of women Gothic writers whose writings subvert patriarchal society'.

Sabine Vanacker recalls in *Reflecting on Miss Marple* that women emboldened by their war time experiences, and enjoying new activities with men, domesticated the detective genre and turn it into an instrument of their own rational and moral capacities. She believes that Christie's contribution lies on the apparent ordinariness, the small unexceptional community, which, nevertheless harbors a killer. 'The detective story is reading at its most basic. We open a book at the opening and track it down to conclusion'. As the detective follows the criminal actions, he is a kind of surrogate author. Detective fiction displays the human story at its most basic and profoundly level: curiosity, pursue of truth and a fair, happy ending.

One must also bear in mind that underlying all novels or short-stories there is an archetypal pattern not allowing for exclusive psychological development of characters;

otherwise it would only prevent the plot's action. Christie's ability lies in the capacity to change and vary according to the possibilities allowed by the pattern, each 'Christie for Christmas' can count upon a variation of the general one which is characterized by its emphasis on logic and reason. In so doing, a rational net of relationships and events is established, allowing the detective, the reader, and, of course, the author, to greet each other for their intelligence and deductive ability. Bargainnier draws our attention to the fact that in knitting there is also always a pattern; Miss Marple's knitting can be an analogy of this intellectual construction. George Simenon (1903-1989) calls it 'embroidery' instead, but even so the idea of a pattern, remains.

Chapter V – Agatha Christie 1. A Biographical Note

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born on the 15 September 1890 in Torquay. Her father was Frederick Miller, an outgoing American with an income of his own enough to support his family accordingly to upper-middle class standards, and her mother Clara, was a rather shy person, who had been brought up by a childless aunt, because her own mother, was a young widow with no means to care for her and two other boys. She was the youngest of three: Madge was the eldest and Monty was the only boy. At the age of eleven, her father died and life changed drastically. Money had to be carefully managed. In 1912 Agatha met Archibald Christie on a dance; they were married in 1914 on Christmas' Eve before Archie joined the Royal Air Force in France. During the War she enrolled in the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the Red Cross as a nurse in Torquay's hospital. When she applied to work in the hospital's dispensary she sat for the Society of Apothecaries examination.

During World War II, and already married to Max, she worked in the dispensary of a hospital in London. This accounts for her first-hand knowledge about poisons and drugs, which she would use in her detective stories. In 1919 Rosalind was born. In 1926 Clara dies and Archie asks for the divorce to marry Nancy Neele. In 1930 she visits Baghdad for the second time and meets Max Mallowan, an archeologist. They got married a year later. For almost thirty years Agatha would spend six months in the Middle East near Max's dig. She died on 12 January 1976.

The brief biographical sketch presents us a rather ordinary course of life, the relevant trait being the use she made of her observations, the knowledge she accumulated, and the situations she experienced. Every activity she performed, every country or region she visited, the people she met in one way or another received a new life in her stories.

2. Christie – the Writer

Agatha Clarissa, in revolt against a Victorian education with its aversion to sex and violence, began writing substantial novels under the pen-name of Mary Westmacott.

She turned rather late to detective fiction, creating immortal characters such as Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, the two best known detectives of hers. Christie's motivation to write follows an old British tradition among women writers. She began writing for the very same reason so many before her had: money, the need to provide an extra income to the family budget without leaving the house. About those days she wrote in her *Autobiography*:

“The nice part about writing in those days was that I directly related it to money...This stimulated my output enormously...In due course I wrote it, and then I had my loggia”. (Christie: 1977, 244)

Christie from employee she became owner of her own company, and made so much money, revenues became a problem. In her work *Come and Tell me How You Live* (1946), the only one she ever signed as Agatha Mallowan, she mentions that in the house they built near Max's dig, in Nimrud she had a small room of her own for fifty pounds, where she used to type her stories. It was a square; the walls were made of mud-bricks, but there she had a solid table with her typewriter on top and a chair. Reading this passage it is impossible not to recall Virginia Woolf and her famous essay, *A Room of Our Own*, when she advises women not only to have an income of at least five hundred pounds, but also a room where they can write at ease. It seems that Christie followed her advice.

As a child Agatha loved to create imaginary friends. Still an infant, she made up the 'Kittens' and pretended to be one of them, while she roamed in the garden of her beloved Ashfield, she liked to pretend that she was a small kitten with several siblings. Later on, she brought into her world of fantasy 'The Girls' – they all had different names and personalities. Clara had always encouraged her to put into writing her fantasies. Agatha was in her early teens, when she took to writing more seriously. Her first book was entitled *Snow upon the Desert*, but before that she had started with small poem and short stories.

Her sentimental novels written under the pen-name of Mary Westmacot are good, but not outstanding and these literary attempts suffered several rejections from more than one publisher. *Unfinished Portrait* (1934) is almost a fictional biography. Yet, her true genius revealed itself when she decided to write a detective story. *The Mysterious Affair*

at Styles, written in 1916, but published only in 1921, was her first one, and she would go on writing non-stop for almost forty years. In her most productive years people used to say that it was 'A Christie, for Christmas'.

Her capacity to create 'puzzles' according to the Golden Age fashion is outstanding, Francis Wyndham calls it 'animated algebra' and the truth is that Agatha was very good with figures, maybe if she had had to choose a career she would have become an accountant and a wonderful story teller of detective stories would be lost forever. In her *Autobiography* (posthumously published in 1977) she recalls that she began writing by her mother's suggestion while she recovered from influenza:

"Why don't you write a story? She (Clara) suggested

'Write a story?' I said rather startled.

'Yes' said Mother. 'Like Madge'.

'Oh! I don't think I could'

'Why not?' she asked....

'You don't know that you can't' Mother pointed out." (Christie: 1977, 218)

She admits having read *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* by Gaston LeRoux (1868-1927) and Madge's challenge, telling her she would not be able to write such a kind of story. She also remembers she first got acquainted with detective fiction when Madge read the Sherlock Holmes stories to her.

"We were connoisseurs of the detective story: Madge had initiated me young on Sherlock Holmes, and I had followed hot-foot on her trail, starting with *The Lavenworth Case*, which had fascinated me ... at the age of eight." (Christie: 1977, 238)

Agatha managed to keep her popularity for more than forty years of writing. Her well planned plots reflected the changing of the world 'outside'. From the 'butler did it' setting of her earlier books, she moved with times accommodating more contemporary themes and situations. The World War II, airplanes, hijackings, the Cold War and the

deadly gambit of espionage and counter-espionage have all in term provided backdrops to her plots. But ” in the popular imagination, Christie is the embodiment of a quintessentially

English cultural conservatism” writes Matthew Beaumont in *Cutting up the Corpse: Agatha Christie, Max Ernst and Neo-Victorianism in the 1930s* (2009, 12).

The essence of Christie’s style and technique was to filter and refine the sordid and violent world of crime to make it entertaining. Motif was always at the story’s core and following the pattern of English murder. This is a particular kind of story where the most important part is the process of deduction. Laura Thompson in *Agatha Christie: an English Mystery* (2007) has an entire chapter on the subject. Her books became a reasoning exercise appealing even to those who saw themselves as intellectuals reading Joyce by day and Christie before putting the light out.

The domestic atmosphere that runs through her stories was something that sprang naturally from her own personality. Christie loved houses, her first love had been ‘Ashfield’ which she always called ‘home’, even in much later years. Stiles was the first house she bought with her first revenues, but it was while living there that she discovered

Archie’s affair and decided to get the divorce, so, in some manner, it became a place to forget. Then she became the proud owner of a Georgian house, Greenway, near the river Dart in her beloved Devonshire; this was her dream house. She had this love for houses ever since she was given a doll’s house as a young girl, in a passage of her *Autobiography* she mentions how much she loved to furnish it; soon it became so full that she asked for a second one, but got a cupboard instead.

Agatha was just an ordinary housewife and cleverly got stuck to what she knew best: the home and all that came with it. She never gave herself ‘airs’, remaining humble, following

Eden Philipott’s advice. He was her very first critic, who suggested that she should stick to what she knew and so she did. When Miss Marple complains that it is difficult to put her thoughts into words as she had no proper education, it is Agatha speaking, because she too had been brought up at home. In her *Autobiography* she recalls the day she went to Buckingham Palace and dined with the Queen, as the second most exciting day of her life, but what she remembers most is the story told by the Queen about a domestic

problem that had once taken place in the palace. So domesticity seems to be her natural realm.

If location is one of Christie's important factors, motive is, of course, central in any detective story worth that name. The central motives in her fiction are: money, fear of exposure and sexual jealousy. She invoked a world of unnerving uncertainty, in which only the fiction of unfailing detection brought security. She passed these feelings on to her writing, maybe without realizing the kind of atmosphere people were living in those days. 'The good old days', as Edwardian times were mentioned were dead as a door nail, just as Dickens would say. Young people, mainly male had been sacrificed at war, youth had been slaughtered and from then on put on a pedestal. From those days onwards youth was seen as too precious to be wasted. Beauty patterns changed, women in their forties were rejected as models and replaced by those in their twenties 'those silly creatures' as Agatha calls them.

Christie's own superiority is found, typically, in her ability to lure the reader's suspicion away from the main suspect by the provision of an alibi, throwing the suspicion upon a less likely candidate, just to reveal at the end that the principal suspect's alibi was a false one, provided by a secret accomplice or wrongly accepted by someone formally in charge, or with some kind of social authority, for a while. During the investigation, the process of deduction can be confounded by the interference of a second or third minor crime, leading the reader away from the 'track', but she never felt the need to move beyond the puzzle formula in which she was in fact the best.

The reasons why she met such success might be due to the fact that she accepted the formulas and conventions of the genre, and, simultaneous, she was able of finding numberless variations within, and for them. In terms of innovation, she added the narrator as the murderer, and a detective team made up of husband and wife. Bargainnier in *Gentle Art of Murder* (1980) calls Christie a superb story teller who demands no specialized knowledge from her readers, but, at the same time, makes them want to join in a process of pursue and discovery for the truth. He talks of Christie's genius, which gave her the insight to realize that ordinary people talk in clichés and stock phrases, and use a small vocabulary organized in short sentences. So, she built

her writing in short paragraphs and a minimum of punctuation, making her stories easy to read and eventually popular.

The stories of *Thirteen Problems* are a perfect example of Marple's close observation of detail, usually of domestic nature and easily ignored, in particular by male eyes. She solves a case of poisoning in one of these stories because she knows that 'hundreds and thousands' are home-made candy decorations for desserts.

