SEVENTY YEARS OF SWEARING UPON ERIC THE SKULL: GENRE AND GENDER IN SELECTED WORKS BY DETECTION CLUB WRITERS DOROTHY L. SAYERS AND AGATHA CHRISTIE

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by

Monica L. Lott
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Dissertation written by
Monica L. Lott
B.A., The University of Akron, 2003
B.S., The University of Akron, 2003
M.A., The University of Akron, 2005
Ph.D., Kent State University, 2013

Approved by
Tammy Clewell Chair, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Vera Camden Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Robert Trogdon Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Maryann DeJulio Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Clare Stacey Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee

Accepted by
Robert Trogdon Chair, English Department
Raymond A. Craig Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

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My dissertation “Seventy Years of Swearing upon Eric the Skull: Genre and Gender in Selected Works by Detection Club Writers Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie” shows how the texts produced by Detection Club members Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie challenge assumptions about the value and role of popular genre fiction and demonstrate how the detective novel engages pressing social issues related to gender in modern Great Britain. Sayers and Christie addressed serious concerns of gender in relation to topics including war and an emerging market economy in inter-war Britain; however, because they were doing so in genre fiction, their insights have not been fully explored. The popularity of detective fiction, according to critics, has resulted in a lack of criticism and a distrust of the popular. Christie, more so than Sayers, has been ignored by critics because of her popularity and the formulaic nature of her fiction. Glenwood Irons claims that Christie’s popularity is responsible for the “general ignorance of the sheer volume of detective fiction written by women” (xi), while Alison Light theorizes that the dearth of Christie criticism, because of her popularity, is “an absence which the growth of ‘genre’ studies of popular fiction has yet to address” (64). My goal is to understand how Sayers and Christie responded to modern issues through their writing and to set their writing in context with contemporary concerns in inter-war Britain. I advocate for a reexamination of Sayers and Christie that goes beyond their popularity as writers of genre fiction and analyzes the ways in which their fiction incorporates modern concerns.

My dissertation looks at the works of two significant writers and shows how they address the high/low boundary—the separation between literature and so-called popular writing—in their discussions of genre and gender. This dissertation has not been modeled on the scholarly monograph; rather I offer a series of related essays focusing on selected works by Sayers and Christie primarily written between World War One and World War Two. Approaching the dissertation as a set of essays allows me to link the topics loosely with the subjects of gender, war,
and nostalgia, yet permits a thorough discussion of the very different ways in which each woman addressed these issues. As I read and reread their works, I was struck by the way their texts provided both an entertaining narrative and reflected serious issues that did not seem to be in keeping with the seemingly formulaic nature of a detective story. Sayers and Christie were able to incorporate serious matters in their writing while earning readers through their compelling storytelling. Their texts demonstrate thematization of war and gender without losing an entertaining narrative. As I researched these topics, I came to realize that my analysis of their representations of war and gender would not easily and tidily come to a singular conclusion appropriate for a book. In the form of essays that are linked by subject matter yet are able to function as standalone works, my chapters can be published as independent journal articles or as chapters in other essay anthologies. As standalone essays, the chapters can thoroughly explore disparate attitudes toward war, gender, and nostalgia pair without being tied in to a goal of publication as a single text.

Some portions of the Introduction have been incorporated as part of my essay “Genre for Justice: The Final Solution and The Yiddish Policemen’s Union as Works of Detective Fiction,” a chapter in Michael Chabon’s America: Magical Words, Secret Worlds, and Sacred Spaces, which will be published by Scarecrow Press in the fall of 2013. A version of my first chapter “Dorothy L. Sayers, the Great War, and Shell-shock” has been published in the Spring 2012 issue of Interdisciplinary Literary Studies. An earlier form of my second chapter “Reexamining the Feminist Label of Gaudy Night” was published in Unbroken Wings: Collected Papers of the International Conference English Literature Today, Oxford 2008.

Codification of the Genre

Texts in the genre of detective fiction have long featured a self-conscious aspect that questions the place of these works in the high/low divide. Maria DiBattista states that “High and
low have come to define not only a vertical differential in aesthetic ‘positioning’ vis-à-vis popular or mass culture but also to indicate a new historical dialectic unleashed by the advent of technological and economic modernization and all its stresses” (“Introduction” 5). The rise of detective fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly with its popularity in the early twentieth century and the flood of inferior writers eager to cash in on the genre, gave way to a movement by its most popular writers to ensure that the genre could be legitimized with standards of quality. In “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” Tzvetan Todorov asserts, “a work was judged poor if it did not sufficiently obey the rules of its genre” (43).

The struggle for legitimacy was a real concern for members of the Detection Club as they worked to codify guidelines in a burgeoning genre whose quality was threatened by its popularity. In “The Detection Club,” a 1933 article for the *Strand Magazine*, G.K. Chesterton refers to the Detection Club as:

> in short, a small society of writers of detective stories; and its only object of amusing itself is best summed up in two statements: (1) That a detective story is a story, and subject to the same literary laws as a love story or a fairy story or any other form of literature; and (2) That the writer of a detective story is a writer; and is just as much bound in the sight of God and man to be a good writer, as if he were the writer of an epic or a tragedy. (Chesterton “Detection” 462)

This acknowledgement that the Club members’ writings are subject to the same “literary laws” as works of literature culturally recognized as important is one of the earliest examples of detective fiction writers making a case for the seriousness of their craft.¹ The internal fight to be

¹ The Detection Club is a coterie that was formed in the 1930s by detective fiction writers Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, G.K. Chesterton, Freeman Wills Crofts, H.C. Bailey,
respected as an author while advancing a genre that is often not taken seriously frequently appears in the critical analysis of detective fiction, though its importance has been downplayed by critics and practitioners of the craft. Critic Marjorie Hope Nicolson claimed in her 1929 essay “The Professor and the Detective” that the detective story’s best feature was its opportunity for the reader to escape “[t]hrough tales of abduction and poisoning, shooting and stabbing, we are able to wallow for a moment in adventures we cannot share, to lose ourselves for an evening in a world of excitement, and return next day to our dry-as-dust lectures, refreshed by vicarious violence” (112-113). She even decried the “[u]nworldly, unnatural academics, who would deny us our brief moment’s respite!” (113).

While Nicolson attributed enjoyment of detective stories as a reason they are not literature, critic Edmund Wilson believed that his lack of enjoyment in the plot was what affected issues of literary merit. Wilson stated in his October 14, 1944 essay “Why Do People Read Baroness Emmuska Orczy, and twenty-two other popular detective fiction authors. Still currently in existence, the Detection Club has published anthologies written by its members for the purposes of raising funds and increasing the popularity of the genre, while its writers have been responsible for hundreds of works of popular fiction. My examination of the works of the Club’s members provides analysis of a popular genre’s reflection of issues occurring in modern Great Britain and shows how the writers referenced and were influenced by each other’s work.

Though it met with less frequency during World War II, it continued after the war and is still meeting today, inducting new members, and publishing new work. The Detection Club members have co-authored approximately thirteen books between 1931 and 2006 (the count is not definite as two books were published with the work of Detection Club members, but not sponsored by the Club, so they are counted in some references and not in others).
Detective Stories?” that, after reading works by Rex Stout, Agatha Christie, and Dashiell Hammett and comparing them to childhood exposure to Conan Doyle’s canon, he was left bored and frustrated. He claimed, “As a department of imaginative writing, it looks to me completely dead” (“Why” 236). He asserted that “the detective story proper had borne all its finest fruits by the end of the nineteenth century” (236) and stated that the genre’s popularity was response to the trauma and guilt of World War One and World War Two. As a result of public outcry, Wilson responded with “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?” three months later. In answer to his readers’ letters, he read works by Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, and Margery Allingham; in anticipating reader outcry about his reviews of their works, he said, “The enthusiastic reader of detective stories will indignantly object that I am reading for the wrong things: that I ought not to be expecting good writing, characterization, human interest or even atmosphere. He is right, of course. . .” (260).

Detective fiction writers and critics, like some science fiction writers, have made a different case, arguing for the importance of the genre, yet eschewing any claims to high literary value. P.D. James, famous late twentieth-century writer and critic of detective fiction, apologetically states in Talking about Detective Fiction (2009): “We do not expect popular literature to be great literature, but fiction which provides excitement, mystery and humour also ministers to essential human needs. We can honour and celebrate the genius which produced Middlemarch, War and Peace, and Ulysses without devaluing Treasure Island, The Moonstone and The Inimitable Jeeves” (195). James makes the case that detective fiction should not be judged as though it were ‘great literature.’ Similarly, science fiction writer Joanna Russ has argued in “Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction” that science fiction requires modes of critical appraisal different from high literature, suggesting that critics need to modify criteria to
include standards other than those applied to traditional literature. At the same time, she does argue that science fiction “presents an eerie echo of the attitudes and interests of a pre-industrial, pre-Renaissance, pre-secular, pre-individualistic culture” (Russ), suggesting a similarity of thematic content with high literary works. Although the comparison to science fiction is useful, David Trotter argues that detective fiction is “the most frequently and the most intensively theorised of all popular genres. It suits the hermeneutic requirements of almost any form of theoretic enquiry you care to imagine: narratology, Marxism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction. The emergence of cultural studies has if anything reinforced the prevailing assumption that to think critically about detective fiction, or indeed any other popular genre, is to think theoretically” (66).

The blurring of the boundary between high and popular literature is becoming a critical commonplace in contemporary critical discussions of genre fiction; it is crucial to note that many detective writers in the early decades of the century saw their work as inferior to the standards of high literature. The codification of the genre by members of the Detection Club occurred as a response to its popularity, which promised less-than-quality writers the opportunity to make easy money as the genre gained fans. Its members worked to create standards for the genre but were unwilling to make a claim for their work’s placement on the high/low divide. This case for detective fiction as literature was something many writers of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction were unwilling to make. This attitude of self-abnegation toward detective fiction by its

2 Though the “Golden Age of Detective Fiction” has been broadly defined chronologically, Stephen Knight, in his 2004 book Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity, claims that Howard Haycraft, in 1942, was the first to use the term “golden age” to categorize detective fiction between 1918 and 1930. For the purposes of this dissertation, I refer to works produced
authors is exemplified by Dorothy L. Sayers, who explains the Detection Club in a preface to the 1931 anthology *The Floating Admiral* as:

> a private association of writers of detective fiction in Great Britain, existing chiefly for the purpose of eating dinners together at suitable intervals and of talking illimitable shop. . . If there is any kind of serious aim behind the avowedly frivolous organization of the Detection Club, it is to keep the detective story up to the highest standards that its nature permits, and to free it from the bad legacy of sensationalism, claptrap, and jargon with which it was unhappily burdened in the past. (Sayers qtd. in Brett *Detection* 186)

This linguistic juxtaposition between Sayers’s “serious aim” and the “avowedly frivolous organization” is typical of even current writers of detective fiction, like Detection Club member P.D. James, though this attitude is becoming less prevalent than it was during the Golden Age due to the genre’s burgeoning popularity.

Detective fiction had become so fashionable during the Golden Age that publishers were willing to print novels that were of less quality simply to fulfill the public’s demand. As Colin Watson, mid-twentieth century detective fiction author and critic, states in *Snobbery with Violence*, “In no other field of literature was there a comparable influx of hopeful newcomers. . . . While demand matched and even exceeded supply, it was not to be expected that the general between 1918 and 1945 as products of the Golden Age. I argue that the period should include works through World War Two because the comparison between World War One and World War Two texts, such as the evolution in the attitudes toward war and nostalgia shown from Christie’s *The Secret Adversary* (1922) to *There Is a Tide* (1948) share similar attitudes toward nostalgia and the role of women in wartime.
standard of detective fiction should be high” (Watson “Snobbery” 97). The Detection Club responded to this threat of inferiority in detective fiction by attempting to keep the genre free from the popular sensational literature through attempts to formalize and codify what made a proper detective story.

There has long been an internal fight in the attempts to maintain popularity while keeping the genre free from the negative connotations that a “popular” novel might have; the battle between popularity and quality is one that continued through mid-century. Raymond Chandler argues in “The Simple Art of Murder” (1950) that the genre of detective fiction in the hands of what he calls an average (rather than gifted) writer is depressing, formulaic, seldom realistic, and is doomed to mediocrity because of its popularity:

The average detective story is probably no worse than the average novel, but you never see the average novel. It doesn’t get published. The average—or only slightly above average—detective story does. Not only is it published but it is sold in small quantities to rental libraries, and it is read…And the strange thing is that this average, more than middling dull, pooped-out piece of utterly unreal and mechanical fiction is not terribly different from what are called the masterpieces of the art. It drags on a little more slowly, the dialogue is a little grayer, the cardboard out of which the characters are cut is a shade thinner, and the cheating is a little more obvious; but it is the same kind of book. Whereas the good novel is not at all the same kind of book as the bad novel. It is about entirely different things. But the good detective story and the bad detective story are about exactly the same things, and they are about them in very much the same way. (209)
Chandler, like Watson, saw how the popularity of the detective story endangered its literary credibility. Though he made his living writing hardboiled detective stories that evolved from the writers during the Golden Age, Chandler was embarrassed by the genre’s popularity because it resulted in lower standards for its writers; its very popular appeal to the public meant that the genre’s writers could be “lazy” and sell books without having to work at their art (214). The unrealistic nature of the genre, according to Chandler, excluded good writers from pursuing it because “writers who have the vision and the ability to produce real fiction do not produce unreal fiction” (214).

This attitude of the one of genre’s most popular writers is echoed in the debate between high and low culture. Andreas Huyssen suggests in After the Great Divide that the distinction between high and low literature arose in the early decades of the century with the rise of modernism, which understood itself as separate from the marketplace and works of popular consumption. Beyond historicizing the emergence of the high/low divide, he also challenges the idea that separation between the two is necessary; Huyssen argues for a consideration of merit without the confines of assumptions about genre and quality. (ix-x). His critique of the high/low divide supports my dissertation’s premise that the works of detective fiction should be taken as seriously as works of so-called high literary art and examined as products of their time, texts which reflect and respond to issues of gender in a culture that would see itself through the process of healing from a crippling war experience, preparing for another war, and negotiating gender roles in modern and postmodern eras. The rise of detective fiction has coincided with changes in attitudes toward gender, and studying the genre’s development offers an opportunity to see its reflection of evolving attitudes toward gender reform.

The Gendered Detective in Sayers and Christie
English society between World War One and World War Two oversaw changing gender roles. While men were fighting on the battlefield, women were being called to participate in the war as factory workers, ambulance drivers, VADs (Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses), and as land girls working in the fields. These opportunities encouraged women to get out of the house and become useful working to assist Britain in the war effort. Though the upheaval of the suffrage movement was temporarily suspended during the war, women gained a new perspective on life without the traditional gender roles condemning them to the narrow confines of *kinder, küche, and kirche*. My focus on the changing role of women in inter-war Britain is predominantly featured in Chapter Two with my discussion of Sayers’s *Gaudy Night* and Chapter Four with Christie’s conversation about women who found themselves without a sense of purpose after World War One and World War Two. I argue that Sayers’s text displays an ambivalent attitude toward the feminist movement; she advocates women having the opportunity to find the work that best suits them, but she operates from a model of essential femininity in claiming that not all women have aptitudes equal to men in some tasks, though women should, in general, be offered opportunities that culture should regard as similarly valuable. I also suggest that Christie’s representations of women display more serious concerns than are usually accorded to her fiction. She shows how women are able to contribute to war work but then are left behind by a society eager to move past the war by putting the men back into the workforce and the women back into the home. These works of detective fiction are able to talk frankly about issues of gender; however, I claim that their status as texts of genre fiction keeps their serious concerns from being fully understood.

The focus on changing gender roles is shown in Sayers’s representations of masculinity in the post-war experiences of Lord Peter Wimsey and the critical debates about labeling *Gaudy*
Night as a feminist or an anti-feminist text; this focus on gender is also found in Christie’s characterizations of the feminine Poirot and the masculine Miss Marple as representations of inter-war cosmopolitan Britain. The Detection Club itself, though it had several women among its founding members, strove to maintain the integrity of detective fiction and, as my dissertation title reflects, had members swear on Eric the (human) Skull in their initiation oath not to make use of “Feminine Intuition,” which was lumped in with the similarly forsworn “Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence” and “Act of God” (Chesterton “Detection” 463-464). That feminine intuition has been relegated to the same status as “Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery,” and “Coincidence” indicates, at best, a distaste or, at worst, a disdain, for feminine sensibilities, an attitude seemingly at odds with the Club’s inclusiveness toward female members. Not just the works of the Detection Club members, but also its very oath shows a coterie that has been adjudicating the role of gender as it pertains to the quality of products of detective fiction. My dissertation shows how Sayers and Christie, arguably the most well-known members of the Detection Club, questioned ideas of masculinity and femininity and encouraged a reconsideration of gender roles in modern Britain.

Chapter Synopsis

My dissertation has been divided into four chapters. The dissertation’s introductory chapter, “Dorothy L. Sayers, the Great War, and Shell-shock,” begins by describing how events, both domestic and global, crafted a unique environment that would create the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. Scarred after the brutality of World War I, British citizens felt betrayed by a government that had allowed such atrocities to continue. The majority of the founders of the Detection Club depicted main characters who were able to work outside the law and solve crimes that were either incorrectly solved by the police or beyond the purview of the established
authority. The detective fiction novel flourished because it brought a sense of comfort to readers, reassuring them that within the confines of several hundred pages someone was keeping order and making sure justice was administered and a peaceful equilibrium restored by the last page. Blossoming in this time period, detective fiction shows itself to reflect the growing modernist movement in its questioning of governmental authority, emphasis on the motivation of the individual, and challenge to social customs. Dorothy L. Goldman suggests in Women Writers and the Great War that women wrote about the Great War as a way not only to identify with the men who had seen battle but also to participate in the war for themselves (95-98). I address this idea of writing about the war as a way for women to vicariously participate in the war effort in my examination of the works of Sayers.

I then analyze Dorothy L. Sayers’s main character, the aristocratic Lord Peter Wimsey, who is distinguished from many of the popular detective fiction heroes of the late-Victorian and early twentieth century because of the effects of his war service on his psyche. As a major in the Army, Wimsey experienced battle first-hand and was nearly buried alive in the trenches. Sayers depicts his shell-shock from this incident to create a new kind of hero, not the emotionless Sherlock Holmes, but a man who has known fear and has been able to fight its effects through his detective work. Wimsey becomes more human-like through his suffering, in sharp contrast

3 Lord Peter Wimsey is the most popular example of this ability to detect crimes which may not have been noticed, prosecuted, or stopped by local authorities, as seen in “The Incredible Elopement of Lord Peter Wimsey” when a husband has taken his wife to the Pyrenees to murder her by playing on local suspicion of madness and depriving her of her thyroid medicine.
to rational and unflappable characters like G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown, Baroness Orczy’s The Old Man in the Corner, or Edgar Allan Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin. Wimsey’s trauma from his war experience makes him more compelling and more relatable to the reader, who identifies with his weaknesses and cares about him and his adventures. Sayers’s writing introduces a character whose emotion and detective abilities create an anti-rationality that redefines post-war masculinity.

Sayers makes a strong claim for the power of the act of detection in granting her male protagonist a sense of agency; by extension, detective fiction itself is viewed by Sayers as having a vital role to play in the healing of a culture traumatized by the Great War. Indeed, the effect of the battlefield on the soldiers is a motif that Sayers revisits in most of her novels, particularly in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928) and *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1937). Sayers had lived with the effects of her husband’s (Captain Oswald “Mac” Fleming) shell-shock and her work had been both disrupted by his frequent illnesses and impelled by the need for money. Critics have previously theorized that Sayers uses shell-shock as a social critique in her earlier novels or as an opportunity to demonstrate the mutability of gender.\(^4\) In contrast, my dissertation offers a new and different perspective by showing how Sayers incorporates shell-shock into her stories and includes a treatment for it in the act featured in the stories themselves: detection.

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This is a powerful statement on detective fiction’s behalf being made by Sayers. Detecting becomes Lord Peter’s cure for his shell-shock. Near catatonic after his war experiences, Lord Peter becomes interested in the world around him and shows his “silly-ass” demeanor to be a façade when, in his first story, he helps clear a friend of murder. Subsequent novels show him saving his brother and future wife from wrongful prosecution, acts which empower him and grant him agency that had been lost during the war. Sayers is making the claim on behalf of detective fiction that sleuthing offers a therapeutic approach in the treatment of shell-shock. She was, albeit temporarily, conquering its hold over her life (in her husband’s illness) by escaping into her work. When its presence appears in her stories, she uses the power of detective fiction to deal with war trauma and redefine masculinity in the post-war period, as well as provide a temporary cure that she was unable to offer her husband whose war experiences informed her writing.

My second chapter “Dorothy L. Sayers: Gender and the Feminist Label of Gaudy Night” discusses Sayers’s 1936 work Gaudy Night, which had often been referred to as one of the first feminist detective fiction novels by early analyses of feminism in detective fiction. However, this categorization is far too simplistic when Sayers’s conflicting attitude toward the feminist movement is taken into consideration. Sayers was openly critical of the feminist movement and published two essays “Are Women Human?” and “The Human-Not-Quite Human” to show her disapproval of it. Yet modern scholarship praises Gaudy Night as one of the earliest and best examples of a feminist detective story. One section of this chapter incorporates the author’s background, which enables the opportunity to address and refute scholarship that claims the character of Harriet Vane is the sole representation of Sayers in the novel, a character created to have a relationship by proxy with her detective-hero Lord Peter Wimsey. I argue that the dearth
of criticism focusing on the villain, scout/maid Annie Wilson, whose attitude toward marriage echoes Sayers’s public statements against the feminist movement, complicates the argument of *Gaudy Night* as an early feminist work of detective fiction. It is these two characters who embody the discrepancies between Sayers’s writing and her public attitudes towards the feminist movement. Modern critics who argue that the novel is markedly feminist or anti-feminist ignore evidence that Sayers’s attitude is more complex and needs to be examined in light of feminism at this time in Britain. Critics often focus solely on the text and gloss over situating Sayers’s work as a product of her time period. I incorporate her essays and speeches, as well as a discussion of her attitude toward the feminist movement, to demonstrate her ambiguous attitude toward the feminist movement and to show how class played a role in her attitude. I believe that there is a more equivocal way in which the texts negotiate gender reform and that strict categorization of the work’s feminist tends to obscure Sayers’s nuances of ambivalence. Interpreting her work as not easily pigeonholed as feminist or anti-feminist and including Sayers’s struggle to understand her roles as an author, wife, and mother (though she never acknowledged her illegitimate son during her lifetime) allows a greater understanding of her text and of her time.

The third chapter, “Agatha Christie’s Wars: Nostalgia and Service,” looks at Christie’s use of nostalgia, particularly in evoking the post-World War One period, as an element that encourages a reappraisal of the war and its effects. Robert Hemmings claims in *Modern Nostalgia: Siegfried Sassoon, Trauma and the Second World War* that “Modern war enforced a destructive breach that made the past ever more inaccessible, apparently even more distant, which served to intensify the longing for it” (5). I argue that Christie offers a reappraisal of the idea of nostalgia: not for a time before World War One, as critics Hemmings and Adrian Barlow define nostalgia in post-World War One texts, but for the war experience itself. She depicts war
not as an experience of blood and terror, but instead as a time period of excitement, purpose, patriotism, and camaraderie. Unlike Sayers whose focus on the war was a prevalent theme in her works, Christie’s references to the war show characters embracing the positive aspects of war memories, an act which allows them to live in the present without a sense of past trauma.

This chapter highlights Christie’s complex attitude toward World War One and World War Two in her novels. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) examines life in wartime Britain; *The Secret Adversary* (1922) follows Tommy Beresford and Tuppence Cowley as they adjust to life after World War One; *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936) examines the case of a man suffering from shell-shock who is framed for murder; *N or M* (1941), with its World War Two setting, encourages reminiscences of World War One; and *There Is a Tide* (1948) highlights the troubles of a female character in returning to the boredom of daily life after her service during World War Two. While these books discuss shell-shock to varying degrees, there is a strong difference between Sayers and Christie in the way they represent the consequences of war in their stories. Sayers’s characters, particularly Lord Peter Wimsey, seem to feel frequently the war’s effects as they attempt to stoically ignore its importance. In contrast, offering war references as a backdrop allows Christie to both foreground her mystery as one of the experiences felt by characters living through the war and establish a common memory for her audience. Christie’s characters acknowledge the war and allow its consequences to fade into the background; they mention the war, but are not affected negatively by their experiences in it. Instead, many evince fondness for a time when they understood their role in society. Tommy and Tuppence reminisce warmly on their time together in the hospital, she as a nurse and he after being wounded. Former soldier Alexander Cust (*The A.B.C. Murders*), finding himself unemployed during the 1930s, speaks of happy days serving his country when he took pride in being useful and understood his role in
relation to his fellow soldiers. Christie addresses these feelings of usefulness during wartime and the change in women’s status during peacetime in the character of Lynn Marchmont in *There Is A Tide* (1948). Lynn’s return from the war brings a sense of restlessness and an awareness that she was no longer valued for herself; her return meant that she would be expected to dutifully marry and stay at home. I claim that the presence of war as background in Christie’s novels, though her characters may joke about their wartime experiences, demonstrates a serious function with its discussion of the long-term effects of war, an aspect of her work that critics have not addressed.

Chapter four, “Agatha Christie and the Modern Mystery,” reviews the connection between Christie and her writing, which I discuss, as other critics have done, as part of the “popular modernist movement.” I argue that Christie’s popular modernism is present through such elements as a reconsideration of traditional gender roles in post-war Britain and the role of self-consciousness in her work as part of the high/low divide in her use of meta-narrative. The meta-fictional elements of her writing—with her creation of characters like Ariadne Oliver (featured in seven novels and two short stories) and Daniel Clancy (featured in *Death in the Air*) who are themselves writers of detective fiction—allow her to comment on her self-conscious awareness as a creator of a product for her reading public. The idea of Christie as a great author of modernism has been considered recently by Allison Light and Jon Thompson, but both authors include a focus on Christie’s conservatism that I dispute with evidence from her texts that demonstrates a progressive outlook. She discussed homosexuality in a normative style—one of the first writers of popular detective fiction to use the word “lesbian” in her works without comment or sermonizing—and she also displayed sympathy for abortion doctors who were banned from the profession because of their practice.
Through the feminine and fussy Poirot and the masculine and steely Miss Marple, Christie relates issues of gender to a reconsideration of inter-war Britain’s sense of Britishness. Poirot, with his particular ways, does not fit in with the traditional, rural, indigenous sense of Englishness. However, he makes himself a necessary part of British culture by performing a necessary service: returning Britain to peace by meting out justice that has eluded the abilities of the English police. She develops a sense of modern Britain, a more cosmopolitan character who is a useful member of British society. Poirot is aware of his appearance as a figure who does not fit into society and uses the stereotype of the foreigner to manipulate suspects’ xenophobic tendencies, which overwhelm their natural reserves of caution against speaking too candidly. The self-consciousness of his role, in being aware that he is enacting a performance during his investigations, demonstrates Christie’s self-conscious awareness of the high/low divide and her place as a creator of detective fiction.

Like Poirot, Christie’s Miss Marple relies on stereotypes of the scatterbrained old lady to lull suspects and witnesses with the familiar, the non-threatening. Miss Marple deliberately cultivates a fluffy image that is at odds with her steely core that calmly solves puzzles and administers justice. Rebecca Langlands in “Britishness or Englishness? The Historical Problem of National Identity in Britain” notes the difference between the two, with “Englishness” understood in “terms of rural localities” and “Britishness” being a term that was considered in “imperial and urban industrial terms” (64). Jed Esty highlights the distinction, according Englishness with the “universalist capacity to absorb and transcend the local” (31). I argue that both characters encourage a reappraisal of Britishness by demonstrating how each detective plays a role and provides a service to modern Britain.
Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie transcend the dismissive label of “genre fiction” through their texts which go beyond the puzzle. Their works address serious concerns in modern Britain and reflect a society that was coping with the upheaval on World War One and was figuring out how to address issues of shell-shock, nostalgia, and changing gender roles. Sayers offers detective fiction as a treatment for shell-shock, allowing her readers to retreat into the puzzle to cope with their trauma. Christie focuses on positive aspects of war and her work evinces a longing for war-time feelings of usefulness, romanticism, and excitement. They offer their audience widely varied ways of coping in post-war Britain. Both address issues of gender and their texts are unable to be easily categorized as feminist or anti-feminist. Sayers sympathizes with characters that are ambivalent about their work and their roles, while Christie offers a reconsideration of traditional gender roles. This dissertation aims to show that these two authors deserve more serious consideration for their recognition of modern concerns in inter-war Britain.
Dorothy L. Sayers, the Great War, and Shell-shock

Dorothy L. Sayers is one of the most well-known writers from the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, an author whose popularity is rivaled only by G.K. Chesterton and Agatha Christie. Her main character, the aristocratic Lord Peter Wimsey, has become a blueprint for the seemingly inane man of leisure who sharpens his intellect through detection. Wimsey has served as an inspiration for Margery Allingham’s Albert Campion and Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn. In the character of Wimsey, Sayers creates a transition from the solely logic-based detective story with little character development to a model that incorporates detectives as characters with actions and emotions that may not necessarily further the act of puzzle-solving but which do contribute to create a thoroughly detailed character. From his opening statement in Sayers’s first novel *Whose Body?* (1923), Wimsey’s irritated “Oh, damn” at the realization of having forgotten his auction catalogue shows a complex, though occasionally petulant and foppish, character whose experiences beyond solving mysteries make him more well-rounded than previous literary detectives. What truly separates Lord Peter Wimsey from his counterparts, the popular detective fiction heroes of the late-Victorian and early-Modern period, becomes apparent in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928) when Sayers demonstrates the effects of his war service on his psyche. As a major in the Army, Wimsey saw a great deal of battle during the war, was nearly buried alive in the trenches, and suffered from flashbacks and anxiety, particularly in situations in which he was responsible for the lives of others. Sayers uses his shell-shock from this incident to create a new kind of hero, not the emotionless Sherlock Holmes or the asexual Miss Marple, but a man who has known the pain of war and has been able

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5 Campion was originally a supporting character who appeared as a Wimsey parody. He appeared in a total of eighteen novels and dozens of short stories.
to address the effects of it. Wimsey was a character that sought an escape into the rational and logic-based detective fiction. Through detection as Sayers depicts it in her novels, Wimsey regains the masculinity that had been wounded by his experiences in the war. Sayers creates a character whose detection activities provide a treatment for shell-shock that enables him to recoup his masculinity, thus fitting him for an idealized marriage at the end of the series.

Lord Peter is a detective who encapsulates the burgeoning modernist movement through his frustration with authority, particularly that of the police force, his sense of loneliness and alienation when solving a case, and his nostalgia for a simpler time before his war experiences. Flourishing in this time period, detective fiction shows itself to reflect the growing modernist movement in its questioning of governmental authority, emphasis on the motivation of the individual, and challenge to social customs. These hallmarks of modern literature demonstrate the trauma felt by a society that had been ripped apart by World War One. The detective fiction novel thrived because it brought a sense of comfort to readers, reassuring them that within the confines of several hundred pages someone was keeping order and making sure justice was administered and a peaceful equilibrium restored by the last page. Through the act of detection, Lord Peter is able to take on authority that enables him to provide justice and closure to other characters, particularly in saving both his brother\(^6\) and his future wife\(^7\) from execution for crimes they did not commit. Lord Peter’s self-awareness of the weaknesses brought upon him by his war experiences introduces a character whose emotion and detective abilities create an anti-rationality that redefines post-war masculinity. The effect of the battlefield on the soldiers is a motif that Sayers revisits in most of her novels, particularly in *Unnatural Death* (1927), *The

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\(^6\) *Clouds of Witness* (1926)

\(^7\) *Strong Poison* (1930)
Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club (1928), Gaudy Night (1936), and Busman’s Honeymoon (1937). In the medium of detective fiction, Sayers explores issues of crippled masculinity in post-war Britain and offers detection as a treatment for shell-shock, making a strong claim for the power of the genre.

A closer examination of the issue of war in Sayers’s writing, both fiction and non-fiction, reveals that her attitude is far more complex than most scholarship indicates. Critics claim that Sayers uses shell-shock as a social critique in her earlier novels (Freedman 372), or as an opportunity to demonstrate the mutability of gender (Plain 50-57). However, no scholarship has unified Sayers’s use of shell-shock as an attempt not only to identify with the war experiences of her husband Mac Fleming but also to understand his experiences and cope with the disruption that shell-shock created in their lives. Fleming had fought in World War One and, according to biographer James Brabazon, “had taken to the bottle and …was often very bloody-minded” (Brabazon 174). When her husband’s shell-shock became so crippling that it threatened their lifestyle and her livelihood, Sayers took the topic of shell-shock and incorporated it into Lord Peter’s recovery, making detecting a panacea for the effects of post-war trauma. Its inclusion in her work offered Sayers not only an escape from her husband’s illness, but also an opportunity to manipulate shell-shock’s effects on Wimsey. Through Wimsey, Sayers creates an idealized view of a soldier who utilizes detection to cope with the trauma of the war. This empowers Sayers as a writer because she can depict Wimsey coping with his trauma and finding a treatment in detection. Sayers represents detection as a rational escape from the effects of war into a narrative that follows the practical conventions of the detection novel as defined by the Detection Club.

In 1940, she wrote in Begin Here: A War-Time Essay, “We are lost and unhappy in a universe that seems to make no sense, and cling to science and machines and detective fiction,
just because, within their limited fields, the problems do work out, and the end corresponds to their intention” (Sayers Begin 119-120). This statement comes after bemoaning a society in which critical thinking and reasoning skills are abandoned by many people and, feeling that lack, some precious few turn to science and detective fiction in an attempt to make up for that dearth. Fiction becomes a poor substitute for an active engagement and questioning on the part of her readers. As a writer of detective fiction, she appreciates the fact that she has an audience, but realizes that, in comparison with more sentimental novels, her readership is smaller because fewer people are willing to seek opportunities to exercise their abilities to reason and make up for the mental laziness that grows more and more prevalent in society. Her works and those of her Detection Club colleagues offer her audience a whetting stone for their wits; however, she is critical of the realization that society demands less from people and that, feeling that lack, her audience turns to fiction in an attempt to keep its mental acuity. However, it is through that challenging of her readers that the audience is able to trace Sayers’s growth as a writer, particularly through the thread of shell-shock in her Wimsey stories.

Contemporary critic Gill Plain follows Lord Peter’s evolution throughout the stories “into a more complex and less superhuman character” who starts as a “collection of clichéd surfaces” and achieves, by Gaudy Night, “a balance between his still remarkable outer strengths and his manifold inner weaknesses” (Plain 46). Sayers, informed by her experiences with her husband’s shell-shock, evolves as a writer because she is able to develop a hero who is multifaceted and realistic as a result of his complexity. When Wimsey marries in the next book and the honeymoon mystery results in his sending someone else to be executed, he makes himself vulnerable, for the first time, by breaking down into tears and letting his wife comfort him. He has never sought comfort before; when an execution has been mentioned, Sayers’s novels have
described him lapsing into either catatonia or manic activity. Plain argues, “as a body of texts, the Wimsey novels chart a progress from an outward-looking but selfish denial of the private, through a more inward acknowledgement of personal need, to the recognition and submission to the law of public service – represented here by the duty of war” (46). Tracking Wimsey’s shell-shock becomes a way to follow Sayers’s growth as a writer and her recognition of the practical necessity of war which comes through in her later propaganda works on behalf of the British government during World War Two.

Sayers and World War Two in Britain

In a typical Sayers fashion, she wanted her propaganda work to be on her terms. Biographer James Brabazon recounts how, in response to her request to become involved with the Ministry of Propaganda, an invitation to serve on the Authors’ Planning Committee of the Ministry of Information was met with a feisty response that “the Ministry ought not to presume to tell writers how and what to write” (175). She did join the committee after receiving assurance that that was not its intent and developed her own spreadsheets for how the Ministry ought to be organized, which were not used; she was later dropped from the Ministry’s list of writers with the phrases “Very difficult” and “loquacious” by her crossed-off name (175-176). For all her distaste of bureaucracy, her wartime work displays a striking combination of romantic exuberance and pragmatism. She “met the war with exultation” as her “patriotism, her sense of history and her sense of romance, deep-rooted qualities all three of them, responded to the image, romantic and yet once of real, of the little peaceable island standing as a bulwark against tyranny” (176). She published “The Wimsey Papers,” eleven letters written from the point of view of various characters from the Wimsey books for The Spectator between November of
1939 and January of 1940. One letter, with the signature of Reverend Theodore Venables who had been featured in *Nine Tailors* (1934), states:

> In this world there is a continual activity, a perpetual struggle between good and evil, and the victory of the moment is always for the side that is the more active. Of late years, the evil has been more active and alert in us than the good—that is why we find ourselves again plunged into war. Even evil, you see, cannot prosper unless it practices at least one virtue—the virtue of diligence. Good well-meaning people often fail by slipping into the sin of sloth … If Christian men and women would put as much work and intelligence into being generous and just as others do into being ambitious and covetous and aggressive, the world would be a very much better place. (Sayers qtd. in Brown 251-252)

Sayers did not believe that peace must be upheld at any cost and she exhorted the readers to understand that Christianity was not necessarily incompatible with war. The letters continue with various characters blaming complacency, indolence, and ignorance for the brewing conflict. (252). In her 1943 essay “They Tried to Be Good,” Sayers blames World War Two on the ineffectualness of the British character. She claims, “There are days like that in the nursery, when, inexplicably, nothing one does can please the grown-ups. The Twenty-Years’ Armistice was just one of those days. We tried to do as we were told, and blundered from one catastrophe to another” (Sayers “They” 118-119). She blames the demands of other countries for the World War Two because of the pressures exerted to make the Central Powers pay for the horrors of war. She states:

> The peace made with Germany was of another kind. The issues were confused, but eventually two voices made themselves heard. One said that the vanquished
had been insufficiently crushed and that the elaborate network of armed restraints by which it sought to enclose them was sufficiently powerful for security. The other said that the terms had been too harsh and that it was time to bring the vanquished into partnership with the victors. Listening to them, one could scarcely help coming to the conclusion that the second of the two was the Voice of Enlightenment, for it was saying all the enlightened things. (120)

It is far too simplistic to claim that Sayers’s use of shell-shock indicates a distaste for war. She understood that war was often an essential and not necessarily unchristian part of nation building. She shows a willingness to fight and an awareness of the paradox of war, that “in a world full of conflicting interests and jarring ambitions, power might be needed to keep the peace. But power in itself was naughty” (119). It is wrong to have power and exert force. It is also wrong to have power and do nothing while people die. That is the state that England found itself in and the combined feelings of powerlessness and blame leave their imprint on the British psyche.

Ariela Freedman’s 2010 article “Dorothy Sayers and the Case of the Shell-Shocked Detective” examines Lord Peter’s shell-shock and suggests that Sayers proposes detection as an initial cure before incorporating marriage as a cure as Sayers’s Lord Peter narratives end with his marriage. During the closing imagery in Busman’s Honeymoon, Lord Peter and Harriet have

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8 The Wimsey narrative is taken up after his marriage in two short stories. Sayers’s death left the early World War II-set novels Thrones, Dominations and A Presumption of Death to be produced by author Jill Patton Walsh according to Sayers’s notes. His shell-shock does not appear strongly in any of these.
spent a white night waiting for eight o’clock, at which time the murderer they have caught will be executed:

The light grew stronger as they waited.

Quite suddenly, he said, ‘Oh, damn!’ and began to cry—in an awkward, unpractised way at first, and then more easily. So she held him, crouched at her knees, against her breast, huddling his head in her arms that he might not hear the eight o’clock strike. (Sayers *Busman* 402-403)

Freedman states that “Sayers ends not with the unmasking of the villain, the confession, the trial, or any of the other familiar conventions of detective fiction, but with the emotional state of the detective himself, humanized through his flaw. Marriage is a very different kind of solution to shell shock than the double-edged one of solving crime, and the beginning of Lord Peter the married man is more or less the end of Lord Peter the detective” (Freedman 383). I disagree with her argument and theorize that though detection has provided a way of dealing with shell-shock that makes him fit for marriage, detection is a treatment, not a cure. Unlike Freedman’s argument, this chapter suggests that detection remains the treatment throughout the stories and his breakdown in the arms of his wife shows that he has been made able to share his weaknesses. Lord Peter’s sobs show him opening up to his wife, instead of relapsing to the internal catatonia that had marked the end of his earlier adventures. Freedman glosses over Sayers’s background and briefly mentions that her husband’s shell-shock informed her writing, but does not, as this paper does, make the case that Sayers’s writing about shell-shock is her attempt to cope with its effects by finding a treatment within her character’s adventures in detection that helps move him past the trauma. In reference to Sayers’s last Wimsey book *Busman’s Honeymoon*, Freedman
sees Wimsey as having been cured of his shell-shock by detection; I disagree and see detection as a treatment but not a cure.

Shell-shock and Treatment

In her 2000 book *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys recounts the symptoms of shell-shock, “stupor, confusion, mutism, loss of sight or hearing, spasmodic convulsions or trembling of the limbs, anesthesia, exhaustion, sleep-lessness, depression, and terrifying, repetitive nightmares” and their link to female hysteria as described by physician William Brown at a meeting of the British Psychological Society in 1920 (625). Brown also stated that the inability to respond to trauma resulted in repression of memories and that discussing the memories through the use of hypnosis would help alleviate the symptoms of shell-shock (qtd. in Leys 625-6). Tracey Loughran’s summary of the history of shell-shock treatments in Britain discusses the cures proffered by asylum owner Lionel Weatherly: “iron, arsenic and Ovaltine,” which he claimed “could work wonders for ‘mild mental disorders’” (88). The idea of talk therapy was a popular one, though it was not often put into practice, according to Loughran. She further states that there was,

little evidence of widespread, in-depth intellectual engagement with psychoanalysis. Although the word ‘psychoanalysis’ was bandied about with increasing frequency from 1918, in many cases this was little more than lip service to the talking cure. Most often the term only connoted a conversation with

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9 The paper he delivered and its subsequent discussion were published in *The British Journal of Medical Psychology* 1 (Oct. 1920): 16-33 under the paper’s title “The Revival of Emotional Memories and Its Therapeutic Value.”
the patient about his war experience and, despite adopting the language, doctors were keen to stress their distance from Freud’s theories and techniques. (89) The attempts at recreating talk therapy in encouraging the shell-shock victim to discuss his war experiences were a less invasive method of treatment than others practiced. Sayers’s incorporation of detection as therapy was among the gentler methods of treating victims of shell-shock. Eric J. Leed recounts in *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War* that in the British army, the difference between soldiers who were malingering and those who were suffering from shell-shock was found in their submission to “disciplinary treatment” (173) which included electrical shock, isolation, a restricted diet (which would have restrictions eased if the victim stopped suffering), and a period of being shouted at (173-174). Leed further details the pride felt by Lewis Yealland, a British supporter of “disciplinary therapies,” who claimed he could “cure cases of hysterical mutism that had lasted for months in a matter of minutes” (174). Leed cites the case of a twenty-four-year-old private who had been mute for nine months; at one session, the private “had been strapped to a chair for twenty minutes at a time while strong electricity had been applied to his neck and throat: lighted cigarette ends had been applied to the tip of his tongue and ‘hot plates’ had been placed at the back of his mouth” (174). When that treatment failed to work because, as Yealland claimed, the treatment had not been “applied with thoroughness and consistency” (174), the private received electrical shock for hour and half-hour sessions until he could whisper. Comparatively, modern treatments for victims of trauma focus on talk therapy, which call upon the listener to participate in the cure by becoming “a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event” (Laub “Bearing”57). By participating in hearing the narrative of the traumatic event, the listener “comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels” (58). In writing of shell-shock, Sayers is calling
upon the reader to participate in the treatment by bearing witness to the pain felt by Wimsey and veterans like him. In this way, Sayers is participating in the healing process as well.