3. Christie and the Theater

Heta Pyrhonen in her work *Mayhem and Murder* (1999) points to the central image of the theater in Christie's work has a literal meaning, especially in *Murder at the Vicarage*. In this particular case the whole village serves as the staging for plays of impersonation, which makes deception, intrigue and murder possible. She says that Agatha Christie's characters resemble a theatrical company, comprising dramatic personae of such social and comical types as the tyrannical landowner, who is the victim in *Murder at the Vicarage*, the English rose, the siren-with-a-past, the army colonel, the secretarycompanion, the endearing rascal... This perspective is enhanced by the closed nature of her settings: the manor-house, or the country village, for instance, are recurrent in her cases.

The "whodunit" factor depicts a world of exclusion where only upper and middle class members can go inside the "setting", working to impose a certain order on reality which becomes indistinguishable from this supposed order. George Grella prefers to call them 'comedy of manners'; whereas Priestman classifies them as 'comic fairy-tales'; Bargainier and Maida Spornic labeled them as Everyman, morality tales a view that Christie herself seemed to share, when reflecting on her own work.

"It was also very much a story with a moral; in fact it was the old Everyman

Morality Tale, the hunting down of Evil and the triumph of Good.” (Christie: 1977, 507).

Nicholas and Margaret Boe Birns call the reader’s attention to ‘the theatricality of her characters ’actions’ in *The Continuum Encyclopaedia of British Literature* (2003). They remind us that even in real life people seldom turn out to be as we expected, and so, her plots and characters somehow invite us to speculate how well and deep we happen to know those that surround us in our daily life.

One possible motivation for her writing theatrical plays might be the longing to outshine her sister Marge, who wrote a play that was performed for some time in the West End. Some of her stories were easily turned into plays; such is the case of *Murder at the Vicarage*, which, in 1949, was adapted to the theater. If her sister Marge’s play was on stage for a few months, her own plays achieved enormous success. *The Mousetrap* is a case in point: it has been on stage non-stop since 1952. It has been performed by generations of actors and enjoyed by different generations of audiences.

In Christie’s novels even the detective sometimes takes hold of ‘disguise’, and the venom can sometimes be the cure. As a young girl Agatha enjoyed going to see a pantomime on Boxing Day, in her *Autobiography* she recollects that the very first time she went to Drury Lane. Some years later, while in France with her parents she liked to perform every night for them one of the fairy-tales she knew with the help of her maid, Marie. As a young woman, her mother, Clara, once took her to Exeter to see a play by Beckett, and while staying in Paris to give her education ‘the finishing touch’ she used to go to the Comédie Française, where she was fortunate to see Sarah Bernard perform. There run in the family a passion for the theater: her father, Frederick Miller, was an amateur actor, who enjoyed dressing himself up, and her sister Marge was also a good amateur actress, who used to perform with the Manchester Amateur Dramatic. In her *Autobiography* she note down:

“One of the greatest joys in life was the local theatre. We were all lovers of the theatre in my family.” (Christie: 1977, 116)

Her main feminine character, Miss Marple, points out that in this world of impersonation or of role playing – to pretend to be someone else rather than oneself - avails itself of ‘conjuring tricks’. The image of the theater as an organizing principle

indicates that her characters love role-playing and some use it for murder. At the beginning all seem possible culprits, and sometimes even the victim is somewhat else different from what she or he claimed to be. Murder robs the *status quo*, because it destroys the community's ability to draw clear distinctions about its members. A primary function of any investigation is to reestablish peace and order; the way chosen is to unmask those who have, or had something to hide.

4. Conservative and Modernists Traits in Christie

It is a fact that Christie writes in her upper middle-class English, but even so she gives it a modern form: there is no slang, but the use of colloquial expressions. Her dialogue is minimalist, her conversations piece with perfection the art of the throw-away remark, the topical and the perishable; a conversation between two young people aims at a 'delightful silliness'.

Poirot, her famous Belgian detective and his friend Hastings seem to develop a relationship similar to the one between Sherlock and Watson, inasmuch these pairs are but a means to represent the Socratic Maieutic, that is, a deductive method based on dialogue in order to bring to light the truth. However, she gives it a slight twitch and makes it modern. Hastings is more than an apprentice asking silly questions and eager to be as good, even better than his master, who always keeps him at bay.

To all these she adds a touch of mockery, which is new in detective fiction. She talks about her own class, the only one she knew well enough to be able to write about in a convincing way, making it 'natural', while she criticizes their way of being. Christie's humor consists essentially of parody, comic characterization, humorous understatement, and exaggeration; most of it results from detachment, a characteristic of comic writing linking it to 'Comedy of Manners'. This benevolent irony pervades her narratives also means that the authoress regarded her work as entertainment, somehow devaluating her own assessment of humankind.

Christie also modernizes detective fiction by domesticating it and placing it firmly inside so-called respectable classes. Even the weapons conceived to murder are either simple or home-made. She uses poison on and on, but exotic poisons are ruled out. Her

interest in middle-class domestic life is unmistakable, but she is not spiteful, her 'nouveaux-riches' are treated amiably. Big houses are used as settings, but Christie interest lies in what confers them the untouchable sense of being her character's 'homes', private-homes, because it is inside them that real life actually happens, and, in consequence, can be depicted. Alison Light supports that Christie 'domesticated' crime as she turned the spotlight upon the bourgeois interior and exposed them:

“Her novels can be read as one huge advertisement of the murderousness of English social life and the desperate need to convert to pleasure of those anxieties which an existence like that of the pro-was middle-class could produce.” (Light: 1999, 175)

But Light extends the idea of 'domesticity' to the weapons Christie uses devising startling

unexpected solutions. Even Marple's methods are common but effective: intrusive nosiness and domestic snooping. It has been said over and over that Christie crimes are always 'closed', and in fact when a murder takes place it establishes a network of connections linking victim or victims to suspects and witnesses making them share an intimacy and making them reveal their darkest secrets, which is very similar to a 'home' if You look at it as your private sanctuary.

She also proves to be of her age in sharing the contemporary passion for trains, boats and planes. Agatha bought her first car, 'my grey bottle-nosed' Morris Cowley, an experience she classifies as the most exciting of the two things that she experienced in her life' with the revenues she got from her books, not only because she enjoyed driving but also because she enjoyed the freedom that came with it, in her *Autobiography* she wrote:

“Oh, the joy that car was to me! I don't suppose anyone nowadays could believe the difference it made to one's life. To be able to go anywhere you chose; to places beyond the reach of your legs; it widened your whole horizon.” (Christie: 1977, 383)

Once she travelled alone to Baghdad by train, it was her favorite way of travelling, where she eventually met her second husband Max Mallowan. Her novel *Murder in the Clouds* (1935) is another proof that she was familiar with travelling by plane. Travels

between the wars became more regulated, and in 1924 passports were introduced becoming within the range of the middle-brow bourgeoning tourism that could afford it. It is this changed and still changing world that she encapsulates in her books.

Her curiosity and empirical way of understanding things led her to experience whatever circumstances offered her, enriching her both as a person and a writer. When she travelled with her husband Archie, in what she calls the Empire Tour, they visited Honolulu. There she tried her hand at surfing, an experience she recalls vividly. She remembers not only the joy of standing on top of her board, but also the bruises that came with it until you are able of being in control. There is even a photograph of her standing in front of it. (Christie: 1977, 342/343).

The idea of social status has something of theatrical and transient about it. Life had revealed itself too short for so many, who had died young. Many traditional families had seen their youngsters die in battle on foreign ground, 'reported missing'. So sacred questions such as: 'who are his/her parents?' or 'where do they come from?' no longer made sense. People did not know one another or recognized the members of their community who were supposed to belong to the 'better' families.

Christie was well aware that many changes for good or ill had occurred along the fifty years she wrote, and here we can find a duality too. She records changes knowing that they are natural and must be accepted, but occasionally she reveals a nostalgia towards 'the good old days' and in a very British way of seeing life, she is amused by it. Britons have always been able of laughing heartily about themselves, and here her Englishness plays a hand. And yet in spite of all the changes one thing remains untouched by it, human nature! In *Bertram's Hotel* (1965) Miss Marple becomes aware that the hotel management is so like her childhood remembrances that it cannot be real, so she declares: "The essence of life is going forward". (Christie: 1965, 85)

5. Christie's Characters

Christie's characters move themselves in a 'living' environment that makes them look natural and they use modern dialogue and expressions. She constructed all her characters carefully whatever social strata they belong to. Agatha had the habit of

talking her works out, and if a character did not seem right, she would change it until it did. So, to depict middle-class she makes them talk ‘polite’, but not necessarily formal middle-class English speech. Wealth and glamour stay with the upper-class, whose members are included to provide a safe source of amusement, while her laboring class elements, mostly servants, ‘talk funny’, which means ungrammatically granting a touch of realism to the whole.

She always thought it best to simply write about what she knew first-hand. She gives them contradictory traits, turning them similar to those displayed by the comedy of manners, namely the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas. Christie uses her sense of humor to misdirect her readers and turning it into a way of reversal proving that things are not always what they seem.

Christie’s criminals are traitors to their class and to their world, which is described as calm and secluded. Their identification is a process of exorcising the threats society anticipates within its own membership and the existence of multiple suspects takes a special meaning in a competitive individualistic kind of society, which was something new by then. In Christie’s literary worlds, anyone may be a criminal even a twelve year old. Her sleuths are invariably amateurs who trust logic and reasoning. Bargainer finds them ‘brilliant’:

“[Christie’s sleuths] are brilliant amateurs, possessing intellectual and moral superiority, who with freedom and personal authority accomplish seemingly impossible feats of detection, while remaining, as a character interesting to the reader”. (Bargainnier: 1984, 44)

Victims are like the murderers in the sense that they have little existence outside the crime. The victim remains a stranger to the reader, being minimally described, and those affected by his or her death show little grief, rendering it acceptable. The victim occupies the background as the investigation proceeds. In *Murder at the Vicarage* what we know, as readers, about colonel Protheroe, is what we are told by the other characters, that is how we learn about his disagreeable personality.

The victim, the murderer and the sleuth are, of course the central characters, but they cannot stand alone. They are surrounded by: witnesses, suspects and bystanders.