Sayers’s experience living with the effects of shell-shock informed her writing. In 1934, after finding a letter her husband had lost several weeks before, Sayers wrote to her cousin Ivy Shrimpton, who was taking care of Sayers’s son: “‘Mac is getting so queer and unreliable that it is not safe to trust him to do anything at all, and if he is told that he has forgotten anything, he goes into such a frightful fit of rage that one gets really alarmed. The doctors say that he is getting definitely queer—but there doesn’t seem to be much that one can do about it’” (qtd. in Reynolds 341). Martin Stone’s seminal 1985 essay “Shellshock and the Psychologists” discusses the medical profession’s difficulties in coping with post-World War One veterans as shell-shock patients. He states that “traditional neurological and psychiatric doctrines” accorded the symptoms of some victims to hysteria, while others “appeared to be suffering from severe forms of ‘neurasthenia’. These were two conditions which at the time were held in low medical esteem” (251). This “low medical esteem” is exemplified in psychologist William McDougall’s 1926 Outline of Abnormal Psychology statement that the neuroses were “especially perhaps in Britain …neglected and despised” by neurologists and psychiatrists alike” because medicine’s dogged focus on a search for structural anomalies could not account for psychiatric issues. (qtd. in Stone 251).

With medicine unable to offer any answers for Sayers, she pressed to find her own treatment for shell-shock. Her letter to her cousin continues and she expresses impatience about the impotent position in which the lack of knowledge about shell-shock has placed them. Though shell-shock is not explicitly named by Sayers, it is strongly suggested:
It is all very worrying, but only part of the major worry which is caused by the mental trouble of Mac’s, which is due to some kind of germ or disease or shock or something—probably the result of the War. Doctors don’t seem able to do much about it, and it makes everything difficult, and explains a lot of what you must have thought slackness and queerness on my part. It also makes the financial position very awkward, as he can’t earn any money, and what with his illness and the difficulty of managing his odd fits of temper and so on, it isn’t easy for me to get any work done regularly and properly. Don’t refer to this too openly when you reply, in case he should see your letter. (qtd. in Reynolds 341-342)

The dearth of resources available to victims of shell-shock (and their families) means that Sayers cannot even be sure that what her husband is suffering from is shell-shock, or that his condition is even a direct result of the war. Her letters suggest deep unhappiness within her marriage; however, Sayers’s life with Mac (Atherton) Fleming is considered by many of her biographers to have been somewhat happy, though uneven with “a deep underlying affection for the other; and on her side there was, in addition, a sympathetic understanding of his troubles, on his real respect for her qualities and a pride in her achievements” (Brabazon 174). Her marriage and that of Peter and Harriet inform each other, with Peter and Harriet’s idealized model of coping and Sayers and Mac’s more realistic struggles with the reality of post-war life. Their marriage in 1926 provided her with a model for Lord Peter’s recovery, the agonizing process of coming to terms with the fact that, as she stated in a letter to her mother shortly after their marriage, “when one has been so badly gassed one cannot expect to go on quite as usual” (qtd. in Reynolds 251-252). Sayers cared deeply for her husband, but often commented in her letters how ill her husband was, how badly his stomach pained him, and how fits of rage or forgetfulness overcame him. Sayers’s
letters provide little clue to her inspiration for her novels; rather they dwell more on the financial needs that her books took care of, needs that were particularly pressing in light of her husband’s sketchy patterns of employment. However, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* displays, more than any other of Sayers’s works, a sense of guilt and responsibility as though, simply by being a British citizen, she is responsible for the consequences of her husband’s service. Even though this sense of responsibility is a general characteristic of works from the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, its pervasiveness in this story shows an idea of guilt, a sense of a desire to participate in the war. Because Sayers did not undergo great hardship during the war, her writing becomes an attempt to understand the experiences her husband lived through which caused his shell-shock and affected their life together. Though written two years into their marriage, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*’s scene of marital strife between an out-of-work shell-shocked veteran and his wife was, as suggested by biographer James Brabazon, an embodiment of the tumultuous arguments between Sayers and Fleming. In incorporating shell-shock into her stories, she also includes treatment for it in the act featured in the stories themselves: detection.

Sayers makes a powerful statement on detective fiction’s behalf. Detecting becomes Lord Peter’s treatment for his shell-shock. Sayers is making the claim on behalf of detective fiction that sleuthing offers a therapeutic approach in the treatment of shell-shock. She has lived with its effects, and it has disrupted her work. She was, albeit temporarily, conquering its hold over her life by escaping into her work. When its presence seeped into her stories, she uses the power of detective fiction to represent the trauma and hold it at bay so that her character can function and gain some sense of peace, a temporary cure that she was unable to offer her husband.

**Women and War**
Dorothy L. Goldman suggests in *Women Writers and the Great War* that women wrote about the Great War as a way to not only identify with the men who had fought but also to participate in the war for themselves. (95-98). This theory is echoed by Sandra M. Gilbert in “Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War,” who suggests the war “was the first historical event to allow (indeed, to require) them to use their abilities and to be of use, to escape the private ‘staves’ of houses as well as the patriarchal oppression of ‘high towers’ and to enter the public realm” (440). Gilbert goes on to describe how the male bonding that occurred among soldiers would be echoed by the liberatory bonding that women felt when they were called upon to play important roles during the war. (443-444). Sayers had had a relatively comfortable time during the war, most of which she spent at Oxford. She was not called to play anything that could be considered an important role; in writing about shell-shock, Sayers creates a character who had an important role and, through him, she can try to understand her husband’s illness and depict a relationship in which a wife helps her husband cope with trauma.

During the war, changing social conditions and the sudden imbalance between the sexes affected Oxford greatly. Mitzi Brunsdale states that the male population of Oxford dropped from three thousand to one thousand between 1914 and 1915 and of the “eight scholars and exhibitioners who came up to Balliol . . . in 1912, only two were alive at the end of the war” (54). Somerville was emptied of its students after the 1915 term and used as a military hospital. The Somerville women were moved to Oriel College and, apparently conducted themselves with decorum, even with residual males attempting to carry on flirtations (54). The women were working to be taken seriously as scholars, with fewer restrictions on their library access at Oxford. Through this, Sayers and the other female Oxford students had learned to live without men and create their own kinds of amusements and employment opportunities. Even though the
passage in 1919 of the Sex Qualification Act made gender discrimination in employment illegal, Sayers and other women found it difficult to find jobs because of the influx of employable soldiers and lack of change in attitudes of employers (McGregor and Lewis 19). Sayers considers nursing during World War One and tells her parents in a 1915 letter, “Of course, in one way I should hate nursing—hard labour and horrors—but I should be frightfully glad to have done it, and to have done something real for the first time in my life (qtd. in Reynolds 109). These feelings of excitement and fulfillment that women felt when they were called upon to be useful have been examined in the non-fictional products of women writers during and after World War One. The liberatory nature of women’s warwork has been observed in the works of Vera Brittain, Rebecca West, and Mary Borden (Lee 11), but the impact of war in the fiction of female detective fiction writers has not been studied. Sayers’s work offers the opportunity to examine the aftermath of war in a fictional setting, though the realism of her husband’s plight after the war seeps into her work.

War and Detection

The motif of life after the terrors of war runs throughout the Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries. Sayers created in Lord Peter a character that could rediscover his capability through his detection. Lord Peter had ostensibly taken up the hobby of detecting to ease the broken heart caused by his fiancée ending their engagement. In fact, “Wimsey returned to the Western Front with ‘the fixed intention of getting killed, but all he got was his majority and his D.S.O. [Distinguished Service Order] for some recklessly good work behind the German Front’” (qtd. in Lewis 5). Although this hobby served to distract Peter from his broken heart and help him to heal, there would be many reminders of the war in his cases. Freedman suggests that Lord Peter “recovers through his discovery of detective work. It gives him new vigor, purpose, and interest
in life, and an accidental hobby develops into vocation. This hobby seems at once an antidote to the war and an extension of the war’s concerns. Detective work serves as both disease and cure” (381). Freedman’s argument that detection is a temporary cure for shell-shock, with marriage being its ultimate cure, differs from my claim that detection as cure allows for marriage. She sees marriage as the ultimate treatment for shell-shock while this paper theorizes that a productive marriage only becomes possible for Peter after detection has helped him deal with his trauma. Peter has not been cured, as Freedman claims. Detection helps him deal with the trauma, but its cyclical nature that leaves him in the position of authority over someone else keeps reinjuring him and reviving the memories of sending his men to their deaths. Simply the act of detecting would be linked with heartbreak and his attempt to exert some sort of control over his life. Detecting served to distract his mind not only from the terrors of war, but also from his broken heart. Though he had led troops in his capacity as a Major, he had still been responsible for carrying out the orders of his superiors. Detecting was a hobby that provided him with autonomy. When faced with lighter, less serious cases, he could choose to pursue the puzzles that interested him. Taking on the cases that threatened those he loved, as when both his sister and brother are accused of the murder of his sister’s fiancé in *Clouds of Witness* (1926) or when Harriet Vane was tried for the murder of her lover in *Strong Poison* (1930), gave him the ability to defend people who were dear to him. He did not have a great deal of control during the war, but ensuring the safety of his loved ones acted as an impetus for him to solve the crimes.

Although the character of Lord Peter seemed to have led a charmed life before the war—wealthy, handsome, well-educated with a First in History at Oxford’s Balliol College, and an excellent cricket player—the charm of his “silly-ass” manner after the war served to isolate and insulate him from the emotions of others. However, a pattern emerges at the end of each case
whereby Peter must face the fact that a culprit he has discovered must have some sort of justice meted out to him or her. It is this responsibility for the fate of others that brings on Lord Peter’s lapses into depression, immobility, and a return to the near catatonic state he was left in after the war. In particular, the final solutions of *Unnatural Death* and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* cause Peter to relive his most horrific memories of the war, often through nightmares.

During *Unnatural Death*, Lord Peter’s “investigations cause two new murders, as well as some attempted murders and finally the suicide of the killer. Wimsey tried to relieve some of his guilty feelings through a conversation he holds with a kindly vicar, during which Wimsey admitted that he acted from a sense of duty and curiosity” (Lewis 7). This sense of responsibility for the criminal, first appearing in *Unnatural Death*, which often causes Peter so much angst is a recurring theme throughout the novels. He even goes so far, as with the villain in *Busman’s Honeymoon*, to hire the brilliant Sir Impey Biggs to defend the culprit. This is the same barrister he had hired previously to defend Harriet Vane, with whom he had fallen in love. His response is the same whether he is trying to save a man he has found responsible for a horrific murder or the wrongfully accused woman he loves. Choosing a barrister of such excellent quality to defend a man he knew to be a murderer seems to be a way of attempting to expiate his guilt and also continues his war-honed sense of *noblesse oblige* that he needs to look out for other men.

Lord Peter knows he has the right culprit because the evidence has led to the villain—who has confessed though shown a strong lack of remorse—but he still wants to be sure that the murderer has every chance at justice. He has problems sending villains to their death, even those he has found responsible of murder(s). This dislike for authority over the lives of others is a holdover from his days as a major in that even “the condemnation of an unrepentant and amoral villain cannot come without ambivalence, since his unmasking and discovery will result in the taking of
his life—a consequence Lord Peter must face seriously because it means that he continues in a death-dealing profession” (Freedman 381). The detection hobby he had turned to for relief from his shell-shock keeps him paradoxically responsible for others because he feels guilt for both the victims he did not save and the villains who are sent to be executed after being sleuthed by him. One aspect of his shell-shock is seen after he returns from the war in his unwillingness to make even the simplest of decisions. As his mother explains in a later novel to the woman he has courted and married over the course of the series:

He doesn’t like responsibility, you know. . . . There were about eighteen months. . . . I don’t mean he went out of his mind or anything, and he was always so perfectly sweet about it, only he was so dreadfully afraid to go to sleep . . . and he couldn’t give an order, not even to the servants, which made it really very miserable for him, poor lamb! . . . I suppose if you’ve been giving orders for nearly four years to people to go and get blown to pieces it gives you a—what does one call it nowadays?—an inhibition, or an exhibition, or something, of nerves. (Sayers Busman 385)

His inanition regarding decision-making stems from the consequences that his previous choices had caused. After being forced to send men to their deaths, even his choice of what to eat for breakfast or what to wear becomes too much responsibility to bear. At the conclusion of one case and its subsequent nightmare, he even frankly remarks to his wife that it was “only the old responsibility dream, and a mild one at that” (qtd. in Lewis 10). The consequences of shell-shock and the idea of personal responsibility come to great prominence in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. 
The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club reflects Sayers’s attempt to understand shell-shock and explore society’s reaction to those who have been damaged by the war and the way perceptions of masculinity were affected by victims of shell-shock. Even its title indicates that the novel focuses on war with the Club’s name referencing the Roman goddess of war (Freedman 377). In the novel’s first scene, Wimsey observes Armistice Day at his club when he hears his friend, Captain George Fentiman, complain that since the war, “A man goes and fights for his country, gets his inside gassed out, and loses his job, and all they give him is the privilege of marching past the Cenotaph once a year and paying four shillings in the pound income-tax.” Fentiman continues, “It’s pretty damnable for a man to have to live on his wife’s earnings, isn’t it? I can’t help it, Wimsey. I go sick and have to chuck jobs up. Money—I never thought of money before the War, but I swear nowadays I’d commit any damned crime to get hold of a decent income” (Sayers Unpleasantness 2). Sayers encourages the reader to see the wounded soldier as more than damaged goods; he is still a man with pride, who has been badly treated by the country he fought for. Her emphasis on the damage to a man’s pride at having to depend on his wife is an attempt to reach out to her husband, whom she was supporting by her writing.

James Brabazon sums up Sayers and Mac’s relationship in his 1981 biography of her by commenting, “If his war-time ailments made him difficult, she would endure the difficulty, If he was the kind of man —and he was—who demanded his meals on the table promptly at the same hour each day, she would see that he got them” (Brabazon 146). Even though Sayers took financial responsibility for her family, she tried to give her husband the appearance of running their household. She attempts to show the vulnerability felt by men in her husband’s condition in the character of George Fentiman. The increased independence of women, especially his wife, particularly grates on George Fentiman, whose nervous condition leaves him dependent on his
wife for financial support. Elaine Showalter suggests that these battles between men and women were not an uncommon experience for men suffering from shell-shock. In an attempt to deny their own hysteria, which had been “an accepted form of feminine expression,” Showalter states that “Men’s quarrels with the feminine element in their own psyches became externalized as quarrels with women” (173). Sayers uses a quarrel between George and his wife to illustrate not only how women’s roles changed while the men were off at war, but also how the men responded to their change in status. Fentiman later carps, “‘The modern girl hasn’t a scrap of decent feeling or sentiment about her. Money—money and notoriety, that’s all she’s after. That’s what we fought the War for—and that’s what we’ve come back to!’” (Sayers Unpleasantness 65). Sayers is trying to gain sympathy for a man forced to rely on his wife, a difficult situation with which she was well acquainted. Nancy Tischler comments that the “painful picture of the Fentiman marriage is too realistic in the story to be either funny or entirely fictional” (Tischler 71). While the men were fighting, women were taking over their roles, providing for themselves and seeking ways of earning independence.

Men have returned from the war to find that the women have made them obsolete. Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis refer to Robert Graves’s The Long Week-End to summarize the soldiers’ homecoming difficulties:

Women were everywhere in public, smoking openly, voicing opinions on political questions (including their own right to vote), wearing clothes that flattened breasts and de-emphasized sexuality, and holding jobs they did not want to leave. Everyone wanted to be nice to the soldiers, but no one knew quite what to say. Everything was different, so hollow. Society wanted very much to welcome the men back but, at the same time, people did not want to give up what they had
gained in the soldiers’ absence. Most women returned to the home reluctantly, and a significant few held on to a new life in the public sphere. War veterans found the adjustment to changing women’s roles especially difficult. Long stretches of abstinence in the trenches inclined the troops to objectify women as just so many desirable bodies. The idea that British women might desire something more—a job, security without marriage, common respect—seemed utterly foreign. (McGregor and Lewis 16-17)

As the women’s opportunities were expanding, the men who had returned from the war with shell-shock found their masculinity was being questioned. Showalter observes that when “military doctors and psychiatrists dismissed shell-shock patients as cowards, they were often hinting at effeminacy or homosexuality” (172). She elaborates, referencing Freudian Karl Abraham, “who argued that war neurotics were passive, narcissistic, and impotent men to begin with, whose latent homosexuality was brought to the surface by the all-male environment” (172).

This theory was not wholly given credence at the time; W.H.R. Rivers, who treated shell-shock cases at Craiglockhart War Hospital disagreed and stated in a 1922 article that in the “vast majority of cases there is no reason to suppose that factors derived from the sexual life played any essential part in causation” (qtd. in Meyer 3). Rivers suggests that the cause of shell-shock should be accorded as “the result of disturbance of another instinct, one even more fundamental than that of sex—the instinct for self-preservation, especially those forms of it which are adapted to protect the animal from danger” (qtd. in Meyer 3). The weakness of feminization was applied to men who had been injured; surprisingly, the designation was applied to those who had been physically injured as well as those suffering from shell-shock. Bourke recounts how “crippled soldiers had to be ‘made’ into men again” with physical rehabilitative tasks showing a
“progression of labour” that went “from stitching bags, to work with machinery” (74). This “‘[c]urative work’ was not only intended to teach the disabled how to become productive workers, but also to become ‘men’, shrugging off what was regarded as the feminizing tendencies of disability” (74). This feminizing of the wounded served to undermine their masculinity, reducing them to less than men: first to children who needed to relearn simple tasks, then to women whose tasks were domestic in nature.

With the surprising discovery of the death of his grandfather, Captain Fentiman has a recurrence of his shell-shock, “Peal after hysterical peal shook his throat... ‘Take him away!... take him away. He’s been dead two days! So are you! So am I! We’re all dead and we never noticed it!’” (Sayers *Unpleasantness 5*). Sayers’s use of the term “hysterical” feminizes Fentiman; she is emphasizing the insidious nature of the disorder in an attempt to help the reader understand how emasculated Fentiman has become by his shell-shock. The maniacal laughter that is Fentiman’s response sends his mind back into the trenches and he is unable to cope with the surprise death, as unexpected as can be when a man in his nineties has an apparent heart attack, of his grandfather.

There is a strong generational disconnect between the older members of the Bellona Club, who would have fought in the Boer War (1880-1881) and Crimean War (1853-1856), and the younger men who have lived through the war. At Fentiman’s hysterical outburst, the younger men are unfazed, while the older men are discomfited by his reaction. The family lawyer refers to George as having “‘inherited a weakly strain from his grandmother,’” to which Wimsey reacts: “‘Well, nervous, anyhow,’ said Wimsey, who knew better than the old solicitor the kind of mental and physical strain George Fentiman had undergone. The War pressed hardly upon imaginative men in responsible positions. ‘And then he was gassed and all that, you know,’ he
added apologetically” (14). This ironic adverbial choice by Sayers shows that some of the
clichéd—though nonetheless true for the cliché—notion of the stiff upper lip still remains strong.
This tone of regret is an attempt to exert control over the circumstances, to downplay the terrors
of war and turn them into something regrettable, like one’s team losing the alumni cricket match
or accidentally dropping a picnic off the punt into the Isis.

The inability to translate the horrors of war after a return to peacetime was a hallmark of
shell-shock. Leed remarks that shell-shock’s appearance after the war represented a
“disillusionment [that] could precipitate severe nervous disorders” (188). One of the doctors
examines George Fentiman during a later breakdown and remarks upon the “‘Nervous shock
with well-marked delusions. . . . A hundred years ago they’d have called it diabolic possession,
but we know better’” (Sayers Unpleasantness 231). It has been approximately sixty-three years
since the Crimean War ended. The men who fought there are dying off, some even in the book,
and those who are alive are unable to understand how warfare has changed. Their generation,
who had known combat, though having different horrors than the World War One veterans, is
slowly being replaced by men who have not fought in any war and cannot understand the need
for sympathy and empathy for the survivors of Europe’s then-most brutal war. The returning
veterans, burdened with shell-shock, find themselves holding on to the effects of trauma,
“preventing it from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past” (Erikson 185).

But it is not only Fentiman who recalls the terrors of war when confronted with the rather
non-surprising death of an old man in his sleep. The disturbed state of the General’s body
suggests to Peter that one of the waiters may have jostled the body and become surprised and
frightened. The doctor at the Bellona Club admits that it is possible discovering the death of the
General could have revived the terrors in other victims of shell-shock: “‘It might seem alarming
to a man in a very nervous state. We have one or two shell-shock cases that I wouldn’t answer for in an emergency. It would be worth considering, perhaps, if any one had shown special signs of agitation or shock that day’” (Sayers Unpleasantness 31). Again, Sayers conveys to the reader the immense strain that the men were under and how it affected their daily lives, that the surprising death of an old man could knock away someone’s self-control. She is also commenting on society’s reaction to the men who suffered from shell-shock. They were often viewed with suspicion by society, seen as weak or unable to withstand upsets. Freedman describes how the “shell-shocked soldier in some ways resembled the rehabilitated criminal, outwardly normal but automatically suspect as prone to lapses. Moreover, victims of shell-shock were sometimes assumed to be more susceptible to criminal behavior… and their amnesiac episodes or periods of loss of control in a wartime context seemed likely to recur in a civilian context” (370). These men who had lost control of themselves during the war were seen as a threat because of their unpredictability. Paradoxically, while the men were seen as a threat to society for the inability to be predicted and controlled, they were also seen as weak and feminine because of their reactions to the war.

Kathy J. Phillips argues in Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature that the war permitted men to be emotional about their friendships as long as the emotion was kept for comrades in battle during battle (65-75). Phillips also discusses the use of the term “womanly” as an epithet used toward those who had been unwilling to go to war. The release of emotion was only acceptable in certain circumstances, such as the death of a comrade. However, any injury, not necessarily a mental response could remove a soldier’s agency. Janet Lee recounts in War Girls: The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry in the First World War how the “[w]ounded soldiers were often represented as infantilized and passive” (152). But
it was the soldiers suffering from shell-shock, or hysteria, who were particularly feminized by their weakness. Elaine Showalter describes how the hysterical soldier was seen as “simple, emotional, unthinking, passive, suggestible, dependent, and weak—very much the same constellation of traits associated with the hysterical woman” (175). This hysteria experienced by the soldiers would render them more powerless after the war; as Sandra Gilbert states, “paradoxically, in fact, the war to which so many men had gone in the hope of becoming heroes, ended up emasculating them” (447-8). The men had gone to war in an attempt to empower themselves as men and fight to save their women, their country, and their way of life, yet many ended up powerless and unable to return to their pre-war lives.