Bargainer calls them ‘supporting players’ (131) and believes their functions are: to provide information about the victim/or murderer, to provide red herrings, to provide social commentary, to provide humor and to provide a sense of familiarity by recurrent appearances. He is convinced that Christie’s greatest talent is the spreading of motive, means and opportunity among all those involved in a murder in such a manner as to make any statement by any one of them suspicious or even worse (132).

In *Murder at the Vicarage* we have a first-person account by Reverend Leonard Clement. This narrator is introduced to the reader as a sober, middle-aged clergyman married to a much younger wife, Griselda, in a flick of passion; she, in turn, is described as ‘a most unsuitable’ wife for a vicar. Their relationship is used for comic effect. Nonetheless Clement is a good delineator of those involved in the crime as he has close knowledge about all of them and a shrewd eye.

6. Settings

At the time Agatha began her career, writers of mystery fiction were expected to use a format of prescribed traditions that had proved successful with readers. It included the usual components of fiction-writing: plot, setting and characters. Convention decreed that the plot must have a setting as introductory background for a story, and that the setting for the plot should be a fictionalized version of the real world milieus where characters would usually go to according to their socio-economic status. Christie decided that the relationship between plot and setting was determined by the needs of each individual story. In *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970) it is stated:

“So in a sense, you don’t have to invent your settings. They are outside you, all around you, in existence – you only have to stretch your hand and pick and choose: a railway train, a hospital, a London hotel, a Caribbean beach, a country village, a cocktail party, a girl’s school. But one thing applies – they must be there – in existence. Real people, real people a definite place in time and space” (1970, 79)

Christie's usual method is to sketch the physical scene quickly leaving it to the reader to fill in details as his/hers imagination wishes. It is never obtrusive; she relies more on the atmosphere of the story, which is the result of the social milieu (characters, society level, way of life, amusements, activities, attitudes). Christie once said: 'I have no eye for visual forms... I realized I could not really *see* things'' (Christie: 1977, 231). She realized this when she tried to learn sculpture, at a time when Rosalind, her daughter was already a toddler.

The type of setting used emphasizes the abnormality of crime. The manor house and the village are joined in a 'close circle'. Her fictional interiors are always functional and used to characterize their owners. The fictional England she writes about is the England she knew, mainly London and Devon.

Saint Mary's Mead, the village used as setting in most of her Marple's stories is described as physically small, often based on a rigid social structure, isolated, but where everybody knows one another. The map she provides of it in *Murder at the Vicarage* comes in line with Emile Gaboriau's ideas and the fact that she repeats places ends up by turning them more real as they give the reader an idea of familiarity.

The term 'village' stems from the Latin word 'villaticus', which roughly translated means: a group of houses outside a villa farmstead. Today a village is understood as a collection of buildings, usually at least twenty, that is larger than a hamlet, yet smaller than a town, containing minimum one communal or public building. (Yates: 1982, 49) Nowadays about 80% of people in England live in an urban environment and only 7% live in rural areas.

'A village is like a pool of stagnant water' says Roland, Miss Marple's nephew, in *Murder at the Vicarage* (125) an idea he shares with most of the readers about smaller urban areas. Those who live in large urban centers tend to look up at the village as a place where peace and quiet can be enjoyed ignoring that behind an idyllic façade many dark secrets can be found. But this is not new: in the 17th century the village was already seen as 'idyllic' judging by the words of Thomas Dekker in his *The Bel-man of London*, 1616:

“In the homely village art thou more safe, then in a fortified castle: the stings of envy, or the bullets of treason, are never shot through those thinne walles.... The country cottage is neither battred down with cannon in time of warre, nor pestred with clamorous suits in time of peace.”

Just as Miss Marple replied her nephew “I believe it is just the opposite, my dear, it is full of life”. (1932, 125) When a crime takes place in a small society, it looks darker, as all those who take part in it, are our neighbors. Bargainnier comments:

“The village is physically small; has a definite, often rigid social structure and is isolated from the great world... Friends become threatening strangers and it has a very special appeal.” (Bargainnier: 1980, 27)

E. M. Yates in *The Evolution of the English Village* (1982, 74) wrote that great changes in society have produced extensive changes in rural settlement, not only in degree but also in area. Socio-economic changes led to different composition of rural societies. When the Enclosure movement took place, the reduction in the number of farms had an impact on the form and appearance of the village. There was at the same time an increase of population, so on the outskirts and on the edge of the village common many new houses were built. Around 1780 Sunday Schools were common establishments all over the country and in 1814 village schools were established. Some villages were embellished with Georgian and Regency frontages or with an occasional house as a genteel class began to arrive. The arrival of railways and the construction of canals brought further change. Despite the addition of a few gentility members in the 19th century, agricultural laborers were the predominant group. This population has been replaced since the coming of inhabitants belonging to higher economic status, commuters and people using houses as a second residence. Village industry was already in decline since the introduction of the manufactory.

Victorians used to classify villages as open: when many residents owned their home or closed when the majority of property was in the hands of just a couple of individuals. Estate villages, in the 18th century became an expression of idealized rural life; they were a kind of display of the owner’s wealth and ideas, a kind of setting to impress visitors to the estate. Cottages were beautiful to see, but still had no living conditions inside.

Changes in the core of the village had been accompanied by two types of growth: councilhousing for those displaced by the war and of low income groups and the appearance of small private estates, introducing a further suburban element to the village. Christie records these changes in her Marple's stories, for example: on the former village common council-housing appear, called the Development, as time goes by in Saint Mary's Meads.

Presently the village has three different types of inhabitants each with its own type of housing. This disunity is a new feature. The village has become urbanized in a way that it has become a town in miniature. Despite every change that village has endured, we still described it in idyllic terms. It is the illusion that beckons, not the reality. We still envelop it in a peaceful stability that contrasts with urban life and which acts as a lure to those living in metropolitan areas.

6.1. Geographical Setting

The geographical setting in her novels is threefold. It provides place or places for the action of the plot. A locale for the crime was a sine qua non of the format. The mystery not only occurred under certain circumstances, but also occurred somewhere. The inherit format also required maps or sketches, which can be found in her earlier works, in spite of her reputation as a rebel against it. In *Murder at the Vicarage* the reader is provided with a map and a sketch. She would treat the relationship between setting and story development in two different ways: sometimes it was passive, a mere background – a stage - for the plot and rarely mentioned, once the story was under way; or it was active – the characteristics of the place could be crucial to the commission of the crime and consequently to its solution.

Christie has been described as mistress of thumbnail characterization, a stylistic feature that can be applied to her settings as well as to her characters. It became more pronounced as her career progressed and she got more experienced. She would indicate the layout of a place, its situation and a few features that would establish its character, the rest she left it to the reader to fulfill according to one's imagination.

Her native Devon was the only area that emerged as an identifiable region. Agatha was aware of change, something that she looked upon as inevitable. Like Miss Marple, she would say that when it happens it is generally for the worst. She exemplifies her opinion with her descriptions of the impact of urban expansion and transformation of villages and large houses. She documents the process of change to which this particular kind of houses had been subjected to, for example: one is sold by the squire to some wealthy Americans, others change functions and are turned into hotels, hostels and schools. Along with the houses she also mentions what happens to their grounds and the way they are kept, revealing the change of economic conditions.

7. Social Setting

Christie belonged to the English upper-middle class and it is its members that she portrays in her fiction. Christie uses irony and almost satire regarding her own social class with its pretensions and excesses, yet snobbery is present among servants too. Her values were those of her class: trust in reason, a deep wish for stability, belief in civilized conduct, faith in property and a strong sense of morality. Her 'own' class provided her with a known social structure for her mysteries, it sufficed to pay attention and later reproduce their attitudes in fiction. Bargainnier believes that Christie uses them as a frame-work of cause and effect to make understandable her characters' actions. (Bargainnier: 1984, 31). Her works can be a valuable record of communities' change for any social historian studying the period.

By the time she was writing villages had been flooded with pensioners and commuters belonging to upper-middle class. Old colonels and high rank civil servants were a common sight strolling leisurely with their spouses or in small groups chattering with one another. Miss Marple is the proud owner of an old cottage, thus stating that she has means of her own, although she cannot do extravaganzas, she can lead a very comfortable life and can keep a maid to hold her company and help her with the domestic chores. She had a good up-bringing as a girl. We are told she once had a *Fraulein*, who taught her the language of flowers. So the setting not only helps in her characterization, but is part and parcel of it.

Saint Mary Mead

Belonging to the Golden Age period *Murder at the Vicarage* has a close setting. This time the Manor house was replaced by the Vicarage, where the murder takes place, but it is still a building that belongs to a privileged social group: the clergy. The characters under scope are still the same. The cottage, though of humble origins, was elevated to the category of home by well-doers. The term cottage seems to have entered the English around the 13th century. The probable source is either Old French or a Germanic language. It was used to describe the dwelling of a cottier, a type of serf in the Middle Ages. Early cottages were probably small, dark and quite unpleasant to live in. But in the 19th century its status was raised from an agricultural laborer's hovel to a middle-class habitation and even on occasion a holiday's retreat for the upper-class as members of royalty favored it, which came to be called *Cottage orné*.

Every cottage used to have its patch of land to supply to the family's needs. It included a variety of vegetables and even animals for food, medicine and dyes. No space could be wasted as it was small area, so it was packed but very well looked after. Fences and hedges were used to keep the animals away from the vegetables. As a rule cottagers planted what they knew would work, often using plants passed on by neighbors. Gertrude Jekyll and Vita Sackville West took the humble cottage garden style and transplanted it to the not so humble country-estates gardens of the landed gentry. The garden in itself is the symbol of Paradise on earth. In *Genesis* Paradise was a garden planted by and other creatures mainly made up of plants, but in the East the garden correspond to a world in miniature.

More important is that, one way or another, it represents one's world vision and completes the notion of *home*.

The construction of her plots must have been something highly abstract – she worked like a mathematician evolving a brain-teaser. Francis Wyndham wrote:

“Agatha Christie writes animated algebra. She dares us to solve basic equation buried beneath a proliferation of irrelevancies.” (Wyndham: 1965, 175)

Others sustain a similar opinion: Julian Symons calls it ‘an exercise in logic’, Dorothy

L. Sayers defines them as ‘pure analytical exercise’ and Mary MacArthur writes ‘about as real as A and B of the algebra problems.’ (MacArthur: 1967, 68) No matter how they phrase it, they all agree that it is her strong focus, the epicenter of her work, and she decisively tipped the balance away from character and setting and back towards the supremacy of the plot.

She understood better than most that popular literature demanded story, that it must force the reader to get through still one more page and end one chapter before putting the light out or putting the book aside. Bargainnier defines Christie as ‘brilliant’ in plotting demonstrating her ability to dramatize the investigation of a crime and makes a list of her seven prevalent methods. Furthermore, he points out that she is also economic with plots and plot’s devices. Still according to Bargainnier, her favorite plot premise is some variation of on the villain being a person directly concerned with the investigation of the crime: the official detective, a fake detective, an aid to the detective or the dumb of a detective allowing them to repeat Poe’s dictum in *The Rules of the Game*: ‘the more complex a case appears, the easier it is to solve’.

Bargainnier also believes that her main technique is the management of time, turning a simple crime into something complex. *Murder at the Vicarage* provides us an example: the murderer adjusts the hands of the clock to confuse the time of death.

Peter Brookes in his book *Reading for the Plot* (1992) writes: “This is a book about plots and plotting”. His idea of plot is: “the design and the intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction, or intent of meaning” (Brookes: 1992, 4). He then describes plotting as:

“...what makes the plot move forward, that keeps us going on reading seeking in the unfolding of the narrative, a line of intention and portent of design that holds the promise of progress towards meaning.” (Brookes: 1992, 8)

His main interest lies in:

“...the motor forces that drive the text forward, of the desires that connect narrative ends and beginnings, and make of the textual middle a highly charged field of force” (Brookes: 1992, 12)

In Brookes' opinion plot is the principle by which a narrative organizes the relationship between story and discourse. The discursive manipulation of the story provides the expansion needed for a story to create suspense, the dilatation needed also to give us a sense of the end, that a narrative has reached a proper closure. Therefore he presents the detective story as exemplary of narrative logic, for such stories are well and about how narrative makes sense of the traumas of life. The detective's plot also amounts to "the active repetition and reworking of story in and by discourse" (Brookes: 1992, 24). In later chapters he analyses several works, but not one of them belongs to detective fiction.

Bargainnier in *The Gentle Art of Murder* (1980) agrees that plot is basic in detective fiction and consists mainly of: murderer kills victim, many are suspected; the detective investigates; reveals the murderer and absolves the innocent, an opinion shared by Marie Robert Rineheart, who remarks: "that there are always two stories in one: the story of what happened and the story of what appeared to have happened" (Rineheart: 1987, 144).

Bargainnier believes that Christie's brilliance in plotting can most clearly be seen in her ability to dramatize the investigation of a crime.

7. Miss Jane Marple

Bargainnier in *The Gentle Art of Murder* writes:

"Christie has taken the traditional spinster of literature and added qualities which contrast with or transcend the convention and in so doing has created one of the most famous women of the 20th century." (Bargainnier: 1980, 78)

When we first encounter Miss Marple in *Thirteen Problems* (1930) she is very much the stereotypical spinster – blue-eyed, somewhat frail and a bit old-fashion, wearing a white lace cap and black lace mittens.

"Miss Marple wore a black brocade dress very much pinched in round the waist. Mechlin lace was arranged in a cascade down the front of the bodice. She had on black mittens, and a black lace cap surmounted the pile-up masses of her snowy

hair. She was knitting – something white and soft and fleecy. Her faded blue eyes...” (Christie: 2002, 9)

She is also gleeful to gossip and not very nice, but she softens over the years and becomes a more likeable character. Miss Marple has lived all her life in the village of Saint Mary’s Mead where she belongs to a discussion group that meets on Tuesdays to discuss unsolved crimes. The group includes other members: the vicar, Miss Marple’s nephew Raymond and his fiancée Joyce, who is an artist. Our sleuth comes up every time with the right solution and the explanation she gives is that in spite of the village being rather small it gave her the opportunity of observing human nature and doing it for so long gave as she has gave her experience. Of course these years of observation and experience are fitfully combined with her shrewd intelligence, a gift she modestly omits. Quite often, she remarks: “there is a great deal of wickedness in village life”. “Bloodstained Pavement”, *Thirteen Problem*, 1932, 87)

Part of her charm lies in her contradictory nature. She has led a sheltered life, never known passions or the trials of domestic family life, but on the other hand, she has encountered every side of human nature and nothing shocks her any more. (*Murder at the*

Vicarage). She is a thorough cynic: “It is very dangerous to believe people. I never have for years” (*idem*). The authoress tells us that this most repeated sentence was frequently uttered by her grannie, known as Auntie-Grannie. No crime can arise without recalling Miss Marple of some other incident and establishing a parallel between the two of them.

She shows sympathy towards the victims of crime and views murder as the distasteful ‘weed’ that can destroy an otherwise beautiful garden of human beings; yet she reminds that ‘no Paradise is complete unless there is a serpent’. (*Murder at the Vicarage*) So she goes after the criminals and exposes them, the same way she pulls out the bad weeds of her own garden.

Miss Marple, most likeable ‘model’ is Caroline, doctor Sheppard ’sister in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is born in her late sixties, in her *Autobiography* Agatha Christie writes:

“I think it is possible that Miss Marple arose from the pleasure I had taken in portraying Dr. Shepard’s sister.... She had been my favorite character in the book – an acidulated spinster, full of curiosity, knowing everything, hearing everything: the complete detective service in the home”. (Christie: 1977, 502)

The real people, who helped in the creation of this character are supposed to be: her grandmothers, especially Margaret Miller, whom she nicknamed ‘Auntie-Grannie’ Anne Grannie B and some of her friends, the Ealing Cronies and her mother Clara whom she was devoted to. In Agatha’s own words:

“Miss Jane Marple, the sort of old lady who would have been rather like some of my grandmother’s Ealing cronies – old ladies whom I have met in so many villages..... Miss Marple was not in any way the picture of my grandmother.... But one thing she did have in common with her – though a cheerful person, she always expected the worst of everyone and everything, and was with the most frightening accuracy, usually proved right”. (1977, 504/05).

The very first description, we are given of Miss Marple, is quite a long one according to Christie standards: she dresses in black brocade and white Michelin lace, later on she will be depicted as ‘fluffy’. This description came out in *Sketch Magazine* (1926/28). Years later those early stories were bound together in a volume entitled *Thirteen Problems* in Britain, whereas in the United States it was entitled: *Tuesday’s Night Murder Club*. The curious thing about her description is that it matches the figure of an early woman-writer of detective fiction called Ms. Oliphant, who used to dress herself exactly in the same way. She had the habit of half-complaining half-boasting herself that she wrote in the second little drawing-room, where all domestic life took place. Miss Marple’s home is also her headquarters.

In *Murder at the Vicarage* she deals with people, she knows for ages, only the painter is, so to say a ‘foreigner’. Domesticity runs along and to dress female detectives in black is almost a ‘tradition’ bearing in mind that Loveday Brooke already favored black. Laura Thompson writes that Miss Marple is, actually, Agatha Christie’s *persona*, i.e., author and character are one and the same. They share memories, a quiet religious faith, are able of facing facts that the modern world wanted to shun, and are both of them

attentive observers of the string of life. The memories of the Army and Navy Stores in Victoria used in *Bertram's Hotel* by Miss Marple are hers. She recalls the days when she used to go there with her aunt Helen, an experience of her childhood, illustrating how much they are one and the same.

The choice of "Marple" for her detective's name may have the following explanations:

- 1) Christie borrowed the name from the home of a Marple family – Marple Hall – that stood near her sister's own home, Abney Hall
- 2) It was borrowed from the larger village of Marple, county of Greater Manchester. The story frequently told goes that Christie was at the station long enough to observe its posted sign.

Carolyn Wells (1862-1942) in 1913 and Mary Robert Rinehart (1876-1958) wrote early woman-focused mysteries in America and recommended a psychological approach. They further suggested the murder might be wrongly exonerated at the beginning of the story. Bearing in mind that Christie had American roots and of course American relatives, it is tempting to think that she had the opportunity to read a copy of those books and they may provide us with another clue to understand the way she build up Miss Marple's character.

If we take into consideration the definition of 'independent woman' by Beauvoir, for example, it fits her as she has means of her own, she is childless and unwed. Miss Marple's financial means are never explained to the reader, but the fact that she does not work in exchange for a pecuniary payment has much to do with her 'lady' status quo. She does voluntary and charity works, functions assigned to ladies only, but these tasks also work out as a way of providing her with information about her fellow villagers. Even today members of the Royal Family are expected to do voluntary work in an institution of their own choice or patronage.

Bargainner defines Miss Marple as the observer of 'English middle-class life (1980, 20) because: "in all the works which take place in England, and they are the majority, life in the country can be traced from World War I to the Swinging Sixties". (1980, 20). The big secret is that human nature does not change.

Sabine Vanacker in *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (2009) draws our attention to the fact that Miss Marple is relieved from sexuality, she is a-sexed, and is undistracted by any emotional bonds; she is free to see things clearly and act impartially as an agent of moral law. She calls Miss Marple a 'structuralist' detective on account of her classification of human beings into specific types she has detected and learned about from the study of her village community. All she has to do is wait for the signs. Marple exercises 'her little grey cells' the exact same way as Poirot, only she never uses the expression, but she couples them with what she calls her 'specialized knowledge'. This sleuth is interested in people as individuals, but knows that human nature does not change, as she states in *The Mirror Cracked from Side to Side* (1962) and *Murder at the Vicarage*:

"This new world was the same as the old. The houses were different, the streets were called 'Closes', the clothes were different, the voices were different, but the human beings were the same as they always had been." (1962, 83)

"I am afraid that observing human nature for as long as I have done, one gets not to expect very much from it". (1930, 67)

Miss Marple is not only Agatha and her tender memories of her infancy, but also the memories of her two grannies on whose figures, the character was constructed. Maybe she turned to those happy days, when her actual life was shattered into pieces by her mother's death and by Archibald's treason and consequent divorce. Miss Marple stands for England and for the British character. In a close reading her stories, and in this particular case the Marple's ones, pose, in-between the lines, a number of fascinating intellectual and moral issues to the reader's consideration.

Bearing in mind that Poirot is a foreigner, his way of thinking can be called 'continental'. His love for order and method reminds us of Descartes's theory, while Miss Marple reacts and acts in accordance to British empirical reasoning adopted, for example, by David Hume or his disciple Adam Smith.

Hume was convinced that we based our knowledge on perceptions, which he defines as units of mental life and divides them into: impressions (association of ideas) and ideas.