The generation gap is again emphasized by Sayers to highlight the myriad of differences between the experiences of the older soldiers from the Crimean and Boer Wars and the young men who served in World War I. George Fentiman complains about his grandfather and brother, men who shared the same stolid attitude toward being a soldier: “The old man—damn it all, I know he was in the Crimea, but he’s got no idea what a real war’s like. He thinks things can go on just as they did half a century ago. I daresay he never did behave as I do. Anyhow, he never had to go to his wife for his pocket money, let alone having the inside gassed out of him—and I couldn’t say anything, because he was confoundedly old, you know” (Sayers Unpleasantness 89). George Fentiman’s shame at not being able to work because of his shell-shock is compounded by his grandfather’s judgmental attitude toward his illness. The inability of the two generations of war veterans to relate to each other’s experiences contributed to the World War One veterans seeing the older ones as unfeeling and the Crimean/Boer veterans not able to comprehend the masculinity crisis felt by the younger veterans who were grappling with the effects of shell-shock; this is seen later in the story when an older Colonel remarks “Sometimes,
Lord Peter, I think that the War has had a bad effect on some of our young men. But then, of course, all are not soldiers by training, and that makes a great difference. I certainly notice a less fine sense of honour in these days than we had when I was a boy. There were not so many excuses made then for people; there were things that were done and things that were not done.” (236). George Fentiman is further confounded in his attempts to gain sympathy by his brother Robert who was:

so thick-skinned; the regular unimaginative Briton. I believe Robert would cheerfully go through another five years of war and think it all a very good rag. Robert was proverbial, you know, for never turning a hair. I remember Robert, at that ghastly hole at Carency, where the whole ground was rotten with corpses—ugh!—potting those swollen great rats for a penny at a time, and laughing at them. Rats. Alive and putrid with what they’d been feeding on. Oh, yes. Robert was thought a damn good soldier. (90-91)

Though not a “damn good soldier,” Lord Peter acquires power when he uses his own shell-shock recovery to manipulate others to open up to him. He gains strength and the ability to understand the mystery by talking about his experiences after the war. In an attempt to empathize with a heartbroken Fentiman cousin, Peter confides in her: “I was in a nursing home—with shell-shock—and other things. I only played one game, the very simplest . . . the demon . . . a silly game with no ideas in it at all. I just went on laying it out and gathering it up . . . hundred times in an evening . . . so as to stop thinking’” (215). Peter manipulates the recounting of a symptom of his shell-shock, his “obsessive behavior,” (Stone 251) to gain the girl’s trust and piece together the clues to solve the mystery. Peter has taken his past and has not just kept it from negatively affecting his work, he makes his shell-shock memories and the recounting of them
work in his favor. His experience with shell-shock becomes a tool he can wield to get others to open up to him. This is an example of what Shoshana Felman calls “the liberating, vital function of the testimony” (Felman “Education” 47). But he still is not able to completely free himself from its influence.

The military tradition that has pervaded the book continues in Sayers’s representation of the older Colonel as executioner, providing a loaded gun to the suspect. After learning the identity of the culprit, Peter’s decision to permit the culprit to commit suicide in exchange for a confession to exonerate the suspected Fentiman family members once again makes him responsible for another man’s death. When Peter conferences with the older, higher-ranked military man, the Colonel states, “you’ve done the best thing, to my mind. I look at these matters from a soldier’s point of view, of course. Much better to make a clean job of it all” (Sayers Unpleasantness 236). There is a curious sense of noblesse oblige about this passage; Peter is granting someone death. He is administering justice and acting as judge and jury, but still the high-ranked, older man is the one who ultimately grants the opportunity for the villain’s self-execution. Stone highlights Rivers’s claim that class played a role in the delayed nature of some cases of shell-shock; Rivers stated that “officers, by virtue of their class background—(in particular their experiences in the public school system) were highly capable of dealing with fear. Indeed, many of them having undergone a ‘character-building’ education were all too capable and continued bottling up their fears and repressing their anxieties until they finally broke down” (qtd. in Stone 260). Peter’s class role meant that he had to see the war through, and ultimately, each mystery, until he could break down under the weight of his responsibilities.

Continuing the Treatment
Nine years have passed in the narrative of Lord Peter’s detection when Sayers explicitly reveals what Peter had gone through during the war. At Harriet Vane’s college reunion, Shrewsbury College porter Padgett recognizes Peter from when they were Corporal Padgett and Major Wimsey. Peter recalls, “‘Last time I saw you, I was being carried away on a stretcher’” (Sayers *Gaudy* 383). The men reminisce:

‘That’s right, sir. I ’ad the pleasure of ’elping to dig you out.’

‘I know you did. I’m glad to see you now, but I was a dashed sight gladder to see you then.’

‘Yes, sir. Gorblimey, sir—well, there! We thought you was gone that time. . . .’

‘I fancy I was more frightened than hurt. Unpleasant sensation, being buried alive.’ (383)

Sayers’s passage emphasizes the male camaraderie of the trenches. Peter had said little to Harriet about his war experiences; it is a chance encounter with a man from his wartime experiences that brings forth his story of being buried alive. The bonding that went on between the men encouraged a sense of solidarity, that he was dependent upon his comrades-in-arms and that they were all fighting for the same cause (Leed 200). Harriet is outside of this and it is due to their shared experiences that she learns key information about the background of a man she was in a relationship with. In this mystery set in a college of women, this is all that is said about Peter’s war memories. The plot takes place in the cloistered women’s college, no place for further tales of men and blood. The topic fades into the background, but is nonetheless still present, a technique indicative of the way the war had ended and people went on with their lives, but still felt the effects.
After their marriage, Harriet is haltingly told the full details of Peter’s shell-shock by Peter’s mother. Peter’s valet, Bunter, had been in Peter’s regiment and, true to his promise, came to work for Peter after he was released. The day Bunter arrived:

happened to be one of Peter’s very worst days, when he couldn’t do anything but just sit and shiver. . . . I liked the look of the man, so I said, ‘Well, you can try— but I don’t suppose he’ll be able to make his mind up one way or the other.’ So I took Bunter in, and it was quite dark, because I suppose Peter hadn’t the presence of mind to switch the lights on . . . so he had to ask who it was. Bunter said, ‘Sergeant Bunter, my lord, come to enter your lordship’s service as arranged’— and he turned on the lights and drew the curtains and took charge from that moment. I believe he managed so that for months Peter never had to give an order about so much as a soda-siphon. . . . He found that flat and took Peter up to Town and did everything. (Sayers Busman 386)

The revelation of Lord Peter’s breakdown creates a belated sense of admiration in the reader. 

Busman’s Honeymoon is the eleventh (and last) novel to feature Lord Peter. By this time, the reader has become accustomed to seeing Lord Peter as a man of action who gains power through his detective work. He is able to ensure justice is administered and that the innocent are not punished. Though the audience may see him as temporarily weak and vulnerable, what is important is the knowledge that Lord Peter has been able to conquer his powerlessness and become an agent for good. Robert Hemmings claims in Modern Nostalgia: Siegfried Sassoon, Trauma and the Second World War that “Modern war enforced a destructive breach that made the past ever more inaccessible, apparently even more distant, which served to intensify the longing for it” (5). Lord Peter seems to recover, at least enough to pursue his detective work, but
the damage caused by the war becomes apparent whenever the responsibilities of his work become too great. At these moments, the audience becomes aware that his return to the consciousness of his strength is only temporary. The pain of his war past can return at any time. Sayers’s admission of Lord Peter’s pain makes him a stronger character because he has been able to, albeit possibly temporarily, conquer his shell-shock by understanding that an activity that allows him to regain power is therapeutic.

This awareness of the ever-lurking chance of a lapse into catatonia creates a sense of nostalgia for a time without the threat of a relapse. Yet it also creates an admiration for the character who has found a way to work through a shell-shock that had left him weak and impotent. His personality after the war is a far cry from the strong, capable man who had entered it and bravely fought; Showalter recounts the theory by Smith and Pear that “the most severe cases of shell shock occurred in officers who had made a reputation as dare devils” (174) because they acted in ways to keep their men from observing their fear. Wimsey’s war exploits had won him accolades for his bravery; he attempts to regain that masculinity lost in his bout with hysteria through his detection. Yet, the ends of his cases, particularly those that send the culprit to be executed, often bring back that sense of responsibility that haunts him. This pattern continues through the end of the series; when a body is discovered in *Busman’s Honeymoon* while Lord Peter and Harriet are on their honeymoon and Harriet and Peter’s solution ends in a death sentence for the murderer. His responsibility for the death of another man takes Peter back to the emotional state of his War days. They had solved the case and “…no marriage had ever been so happy as theirs—only, Peter was dreaming again” (Sayers *Busman* 390). Sayers uses these dreams to show the pressure Peter was under when he had to care for the lives of his men in the trenches. Once again, Peter holds someone’s life in his hands and, through his detecting
hobby, is responsible for the death of another man. Though there is no explicit reference to Peter sending someone to death during the War, the links that occur between his hobby and War experiences strongly suggest that he had to have been responsible for the death of at least one of his men. Peter’s role as an officer could be the simplest impetus for guilt; J.M. Winter states in *The Great War and the British People* that for “every officer killed, twenty men of lower ranks fell during the war” (282). Having grown up with a life of privilege decreased the odds that Peter would die while increasing the odds that one or more of those he commanded would be killed.

When Harriet appeals to her mother-in-law for suggestions to help Peter, Peter’s mother responds, “‘Let him find his own way out. . . . One thing, my dear—*he is still there*, and that’s encouraging. It’s so easy for a man to be somewhere else’” (Sayers *Busman* 395). “‘It’s not cold,’ he said, half-angrily, ‘it’s my rotten nerves. I can’t help it. I suppose I’ve never really been right since the War. I hate behaving like this. I tried to stick it out by myself’” (400). He has retained his stiff upper lip throughout the trial out the three weeks between the pronouncement of guilt and the execution. However, before dawn on the day of the execution, he allows her to comfort him: “Quite suddenly, he said, ‘Oh, damn!’ and began to cry—in an awkward, unpracticed way at first, and then more easily. So she held him, crouched at her knees, against her breast, huddling his head in her arms that he might not hear eight o’clock strike” (403). For the first time in their relationship, Harriet can comfort Peter. Sayers uses this moment of his opening up to her to show the completeness of their union. Freedman suggests Peter Wimsey’s ability “to surrender to his wife is a sign of their reconciliation and of the potential to bridge the gap between their lives. This romantic, even idealized ending — the light growing stronger, the husband in the arms of his wife — takes the image of the effeminized shell-shocked soldier and reverses its significance” (383). Lord Peter finds strength in allowing himself to be comforted.
Unlike his earlier aid from Bunter, his wartime subordinate and peacetime servant, the help from Harriet, his wife, is an opportunity to acknowledge his weakness and deal with it, rather than push it aside for a later time. She is able to meet him as a comrade in crime-solving which evens out their relationship; his sex made him her superior, as did his class, wealth, and his act in saving her from execution after being wrongfully accused of an ex-lover’s murder. Even though the story ends with an execution and Lord Peter breaking down, Sayers ends her series with a sense of optimism that Lord Peter and Harriet will be equal partners in life. The day dawns and their relationship is idealized by the closing John Donne Eclogue for the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset that details an eternal fire made of two hearts and four eyes.

Sayers was a pioneer in discussing the impact the war had had on the soldiers. McGregor and Lewis note that her seminal The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club precedes both All Quiet on the Western Front and Good-bye to All That (73). Through the medium of detective fiction, a genre which has often been derided with the epithet of “popular literature,” Sayers opens the way for a dialogue which acknowledges the horrors felt by the men who have served. Even though the war is no longer a topic making daily headlines, it has not left the national consciousness. It was still making its effects known in the lives of all those who fought and all those who were left at home to wait. Sayers’s use of shell-shock as a literary device recognizes that for many the war is still going on.
Dorothy L. Sayers: Gender and the Feminist Label of *Gaudy Night*

Dorothy L. Sayers’s 1936 work *Gaudy Night* was hardly the first work of detective fiction to have a female character as its focus. Most notably, *Gaudy Night* was predated by those of fellow Detection Club members Baroness Emmuska Orczy, with *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* (1910) and Agatha Christie’s novels featuring Tuppence Cowley Beresford, first seen in 1922’s *The Secret Adversary*, and Miss Jane Marple, whose first appearance was in the short story “The Tuesday Night Club” (1927). The controversy arises from *Gaudy Night*’s label as one of the first feminist detective fiction novels. Sayers scholarship usually focuses on the development of Sayers’s main character, the detective fiction writer Harriet Vane, and rarely looks at the mystery that is ostensibly the purpose of the novel. In failing to do so, Sayers’s complex attitudes toward the feminist movement, as encapsulated by the villain Annie Wilson, have not been explored. Wilson’s attitudes toward marriage and motherhood echo Sayers’s published essays regarding the feminist movement and the role of women in the home and the workforce. *Gaudy Night* continues to show Sayers’s attempts to reconcile her fiction with a world of changing gender roles. Just as her earlier novels focused on gentleman detective Lord Peter Wimsey’s conflict of masculinity in the face of his World War One experiences, *Gaudy Night* features a strong female character attempting to understand the changing social dynamic in women’s roles. In her works featuring Harriet Vane, particularly *Gaudy Night*, Sayers uses the medium of detective fiction to explore a society that witnessed the transition and transformation of established social roles.

Incorporating the author’s background and her public statements regarding the feminist movement provides an opportunity to address scholarship which claims the character of Harriet

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Vane is the sole representation of Sayers in the novel; even Sayers’s friends teased her that she had created Harriet Vane as way to have a relationship with her detective-hero Lord Peter Wimsey. However, no scholarship observes the echo between her public speeches and the sentiments of her *Gaudy Night* criminal Annie Wilson. The conflict between Harriet Vane and Annie embodies the complexities and discrepancies between feminist interpretations of her detective fiction and her public attitudes towards the feminist movement, as observed in her public speeches. Sayers uses the character of Annie to emphasize the class divisions in 1920s and 1930s feminism, which was examining issues of poverty and contraception, women in the workplace, and an expansion of women’s suffrage (Kent 240-242). Post-war detective fiction offered an escape, particularly for female readers, who had been useful during the war and were then finding themselves expected to give up their positions for the returning soldiers. At that time, the audience for detective fiction was predominantly female (Symons 86). Through the characters of both Harriet Vane and Annie Wilson, Sayers examines the ambivalence of the feminist movement and disparages its issues with class. Closer analysis of the character of Annie Wilson enables Sayers’s criticism of the feminist movement to be more fully understood and addresses scholarship that suggests *Gaudy Night* should not be categorized as feminist detective fiction. I suggest that Sayers’s text considers a negotiation of gender roles and that labeling the text as strictly feminist or anti-feminist reduces its complexity to fit an imperfect label.

A Wimsey History

Sayers’s detective fiction featured the character of Lord Peter Wimsey, a gentleman detective who aped the mannerisms of P.G. Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster. He turns to detection to cope with the shell-shock trauma of World War One, which is compounded by his fiancée’s decision to marry another man in his absence. Between Wimsey’s first appearance in *Whose
Body (1923) and his presence in Gaudy Night (1935), he was featured in eight full-length novels and two books of short stories. Among those works were Strong Poison (1930) and Have His Carcase (1932); Strong Poison introduced him and Sayers’s readers to the character of Harriet Vane, who was on trial for the poisoning murder of her lover Philip Boyes. Wimsey is instantly attracted to Vane and works throughout the novel to solve the mystery and free Harriet, who was on trial for her life. Before solving the mystery, he proposes to Harriet; she refuses his offer of marriage, offering to live with him instead in “a tone . . . so unutterably dreary” (Sayers Strong 245) that he refuses, even after she reminds him that such an arrangement would allow him to “cut loose any time [he] wanted to” (245). Despite the appearance of a feminist resistance to marriage, Harriet’s desire to cohabit comes as a result of her wounded psyche, not because of any dislike for the institution itself. She refuses his offer of marriage because she not only needs time to deal with the shock of her arrest and near-conviction for murder, but also because she does not want to feel like she is tying herself to him for the rest of her life. She is attracted to him and feels like she owes him, thus the offer of a physical relationship, but she is unwilling to promise him anything permanent. His refusal indicates his awareness of how damaged her self-respect has become through her relationship with ex-lover Philip Boyes. Harriet does not appear in Five Red Herrings (1931), but is the main character in the next work, Have His Carcase. Two years have passed in Sayers’s timeline. While on a walking tour of England, Harriet discovers a man’s body. The subsequent publicity generated by a well-known authoress (and one-time murder suspect) claiming to have found a man’s body (which was lost for a time after being washed out to sea) proves overwhelming and she welcomes Wimsey’s assistance (though initially displeased that he was alerted to the murder by the reporter she had reached out to) in solving the mystery as the police are inclined to label the man’s death a suicide. Throughout the
novel, Harriet reaches out to Peter, then pushes him away when he expresses his feelings and offers one of his frequent proposals. The novel ends with their relationship at an impasse; she consents to ride back to London with him and have dinner. The three years that pass (in real time and in the Wimsey timeline) until *Gaudy Night*’s publication feature Wimsey appearing in two novels and one collection of short stories without Harriet, though *Gaudy Night* suggests that he has been pursuing her in the interim.

**Feminism in 1930s Detective Fiction**

Contemporary critics have praised *Gaudy Night* as an example of an early amalgamation of the detective fiction corpus, a strongly male-dominated field, and the feminist movement, which complicated the genre. Whereas male characters from male authors were rarely troubled with lengthy concerns of the heart, i.e. Sherlock Holmes’s very brief fascination with Irene Adler, the dearth of female characters in the short stories of Edgar Allen Poe, female authors slowly made changes to the genre by introducing characters with less pronounced masculine characteristics. Sally R. Munt discusses how Agatha Christie’s characters exemplified this shift, particularly the “narcissistic, emotive . . . obsessed with the domestic . . . feminine hero” Hercule Poirot (Munt 8). Christie’s other popular character, the asexual Miss Jane Marple, is featured in twelve novels which do not provide her with any masculine companions, nor is she ever described as taking any serious interest in a man. Lord Peter Wimsey, with the shell-shock from his war experiences returning after difficult cases, was a more modern hero who did not need to keep up a façade for the British public, unlike other heroes who reigned as thinking machines.

Sayers and Christie were not the only popular female writers of detective fiction in the early twentieth century; however, their writing was considered superior to other women’s detective fiction by themselves and their male cohorts in the Detection Club, whose members
included Sayers, Christie, G.K. Chesterton, and other male detective fiction writers. Merja Makinen describes how other women’s detective fiction of the period, such as the novels of Mary Roberts Rinehart and Mignon Eberhart, was heavily derided by the Detection Club because it “relied on intuition and a knowledge of personality to solve the crimes, rather than on material evidence and rationality” (101). Past Detection Club President Julian Symons states in *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* that these early novels, “were stories written to a pattern. All of them deal with crime, and the crime is almost always murder. There is a detective, but his activities are often less important than those of the staunch, middle-aged spinster, plucky young widow or marriageable girl who finds herself hearing strange noises in the night, being shut up in cupboards, hearing odd and apparently sinister conversations, and eventually stumbling upon some clue that solves the mystery” (89-90). Though their contemporaries devalued their works, they serve as a transition from those the omnipotent male detective to works that include intelligent female characters who are able to solve crimes for themselves. In fact, the Detection Club’s Initiation Ceremony asks potential candidates to swear not to make use of “Divine revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence or the Act of God” (Brabazon 144). Sayers and Christie, the sole female members of the Detection Club at this time, were adamant that logic be allowed to rule the detective novel and that the practices made popular by other female authors would not corrupt the genre.

*Gaudy Night* as Feminist Text

Indeed, Sayers realized that this shift obfuscated the genre and claimed “the less love in a detective story the better” (qtd. in Munt 10). This distinct separation proves problematic with the publishing of *Gaudy Night*, a novel which was criticized for being too “highbrow” and lacking in a solid mystery plot, instead pondering issues of women’s place in the workforce and the home.
Though the novel was popular, critics were divided as to its literary merit. In particular, Q.D. Leavis savaged Sayers in “The Case of Miss Dorothy Sayers,” her 1937 review of *Gaudy Night* and its sequel *Busman’s Honeymoon* and bemoaned the fact that:

> What does seem indisputable is that Miss Sayers as a writer has been a vast success in the senior academic world everywhere. The young report that their elders recommend *Gaudy Night* to them, Miss Sayers has the entrée to literary societies which would never have opened their doors to Edgar Wallace, she is canonized as a stylist by English lecturers, and so on; after all her reputation as a literary figure must have been made in such quarters. Speculation naturally turns on how anyone can devote himself to the study and teaching of the humanities (we will let off the scientists, in spite of their living in a place that alters all one’s values) and yet not be able to place a Dorothy Sayers’s novel on inspection if it comes his way. (305-306)

Leavis claimed that the book’s popularity among academics was due to personal pleasure at seeing their profession reflected so nobly and philosophically; she disparaged them for not using their skills at literary analysis to see that this was not a work of quality fiction. However, the book’s popularity has proven far longer lasting than its negative critiques, particularly with its depiction of strong female characters pursuing academic work. Maureen Reddy unequivocally references *Gaudy Night* as “the first feminist detective novel and the book most feminist readers of crime novels I know cite as the one that first attracted them to the genre” (12). Carolyn G. Hart echoes this, claiming the novel has “long been lauded as the first feminist mystery novel. Certainly it celebrates women as thinking beings equal to achieving any goals they set and points out the obstacles women faced. Women had studied at Oxford since 1870, but Sayers was one of
the first generation to be granted a university degree” (48). As one of that first generation, Sayers understood the pressure the graduates were under to prove themselves worthy of their trailblazing status. Sayers’s works had long since proven the mind and heart of Lord Peter Wimsey; in creating a woman who could match his intellect, she was advocating for the voice of educated women. B. J. Rahn takes the feminist claim even further, “Dorothy L. Sayers was the first author to employ the detective story to write about important feminist issues. She used crime fiction to try to change rigid attitudes toward sexual roles. She advocated sexual equality in professional life, equality of sexual freedom, and female autonomy within marriage” (51). Yet, there are issues with *Gaudy Night* that cause critics to question its feminist credentials.