‘Man’s mind is part of nature’ he used to say, that is why some prefer to consider Hume a ‘Naturalist’. He also defended that humans are driven by passions, which are the moving power of our actions coming before reason, which, in his opinion has a subordinate role in our actions. Hume relies on the senses a theory that goes back to the Pyrrhonist tradition, later developed by John Locke, especially in his treatise *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Hume is also convinced that association is linked to Empiricism, or else that all knowledge comes from experience and that we are able of establishing cause and effect by means of experience.

There is no doubt that Miss Maple’s approach to criminal cases she is meant to solve is based on the empirical method and the rules of associationism. Experience is her guide and being further in years allows her to be in possession of some of it. In spite of having led a sheltered life, she has been an attentive observer of human nature. The village of

Saint Mary’s Mead is a micro-cosmos of the Universe, inhabited by good and bad individuals, and when something bad happens its consequences are even more terrible, because it hits everyone in one way or another, since in this small community everybody knows everybody else.

Poirot seems to act following Descartes’s (1596-1650) theory of rationalism. Moreover, the French philosopher’s emphasis on the importance of order and method to reach a reliable, truthful answer in every field of knowledge, as postulated in his well-known essay *Discourse on Method* (1637), met the needed deductive process to disentangle the criminal mysteries. Descartes focus on the systematic doubt as starting point of the process of knowing also fit the requirements of the detective’s function: he should consider the crime and all the individuals involved without prejudice, i.e., pre-concepts. Nothing may be taken for granted; every item has to be analyzed per se, and only after this deconstruction of the several pieces of the puzzle and the clear understanding of each of them, is the investigator prepared to build a systematic and synthetic answer concerning the criminal occurrence.

In short, on the one hand, Poirot stands for everything that is foreigner, continental: his mannerisms, his elegance; his obsession to represent the world he lives in a rectilinear

way, with no room for hazard, briefly, his eccentricity concurs to the notion of this detective as an outsider in relation both to the country and to the crime scene. On the other hand, Miss Marple embodies the very notion of Englishness: she is one of them, she is a respectable lady as far as class and age are concerned; she is always discreet and subtle in her ways of unveiling the truth, avoiding displays of her intellectual prowess.

During the Imperial British era, and before the globalization phenomenon which transformed the world in the late twentieth century, the Britons had a very peculiar way of looking at the rest of the world. Most of them saw themselves as the finest specimen civilization had produced and they used to ‘measure’ all others by comparison to themselves. Of course in those days Britain was the workshop of the world, the leader of the industrialization process and, in consequence, of commerce. ‘Others’ were labelled more or less civilized according to the British, or more accurately, the English standards.

From their island, they liked to watch and comment on everything that went around them. Said (1935-2003) defines Englishness as: “The ability to represent both itself to others and those others to themselves. (<http://www.encyclopediabritannica/2426.htm>)

Notwithstanding this feeling of safety and superiority which made them bold, the launch of Hitler’s aircrafts air-raids against their beloved country brought all this down. The aviation had already showed its potential during World War I, but it was World War II that its full potential was put on gear. There were different kinds of planes to accomplish different tasks. Planes could now carry several men on board like the bombardier, or just one pilot like the spitfire. The days of one man, one machine belonged to the past, except in some confronts between pilots. The American squadrons that flew in World War II were known as the *Eagles*, one of America’s most iconic symbols and, at that moment, also the face of the American powerful role in the world conflict. One of these American squadrons stayed at Christie’s house in Devon, and left paintings of their planes on the walls of the library, which can still be seen. From then on Britain became as vulnerable as any other nation. Their famous insularity, which had protected them from the Spanish

Invencible Armada, was no longer a barrier. No wonder that Miss Marple, as Christie’s partial *persona* reacts to all these events and changes she witnessed with a tinge of

nostalgia together with a feeling of loss of so many young people as well as the imperial/national status.

The idea of Britain as a nation or, more rigorously, a cluster of nations have been dealt with since the 18th century when Nationalism began to be regarded as a sentiment capable of molding public and private life in the era of Europa's democratization and mass politics. According to Hobsbawm in his work entitled *Nations and Nationalisms* since 1780, the English people hardly gave a thought to this concept, much more active among the Welsh or the Irish peoples, because they did not feel challenged by these smaller unities. (1990, 36).

Actually, British nationalism stem from the wish to protect and defend the British Empire: the metropolis confronting the colonies constitutes one of the most determining factor of modern history. The apogee of nationalism and particularly of British nationalism would rise roughly during the war period, 1918-1950, due to the World Wars and the inherent exacerbating need of defending one's homeland and collective identity. The peace treaties which led to the end of World War led to the establishment of many independent nations.

After World War II, nationalism spread quickly through Asia and Africa based on the principles of self-determination upheld first by the League of Nations, and later by the United Nations. After 1945 the United Nations supported the former colonies aspirations to independence and so made pressure to dismember the British Empire invoking the immorality and economic unsustainability of the empires, but the truth is that it had begun to break down long before. For a period of thirty years independence was given to the several colonies of the British Empire: India, the 'crown's jewel' became independent in 1947, split into two new nations, India and Pakistan. From the imperial ashes emerged the Commonwealth a form of keeping together all former British possessions.

Since the 1980s nationalism has been mainly used to express the wish of groups that the United Kingdom would sever the existing ties with the European Union, to preserve the British culture. Quite often nationalism is evoked to actively campaign against ethnic minority, equal rights and asylum seekers. Nationalism, can be defined as an

ideology based on the premise that the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests, may grow in a more extreme way, as it happened with the collapse of Yugoslavia, which was divided into two independent nation-states. This is also the case of emergent separatist movements, such as the Basque Country in Spain, or the Irish question.

Agatha Christie does not deal with these topics in a direct way, though many of the characters who populate her fiction are former civil servants or business men from the other side of the Atlantic. All of them bring a slice of the contemporaneous perspectives about the empire, the wars and the results thereof. Poirot's friend Hastings, for instance, makes a *mésalliance*, but will not lose his status if he agrees to live in Australia and not in the metropolis. Poirot's advice denounces the current double standard in a light way. Moreover, the 'tyranny of the majority', to use John Mill's words is exposed by the eccentric outsider. One may say that is a fair example of British humor, which is still today of a very peculiar kind. Britons insist on knowing, who they are. Lots of books written upon the subject prove this curiosity, as well as the sensibility to see and laugh at their shortcomings.

7.1. The Character's Life

We are told Miss Marple had a sister probably a Vicar's daughter like herself. She was educated at home as usual among the girls of her generation by a *Fraulein*, who taught her, for instance, the language of flowers. It was not a formal education. She went to Paris to the Paris Exhibition with her own mother and grandmother. When she turned fourteen she went to London and enjoyed her stay at Bertram's Hotel. She had an aunt called Helen, who used to take her shopping at the Army and Navy grocery department, usually afterwards they had luncheon, which finished with a treat, a strawberry ice-cream. At the age of sixteen, she goes to Florence to finish up her education and meets two American girls, with whom she remains friends for life. The reader is also told, in a very brief reference, she was once engaged to a young man who perished during the Great War. However the reader is introduced to Miss Marple in her later stage of life, when she is living alone in a Victorian house, better to say a cottage in Saint Mary Meads village.

As for Miss Marple's features, she is portrayed as being tall and thin. Her hair is white, occasionally grey while her face is pink and wrinkled. Her teeth are lady-like and her eyes are china-blue and they can look either innocent or shrewd. The very first description we are given of Miss Marple appears in *Thirteen Problems* (1930) where she is dressed in a long, black brocade dress, wearing black lace mittens, white lace cap on her piled up snowy hair. Black and white, which are defined as absence and presence of light, respectively, when mixed the result is grey, and in terms of color it corresponds to Humankind and the scale of value is based upon the grey scale from maximally light (white) to maximally dark (black). In our lives dark and light are fundamental experiences. Black and White frequently symbolize God. In fact, within the story construct the authoress is God, as sees all and knows all. Marple has a vast knowledge about mankind. She is not naïve, although she has led a sheltered life. However, one must bear in mind that every culture has attached a vast list of symbolic meanings to both of them. Kress and Van Leeuwen in *Color as a Semiotic Mode*, sustain that:

“Color is a very important resource of visual communication.... It has more than an ideational function and can be used to denote specific people, places and things as well as classes of people, places and things and more general idea.”

Although she always dresses in a lady like fashion wearing grey crepe and lace, in later descriptions she appears wearing a tweed outfit, stout walking shoes for her errands in England, sandals or a pair of Penisoles for holidays. Whenever she goes to the market she puts on her hat and gloves, carries an umbrella, her handbag and a colorful shopping basket.

7.2. Psychological Traits

Miss Marple believed as it has been already mentioned the worst of people, which is in fact a Victorian trait. She was able of holding a secret, but she could also tell lies, especially if it helped in her investigations. About men she used to say like any old maid that they are a ‘special kind of animal’. They had to be provided with special drink and food, but she liked good looks in a man. Miss Marple is not ignorant in question of sex or love. Like any well brought-up Anglican she kept a religious book on her bed-side table, which she read as she woke up or before going to sleep.

As a sleuth she is intelligent, logical, inquiring like a first-rate scientist. She began by collecting facts, upon which she drew her hypothesis. Most of times she wears a disguise, herself: the frail, sweet old lady a little bit dotty sometimes. Canvassing, bird-watching or collecting for charity are used as ‘covers’ for her legwork. Griselda, the rector’s wife in *Murder at the Vicarage*, remarks on Miss Marple ‘the worst cat in the village’. Sometimes Miss Marple tells a lie, but she can spot others immediately, when they do it and the reason is because she does not trust people ‘I’m afraid that observing human nature for as long as I have done, one gets not to expect very much from it (*Murder at the Vicarage*: 1930, 19).