Rahn considers the complexities of the text’s feminism with a later statement that Lord Peter “forces her (Harriet’s) independence upon her” (63), referring to the antepenultimate scene, when Harriet tells Peter, “If I owe you nothing else, I owe you my self-respect” (Sayers *Gaudy Night* 497). This scene, when Harriet is thanking Peter for his help, is often picked out by critics as support for the claim that *Gaudy Night* is not a feminist text. SueEllen Campbell states that, “In a novel that so clearly sees marriage as the union of two equally independent people, and whose heroine is surely responsible for her own self-respect, such statements are disturbing slips back into the kinds of traditional thinking Peter and Harriet have both been learning to surmount” (17). It is a difficult scene; the reader begins to anticipate that Harriet will finally acquiesce to Peter’s proposal of marriage, all the while hoping that each character has been able to learn to address his or her fears of dependency and allow himself or herself to be vulnerable.

In highlighting the complexity of the choices available to women at this time, Sayers is reiterating the fact that women’s movement has created difficulties. Rather than choosing either a career or marriage and family, women are able to consider a life that combines domestic and
public spheres. With the power of choice, relationships between men and women have become a minefield with each party trying to figure out the balance of power. Wimsey has been put into an impossible situation. Because he saved her life in *Strong Poison*, Harriet feels that she owes him, though neither wants a marriage based on gratitude. He has had to demonstrate over and over that he sees her as an equal, even writing to her in an earlier scene, “if you have put anything in hand, disagreeableness and danger will not turn you back and God forbid they should. Whatever it is, you have my best wishes for it” (Sayers *Gaudy* 236). He does not evince any sort of proprietary attitude towards her; he does not try to turn her away from the mystery or offer advice as to how she should deal with the problem. Upon reading that, she realized that:

he had deliberately acknowledged that she had the right to run her own risks. . . .

Not one man in ten thousand would say to the woman he loved, or to any woman:

‘Disagreeableness and danger will not turn you back and God forbid they should.’

That was an admission of equality, and she had not expected it of him. If he conceived of marriage along those lines, then the whole problem would have to be reviewed in that new light; but that seemed scarcely possible. To take such a line and stick to it, he would have to be, not a man but a miracle. (237)

This sense that their marriage would be different, that she need not fear suffocation by matrimony encourages the reader to understand a marriage of equality, with both Lord Peter and Harriet retaining independent interests, as a genuine possibility. Even when Peter proposes to Harriet and she finally acquiesces, there is still the emphasis that it will be a joining of equals. He asks her, “‘Placetne, magistra?’” which translates to “Does it please you, female teacher?” and she responds “‘Placet’” or “It pleases me” (501). Transfiguring something as romantic as a proposal into an intellectual game ensures that these two will have a marriage of two equal minds
as well as of two physical bodies. Carolyn G. Hart comments on this: “even at this moment, Sayers refines a moment of emotion into a response of the intellect” (48). The sense of their union as being dependent on intellect is paramount; they are intelligent, independent people who are making the active choice to wed and share their lives. Sayers brings forth Harriet’s fears on the juxtaposition of marriage and a profession to echo new fears that many women were beginning to feel at that time and still ponder to this day. Yet, for Harriet, the two can be combined. Through her, it is observed that “it is intellectual integrity that has solved the mystery, and has also brought Peter and Harriet together; thus demonstrating Dorothy’s thesis that adherence to the intellect is as necessary for the business of living as for scholarly study or for the solving of detective problems” (Brabazon 153). It is possible to follow Harriet’s mindset as she comes to realize that marriage does not have to limit her. Harriet’s acceptance of Peter’s proposal carries the echoes of Mary Roberts Rinehart and her contemporaries, whose novels ended with marriage and motherhood for the assertive female detective. Makinen states:

> with its subtext of an intelligent woman’s role in society and the choice between marriage or an intellectual career, [Gaudy Night] has fuelled a debate amongst feminist critics of detective fiction, as to whether its subversive content is proto-feminism, although many have been disappointed that the conventional denouement remains marriage to Wimsey. (101-102)

The book could not have ended with any other act than Harriet’s acceptance of Peter’s proposal for the simple reason that Sayers had long since tired of her detective and was determined to retire him. Unlike Conan Doyle’s killing of Sherlock Holmes, Sayers gave Lord Peter a quiet retirement to the country with Harriet (who continued her writing 11) while managing Lord Peter

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11 See *Busman’s Honeymoon* and “Talboys”
and their household, including their three sons. In a 1928 letter to Dr. Eustace Barton, Sayers’s correspondent for medical issues and co-author of The Documents in the Case, Sayers tells him of Lord Peter Wimsey, “I certainly don’t intend to kill him off yet, but I think it would be better to invent a new detective for any tales we do together. . . . Also, I’m looking forward to getting a rest from him, because his everlasting breeziness does become a bit of a tax at times! (qtd. in Reynolds 274). By not killing off Peter, Sayers left open the possibility of a return. However, through retirement, she had constructed Harriet as a match for Lord Peter; their marriage was the continuation of a character narrative and could not have occurred until their admission of each other as equals and Harriet’s realization that they could create their own marriage. This sense that marriage meant a betrayal of feminism does not take into account the complex relationship Sayers had with the idea of feminism. Sayers herself, in “Are Women Human?” a 1938 address given to an unspecified women’s society, stated, “I was not sure I wanted to ‘identify myself,’ as the phrase goes, with feminism, and that the time for “feminism’ in the old-fashioned sense of the word, had gone past…under present conditions, an aggressive feminism might do more harm than good” (Sayers Unpopular 129).

The “F” Word

As discussed in the “Women and War” section of the previous chapter, World War One disrupted the feminist movement in England. Caine and Sluga suggest that wartime patriotism was employed to affirm women’s status as citizens of England: “to signal the capacity of women  

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to be active citizens, and to exercise other political and legal rights that accompanied citizenship” (149). However, after the war, the role of the feminist movement was in a state of flux. Denise Riley recounts in “Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History that the “term ‘feminism’ itself, immediately after the First World War, and the granting of partial women’s suffrage, came to denote a narrowness, an anti-democratic or frankly bourgeois cast of mind and an ungenerous rehearsal of old grievances which should have been decently laid to rest. Most damagingly, it came to be seen as a selfish antithesis to ‘the social’” (59). Riley suggests that in the War’s aftermath that feminism is pushed to the side, especially after women over thirty who were property owners or married to property owners were granted the vote by the 1918 Representation of the People Act. To a society that was focused on rebuilding, reigniting the militant feminism of the pre-war years was anathema. Riley states that the “First World War, that Calvary of men, was a sacrifice so vast that to press a nagging ‘sex-consciousness’ was shaming” (60). However, for some feminists, the end of the war meant that the returning soldiers would need to find a new enemy and, with rising unemployment and women unwilling to give back their jobs, could blame the British women. Feminist writer Cicely Hamilton saw the backlash against women to be a refocusing of the soldiers’ energies after Germany was no longer the enemy; she stated in 1927 that, “With no enemy to subjugate, in the shape of man or beast, an unemployed instinct may turn on women and subdue them to complete feminity [sic]. . . . The peace in our time for which we all crave will mean a reaction, more or less strong, against the independence of women” (79). Peace comes at the price of stifling the voices of women who have not been served by the feminist movement thus far, and so the term “feminist” becomes, as recalled by Virginia Woolf in Three Guineas (1938), “an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has much harm in its day and is now obsolete” (302). This fight over the word’s meaning
would be mourned by feminist author Ray Strachey, as stated in *Our Freedom and Its Results* (1936): “modern young women know amazingly little of what life was like before the war, and show a strong hostility to the word ‘feminism’ and all which they imagine it to connote” (10).

Sayers did not like to be categorized as a feminist, explaining that she feared the labeling inherent in identifying herself as such:

What is repugnant to every human being is to be reckoned always as a member of a class (sex classification) and not as an individual person. . . . What is unreasonable and irritating is to assume that all one’s tastes and preferences have to be conditioned by the class\(^\text{13}\) to which one belongs. That has been the very common error into which men have frequently fallen about women—and it is the error into which feminist women are, perhaps, a little inclined to fall into about themselves. (Sayers *Unpopular* 130-131)

Sayers claims that men and women should be treated as individuals with unique preferences as to vocation, then questions why women are forced to make a choice between career and family: “It is unfortunate that they should so often have to make the choice. A man does not, as a rule, have to choose. He gets both. In fact, if he wants the home and family, he usually has to take the job as well, if he can get it.” (134). Highlighting the unfairness of a society that creates a choice for women that men are not faced with, Sayers’s words here mirror the early feelings of Harriet, who mulling over the romantic fates of people who are “cursed with both hearts and brains” decides “I don’t think the compromise works” (Sayers *Gaudy* 68). However, this is a comment that is

\(^{13}\) In this speech, Sayers is not referencing “class” as one’s role in the strata of society, but as a category that people belong to i.e. stout v. slender, university dons v. agricultural labourers, or Communists v. Fascists.
meant for Peter to argue with; Harriet wants him to persuade her that their relationship is possible, but she is having a hard time convincing her head to follow her heart.

This either/or dilemma presents itself again in Harriet’s mind when she is roaming the college halls at night, thinking of the sleeping females: “So many destined wives and mothers of the race; or, alternatively, so many potential historians, scientists, schoolteachers, doctors, lawyers; as you liked to think of one thing of more importance than the other” (115). Again, Harriet is creating a dichotomous choice that a career and a family life are incompatible. Harriet works hard to develop and acknowledge the idea that marriage to Peter might not impinge upon the freedoms she has grown to love as a single woman, namely the right to work hard at a vocation she loves.

Annie Wilson, Villain with a Voice

Critics have spent little time looking at Sayers’s attitude toward the feminist movement in the ideas of villainous scout/maid Annie Wilson, who tells Harriet that her daughters will be “good girls . . . and good wives and mothers—that’s what I’ll bring them up to be” (246). Annie advocates that her daughter embrace the same institution that has failed her. When her marriage ended, she was left unable to cope and her bitterness has left her warped. Her eight-year-old daughter’s declaration that she wants a motorcycle and to work in a garage is received with the comment, “That’s a boy’s job. . . . You’ll never get a husband, Beatrice, if you mess about in a garage, getting all ugly and dirty” (246). Harriet’s annoyance from these comments strengthens a reading of Gaudy Night as a feminist text. Ironically, the eight-year-old Beatrice seems to be the most feminist character in the whole book because she embraces the idea of doing useful work that she enjoys, regardless of whether the job was traditionally male or female oriented. The idea of usefulness is presented earlier in the text when Harriet meets a fellow graduate whose
marriage finds her wistful after leaving behind academic life for farm work and child-rearing. Harriet leaves her friend “with a depressed feeling that she had seen a Derby winner making shift with a coal-cart” (50).

Sayers’s complex attitude toward the negotiation of gender roles within a marriage is often misunderstood because she does not clearly show that, for women, family life and career are compatible. Her claims that usefulness and personal preference should trump societal expectations for gender come into conflict with her difficulty showing female characters that have successfully combined marriage and family life with a career. The closest example in *Gaudy Night* is Harriet’s fellow graduate Phoebe Tucker, who had been a History student and married an archaeologist. She and her husband “dug up bones and stones and pottery in forgotten corners of the globe, and wrote pamphlets and lectured to learned societies. At odd moments they had produced a trio of cheerful youngsters, whom they dumped casually on delighted grandparents before hastening back to the bones and stones” (14). This is the nearest approximation Sayers offers to a woman who has combined career and a family and she is not involved with the raising of her children. Sayers is trying to write a novel that shows women can combine work and a family and the closest example she can provide rarely engages with her children. However, this is more a reflection of the class to which the character belonged than an indictment on the success of combining career and family. The academic women came from middle and upper middle class, so having household help in caring for their children would not be atypical. The wealthy, educated women were empowered by their status, unlike the lower class women whose concerns about money and providing for their children left them with little time for protesting.
In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers used the issue of women’s roles in higher education to comment on the complexities of the women’s movement and the choices available to women as a result of changing gender roles in society. The mystery featured in *Gaudy Night* stems from poison pen letters and pranks that have been directed at the students and faculty of Harriet’s alma mater, Shrewsbury College, Oxford. While attending her reunion, Harriet is asked by the dons to look into the matter. Ostensibly staying in college to research a book on Sheridan Le Fanu, Harriet is taking the time to both investigate and consider her feelings for Lord Peter. One issue that arises in criticism of the text is Harriet Vane’s role as a fictionalized version of Sayers. While there are notable similarities, namely the physical description and the career as a mystery writer, no critic has observed the similarities between Sayers’s personal life and that of her Shrewsbury College poison pen, Annie. Though the mystery plot is dependent on Annie’s hatred of the academic women in her poison pen letters and physical attacks on students on dons—her husband’s suicide was precipitated by one of the Shrewsbury dons who had previously turned him for plagiarism, prompting his financial and emotional ruin—Annie is rarely mentioned in analyses of *Gaudy Night*. In fact, the two sentence summary of her character in Bargainnier’s *10 Women of Mystery*\(^{14}\) (34) gives her more discussion than most works.

Campbell acknowledges that Sayers is unable to give all the power to the women of Shrewsbury:

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\(^{14}\) Bargainnier extolls Harriet as “One of the first, and few, liberated women of detective fiction” (*10 Women* 28), but simply states that Annie “the Shrewsbury College poisoned pen, was hired as a scout or servant whose job is to facilitate the smooth domestic operation of the college. Instead, she disrupts it” (34).
Despite the novel’s explicit endorsement of the intellectual independence and ability of women, in other words, Sayers still allows the one man involved to have the final authority. She is not entirely blind to the inconsistency this involves: confronting the room full of academic women who have just listened to Peter tell them what he has discovered, the culprit, Annie Wilson, spits out, ‘You can’t do anything for yourselves. Even you, you silly old hags — you had to get a man to do your work for you.’ (Campbell 16)

It is Peter who has led the meeting during which Annie was revealed as the culprit. The women of Shrewsbury, even Harriet, were all ignorant of the identity of the poison pen until Peter’s announcement. Even though Harriet has been the focus of the narrative, and Sayers has been emphasizing the importance of well-educated, thinking, reasoning women, Sayers gives the climax of the story to a man. It was Harriet who suffered a concussion at the hands of Annie, Harriet who was called to Shrewsbury to investigate, but Peter gets the credit for deducing the offender’s identity. However, Campbell ignores the fact that Wimsey, not Harriet Vane, embodies the classic convention of the detective character. The mystery itself is an excuse to explore issues of gender roles and examine how class is used. Because Wimsey is not the main character and the mystery is incidental, so too is his solving of it.

Harriet may be the central female of the piece, but she is not the only one around whom the narrative turns. However, it is the other character’s lack of dialogue on the book that has caused her to be largely ignored by critics. Because Annie is present in only four scenes, and expresses her beliefs about the role of women in the workplace in just three of them, her character is often disregarded or simply seen as Sayers’s vehicle for showing how necessary the feminist movement is. Annie’s focus has been on her family and her husband’s career; after his
suicide, that focus is forged through an obsessive grief into vengeance. Her tirades at the end, castigating Harriet for her unwillingness to marry Peter, declaim: “You don’t want to cook his meals and mend his clothes and bear his children like a decent woman. You’ll use him, like any other tool, to break me. You’d like to see me in prison and my children in a home, because you haven’t got the guts to do your proper job in the world” (Sayers *Gaudy* 487). These accusations mark a damaged psyche that has lost its reason because her life has been dependent on someone else for her purpose. Annie Wilson is a twist on the idea of soured virginity; she has become warped through her marriage and obsession with her husband, a man whose act of plagiarism and downfall into alcohol abuse and suicide had too great an impact. The daughter of his landlady until her marriage, she had no outside sense of self other than wife and mother. His betrayal of their family caused her to snap. Her character shows the necessary aspects of feminism. She becomes the villain because she initially is not a feminist; she chooses the traditional path of wife and mother. Sayers addresses the confinement of the roles offered to women and stresses the importance of being aware of the limiting power of those roles. This distinction of class echoes research done by the Women’s Health Enquiry Committee; this work—written by Margery Spring Rice detailing an investigation started in 1933 and published in 1939 under the title *Working Class Wives, Their Health and Conditions*—“identified extreme poverty and a near-total lack of time and facilities for leisure as responsible for crippling the lives of working-class housewives” (Dyhouse 134). Class boundaries played a divisive role in the feminist movement, keeping interested women from developing and working toward a common goal, as the suffrage movement had done. Dyhouse later states that “class divisions certainly inhibited feminist attempts to find creative and enduring solutions to problems of domestic organization…. For middle class women, work outside the home was conceived of as a right, or a privilege; whereas
lower down the social scale women might identify their very source of oppression in what was effectively experienced as the dual burden of housekeeping and paid labour” (137).

Annie’s marked absence from most criticism has resulted in a focus solely on the relationship between Harriet and Peter in the majority of analyses. She is pushed into the background of the plot, often seen as simply a tool to show how women can be their own harshest critics. Her arguments castigate the women for stepping outside the roles of wife and mother. The very reason behind her crime emphasizes how women can become embittered by living their lives through their husbands: “Thus, it is not celibacy and the pursuit of learning, but devotion to a man, which has led a woman into half-crazed vengeful malice” (Brown, Clements, and Grundy). Sayers advocates women having the opportunities to do the work that suits them, a motif which Harriet states several times. This idea of flexibility between the traditional gender roles, an exchange of work, is something that Annie cannot grasp. Because of the trauma of her husband’s suicide, a result of his plagiarism and subsequent breakdown, Annie is unable to realize the pressure that men are under to care for their families. In general, she blames the academic women, at whom she yells:

A woman’s job is to look after a husband and children. I wish I had killed you. I wish I could kill you all. I wish I could burn down this place and all the places like it—where you teach women to take men’s jobs and rob them first and kill them afterwards. (Sayers Gaudy 485-486).

She particularly blames the don who had discovered her husband’s plagiarism, which set in motion the events leading to his suicide. While she is clearly the villain, her poison pen letters and acts of vandalism have had the college in an uproar; it is her powerful voice that galvanizes the Shrewsbury dons to reconsider issues of honor and duty. She, the penniless, uneducated
cleaning woman, becomes dominant enough to make the educated women live in fear. She is an example of not only why the feminist movement is needed, but also a reason why class issues needed to be addressed by the feminist movement. Barbara Caine states in *English Feminism 1780-1980* that during the “whole interwar period, the marriage bar and the general problem of how married women might combine paid work with domestic and familial duties, was perhaps the one most deeply felt by middle-class feminists” (189). Annie’s voice becomes stronger than those of the educated women; she is crying for attention, an awareness of her situation, and it is being ignored by those who are more powerful than she is. In giving authority to the uneducated Annie, Sayers is making a claim for the powerful voice of women who have been silenced due to their lack of opportunity. Annie’s voice was lost in marriage, helpless while watching her husband’s downward spiral. When forced to be the power in her family, she, who was not taught to acknowledge her own abilities, becomes warped in her focus on the educated women who had the chances she did not.

**Sayers’s Complexity**

Few analyses examine the power of her voice; a notable exception to the general tendency of critics to silence Annie is Janice Brown, who claims: “The Sins of Pride, Envy, and Wrath that characterize Annie Wilson are, in fact, at the root of all the ugliness, failure, and unhappiness in the novel, but the moral complexities in which the characters become embroiled also involve the Sins of Sloth and Lust—Sins that Sayers later recognized as arising from ‘defective’ and ‘excessive’ love” (Brown 154). Sayers understood that kind of love. She had been attached to, though never physically intimate with, John Cournos, during a yearlong relationship. In his definitive biography of Sayers, James Brabazon states:
She wanted his children and would have married him. He wanted neither marriage nor children; he wanted to be ‘free to live and love naturally’, which of course involved contraception. This for her was the reverse of natural, and she would not have it. . . . Dorothy several times expressed her distaste for ‘the taint of the rubber shop’\textsuperscript{15} and ‘the use of every dirty trick invented by civilization to avoid the natural result.’\textsuperscript{16} (Brabazon 93, 94)

\textsuperscript{15}The topic of birth control became a key feature of the feminist movement. Addressing issues of child-bearing became a way to discuss the topic of poverty as women could be responsible for the number of child they had and control their ability to work and provide for them. Cheryl Law recounts in \textit{Suffrage and Power: The Women’s Movement, 1918-1928} the efforts of Dora Russell and Leah L’Estrange Malone, two of the founders of the Women’s Birth Control Group who, in 1924, created the slogan, “It is four times as dangerous to bear a child as it is to work in a mine and mining is men’s most dangerous trade.” This idea of childbearing as a trade was promoted by \textit{The Women’s Leader}, at a time when it was illegal for state-funded medical facilities to give birth control advice and doctors and nurses faced termination if found doing so. (169)

\textsuperscript{16}The British public was clamoring for a frank discussion of sexuality within a marriage. Marie Carmichael Stopes’s 1918 work \textit{Married Love}, a sex manual, sold two thousand copies within two weeks. After marrying at age thirty-one in 1911, PhD in hand, Stopes was unable to understand why two years of happy marriage did not produce a child. She “approached the problem as a true scholar and spent six months in the British Museum reading almost every book on sex in English, French, and German. She came to the conclusion that her marriage had never been consummated; she was a virgin, and her husband was impotent” (Holtzman 39). She wrote in the preface to her book, “In my own marriage I paid such a terrible price for sex-ignorance
Cournos supported the use of contraception as a means that would keep them independent from each other by preventing any consequences that would have bound them together. Sayers saw contraception as interfering with a physical all-encompassing relationship. The contraception, for her, represented his attempts at pushing her away and keeping himself separate from her. Annie’s rant at the end of the story is an echo of the letters Sayers had written to John Cournos after she learned he had married, “I love thee still and as you’ve no use for me I must be in a very stupid and false and painful position…If I saw you, I should probably only cry—and I have been crying for 3 years now and am heartily weary of the exercise” (qtd. in McGregor and Lewis 46). In 1923, Sayers began a relationship with another man and found herself pregnant and unmarried. In one of many letters to Cournos, she considered her attitude toward sex, “but of course I wanted to be persuaded—and in the bigger matter as well—I longed to be overborne, like any Victorian fool” (Brabazon 96). It is difficult to reconcile this statement with Sayers’s reputation as creator of a work hailed as the first unequivocal feminist detective fiction novel, telling a man she wished he had physically and emotionally overpowered her for sex. By taking away her ability to choose, Sayers voices a desire to abdicate responsibility for the consequences. It introduces a sense of nostalgia when times were simpler, when women were not burdened with the opportunity of choice and the sense that because it was possible to combine family life and a career that they needed to do so. The power of choice, particularly as it related to the consequences of sexual activity, had great resonance for Sayers.

that I feel that knowledge gained at such a price should be placed at the service of humanity” (39). Holtzman further recounts Stopes’s activities answering letters from her reading public (she had received at least 5000 by 1944), writing more on sex and contraception, establishing birth control clinics, and forming a society to promote contraception.
At the time of her death in December of 1957, Sayers had never openly acknowledged her son Anthony as her biological child, a result of a brief liaison with another man. Having placed him at birth with a cousin who took in orphans, she went through a mock adoption with her husband ten years later. Brabazon stresses Sayers’s desire for her secret to be kept hidden:

It is all the more amazing, in view of the provisional and temporary nature of that secret as she then saw it, that in fact it was kept completely intact even after her parents were dead. Later on, Dorothy’s secretaries knew about Anthony, for letters were exchanged and there were regular cheques to be sent. And some of the people in Witham, the little town where she then lived, seem to have picked up the secret. Schoolmasters, too, had to know. But outside the circle of those actually concerned with the boy, not one of Dorothy’s friends knew about him until the day of her death. (105-106)

Sayers neither identified herself with the feminist movement, nor took advantage of any of the changing social mores to claim the son she had had out of wedlock. She also made no attempt to convince her husband to allow her son to live with them. Her reality is far different from the idealized marriage that she seems to propose for Harriet. This is not Peter’s “admission of equality” or Harriet’s belief that “He and I belong to the same world, and all these others are aliens” (Sayers *Gaudy* 237, 365). It is far too simplistic for scholars to proclaim *Gaudy Night* as either a feminist or an anti-feminist novel when Sayers’s ambivalent attitudes between her life choices, her fiction, and her non-fiction show a woman adjusting to changing gender expectations. Sayers did not want to be associated with the idea of what being a feminist meant; from her earliest days with the Detection Club, she wanted to look beyond issues of sex and gender at the capabilities and proclivities of each individual. She complicates these ideas in
claiming, “Few women happen to be natural born mechanics; but if there is one, it is useless to try and argue her into being something different. What we must not do is to argue that the occasional appearance of a female mechanical genius proves that all women would be mechanical geniuses if they were educated” (Sayers Unpopular 137). Sayers demonstrates beliefs based on a dominant model of essential femininity, that the profession of a mechanic may not be in the nature of most women, but should be nurtured if it is present. This sense of essentialism allows her compartmentalize women’s roles while acknowledging that they may not suit everyone and that allowances need to be made that allow women to follow their inclinations. Her desire to be judged on individual merit ignores the reality that without the feminist movement opening up new work possibilities for women, it would never become known if a female possessed the mental acuity of an engineer or mechanic.

Earl Bargainnier refers to Harriet as “One of the first, and few, liberated women of detective fiction” (“10 Women” 28). Sayers did not, in any way, behave as a liberated woman. Her behavior to shun the title of feminist and to hide away a child she had borne illegitimately is not that of a progressive, independent woman. Rather, these actions speak of fear of violating social taboos; Sayers’s speech declaring most women would rather stay at home is an echo of Annie’s suggestion to Harriet that women should be happier with a nice husband and lots of children (Sayers Gaudy 127). Sayers’s life was vastly more complex than can be encapsulated in a facile identification with Harriet Vane. To ignore her history reduces the novel to an interpretation that is far too easy and far too neat, not at all in keeping with the woman behind it.

As David Glover states, “the relationship between Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane offers the possibility of a very different kind of cross-class marriage, companionate and egalitarian, domestic and intellectual” (46). This idealized marriage created by Sayers showed
the possibilities of a union between two equals. In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers battled with issues of feminism, demonstrating the need for women of all classes to be aware of their voice and to understand that they had the right to speak. Critics who argue for a polarizing feminist or anti-feminist label to be put on the text fail to observe Sayers’s response to and negotiation of the complexity of gender roles.
Agatha Christie’s Wars: Nostalgia and Service

Through the medium of detective fiction, Christie represents nostalgia in her work with the depiction of war memories and a sense of togetherness that highlighted positive aspects of war to a fragmented post-War British society. Christie reconceives the idea of nostalgia by making wartime experiences the subject of nostalgia for her characters, creating a longing for times of activity, usefulness, and a sense of purpose and awareness of one’s place. Analyzing Christie’s incorporation of war shows a methodical aspect of her work, the popularity of which, ironically, has kept her work from being treated as seriously as that of her more literary-minded fellow detective fiction authors. Christie’s representations of World War One and World War Two as part of the background have shown her to be a master of technique in her subtle and complex attitude toward war, but she has not been studied as a particularly serious writer. However, looking at the presence of war in her works enables the popularity of her canon to be defined as grounded in serious concerns. Offering war references as a backdrop allows her to both foreground her mystery as one of the experiences felt by characters living through the war and establish a common memory for her audience. Her complex treatment of war paradoxically allows it to both fade in to the background, allowing her characters to experience life (and murder) beyond the war, and remain present for Christie to draw on in the characters’ memories as a happy time period of usefulness. Christie offers a different way of understanding war by rendering war experiences as objects of nostalgia. Not simply a queen of detective fiction plotting techniques, Christie’s technical mastery is embedded in a capacity to think about and represent wartime concerns and contemporary issues.

The sense of nostalgia for British wartime culture is shown in her works that are set during war, as in the idyllic countryside of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (written and set in
1916, though published in 1920), and those set soon after the war which fondly recall Britain during the war: *The Secret Adversary* (1922) and *The Murder on the Links* (1923). Christie touches on the positive wartime experiences of the soldiers in *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936) through the camaraderie of the trenches and the sense of acceptance felt by soldiers and, with World War Two looming, evokes a sense of sentimentality in those citizens for whom World War One meant they were needed and useful in service to their country in *N or M* (1941).

Christie continues her nostalgia for wartime experiences after World War Two in *There Is a Tide* (1948), during which her lead female character, who had served in the Women’s Royal Naval Service, finds herself unable to reconcile her memory of the war as exciting with the boredom of finding herself home and planning a wedding.

Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia* as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii). This longing, usually for the comfort of the British pastoral, permeates the texts of many British writers like Siegfried Sassoon, who dreamed of “starshine on the fields of long-ago” and “wealds of vanished summer” in his 1918 poem “Memory”. This sense of nostalgia for pre-war Britain provides what Adrian Barlow refers to as the “sense that not just the landscape but the actual soil of England embodied everything for which Englishmen were prepared to fight” (18). However, Christie’s writing does not display, as Robert Hemmings states of the work of Edmund Blunden, “the Georgian nostalgia for a simpler past when landscape helped forge a stronger and authentic sense of Englishness among individuals and their organic communities” (18). Christie’s writing features a nostalgia for the war itself, a time period when her characters felt a sense of purpose and reveled in the idea that they were participating in a cause in support of their country.
The presence of war as background in her novels, though her characters may joke about their wartime experiences, has a seriousness in its discussion of the long-term effects of war. Her characters’ war memories imbue the texts with a sense of optimism that highlights war as a time of camaraderie and excitement. In his 1986 article “Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience,” George Mosse discusses how the soldiers after the war “considered the war years in retrospect the happiest years of their lives” (494). Mosse claims, “This was no mere nostalgia, but through recalling ideals supposedly experienced by millions during the war, the horror was to be transcended and the meaning which the war had given to individual lives retained. Here the companionship of war-time camaraderie, shared at one time or another by almost everyone in the trenches, proved more important than the spirit of 1914 which for most soldiers remained rhetoric rather than experience” (494). This sense of brotherhood united the soldiers and made the war a positive experience. Mosse also summarizes how the war became an object of fascination and, as presented to potential soldiers was “giving purpose to purposeless lives . . . described as a festival—that is as an event exhilarating through its exceptionality, standing outside and above daily routine” (493). The excitement of war also held meaning for British troops through the idea that they were fighting for a cause, following in the British literary and cultural tradition of crusaders on a romantic quest. As Paul Fussell states in “The Romance Quest”: “the experiences of a man going up the line to his destiny cannot help seeming to him like those of a hero of medieval romance if his imagination has been steeped in actual literary romances or their equivalent. For most who fought in the Great War, one highly popular equivalent was Victorian pseudo-medieval romance” (22). Christie addresses post-war issues of unemployment by not only underscoring the chances for romantic adventure available to characters who are not tied to traditional employment but also offering opportunities for wistful
reminiscences of wartime usefulness. She is able to address serious concerns like shell-shock, soldiers’ unemployment, and the restlessness felt by women—who were welcomed into the workforce during the war then cast off when they were no longer needed—by emphasizing the positive aspects of war and extending an escape into narratives that saw these negative issues as gateways for opportunity and adventure. Her texts offered comfort and certainty through their formulaic nature and the assurance that justice would be restored, as well as a way to deal with death and trauma that was safe and predictable. As Jessica Mann states in *Deadlier than the Male: An Investigation into Feminine Crime* Writing, “the actuality of death is absent from this type of story. Nobody grieves; nobody bleeds—they are merely surrounded by ‘dark stains’. Children never die, and sympathetic characters rarely; the victims are expendable, in brutal terms, but they are set in a well-ordered society where right prevails and the criminal never escapes—so different from anarchy all around” (147). Christie’s attitude toward war is matter-of-fact; she remains apolitical, not castigating the government or questioning the need for war. She has sympathy for refugees, basing Poirot on the Belgians who had come to her village, but she retains a sense of optimism, as though the war has allowed her characters to have more opportunities and has created a pathway for positive experiences. Her complex treatment of war allows it to remain in the background, yet encourages her characters to both remember its positive aspects and move on with their post-war lives.

**Christie’s Nostalgia**

Christie’s nostalgia functions to provide consolation and optimism, as well as a feeling of unity, to help her audience negotiate radical social changes in post-war Britain and to understand issues of joblessness and the changing social gender roles. Unlike Dorothy L. Sayers, who spent World War One first teaching Modern Languages at a Girls’ School then working at Blackwell’s
book store in Oxford, Agatha Christie spent the war as a nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) while waiting for her fiancée/husband to return from his service in Britain’s Flying Corps (Brabazon 58-70; Christie Autobiography 215-274). Christie’s involvement nursing soldiers informs her novels, particularly the character of Tuppence Cowley, later Tuppence Beresford, whose employment as a V.A.D. is described in Christie’s second novel, The Secret Adversary (1922). This text is typical of Christie’s treatment of the war in her novels, in that the war is seen as part of the backdrop, the destructive effects of which rarely intrude on daily life. Her characters fondly reminisce about their wartime experiences and even express longing for their wartime roles. Unlike Sayers, who created in Lord Peter Wimsey a character whose time in battle and the responsibility felt for his men often moves to the foreground, Christie developed characters who often acknowledge the war as an aspect of the past which they miss. There is no trauma or sense of the battlefield, just the merry pranks of soldiers in a hospital and a memory of purpose and usefulness. Without trauma keeping them stuck in the past, Christie’s characters can move between living in the present and happily recalling their war years.

This acceptance and valuing of her characters’ war experiences allows Christie to incorporate optimism in addressing negative aspects in post-war society, an aspect that detective fiction novels, particularly those during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, are able to feature through their inherent coping mechanism. The novel of detective fiction has chaos embedded in it: various combinations of murder, theft, treachery, and treason serve to upset the balance of society. However, detective fiction provides an ending to the chaos with its built-in function of a solution to the problem, a return to equilibrium. David Lowenthal claims, “A perpetual staple of nostalgic yearning is the search for a simple and stable past as a refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present” (21). Christie takes this a step further through her representation of British
Christopher Shaw states in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* that in works of detective fiction the “reader is invited into a world which is complicated but ultimately understandable. Genre fiction becomes a form which gives reassurance about the legibility and predictability of the world. The readers share a nostalgic metaphor of consolation and security as the predictably complex structures of plot work themselves towards their comforting denouement” (“Genre” 100). Through a wartime setting in her first novel, she is able to blot out the horror of war by providing a pleasant British landscape of good people who work together to alleviate and combat the disarray of a murder. This escape into an optimistic interpretation of wartime Britain allows her readers to gain some perspective on the war. While the war is mentioned in Christie’s early novels, she allows it to be part of the background while incorporating characters whose experiences have been constructed by her own war work. It was while working as a V.A.D. in the hospital dispensary, after being promoted from various duties on the ward, that Christie began writing her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

**World War One as Current Event**

Agatha Christie’s early work, though heavily influenced by the detective fiction of Conan Doyle, contains contemporary concerns of recent veterans and refugees while backgrounding the reality of battle itself as a way of focusing on wartime Britain and the ability of its citizens to construct their own interpretations of peace and justice. Christie may have started writing by imitating Conan Doyle, but she instills in her work a sense of optimism because of its setting; though war may be going on, the people of Britain can deal with death, administer justice, and not be overwhelmed or traumatized. Published in 1920, though written in 1916, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* opens with Lieutenant Arthur Hastings stating that he “had been invalidated home
from the Front; and, after spending some months in a rather depressing Convalescent Home, was
given a month’s sick leave” (Christie *Styles* 1). Mary S. Wagoner states in her 1983 biography
*Agatha Christie* that Christie was “consciously imitating Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes tales
in her basic design”; Christie developed the idea for Hercule Poirot from “Belgian refugees
staying in Torquay” (37). Wagoner mentions the parallel between the introductions of Captain
Arthur Hastings and Sherlock Holmes’s chronicler and friend Dr. John Watson who are both
presented returning to England after having been wounded in wars (Dr. Watson’s service in
Afghanistan being Sherlock Holmes’s earliest deduction). Hastings arrives to stay with his friend
John Cavendish:

> It was a still, warm day in early July. As one looked out over the flat Essex
country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed almost
impossible to believe that, not so very far away, a great war was running its
appointed course. I felt I had suddenly strayed into another world. As we turned in
at the lodge gates, John said:

> ‘I’m afraid you’ll find it very quiet down here, Hastings.’

> ‘My dear fellow, that’s just what I want.’

> ‘Oh, it’s pleasant enough if you want to lead the idle life. I drill with the
volunteers twice a week, and lend a hand at the farms. My wife works regularly
‘on the land’. She is up at five every morning to milk, and keeps at it steadily until
lunchtime. It’s a jolly good life taking it all round—if it weren’t for that fellow
Alfred Inglethorp!’ (Christie *Styles* 3-4)

In the midst of war, with much of his family participating in some way, John Cavendish finds his
stepfather his only complaint, which conveys not only an attempt to maintain a sense of reserve
and stoicism but also a feeling of general content with his life of business and usefulness during the war. After the family is introduced, talk turns to Hastings’s career, at which time the audience learns that Hastings had met a then-unnamed Poirot on an earlier case; Hastings reminisces about their earlier times together, even comparing him to Sherlock Holmes. This reference to Holmes is typical of detective fiction, which Bargainnier calls “an attempt to create a sense of verisimilitude: those other characters or works belong to fiction; this is real” (“Gentle” 173). Christie continues her attempts at artistic authenticity in the character of Cynthia Murdoch, a ward of the family works at a nearby Red Cross hospital as a V.A.D. In her early books, it is not uncommon for Christie’s young female characters to be employed thus, as she had been. This enables Christie to have a claim of authority in talking about war work because she is incorporating her own experiences. Hastings ventures to joke with the young Cynthia, asking her how many she has poisoned at the dispensary to which she grins and replies “Hundreds!” (Christie Styles 8). Christie uses Cynthia’s war work to bring grim humor to the story, in the joke of killing hundreds. Spinning the horrors of war comic and non-threatening is an aspect of Christie’s serious treatment of the war. The issue of war cannot be ignored and, by incorporating humor, Christie is diffusing tension and focusing the reader on the experiences of a young girl who is finding a purpose through her war work. By turning the topic of war into something that can be joked about, Christie turns war into a subject that her readers can address on their own terms.

Christie’s complex attitude toward war is exemplified by the inclusion of humor which shows her characters making light of wartime hardships. Her characters are able to joke about the changes the war has wrought, as seen in the maid Dorcas’s response to Poirot’s query about the number of gardeners employed at Styles: “Only three now, sir. Five, we had, before the war,
when it was kept as a gentleman’s place should be. I wish you could have seen it then, sir. A fair sight it was. But now there’s only old Manning, and young William, and a new-fashioned woman gardener in breeches and such-like. Ah, these are dreadful times!” (43). This comment brings another note of grim humor to the story, that the dreadful times referred to may not be referencing the war but the woman wearing pants, an example of women’s changing roles and the slow pace at which these changes were occurring. Even the choice of setting in the Golden Age of Detective Fiction showed a desire to return to a simpler England. J.K. Van Dover notes that the “preferred scene is the country house, the seaside resort, the train coach, the quadrangle. These contained scenes serve the practical function of limiting the possible suspects; they also imply a nostalgia for a certain sort of innocent place: a place where everyone has a role, and where everyone finds fulfillment [some to a greater extent than others] within that role” (Van Dover 37). He continues by suggesting that after identifying the killer, the detective “enables the many to resume their normal, relatively contented lives. The country house, resort hotel, sleeper coach, college quadrangle—England—is restored to the innocence which it ought to have” (37). The lost innocence is restored through logic, which empowers the detective and, ultimately, the Golden Age reader, who had chosen a book which would allow not only an escape, but also the security of an ending in which the justice found in logic prevailed. Van Dover is making an argument for the traditional definition of nostalgia, the pining for lost pre-war times. I challenge his claim and suggest that Christie thematizes the war itself as an object of nostalgia. The war has brought purpose, excitement, and opportunities for her characters.

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17 As stated in the Introduction, I define the Golden Age of Detective Fiction as the period from 1910 to 1945 that saw the growth and codification of the detective fiction genre in Great Britain.
Christie’s innovativeness as a writer is found through her use of nostalgia as a coping mechanism in the way she takes the model of the pastoral and transforms it from a place of peace to a present filled with murder and intrigue that still provides comfort through the formulaic nature of detective fiction that guarantees the reader a happy ending with harmony reestablished. The village itself, with its typical Englishness that would become a Christie characteristic, creates a sense of nostalgia for unified British culture, which was prominent during World War One. K. D. M. Snell writes in “A Drop of Water from a Stagnant Pool? Inter-war Detective Fiction and the Rural Community” that, “These villages were sometimes idealized or stereotyped, and were often nostalgic. They were a landscape envisaged as potentially moral, restorable to such a homely state, and they were handled as such by quite conservative writers, at a time when the influence of the church was declining, and when rural society, faced with depression and change, was seen to be in economic and social trouble, or even in moral decay” (25). As the book’s plot of murder and greed is developed, the sense that neither the war nor murder will alter the British landscape in any significant way creates a feeling of comfort that Britain will endure.

Christie’s text reflects her complex attitude toward the war by maintaining a fine balance between showing characters involved in various war efforts and bringing a sense of optimism in seeing the war as something outside of themselves, separate from day-to-day life and not directing the household’s actions and conversations. The war talk even becomes a respite when used as a distraction; after a murder occurs at Styles, Hastings describes how by “tacit consent, all mention of the tragedy [of the murder] was barred. We conversed on the war, and other outside topics” (Christie Styles 115). The tragedy of a death in the family outweighs the tragedy of the war and turns talk of the war into a distraction from the family matriarch’s murder.
Christie includes the war as a current event, but makes its presence an outside force of the characters’ lives, which suggests a degree of optimism insofar as the war can be compartmentalized and made less threatening. Her attempts to show characters controlling the impact of the war affirm the great influence the conflict had on British citizens. Stephen Knight suggests that *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* “at once recognises the impact of the war, as the Watsonesque narrator is a wounded officer and the detective is in the area with other Belgian refugees. But if the context is post-Edwardian dismay, that has nothing to do with the plot, which focuses on the reasons why someone from her extended family has poisoned the wealthy Mrs Inglethorp.” (Knight 90). This argument from Knight incorrectly diminishes the power of the war by suggesting that the background of the war is incidental. I challenge Knight’s claim that the mention of the war is not serious because it is not an important part of the plot. The war is not present only because Christie was writing what she knew; the background of war is necessary to demonstrate that, in the midst of overseas battle, Britons could be shown a model of citizens coping with the trauma of death and finding peace after suffering. Christie’s complex attitude toward the war displays a seriousness that acknowledges the presence of the war but also models life during the war and reflects daily life for many Britons. Though it is only her first novel, Christie has developed the ability to put the seemingly far-reaching war into the background, while allowing the characters’ experiences in the war to shape them but not take over their lives.

**Male Camaraderie**

Through her fiction, Christie creates a way for her British reading public to focus on optimistic changes in health and cultural unity of post-war Britain. According to J.M. Winter in *The Great War and the British People*, life during and after World War One had many positive aspects for the British people. Winter cites a rise in life expectancy for those men and women too
old to fight and a steep drop in infant mortality rates, as well as an increase in the “working class standard of health” (Great 105-106). Toward the end of the war, Winter accounts for an upturn in the standard of living through families having more income through rising wages, smaller family size, the “substitution of less expensive, though equally nutritious foods for more expensive foods…and certain social policies, such as the opening of industrial canteens, the enforcement of closing hours on pubs, as well as the payment of separation allowances to support the families of servicemen” (213-214). This increase in health standards is matched by a change in cultural ethos, a willingness to engage in public displays of grief and commemoration as Winter states in Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. Mourning was accepted and society was encouraged to express its grief in a search for healing. As Winter states, “Bereavement was understood and lived both privately and at the collective level, in families, associations, and in communities first constructing and then gathering in front of war memorials, prominent and obscure, to remember the fallen. Whatever form it took, this invocation of the dead is an unmistakable sign of the commonality of European cultural life in this period” (Sites 227). The focus is on rebuilding after the war and memorializing the dead so that the living can deal with grief and move on. Winter explains that this common grief broke down class distinctions and claims that “Among the many legacies of the Great War, this bond of bereavement was one of the most prominent and the most enduring” (228).