7.3. Miss Marple’s Methods

Miss Marple is above all a pretty good example of the British frame of mind of the period, so her methods rely on experience, she is empirical. She solves her cases by applying former knowledge to new situations, if $A+B=C$ in a former case, then, if A and B are similar to them, the result must be C as before. In *Thirteen Problems*, more accurately in “The Affair at the Bungalow” Miss Marple says: “But I recall no village parallel to help me this time.” (274) She is logical, but the ground for new experiences is ‘experience’ itself, as if she used a sort of matrix. Those who helped building up the Industrial Revolution were mechanics. They improved their old devices; they did not build them up from scratch. Hobsbawm in *Industrial Revolution* (1984, 82/83) admits that small technical or scientific knowledge was needed besides a practical mechanical one. Simple ideas and devices known for centuries, which were cheap, were put into action producing wonderful results:

“The novelty was not in the innovations, but in the speed with man of practical sense decided to use science and technology that were at hand.” (Hobsbawm: 1984, 82/83)

Her methods of crime solving are based on the belief that “human nature is much the same everywhere” and certainly it is easier to study it in a small village, such as Saint Mary Mead. In *Death by Drowning*, one of the stories included in *Thirteen Problems*

(291) she says just so:” I know human nature! (...) It is impossible not to know human nature living in a village all these years”. She can always know how someone reacted in any crime, because of the village counterpart. When she is not gossiping and solving mysteries, her pastimes are gardening, knitting and bird-watching, that can reveal themselves a precious device to observe others without raising any suspicions. In “Ingots of Gold” included in *Thirteen Problems* (71) Miss Marple solves the case because she not only knows about gardens about gardeners habits as well.

She also relies on her feminine sensitivity and empathy to solve crimes. Age is another important tool to perform her detective work. In order to make her methods work had to be old, since to be in such mature season of life allows her to form analogies and draw comparisons between city and village life, between past and present. Although with quite different styles, she, just like Poirot, can put people off their guard and so more often than not, they underestimate her. Being in the background, as it happens in *Thirteen Problems*, and being ‘chatty’ enables her to learn of people. She really turns into a ‘fuddy-duddy’ with old age.

Many accuse ‘Miss Marple’ of relying too much on her intuition, but Bargainner comes to her rescue, by saying that her ‘intuition’ is ‘actually the result of close observation of human types’, “it is like reading a word without having to spell it out”. She solves her cases by comparison “In fact, the only way is to compare people with other people you have known or come across. You’d be surprised if you knew how very few distinct types there are in all”. (Bargainnier: 1980, 96)

7.4 Weapons

Miss Marple enjoys gossiping by the garden fence, and this is one of her ways of knowing what is happening and who is doing what. Gossip is one of the world’s oldest and most common ways of spreading and sharing facts and views. In Old English ‘gossip’ (godsibb) meant a person elated to God, specifically referring to a woman’s close female friends at the birth of a child (those she would choose to be godparents), later on it came to mean more generally a close female friend or companion, and afterwards the kind of talk characteristic of intimate friends – chatty talk about the details of personal matters and relationships, the sharing of secrets. Recent studies

showed that criticism and negative evaluations account for only five percent of gossip time. Kate Fox in her article entitled “Evolution, Alienation and Gossip - the role of mobile telecommunications in the 21st century” writes that gossip is vital to our social, psychological and even physical well-being, and that instead of doing it by the picket fence as Miss Jane Marple does we are using the mobile phone instead, and nowadays she could add the social nets, like Twitter or Facebook. These new communicational technologies allow us to ‘gossip’ anytime, anyplace, anywhere, but she takes this idea a step further and writes:

“Gossip is the human equivalent of ‘social grooming’ among primates, which has been shown to stimulate production of endorphins, relieving stress and boosting the immune system.” (Fox: 2000, 3)

Another curious idea of hers is that women have the knack to make gossip interesting and exciting due it seems, to their skill in: tone, detail and feedback.

A definition of gossip can be: idle talk between friends. The term often specifically refers to talk of scandal or slander related to known associates of the participants and discussed in an underhand or clandestine manner. It was, and still is the most common form of spreading and sharing facts and views. It also has the reputation for the introducing errors and other variations into the original information thus transmitted. The term also carries implications that the news passed on are of personal or trivial nature.

Miss Marple had the luck of chatting face to face with her gossip-partner, of looking him or her in the eyes carefully observing their facial expressions and drawing conclusions, while leaning by the picket-fence.

Gardening is another way she has of knowing what goes on, while she soils her hands, she keeps her ears sharp to any talk of her neighbors interchange within her reach. In general, gardening is regarded as an incredible relaxing hobby that allows anyone to get in touch with the earth and one’s own self and besides it is not expensive. It was considered a suitable activity for women of the elite classes and an expected activity for those belonging to the middle one. It was seen as a suitable activity for women because it was in line with their nature, being labeled as ‘acceptable’ had the result of providing

women not only with an open air pastime, but eventually opened the door of certain professions like landscape architect and Beatrix Farrand (1872-1959), the American pioneer landscape architect, is such an example.

The garden literature of the 19th century was divided by classes. In other words, only those who had the leisure, the means and the required education wrote books about gardening, which were purchased by those belonging to middle-class. But in *Murder at the Vicarage* Miss Marple tends a very peculiar sort of garden: a rock garden or rockeries as they were called in Victorian days. Anne Hart in *Agatha Christie's Marple – The Life and Times of Miss Jane Marple* (1997) calls it a Japanese garden (Hart: 1997, 7), but in fact a rock garden is not a Japanese garden and vice-versa.

There are at least two kinds of Japanese gardens: those where the main feature is a pond and those that are called 'dry' gardens, which may have plants, but do not have waterbasins. Through times these two have naturally evolved and suffered Western influence, yet remained faithful to their early characteristics. The Japanese word for 'dry' garden is *Karesansin* which can be defined as a garden composed mainly of raked sand and gravel. In their simple form they are beds of sand or gravel raked regularly, into simple patterns of parallel lines. One of the best examples is the 'dry' garden of the *Tōkaian* sub-temple of *Myoshi-ji* Temple. Often referred to as 'meditation' gardens, their use was an adjunct to the meditative experience providing a non-distracting view from sitting space used during and after meditation, which would take place indoors. Nowadays they have become particularly popular with offices when there are courtyards as in general they are of small size and imply little maintenance.

Their essential inspiration is Japan's natural landscape, which is interpreted and miniaturized and abstracted in the garden design. They may include symbolic features or present an allegorical story. The rocks used in these gardens vary in number and shape.

Some have specific symbolic forms: the turtle, which are low rounded stones, symbolizing the depths to which human spirit could sink or the human spirit fruitless struggle against overwhelming obstacles, which are paired with the 'crane' stones usually a group of stones symbolizing the human spirit rising above the mundane and crushing events of daily life. There is also a big rock known as the 'ship' rock, due to its

similarity in shape to a boat with its prow rising out of water. The garden can be interpreted as the parable of mankind journey across the water of life.

On the other hand, the main feature of a rock garden is the fact that its main elements are rocks but they are used in a very different way. In a Western rock garden very small plants brought sometimes from overseas countries are also used and they need a special care. They can be defined as: 'designed to look as if they are a natural part of a rocky hillside or slope. When rocks are added, they are generally laid on their larger edge as in natural strata. The main rocks from which this kind of garden is constructed are sandstone and limestone. Granite is usually regarded as too hard, because it weathers slowly. A few larger boulders usually look better than a number of small rocks. Alpine plants, exquisite in their smallness had a strong aesthetic appeal also offered a challenge because they are the most difficult of all plants to cultivate. In a well-designed rock garden, rocks are arranged so that there are various exposures for sun tolerant plants such as rockroses and for shade tolerant ones, such as primulas.

Rock gardens function as a garden in miniature and are said to be an English 'invention' as Britons were among the first to bring into their homeland such kind of plants and tried to cultivate and adapt them to their own climate, in which case the fact that Miss Marple has such a garden strengthens her ties not only with Englishness but also with the 19th century way of life. Plants of such small size need a keen eye and someone to pay close attention to detail, two features Miss Marple possesses to perfection. In her case her rock garden may function as a training field for her to develop her detective skills and conduct the required activities.

Bird-watching also provides Miss Marple with an alibi while she spies on others. This activity relies of observing and studying birds with a naked eye or through a visual enhancement device like binoculars. Sometimes it involves a significant auditory component. It has been a popular hobby in Britain since the middle of the 18th century. Birding is at the same time a scientific exercise, an ecological necessity and an extraordinary example of inter-species connections. Again qualities, such as patience, quietness and devoted attention are needed both for the hobby and Miss Marple criminal investigations.

Knitting can be listed as another of her weapons, although she may seem absorbed counting her stitches, the fact is that she is ‘on alert’ to everything that goes around her. Knitting can be defined as a functional art form that uses a variety of stitches to create something out of a simple strand or yarn of thread. What is today labeled as womanly work, was in times done by men. Sailors, at her Majesty’s service, used to knit, as a way to pass time during long voyages. In Victorian days it became a parlor art used to make all sorts of exquisitely fine laces, bags and baby clothes. Later on it spread itself to sportswear. It has remained unchanged for twelve centuries. For the Puritans knitting was a way of preventing the evil danger of idle hands, and additionally a valuable skill that could provide an income. In this case it can be regarded as a valuable hobby.

Miss Marple knits for charity, but this exercise helps her to keep focus. It has been said before that Christie substituted quilting for knitting. The latter most of the times has a pattern made up of different kinds of stitches implying that you have to keep counting. It can be an analogy for crime. Step by step data are assembled and considered until the criminal is unmasked. On the other hand, knitting may become so mechanical that you do not have to look at what you are doing. Blind people can knit, just by counting the stitches. In a rather Victorian way Miss Marple keeps her hands busy, while her ‘head’ tries to solve the ‘riddle’. The common sentence: ‘I cannot lose a stitch’ may have here a double meaning, implying that: she cannot overlook any detail, any clue or else the pattern will be ruined; likewise her investigation must be attentively scrutinized, or else the murderer will escape justice.

Her major weapon, however, consists of simply playing ‘herself’. She is an accomplished actress, she plays the expected spinster role, which allows her to gather vital information from others, without them suspecting it. Albeit respectable, the spinster was usually viewed as a secondary figure, someone there was no need to bother too much with. Staying in the background, and keeping a low profile easily put others off guard, paving the way for all kinds of information and genuine reactions to the circumstances.

7.5.Saint Mary Mead

Murder at the Vicarage first edition had in Émile's Gaboriau style a sketch of its few structures and connecting roads and lanes. Around it there were only open fields and woods. The village was to reappear in practically all of Miss Marple's stories becoming part and parcel of the narratives, a kind of character by its own right.

The process of change affected the village and its surrounding area almost in every same way that the processes of ageing slowly, but surely took their toll on her female sleuth. A quarter of a century after its introduction the village showed most of the urban encroachments of post-World War II into rural Britain. As people moved into the village housing developments popped up, either private or public; a Hall was added, shop fronts were modernized and it began suffering from the lack of parking space.