Through her fiction, Christie commemorates the war by showing the optimism felt by characters who had bonded through their war experiences and were eager to experience the possibilities of life after war. Christie’s third novel The Murder on the Links (1923)—the second featuring Hercule Poirot and Captain Arthur Hastings—shows how the war continues to recede
into the background for its characters, with only two notable mentions. The first chapter first chapter finds Captain Hastings on a train in France during which:

We passed through Amiens. The name awakened many memories. My companion seemed to have an intuitive knowledge of what was in my mind.

‘Thinking of the War’

I nodded.

‘You were through it, I suppose?’

‘Pretty well I was wounded once, and after the Somme they invalided me out altogether.’ (Christie Links 4)

Christie’s third novel is published four years after the war has ended and it is fading further into the background of her novels. Christie’s technique in crafting a quality mystery included references to a common past, a remembrance of the sense of unity felt by the British public during the war and a transition from grief to a new present, what Winter refers to as “a process of separation from the dead, of forgetting as much as remembering” (Winter Sites 224).

This era provided opportunities for growth not only of the genre of detective fiction, but also an opportunity for female authors to codify themselves in the new genre. This time period was, as Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker state in Reflecting on Miss Marple: “a particularly favourable time for women’s detective fiction; emboldened by their war-time experiences, and enjoying new equalities with men, women domesticated the detective genre and made it into a vehicle for their own ratiocinative and moral capacities” (Shaw and Vanacker 4). Christie indulges in a personal nostalgia through her writing, a way of reliving the most positive aspects of her life experiences—the sense of purpose she felt at helping during World War One—and using her fiction to cope with a gamut of negative emotions from the minor annoyances at having created a
popular character that the public longed for to the heartbreaking pain of divorce; in her work, there are three characters that best reflect Agatha Christie: Ariadne Oliver, the detective fiction writer who assists Hercule Poirot in several books while rueing the creation of her own irritating foreign detective; Celia, who appears in Unfinished Portrait discussing the pain of divorce, written under Christie’s pseudonym Mary Westmacott; and Prudence Cowley (who is better known by her nickname “Tuppence” and, after the events of The Secret Adversary, married name “Beresford”) into whom Christie incorporated her own war experiences. In her autobiography, Christie discusses her first days nursing and her learning curve at discovering the tricks of her soldier patients, telling one of them: “Somebody seems to have written down a very peculiar diet. I don’t think it was Sister or Doctor. Most unlikely they would order you port wine” (Christie Autobiography 219). Christie’s The Secret Adversary (1922) provides an opportunity for Christie’s wartime experiences to be voiced in a character. Tuppence, unexpectedly encounters Tommy Beresford, an old friend from her childhood whom she had last seen during the war. This incident inspires Tuppence’s reminiscence to Tommy, “You always were a shocking liar…though you did once persuade Sister Greenbank that the doctor had ordered you beer as a tonic, but forgotten to write it on the chart. Do you remember?” Tommy laughs and fondly reminisces, “I should think I did! Wasn’t the old cat in a rage when she found out? Not that she was a bad sort really, old Mother Greenbank! Good old hospital—demobbed like everything else, I suppose?” (Christie Adversary 3). Tuppence’s long speech recounts her war work: washing and drying plates, peeling potatoes, sweeping on the wards, and driving a general.

The experiences recounted by Christie through Tuppence are typical of those had by many British females who found themselves called to serve their country in unexpected ways, new roles that liberated them. Samuel Hynes recalls in A War Imagined that “Middle-class and
upper-class girls had also escaped, into volunteer work in hospitals and into the auxiliary services, where they were continually in the company of men in circumstances that their mothers would never have approved in peacetime—bathing the wounded, dressing their wounds, working with men, driving them about. At the war’s end there were 61,000 women in the VAD and the forces” (363). Tuppence’s experiences as a VAD finding adventure and a sense of purpose reflect Christie’s role in the war and give her a way to contribute further to it. Christie’s characters who miss their wartime experience emphasize how proud they were to be participating in the war effort. Tuppence and Lynn Marchmont, the post-World War Two Wren heroine of Christie’s There Is a Tide (1948), are compatriots to the experiences of May Wedderburn Cannan and Vera Brittain, both of whom experienced the liberatory nature of war work through nursing, with the parallel between Lynn Marchmont and Cannan addressed later in this chapter. Brittain states in Testament of Youth that during the war, “After twenty years of sheltered gentility I certainly did feel that whatever the disadvantages of my present occupation, I was at least seeing life” (213). She wrote in a letter to her parents addressing their concerns regarding her work:

Nothing—beyond sheer necessity—would induce me to stop doing what I am doing now, and I should never respect myself again if I allowed a few slight physical hardships to make me give up what is the finest work any girl can do now. I honestly did not take it up because I thought you did not want me or could not afford to give me a comfortable home, but because I wanted to prove I could more or less keep myself by working, and partly because, not being a man and able to go to the front, I wanted to do the next best thing. I do not agree that my place is at home doing nothing or practically nothing, for I consider that the place
now of anyone who is young and strong and capable is where the work that is needed is to be done. And really the work is not too hard—even if I were a little girl, which I no longer am, for I sometimes feel quite ninety nowadays. (213-214)

Christie understood the sense of pride that women derived from feeling patriotically useful and continued the theme in her later work, noticeably in the character of Lynn Marchmont who, three days after coming home from serving in the Women’s Reserve Naval Service in World War Two, finds that “already a curious dissatisfied restlessness was creeping over her. It was all the same—almost too much all the same—the house and Mums and Rowley and the farm and the family. The thing that was different and that ought not to be different was herself” (Christie Tide 20). Though the inter-war years had seen radical changes in women’s suffrage with the 1918 Representation of the People Act giving women over age thirty the vote (as long as they were householders, wives, property owners, or university graduates) and the 1928 Representation of the People Act (which gave all women over the age of twenty-one the right to vote), Christie’s female characters are expressing contemporary concerns about finding their place in a post-war Britain that is coping with changing gender roles. (British Library “Timeline”). Lynn Marchmont’s voice from the 1940s is strikingly similar to that of Tuppence Beresford with the parallel emotions of women feeling nostalgic for the excitement of war and their ability effect change.

Through their reminiscences, Christie explains that Tommy and Tuppence miss the war, highlighting both male longing for camaraderie of war and female nostalgia for a society whose upheaval meant traditional gender roles were cast aside and women were valued for their ability to contribute. Christie’s characters are without precedent, people who were exhilarated by the opportunities given to them by the war. As the conversation continues, Tuppence recalls working
at a “Government office. We had several very enjoyable tea parties. I had intended to become a
land girl, a postwoman, and a bus conductress by way of rounding off my career—but the
Armistice intervened! I clung to the office with the true limpet touch for many long months, but,
 alas, I was combed out at last. Since then I’ve been looking for a job. Now then—your turn”
(Christie Adversary 5-6). Through Tuppence, Christie gives a voice to the women who
discovered a purpose during their war-work then found themselves unneeded after the war.
Margaret and Patrice Higonnet detail this common situation in Behind the Lines. Though
women’s political rights were progressing, “these political adjustments were not accompanied by
the fundamental changes in the situation of women that had been anticipated” (33). Tuppence
had done good work for her country and now, like so many women, was finding that post-war
Britain had fewer opportunities for her. As Claire Culleton states, “though working class women
were recognized and rewarded for participating in their culture’s enterprises during the war, their
lives quickly were redefined and circumscribed by resurgent notions of women’s pre-war
traditional roles” (171). The war has changed Tuppence by her exposure to a world that accepted
and valued her as a worker. Post-war Britain was not as welcoming of her skills as wartime
Britain had been. Tommy is equally blasé about his wartime experience: “‘There’s not so much
promotion in mine,’ said Tommy regretfully, ‘and a great deal less variety. I went out to France
again, as you know. Then they sent me to Mesopotamia, and I got wounded for the second time,
and went into hospital out there. Then I got stuck in Egypt till the Armistice happened, kicked
my heels there some time longer, and, as I told you, finally got demobbed. And, for ten long,
weary months I’ve been job hunting! There aren’t any jobs! And, if there were, they wouldn’t
give ’em to me. What good am I? What do I know about business? Nothing.’” (Christie
Adversary 6). In the character of Tommy, Christie provides a voice to the men who found
themselves not needed after the war, acknowledging a part of her audience who are not as useful after the war as they were during it. Though Christie’s husband was able to acquire a job easily soon after the war ended, the same could not be said of soldiers who were demobilized later.

Through the experiences of Tommy Beresford (*The Secret Adversary* and others) Alexander Cust (*The A.B.C. Murders*), and Anthony Cade (*The Secret of Chimneys*), Christie’s characters reflect employment issues in post-war Britain, idealizing wartime when British citizens worked together as part of the war effort and providing a sense of optimism that their lack of unemployment could give them a chance for adventure. Postwar characters’ employment troubles add realism to her work because she is able to mirror the troubles of her reading public.

In his book *British Unemployment, 1919-1939: A Study in Public Policy*, W. R. Garside recounts: “The incidence of unemployment throughout the interwar period was generally higher for men than for women and for older workers and youths between the ages of 21 and 25. Insurance statistics show that the male unemployment rate was typically 50 per cent higher than that for women and was particularly acute amongst male unskilled manual workers (12). Garside discusses high rates of unemployment between 1923 and 1938 in “old staples” such as shipbuilding, cotton, and iron and steel industries and compares them with lower rates of unemployment in “‘new’ industries” like cars and aircraft, chemicals, and electrical engineering (13). Garside suggests that the latter industries, with “their lower dependence on the volatile world market and their exploitation of new techniques and methods of production produced an expansion of output and a lower rate of unemployment that only served to emphasize the scale of decline in less favoured sectors” (11-12). In *An Autobiography*, Christie recounts how her husband “had been quite right to settle in a job before he resigned from the Flying Corps. Young people were desperate. They had come out of the services and had no jobs to go to (Christie
Christie’s husband would later find himself in the same situation after giving up his job for a trip around the world promoting the upcoming Empire Exhibition. Offered the promotional opportunity by a friend, Archibald Christie was accompanied by his wife on a trip to Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and Canada. Upon his return, he found that his previous employers had not kept his post open for him; Archibald Christie had a great deal of trouble finding another job, ultimately reluctantly settling with a city firm that Christie claimed were “well known to be crooks” though he tried to stay “for the most part on the right side of the law” (297). She relates in her Autobiography that her unemployment, as a married woman, was not even considered: “it was not a thing one would even thought of saying in 1923. In the war there had been WAAFs, WRAFs and WAACS, or jobs in munitions factories or in the hospitals. But they were temporary; there were no jobs for women now in offices or ministries. Shops were fully staffed” (296).

Unlike Sayers’s characters who cannot bear to discuss the war, Christie’s characters mourn for the parts of the war that made them feel a sense of purpose and a sense of unity with others. As characters, they embody what Robert Hemmings refers to in Modern Nostalgia: Siegfried Sassoon, Trauma, and the Second World War as veterans who have “returned with varying degrees of directness to the trauma of wartime and refracted this experience through nostalgia” (24). What sets Christie’s characters apart is that their nostalgia involves no “looking back to a pre-traumatic past and staking claims of authenticity in an earlier period of harmony between the self and the natural world” (24). For Christie, the war itself becomes an object of nostalgia as characters consider their war experiences fondly and admit to missing positive aspects of the war. War trauma plays no role; her characters’ experiences have been predominantly bloodless. Whereas Hemmings discusses “autobiography as an appealing
counterbalance to the fragmentation of modernity” (24), Christie includes autobiographical aspects comparatively to emphasize how much better life has been made by the war for her characters. Using unemployment as a springboard to adventure, Christie romanticizes joblessness by incorporating a sense of adventure and freedom. Though sensitive to the problem of unemployment, Christie creates a representational scheme that invites her audience to dream about the possibility of continuing to imagine a British society in which all members contributed meaningfully and usefully, as Tommy and Tuppence are able to do in pursuit of foreign spies. When planning an advertisement proclaiming their willingness to have adventures, Tuppence suggests:

‘Shall we begin: ‘Young officer, twice wounded in the war—’’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Oh, very well, my dear boy. But I can assure you that that sort of thing might touch the heart of an elderly spinster, and she might adopt you, and then there would be no need for you to be a young adventurer at all.’

‘I don’t want to be adopted.’ (Christie Adversary 9)

Tommy was not irritated or offended by Tuppence’s lighthearted reference to his service and injury; he was disconcerted by the suggestion of his being adopted as his uncle had wanted to adopt him. War becomes a casual topic in conversation and even a tool for diversion. When Tommy is searching for clues at an empty house, he alludes to the war in an attempt to direct the realtor’s thoughts away from his real purpose, commenting how “houses are scarce nowadays” to which the woman replies, “That they are…My daughter and son-in-law have been looking for a decent cottage for I don’t know how long. It’s all the war. Upset things terribly, it has” (161).
Before the mystery’s climax, Tommy angrily confronts a friend whom he thinks is a rival for Tuppence’s affections, telling him:

Oh, go to the devil! I can’t stand your coming here and talking about ‘little Tuppence.’ Go and look after your cousin. Tuppence is my girl! I’ve always loved her, from the time we played together as kids. We grew up and it was just the same. I shall never forget when I was in hospital, and she came in in that ridiculous cap and apron! It was like a miracle to see the girl I loved turn up in a nurse’s kit—.(184)

In this case, the war is cited as a positive event in Tommy’s life as he credits the war for bringing Tuppence back into his life. Though wounded twice, he does not display any signs of shell-shock and seems to be grateful for its role in reuniting him with Tuppence.

In *The Secret Adversary*, the war plays a role that is constantly shifting between the background and the foreground. The past adventures during wartime are occasionally highlighted during fond reminiscences, though the focus of the plot is on modern (set in 1919) responses to pre-war alliances. The plot concerns a lost treaty that was passed on to an innocent girl during the sinking of the *Lusitania*. The treaty’s contents would embarrass countries that were newly at peace; while in search of the document, the criminal mastermind meets with Russians in favor of Communism, an Irish Sinn Fein member, and a German leader who have joined with various British officials in an attempt to undermine the Labour government while seeming to support it in order to bring down the country. When the plot is foiled, the villain commits suicide and the rambling contents of his diary are included: “The war has disturbed me. . . . I thought it would further my plans. The Germans are so efficient. Their spy system, too, was excellent. The streets are full of these boys in khaki. All empty-headed young fools. . . . Yet I do not know. . . . They
won the war. . . . It disturbs me” (237). The villain is one who seemed to support Britain while acting as a King’s Counsel for His Majesty’s government. He is a traitor to Britain, which makes him an apt enemy for a reading public that has spent the past eight years supporting Britain. With the baddie-as-spy-against-Britain motif, she crafts a villain who recreates in her audience the sense of British unity that had helped sustain them during the war. With her appeal to British readers of detective fiction, Christie was becoming a well-known author of detective fiction.

**Addressing Shell-shock**

With few references to politics in her work, Christie seems to have taken the words of George Orwell to heart that “the literary history of the thirties seems to justify the opinion that a writer does well to keep out of politics,” though she does occasionally include mentions of the war matter-of-factly without any clear political bias (Orwell 518). Christie’s characters, as a general rule, do not seem to have any lasting negative effects from it. World War One fades from prominence in Christie’s works until 1936’s *The A.B.C. Murders* in which the reader alternates between two narratives: Hercule Poirot solving a series of murders in which the killer taunts him and Alexander Bonaparte Cust’s inability to connect with others, a characteristic that has been greatly exacerbated since the war. Through the character of Cust, Christie addresses two issues relevant in post-war Britain: the attitude toward victims of shell-shock and the unemployment crisis. His war experiences, when compounded with his epilepsy, create the perfect red herring of a suspect who cannot remember his recent actions. This character is a good suspect because he embodies and disproves stereotypes held by the British public about shell-shock victims. Ben Shephard states in his 2001 book *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*: “Mystery writers like Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers were quick to exploit the possibilities of shell-shocked characters who behaved in wild and unpredictable ways or, like the
killer in Christie’s *ABC Murders*, carried out crimes in a state of hypnotic suggestion” (148). I argue with Shephard’s use of “exploit” and suggest that Christie should be praised for drawing attention to the way shell-shock sufferers were stereotyped. Instead of castigating Christie for ostensibly exploiting shell-shock for plot purposes, I contend that she depends on her readers assuming that shell-shock makes him unstable and, by exposing that prejudice, encourages a reconsideration of how shell-shock victims are viewed. Cust is framed for murder because he seems jumpy and disturbed and attracts the attention of the man who would commit the murders. Cust is described as looking around in “that lost-dog fashion that was characteristic of him” (Christie *A.B.C.* 310). He finds himself next to a man who has been reading about the murders. When the man idly comments about them and Cust is uneasy, the young man sees that Cust’s hands,

were trembling so that he could hardly hold the paper.

‘You never know with lunatics,’ said the young man chattily. ‘They don’t always look barmy, you know. Often they seem just the same as you or me. . . .’

‘I suppose they do,’ said Mr Cust.

‘It’s a fact. Sometimes it’s the war what unhinged them—never been right since.’

‘I—I expect you’re right.’

‘I don’t hold with wars,’ said the young man.

His companion turned on him.

‘I don’t hold with plague and sleeping sickness and famine and cancer . . . but they happen all the same!’

‘War’s preventable,’ said the young man with assurance.

Mr Cust laughed. He laughed for some time.
The young man was slightly alarmed.

‘He’s a bit batty himself,’ he thought.

Aloud he said:

‘Sorry, sir, I expect you were in the war.’

‘I was,’ said Mr Cust. ‘It—it—unsettled me. My head’s never been right since. It aches, you know. Aches terribly.’

‘Oh! I’m sorry about that,’ said the young man awkwardly.

‘Sometimes I hardly know what I’m doing. . . .’

‘Really? Well, I must be getting along,’ said the young man and removed himself hurriedly. He knew what people were once they began to talk about their health.

Mr Cust remained with his paper.

He read and reread . . . (311).

Christie uses Cust’s symptoms of possible shell-shock to make the reader believe that he is the culprit. Cust is set up by the true murderer in the profession of door-to-door salesman. One of the witnesses recalls their encounter: “I’d forgotten all about it. But it wasn’t important. Just one of those men who come round selling stockings—you know, ex-Army people. They’re very persistent. I had to get rid of him. . . . He spoke to me instead of ringing but he was quite a harmless sort of person (332). Christie discusses in her autobiography how after the war, “Young men were always ringing the doorbell, trying to sell stockings or offering some household gadget. It was a pathetic sight. One felt so sorry from them that one often bought a pair of rather nasty stockings, just to cheer them up. They had been lieutenants, naval and military, and now they were reduced to this” (Christie Autobiography 267). Christie employs the character of Cust, and the earlier characters of Tommy Beresford and Anthony Cade, to create sympathy for men
who are unable to find employment after the war. Barry Eichengreen states in “Unemployment in Interwar Britain: New Evidence from London” that “High rates of unemployment among males aged twenty-five to twenty-nine were sometimes viewed as an indication of the inability of workers in their early twenties to re-establish themselves in the labor market after the loss of their first dead-end jobs” (351). Cust is one example of many veterans who are having problems finding work after the war. His plight is not uncommon and, as such, becomes a way that Christie’s work can be accessible to more people because she has empathy for a situation so many of them are in. She is responding to an aspect of post-war Britain that would be familiar to many of her readers, but, again, she creates a sense that unemployment provides opportunities for excitement.¹⁸ That adventure finds Cust and he is employed to be a patsy for murder, as well

¹⁸ Christie continues the optimistic idea that unemployment leads to adventure in The Secret of Chimneys (1925). Hero Anthony Cade finds himself bored working as a tour guide in Africa and quits in search of adventure, taking on the task of returning some blackmail letters under a friends’ name. In an attempt to get close to the blackmailed heroine, he pretends to be unemployed and plays with the stereotype to exact an introduction to her. The heroine, Virginia Revel, returns home to find on her doorstep a young man who was “shabbily dressed, and carried in his hand a sheaf of leaflets. He held one out to Virginia with the legend on it plainly visible: ‘Why Did I Serve My Country?’ In his left hand he held a collecting box.

‘I can't buy two of those awful poems in one day,’ said Virginia pleadingly. ‘I bought one this morning. I did, indeed, honour bright.’

The young man threw back his head and laughed. Virginia laughed with him. Running her eyes carelessly over him, she thought him a more pleasing specimen than usual of London's unemployed. She liked his brown face, and the lean hardness of him. She went so far as to wish
as a stocking salesman. Eichengreen continues: “Ministry of Labour studies from the early and mid-1920s also attribute the high risk of unemployment in this age bracket to the fact that the labor force participation of these workers had either been interrupted or delayed by service in the armed forces” (351). Christie plays on the stereotypes of shell-shock as a plot element to expose the public’s use of them. By encouraging her audience to jump to an incorrect conclusion about Cust, then exposing it as such, she is raising awareness of the plight of victims of shell-shock through highlighting the public’s unfair mindset. Sensationalizing the red herring of Cust reminds the British public that the victims of the war are still present and in need of acknowledgement and treatment, not discrimination and labeling. The stigma placed upon the character of Cust because he had been a veteran and was believed to have been traumatized by his service exemplified the British attitude toward shell-shock.