As mentioned above, in Christie's lifetime there occurred several economic and social changes in almost every aspect. No wonder that villages were also swept by these winds of change. The number of average age of its inhabitants increased. People who had lost their families and homes because of the war moved to other parts of England. Thus the relationships among villagers suffered a profound modification, and sometimes a gap emerged, separating old villagers from the recent inhabitants of the new and different styled buildings growing around.

Miss Marple, the typical inhabitant of the Victorian and Edwardian village, owner of her own cottage, surrounded by her well-kept garden, is a social and economic survivor of the old order. To live in a village instead of the big city, keeps her financially independent and regarded as an important member of the traditional community. So, to set her in this scenario not only helps in her characterization, but is an intrinsic part of it. Where else could the reader naturally fit in such a spinster? It is easy for us to imagine Miss Marple doing her shopping in the main street of Saint Mary's Mead, greeting her old neighbors and keeping a sharp eye on everything that happens around her.

Chapter VI – *Murder at the Vicarage*, a Brief Analysis

This is a story belonging to the inter-war, middle-brow period when domestic and detective novels were characterized by narrative ambiguity and illusion. Through the voice and gaze of our spinster protagonist, the spinster named Jane Marple, this novel

covertly alludes to query power and gender relations, while simultaneously upholding the status quo. Its techniques of focalization and narration are reviewed in order to demonstrate how normalizing concepts of home and heterosexual families are explored and criticized. During cataclysmic events, like murder ways of seeing are pushed to the gore. Yet in each case once the cataclysmic event is solved, the conventional order is restored by the effective surveillance of this particular spinster.

The novel's title is quite explicit about its story. Briefly, the reader is introduced to the vicarage of Saint Mary Mead's. It fairly percolates with gossip and speculation on the unseemly behavior of the village residents, much to the discomfort of the vicar. Least liked in the neighborhood is Colonel Protheroe, who argues with other church officers, insists on going over the church accounts with the vicar, harasses a visiting archeologist, nearly comes to blows with a painter and finally ends up dead on the vicar's study.

In this particular case Miss Marple's concern is to trap the murderers and save the helpless Hawes from being the scapegoat. Almost every character has once in his life done something wrong. We can also find characters within its fictional world as much addicted to detective stories as the intended reader is.

The victim, the most disliked colonel Protheroe, who happens to be, as far as we are told, a very bossy man pushing everyone around. He was married twice: his first estranged wife reappears, as Mrs. LeStrange, who happens to be very ill, in fact, she is dying and with whom he had a daughter, called Lettice and his second wife, the actual Mrs. Protheroe, cheated on him with the good-looking and much younger than herself, Lawrence Redding, the painter. Lettice calls her father a 'beast' and even the benevolent vicar Mr. Clement utters that: "Anyone who murdered colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service" (5). It can be said that he is disliked in the private as well as in the public sphere as representative of the Army as an institution. After World War I the higher ranks in the Army were not much loved. Common folk blamed them for several reasons: being responsible for the waste of thousands of lives; being unprepared to deal with such situations as those as the world conflict had placed on their hands; knowing nothing about war strategies or logistics.

This particular story has an omnipresent narrator, Mr. Clement, the vicar who happens to be a feeble social authority. Although, he is still listened to by his parishioners, the old villagers, he is hardly obeyed and his influence very seldom acts upon his 'flock'. The exception is the sermon he preaches after the murder has taken place, when he invites the murderer to come forward and abide his guilt. His marriage to a much younger wife, is considered by the village traditional forces as transgressive and inadequate, though it reveals itself as quite innocent and happy one; by the end of the story, the reader is told that Griselda is expecting a baby.

Clement as representative of the Anglican Church is not a formidable figure, as if the institution itself was losing its grip upon followers, only able of playing a conjuring trick in times of crisis.

Lawrence Redding and Anne Prothero are the murdering pair, providing an alibi for one another. He is the outsider, the serpent that creeps into the garden of Saint Mary Mead. Miss Hartnell, who belongs to Miss Marple's close circle of friends tells the reader "He is a very good looking fellow" (14). Miss Marple liked good looks in a man and she says so, although she considered them a "special kind of animal" who needed proper food and drink, an idea common among lonely ladies of the times. Curiously, Agatha Christie does not link good looks or beauty to kindness or goodness, as fairy tales usually do. On the contrary, she links it to Evil, in *Cat among Pigeons* (1959) it is written: "Evil children are often beautiful!"

In *Murder at the Vicarage* neither the female murderer nor the victim are beautiful or very young. As a whole they represent a middle-aged group of traditional well-to-do people, who are facing a decadent phase in life. In one way or another they have to put up with their former actions and the failures that resulted from them both in the social and professional circles. The wrongs of the past must be amended either by death, or by bringing out the truth and facing the consequences of their former social status. Even sweet and innocent Griselda ends up by revealing that she had met Lawrence Redding sometime before marrying Clement and romance, spiced with a bit of suspicion, lingers in the air.

These events and their denouement also depict the transitorily ambience British society was going through and nothing better than a confined space, such as the tiny village of Saint Mary Mead to bring it out. In fact, it functions as Britain's micro-cosmos.

At some length the failure of the institution of marriage exemplified by colonel Protheroe and his 'wives' and of affective ties, Lettice, the daughter calls him a brut, are also under scope. Instead of the solidity of the marriage vows characters and readers are confronted with a fluid notion of loyalty and 'everlasting' devotion is no more represented by some members of its members. Violence on the part of the husband and adultery on the part of the wife turn the usual roles of protector and head of the family and of the submissive chaste wife into a farce.

On the other hand, the unusual couple constituted by the vicar and his much younger and socially inferior wife are a match blessed in heaven and only slowly accepted and eventually blessed on Saint Mary Mead earth. They stand for the new order where feelings and truthfulness in private relationships are more important than any social conventions.

Each one of these pairs ends up by setting a bad and a good example of how a marriage should be.

In this story only two characters represent a much younger generation: the colonel's daughter Lettice and Dennis, the vicar's nephew. They must be around the same age, as they are invited for the same kind of parties. Lettice seems to be very aloof, never knowing what time it is; she does not wear a watch or where she has left her belongings. Mr. Clement, who happens to be quite a good character reader, knows that she is just putting on a show. The truth is that it is she who slashes the forgotten picture of her mother left behind in the attic's lumber room, when suspicions arise against Mrs. Lestrangle, who actually is the former Mrs. Protheroe and Lettice's mother.

Dr. Stone, the archeologist, represents a famous 19th century branch of knowledge, due to the recent discovery of King's Tutankhamun tomb and treasure, is here presented as a fake. He is an unreliable character being nothing more indeed than a common thief.

Justice is here represented by three different characters: Inspector Slack, colonel Melchett and Constable Hurst.

Inspector Slack works and most likely lives in Much Benham a town nearby. So, he is not a total stranger to Saint Mary Meads, but he is not an insider either, as it happens with colonel Melchett. The two of them seem to get along, although at a certain point in the investigation they take different stands about the case. It may be said that the first represents the modern policeman diligently and scientifically looking for clues and evidences everywhere, leaving no loose ends, no stones unturned, which might sustain his theory of how a crime was committed. Inspector Slack is not a very nice ‘chap’ when he makes his ‘entrance’. He imposes his authority upon the vicar and the doctor Haydock, the village’s general practitioner, not letting them utter a word about the case while he goes around the crime scene, the vicar’s study, looking for evidences. As the investigation moves forward Inspector’s Slack is praised by his energy “He is very energetic. One cannot like Slack but one can admire his energy”, says the vicar, (97) “He’ll nose his way through to the truth” (75). When told about the clock being fifteen minutes fast, he turns the table pointing accusingly at Mr. Clement for not telling him sooner. In the end all the merit of catching the murderers is his for the taking, although the trap the murderers fell into was actually laid out by Miss Marple.

Colonel Melchett keeps the liaison between Inspector Slack and all the other people involved with the crime in one way or another. He is not pig-headed as Slack is, and only uses the authority he has been invested with as Chief Constable of the County (173) when it is of the utmost urgency.

Constable Hurst is a secondary figure just needed to take notes down and perform the pedestrian work in search of clues, making inquiries, typewriting memos or reports. He enjoys for some brief minutes the importance of being the man in charge when summoned to the crime scene, but it quickly fades away when Inspector Slack comes in. Hurst is not destitute of practical knowledge: he knows the villagers and understands the ways the village as a community functions.

1. Setting

The murder takes place in Saint Mary Mead, a traditional English village mostly unaffected by social upheavals of World War II, where a clear class system exists: all the residents are white, apparently Anglican and genteel households still have servants.

The small village is surrounded by woods and meadows, its core is composed by the Church, the vicarage, a few Queen Anne and Georgian Houses, the Blue Boar pub and a few shops. People travel to the near town of Much Benham, or get by train to London to shop, while gossip travels through a network of servants and delivery boys. This net of functional social relationships changes according to times carrying underneath a history of the social changes that took place in England in the first half of the twentieth century.

The characters are set in a scenario built up of three different kinds of buildings, each one of them representative of a social order. The manor-house, where colonel Protheroe inhabits naturally stands for aristocracy and upper middle-class; the vicarage or parsonage, once again for a privileged class: the clergy, acting in this particular case as a sort of neutral ground; and the cottage, the laborer's dwelling so much favored by aristocracy and higher-classes. Together they draw a closed circle, so characteristic of the golden age period.

Parsonage can be defined as the house built for or to be used by the incumbent of an Anglican parish. A term that covers both rectory and vicarage. It is one of England's bestloved traditional building types. English Parsonage has social, historical and architectural importance. They combine many coveted qualities: their fine architecture, their air of civilization, their charm and character, the traditional values and quality of essential Englishness which they evoke.

The vicarage, in this particular case, stands near the center of the village, where the shops are, and near the woods. This specific location can symbolize its relation between untamed Nature – where all the living beings act and react according to their natural instincts – and the humanly built community dominated by the social conventions. This duality is characteristic of the murderers' dilemma: to live according to their feelings and physical emotions or to abide to the social conduct code.

Socially speaking the parsonage stands between the Hall representative of aristocracy or upper middle-classes and the cottage, which although favored by the powerful remained attached to simple folk.

Chapter VII – To Conclude

In the Golden Age four women take the honors as they developed and polished the basic detective formula with its heroic protagonist, intrusive criminal and eventual restoration of order. From then on, talented women writers extended and reconfigured the conventions of the genre. Despite their important contributes, they have consistently received less space in interviews, newspapers and magazine columns and fewer nominations or awards for their work. Female characters play many roles: victims, suspects, murderers, accomplices, narrators, onlookers and detective. Presently, we cannot say that is a genre written by women for women, but they still play an important part both ways.

Agatha Christie has been awarded a lot of titles, even in life, but in spite of all these honors, she kept herself humble, never did success got over her, never did she try a hand at displaying a kind of knowledge she did not have. She kept herself within her class, because it was what she knew best, making her characters believable. Agatha portrayed upper middle-class with ease and grace, showing the reader its dark and its sunny side. She is, in fact, more than a story-teller; she is an observer of our human kind, in line with so many great names of literature.

Her characters may not have the psychological depth of usual literary characters, but still they depict the essence of the human condition, that is probably one of the reasons that has turned her works into ‘classics’. One can also add the fact that they are easy to read, as she liked to reproduce the way people talk and acted. Underneath this lightness and easiness this author deals with her plots and characters, it is possible to uncover a much more serious reading.

Although an author works mainly with his/hers imagination, he/she always need some solid ground. In this particular case the authoress joins her own childhood recollections and binds them with her own life experience to create a character, who has appealed to generations of readers. So between Agatha and Miss Marple there can be established many connections, but it must not be forgotten that they are not one and the same. If, in some moments a few autobiographical traits may be detected in the character, the differences between the two are numerous and obvious.

All Marple's stories provide us with a rich detailed social history of society of the last century. For example, an average middle class couple would rarely contemplated marriage until financially secure enough to acquire a house-maid, a cook, a parlor-maid and a future nanny, However, the vicar and his young wife Griselda, who by the end of the story become parents, do not fit the pattern; they can only afford one maid, and she is not a very good one, judging by what we are told.

We can find in the narrative elements derived from the Holmesian tradition mixed with others introduced by contemporaries – the exposure of false alibi basis on rail timetables.

Christie's own superiority is found typically in her ability to lure the readers' suspicions away from the main suspect by the provision of an ostensible secure alibi, to throw it upon a less likely candidate, and finally to reveal the main suspect's alibi as a false one usually faked by a secret accomplice. The process of deduction is often also confounded by the interference of subplots, causing the misreading of the signs. In this specific murder the double confession, produced by the widow and her lover with the purpose of feeding a sense of reasonable doubt both in the local authorities and in the reader's minds resolves itself in an actual pair of murderers whose crime's motive consists in their adulterous relationship, a rather interesting topic for gossip in every quarter, and a traditional theme in the comedy of manners.

The interplay between real facts and the keeping up of appearances unfailingly exposes the hypocritical upper middle-class double moral standards, questioning their tradition role as models and bastions of the community. Politeness, in spite of smoothing human relationships, is a poor substitute for ethics. The cynical Miss Marple never lets the reader forget it.

Surprisingly or not, when trying to 'dissect' the character of Miss Jane Marple, we realize she is so much more than the frail, dependent old lady tradition harbours as the desirable feminine stereotype. Miss Marple's neighbors are unable to picture her otherwise, which her as a mask. The authoress places her sleuth in a setting that looks plausible and in turn helps the character to look natural. As readers we get the feeling that it is possible to find her just around the corner especially if we are walking in a village. But Miss Jane is much more than the 'old cat in the village' (1932:8). She is a

resilient old lady who never complains about her own fate, never loses herself in a daydream of lost grandeur, though she sometimes remembers that past. She firmly stands for everything good that Britain has ever had: an Empire supported by a powerful navy, where the sun would never set upon its dominions, an economy that ruled the civilized world. Her loyalty to her homeland goes together with her deep sense of justice, and her awareness that nobody is perfect, and so one must laugh at one's shortcomings and if possible amend oneself. In short, she embodies the idea of Englishness she and her creator could breathe.

Appendix

Miss Marple's Faces

In *Murder at the Vicarage*



Jane Marple, better known as Miss Marple, has been depicted in multiple ways such as drawings, as Gilbert Wilkinson's first illustration of the character for *The Royal Magazine*, in 1927.

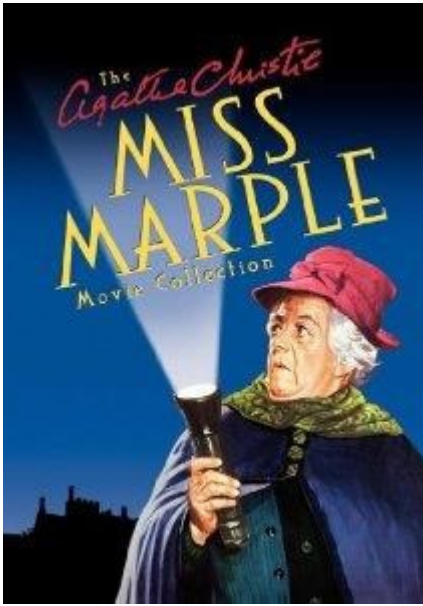
Fig.1: Gilbert Wilkinson, Miss Marple; *The Royal Magazine*, Dec. 1927.

On stage, she was first played by the British stage actress Gracie Fields in the play entitled *A Murder is Announced*, in 1956. On radio, there have been also adaptations of Christie's detective stories. June Whitfield gave voice to Miss Marple on 12 plays.



Fig.2: Gracie Fields

In 2008 a graphic novel of *The Murder at the Vicarage* authored by Norma appeared, thus creating a new form of depicting this famous character, and reaching an even wider public.



Other actresses played the same role, including Helen Hayes, Angela Lansbury, Joan Hickson and Margaret Rutherford. However, the actresses who have performed Miss Marple's role have done it in different Christie's stories, not covering the author's whole work. As far as, in *The Murder at the Vicarage* is concerned, only a few played the lead role, due to production decisions about which stories should be adapted to cinema or television at a precise moment. For instance, Margaret Rutherford, one of the most celebrated of Miss Marples, never did it.

Fig.3. Margaret Rutherford as Miss Marple.

As already mentioned, the cinema and the television have produced many of Agatha Christie's works, and cherished her star detectives, Miss Marple and Poirot. In the particular case of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the interest of several TV channels in the production of series about Agatha Christie and her works resulted in more than one version of that story, and in the introduction of distinct Miss Marples.



Fig. 4 Geraldine McEwan

For instance, from 2004 to 2009 Geraldine McEwan played Miss Marple in a television series for ITV entitled *Agatha Christie's Marple*. Among the many novels she performed is *The Murder at the Vicarage* broadcasted in December 2004. In 2008 Julia McKenzie followed her step

Joan Hickson played the lead role in a BBC series entitled *Miss Marple* and covering several Christie's novels, from 1984 to 1992. She is one of the favorite Marples.

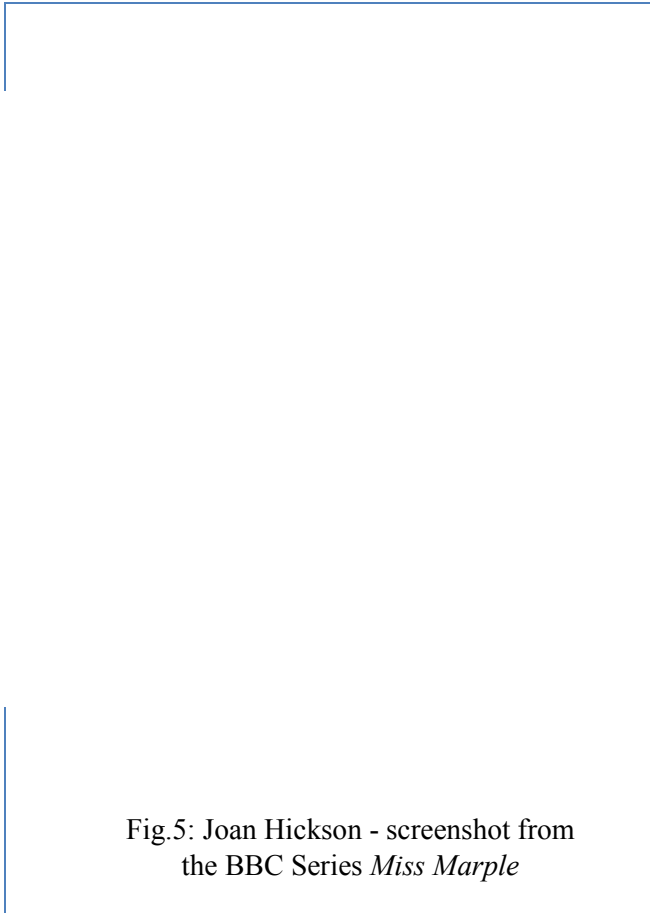


Fig.5: Joan Hickson - screenshot from the BBC Series *Miss Marple*

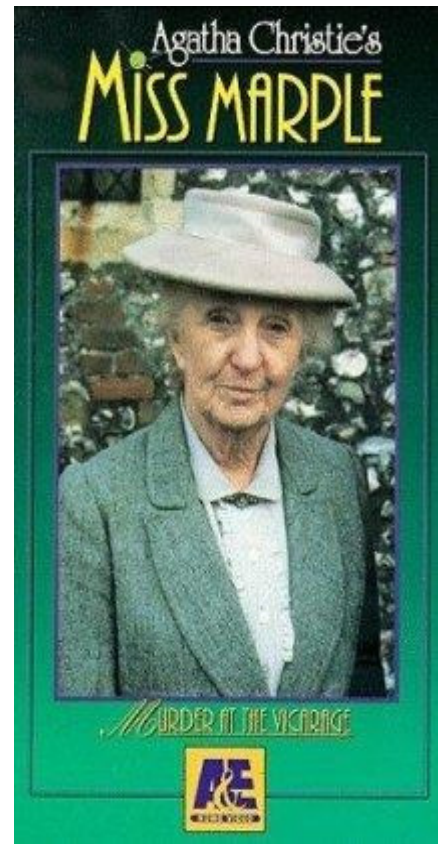


Fig. 6: The Murder at the Vicarage, 1986

As far as it is generally known, Joan Hickson was Agatha Christie's most favored incarnation of her feminine sleuth. Besides Hickson's acknowledged theatrical skills, her physical appearance naturally contributed to this preference.

The challenge to meet the spectator's imagined image of Christie's character continues up till today. Apparently, Jennifer Garner was Disney's choice for the reboot of Christie's heroine, a rather controversial decision; suffice to look at the picture of the new Miss Marple's face to understand the numerous fans' adverse reactions.



Fig. 7: Jennifer Garner.

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