It is not only Cust’s signs of shell-shock that makes him an ideal suspect; Poirot impatiently recounts the few facts known about Cust: “We know nothing at all! We know where he was born. We know he fought in the war and received a slight wound in the head and that he was discharged from the army owing to epilepsy” (Christie A.B.C. 358). Cust is in police custody after having an epileptic fit at a local police station. Poirot questions him about his past and finds that Cust may not have been a victim of shell-shock. Upon being asked about his war experiences,

Mr Cust’s face lightened up suddenly.

she had a job for him” (56-57). Again Christie continues the motif demonstrating that unemployment brings the optimistic chance of adventure, love, and wealth. Anthony Cade ends up marrying Virginia Revel and taking over the monarchy of a Balkan state.
'You know,' he said, ‘I enjoyed the war. What I had of it, that was. I felt, for the first time, a man like anybody else. We were all in the same box. I was as good as anyone else.' (364)

Cust displays a longing for war-time camaraderie that created a sense of equality with his fellow soldiers, an equality that minimized class differences and emphasized their shared experiences. In A War Imagined, Hynes discusses the “dream that many working-class men had brought home from the Front—the dream that the war, in which working men had fought beside men of the middle and upper classes, would make a difference in the English class system. Surely now that the war was over, men who had survived it would carry their wartime spirit of comradeship into peacetime” (412). It is ironic to blame Cust for having been harmed by the war when he talks about how much he enjoyed it. In this characteristic, he is like Christie’s Tommy Beresford who misses his wartime experiences. As a non-combatant, Christie’s war experience was limited to nursing. She honors male camaraderie in a way that combatants had been taught to do. Through Cust, Christie emphasizes wartime memories of camaraderie to encourage a sense of unity and optimism in post-war Britain. Winter states that in The Great War and the British People that, With few exceptions, what mattered to the men who fought in the Great War was not whether that war, or indeed any war, was just or justifiable. What gripped their imagination was rather the camaraderie of the trenches and the courage and sheer tenacity in the art of survival of the men with whom they served” (292). Cust misses a time when he fit in with other men. He knew his place and resents the fact that he was discharged from serving with his fellow soldiers. Cust embodies George Mosse’s “Myth of the War Experience” which “summarized some of the main themes which had moved men during one or another stage of the war: the spirit of 1914, the war as a test of manliness, the ideal of camaraderie and the cult of the fallen soldier—a whole series
of attitudes which helped men confront and accept this unprecedented experience, and informed many of the literary, artistic and political perceptions after the first world war” (492). In promoting this idealized version of camaraderie through the idealized perception of Cust, Christie is showing a sense of nostalgia for war itself, when Cust understood his place and his role in fighting for his country. Cust continues:

His smile faded.

‘And then I got that wound on the head. Very slight. But they found out I had fits . . . I’d always known, of course, that there were times when I hadn’t been quite sure what I was doing. Lapses, you know. And of course, once or twice I’d fallen down. But I don’t really think they ought to have discharged me for that. No, I don’t think it was right.” (Christie A.B.C. 364)

Shephard recounts that the “only mental defects recognised by military recruiters were syphilis, lunacy (for which an asylum certificate was required) and epilepsy” (Shephard 26). After he has been taken into police custody, Cust tells Poirot: “My head—I suffer very badly with my head . . . the headaches are something cruel sometimes. And then there are times when I don’t know—when I don’t know . . . (Christie A.B.C. 365). Significantly, after the mystery is solved and Cust has been released, Poirot suggests to him, “And-just a little word-what about a visit to an oculist? Those headaches, it is probably that you want new glasses” to which Cust responds, “You think that it may have been that all the time?” and Poirot agrees, “I do” (376). While Poirot blames the headaches on Cust’s poor eyesight, they may well have been a side effect of the epilepsy. Christie uses Cust to show how shell-shock victims are treated, how easily they can be marginalized as scapegoats. What is remarkable about Christie’s technique in the creation of Alexander Cust is her ability to show the isolation felt by former soldiers. Winter states that “in
later years, ex-soldiers frequently returned to this sense of separation which war writers captured. Some German and Austrian war literature also reflects the soldiers’ pervasive feeling of marginality, of separation from a civilian world to which it seemed impossible to return” (Great 294). Christie offers a fully fleshed-out character that is an apt representation of a former soldier and, because of his appearance in genre fiction, her apposite characterization ability is ignored. Because Cust appears in detective fiction, he is seen simply as the red herring, a common trope of the formulaic genre, not as a character that represents a serious commentary on the plight of returning soldiers.

World War Two: Nostalgia Redux

As World War Two approached and passed, Christie retained the sense of nostalgia for war work that permeated her earlier novels. Again, though she is writing in the middle of war, she manages to provide background references to battles or the Blitz. Her characters want to be in the middle of fighting for England and, when they recall their experiences during World War One, they express nostalgia for them. Unlike Sayers who would accept a position writing propaganda for the British government during World War Two (though she would be fired soon after), Christie renewed her efforts at creating a sense of unity in her audience in her books. Her reading public could not ignore the looming war, but could, through her characters, experience a sense of actively participating in fighting the war. Her work provides a feeling of involvement in the war effort that she felt lacking in her own life throughout the war.

Christie approached World War Two with a fatalist attitude, stating in her Autobiography, “So time went on, now not so much like a nightmare as something that had been always going on, had always been there. It had become, in fact, natural to expect that you yourself might be killed soon, that the people you loved best might be killed, that you would hear
of deaths of friends” (Christie *Autobiography* 475). This belief led her to prepare for her own death, recounting in her autobiography that she “had written an extra two books during the first years of the war. This was in anticipation of my being killed in the raids, which seemed to be in the highest degree likely as I was working in London” (497). Certain that she would die during the bombing of London, she wrote *Curtain*, the final case of Poirot, for her daughter Rosalind, and *Sleeping Murder* featuring Miss Marple for her husband. Although *Sleeping Murder* is billed as Miss Marple’s last case, there is nothing in it that suggests a finality of character as Hercule Poirot’s death does as the end of *Curtain*. She left the rights to her daughter and husband not only to provide for them in the event of her death, but also to cheer them up, telling them the books should be read “when you come back from the funeral. Or the memorial service, to think that you have got a couple of books, one belonging to each of you!” (497). These books were published approximately thirty-five years later when dementia had begun to affect Christie. In simply accepting that she might be killed in the war and continuing to work through it, Christie displays the same attitude of acceptance and a willingness to be part of the cause that she shows in her characters.

However, it was not simply a resigned mindset that prompted her writing; she turned to her writing to escape from the Blitz into a fictionalized environment that made the war less dangerous, more thrilling, and full of opportunities to actively fight and work for Britain’s victory instead of passively waiting to be bombed: “I never found any difficulty in writing during the war, as some people did; I suppose because I cut myself off into a different compartment of my mind. I could live in the book among the people I was writing about, and mutter their conversations and see them striding about the room I had invented for them” (476). The war becomes manageable because she is able to experience it on her terms. Her 1941 novel *N or M*
continued the Beresfords’ story: “Now with a grown-up son and daughter, Tommy and Tuppence were bored by finding that nobody wanted them in wartime. However, they made a splendid comeback as a middle-aged pair, and tracked down spies with all their old enthusiasm” (475-6). This is not the sense of doom at undergoing another terrible war that contributed to Virginia Woolf’s decision to kill herself. This new war revives excitement and opportunities to be active and useful. Not displaying Tommy and Tuppence’s feelings of helplessness early in the book, Christie was welcomed back into dispensary work while Christie’s second husband, archaeologist Max Mallowan joined the Home Guard, a group which Christie referred to as “like a comic opera” as the husbands were enjoying playing at war before the bombing started. Christie recalls in her *Autobiography* that “Like everyone else, he was clamouring to be sent abroad, to be given some work to do—but all anyone seemed to want to do was to say: ‘Nothing could be done at the present’—‘Nobody was wanted’” (Christie *Autobiography* 470). Mallowan began working in London on Turkish Relief until he was later accepted into the Air Force. This affirms Tommy’s complaint that “it’s pretty thick when a man of forty-six is made to feel like a doddering grandfather. Army, Navy, Air Force, Foreign Office, one and all say the same thing—I’m too old. I *may* be required later” (Christie *N or M* 2). Tuppence’s reply echoes her opening biography:

> They don’t want people of my age for nursing—no, thank you. Nor for anything else. They’d rather have a fluffy chit who’s never seen a wound, or sterilized a dressing than they would have me who worked for three years, 1915 to 1918, in various capacities, nurse in the surgical ward and operating theatre, driver of a trade delivery van and later of a General. This, that and the other—all, I assert firmly, with conspicuous success. And now I’m a poor, pushing, tiresome,
middle-aged woman who won’t sit at home quietly and knit as she ought to do. . .

. It’s bad enough having a war. . . but not being allowed to do anything in it just
puts the lid on” (2).

Tommy and Tuppence are chosen to find Fifth Columnists who have infiltrated the Intelligence
community because so much time has passed since their earlier intrigues that they would not be
suspected as anything other than typical middle-aged seaside visitors. It is ironic that the lapse of
time that has made them feel no longer connected to the Intelligence community is the reason
they (initially only Tommy) are chosen for the assignment.

Christie’s sense of nostalgia for wartime settings continues in her novels and echoes her
earlier female characters’ statements missing wartime, particularly in Lynn Marchmont of There
Is a Tide (1948). After her return from serving as a Wren, Lynn finds herself missing war after
three days at home. When looking through newspapers, she realizes the exhilaration of war has
left her and others like her unsuited to post-war life:

O brave new world, thought Lynn grimly. Her eyes rested lightly on the columns
of the daily paper. Ex-W.A.A.F. seeks post where initiative and drive will be
appreciated. Former W.R.E.N. seeks post where organising ability and authority
are needed.

Enterprise, initiative, command, those were the commodities offered. But what
was wanted? People who could cook and clean, or write decent shorthand.

Plodding people who knew a routine and could give good service. (Christie Tide
21)

Lynn is lost in a world that does not need her wartime skills, abilities that she has come to value
in herself. In finding herself at odds with her post-war setting, Lynn represents those who miss
the stimulation of war and the opportunities for personal growth that it offered. Lynn quarrels with her fiancé, who had to stay home to work the farm and realizes claustrophobically:

she would never go away again. Go away, that is to say, in the sense that the words now held for her. The excitement of gang planks being pulled up, the racing of a ship's screw, the thrill as an aeroplane became airborne and soared up and over the earth beneath. Watching a strange coastline take form and shape. The smell of hot dust, and paraffin, and garlic - the clatter and gabble of foreign tongues. Strange flowers, red poinsettias rising proudly from a dusty garden. . . .
Packing, unpacking—where next?
All that was over. The war was over.
Lynn Marchmont had come home. Home is the sailor, home from the sea . . . But I'm not the same Lynn who went away. (41)

This sense of loss echoes May Wedderburn Cannan’s “Rouen” (1917) with each creating a portrait of a woman being excited by danger and travel: one whose “heart goes out to Rouen . . . who remember[s] our Adventure” (Cannan lines 50-51). With Lynn back from the war, safe with her family, Christie creates a nostalgia that shows a woman without purpose since her return from war. Lynn realizes later in the text that she has been drifting since she returned:

An aimless, formless method of living. Ever since she had come out of the Service. A wave of nostalgia swept over her for those war days. Days when duties were clearly defined, when life was planned and orderly—when the weight of individual decisions had been lifted from her. But even as she formulated the idea, she was horrified at herself. Was that really and truly what people were secretly feeling elsewhere? Was that what, ultimately, war did to you? It was not the
physical dangers—the mines at sea, the bombs from the air, the crisp ping of a rifle bullet as you drove over a desert track. No, it was the spiritual danger of learning how much easier life was if you ceased to think. . . . She, Lynn Marchmont, was no longer the clearheaded resolute intelligent girl who had joined up. Her intelligence had been specialised, directed in well-defined channels. Now mistress of herself and her life once more, she was appalled at the disinclination of her mind to seize and grapple with her own personal problems.

By incorporating a war nostalgia after World War Two which echoes so strongly the experiences of Tuppence and Alexander Cust, Christie's work makes a case for the positive aspects of war and emphasizes war’s power for good, for helping people understand their own abilities and realize the joy felt in excitement of the unknown.

In writing the book that would be Poirot’s memorial, Christie revisits Poirot’s first case and displays an awareness of the complexities of reminiscing about wartime. *Curtain*, the novel Christie created as Poirot’s last, features the ultimate sense of nostalgia: a return to the setting of her first novel, a rekindling of Poirot and Hastings’s partnership, and a reappraisal of Poirot’s career. Set at Styles, the location where Poirot first appeared for Christie’s readers, the opening finds Captain Hastings on a train and thinking about his first case: “How long ago was it that I had taken this selfsame journey? Had felt (ridiculously) that the best of life was over for me! Wounded in the war that for me would always be the war—the war that was wiped out by a second and more desperate war” (Christie *Curtain* 1). Christie acknowledges the idea that wartime was not a happy time for all her readers and encourages empathy for those who suffered during the war. When Hastings refers to their earlier case as “good days,” Poirot corrects his
nostalgia: “You may speak for yourself, Hastings. For me, my arrival at Styles St. Mary was a sad and painful time. I was a refugee, wounded, exiled from home and country, existing by charity in a foreign land. No, it was not gay. I did not know then that England would come to be my home and that I should find happiness here” (13). Even though the war has dimmed in Hasting’s memory, it has not in Poirot’s: “you look back, you say, the tears rising in your eyes, ‘Oh, the happy days. Then I was young.’ But indeed, my friend, you were not so happy as you think. You had recently been severely wounded, you were fretting at being no longer fit for active service, you had just been depressed beyond words by your sojourn in a dreary convalescent home” (13). Poirot has been all-knowing throughout the series, often twitting Hastings for his inability to look deeper into situations and understand the psychology behind people’s choices. However, Poirot’s suicide note indicates that Hastings, with his tendency to romanticize the war years, was correct in doing so. Poirot’s last written words “They were good days. Yes, they have been good days. . . .” (215) complete the portrait of a character who found joy and a sense of purpose during war, a theme common to many Christie characters. Though Curtain was written in the midst of a second war and published approximately thirty-five years later, the memories of World War One may dim but the consequences of the war are far-reaching in the authors, their characters, and the impact on detective fiction itself.

The Golden Age of Detective Fiction existed because the war made readers and writers long for a sense of security that the detective novel could provide. Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie responded to this need in different ways: the former, who lived with the effects of shell-shock, created a hero whose war experiences stayed with him and compelled his quest for justice, and the latter, who worked during the war, strove in her novels to show the hopeful possibilities of life during and after the war. Christie’s wars are bloodless ones: filled not with
trauma and battle but with prospects for adventure and the chance to serve a country and be a part of something worthwhile. She highlights the struggles of women to find their place in a post-war Britain that no longer valued their service and shows the optimistic opportunities that were present for individuals willing to return to adventure. She encourages her readers to find commonalities with her characters and see an idealized Britain that had tidy endings in which the villains were captured and peace returned. In the work of Christie, war itself becomes an object of nostalgia, validating her readers’ acknowledgement and justification for missing positive aspects of wartime Britain.
Agatha Christie and the Modern Mystery

Agatha Christie is the most well-known of the members of the Detection Club, a writer whose works are only surpassed in popularity by the Bible and Shakespeare. Christie’s popularity serves as a double-edged sword in that, while her name and characters live on, her works have not received the critical attention of those by fellow Detection Club members Dorothy L. Sayers or G.K. Chesterton. Christie is not listed among the great writers in modernism, but she should be because of her representation of aspects of popular modernism such as a reconsideration of traditional gender roles in post-war Britain and the role of self-consciousness in her work as part of the high/low divide in her use of meta-narrative. The use of meta-narrative allows Christie to speak directly to her readers through the medium of detective fiction and highlights her complex attitude about the quality of detective fiction and the author’s role in creating a product for her reading public. I argue that Christie’s discussion of the feminine, fussy Poirot and the masculine, nervy Miss Marple show her responding to a post-war Britain that was dealing with changes in traditional gender roles. Through Poirot and Miss Marple, she represents a new Britain with modern characters who are aware of their roles and play upon them self-consciously to affect how other characters see them.

The link between Christie and the popular modernist movement in literature is not a new one, though it is not particularly widespread. While critics have called attention to her popular modernism, I believe they have incorrectly overstated Christie’s conservatism. The few critical studies that do link Christie with the popular modernist movement echo each other in supporting the idea of her conservatism. Allison Light in Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars (1991) also argues that Christie should be considered one of the great writers of popular modernism but accords Christie’s texts more aspects of traditional
conservatism than I think are applicable. Light bemoans the idea that “it may be popular to write about Conan Doyle or even Raymond Chandler but Christie remains beyond the pale, the producer of harmless drivel. An unsuitable case for a critic. It is an extraordinary fact, given the centrality of her work to British cultural life, that no self-respecting British critic has ever written at decent length about her, or felt impelled to look more closely at what that work might speak to” (64). I support Light’s claim that Christie’s popularity bears the blame for the dearth of scholarship; however, I question the correct application of the title “self-respecting” with its seemingly condescending attitude toward previous Christie critics. Critics have discussed the way Christie’s popularity as a writer of detective fiction has prevented her work from receiving previous critical attention.

The characteristics of detective fiction—the distrust of authority, the reliance on psychology and self-examination, the search for truth—are all aspects of modernist literature. Peter Childs defines the goal of modern literature as “to represent consciousness, perception, emotion, meaning and the individual’s relation to society through interior monologue, stream of consciousness, tunneling, defamiliarisation, rhythm, irresolution” (3). Even the formulaic story arc of introduction, crime, false clues, denouement of revealed villain, and administered justice allows the focus to be on characterization and themes. Light suggests, “Once we consider the whodunit as a form of popular modernism, these apparent failings, the emptying of moral and

19 Though the title is listed in a footnote, Light apparently discounts past-Detection Club president H.R.F. Keating’s 1977 anthology *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*. No connection between Christie and modernism is discussed, though Keating’s work, comprised of articles by detective fiction critics or fellow Detection Club members, provides thorough discussion of Christie’s sales, biography, public image, film adaptations, as well as in-depth literary analysis.
social effect, the evacuating of notions of ‘character’, the transparency of the prose . . . appear in a different light. What has come to seem to us the epitome of the old-fashioned and the genteel, arguably began life as a modernising, de-sacramentalising form, emancipating itself from the literary lumber of the past” (66). Detective fiction allows a break with literary past because of its newness as a genre that reflects the anxieties of post-war Britain. This reflection of anxiety, of life during and after chaos, found in Christie’s popular modernism is reminiscent in voice to that of her contemporaries. Light claims Christie’s writing contains “an archness one hears again and again in the period— in Wooster, in Wimsey, but also in Waugh and Huxley, and in the essays of Virginia Woolf—a refusal of seriousness, of the cumbrous and weights, as well as of the moral sententiousness of the older generation” (Light 68). By treating death as an everyday occurrence, a puzzle to be solved instead of a tragedy, Christie is reconsidering ideas of seriousness and mirroring British society coping with life after World War One.

The claim for Christie as a peer of the great modernist writers is also made by Jon Thompson in *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism* (1993). However, like Light, Thompson focuses heavily on the conservative aspects of modernism in Christie’s writing. He argues, “The more obvious pastoral settings express values implicit in all of Christie’s fiction: a fondness for an orderly, circumscribed social world stratified by differences in manners” (122). Thompson suggests that Christie’s “conservative vision of modernity” demonstrates nostalgia for pre-war years with “the pastoral element implicit within Christie’s fiction . . . as a distinctly modernist idealization of England, an England that exists in the popular imagination as a conflict-free, rural Arcadia sustaining the values and traditions that define ‘Englishness’”(122-123). What Thompson fails to realize, in addition to his misapplication of Christie’s nostalgia as being for pre-war times, as discussed in the previous
chapter, is that his claim for Christie’s conservatism is not evidenced in her fiction. His dependence on the pastoral setting as evidence for her conservatism is belied by the many non-pastoral and, often, non-English settings used by Christie. She frequently employed exotic island settings as in And Then There Were None or A Caribbean Mystery, or placed her mystery in a travel setting as in Death in the Air, Murder on the Orient Express, The Mystery of the Blue Train, The Main in the Brown Suit, and Death on the Nile. Light argues that the “conservatism of the stories may appear to lie both in their summoning up a fear of moral and social anarchy and in their feeding that desire that people have to live in an ordered universe” (100). These are not conservative elements; the sense of seeking order from chaos is an element of all detective fiction and cannot be used as evidence of a conservatism that is uniquely Christie.

Christie’s texts exhibited ideas that were far-thinking and described a Britain that rejected conservative ideals and looked forward. In At Bertram’s Hotel (1965), Christie’s Miss Marple bemoans a return to traditional values through nostalgia. Miss Marple states that the nostalgia found at Bertram’s Hotel “seemed wonderful at first—unchanged you know—like stepping back into the past—to the part of the past that one had loved and enjoyed. . . . But of course, it wasn't really like that, I learned (what I suppose I really knew already) that one can never go back, that one should not ever try to go back - that the essence of life is going forward. Life is really a one way street, isn't it?” (195). The text evinces sympathy for former physician Dr Stokes who is described as “[A] very nice man . . . embittered a bit, of course, by being struck off. It was only his kind heart really, helping a lot of girls who were no better than they should be” (158). Christie is still a product of her time and blames females for getting pregnant, but her sympathy for a physician who is actually performing the abortions shows a decided lack of conservatism.
This dearth appears in her inclusion of other social issues, namely the open attitude toward sex, both heterosexual and homosexual. In *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964) Miss Marple considers the novels her nephew Raymond has sent her: “So difficult—all about such unpleasant people, doing such very odd things and not, apparently, even enjoying them. ‘Sex’ as a word had not been much mentioned in Miss Marple’s young days, but there had been plenty of it—not talked about so much—but enjoyed far more than nowadays, or so it seemed to her. Though usually labelled Sin, she couldn’t help feeling that that was preferable to what it seemed to be nowadays—a kind of Duty” (2). She feels empathy toward a young girl whom she hears being castigated by her boyfriend for her lack of sexual experience “To have sex experience urged on you exactly as though it was an iron tonic! Poor young things . . .” (2). This is not a sense of nostalgia as Miss Marple’s character has frequently rejected an idealization of the past. Christie’s inclusion of the discussion of sexual attitudes is a sign of progressiveness. Simply having a conversation about sex shows a modern attitude that acknowledges new social mores for sexual activity and displays a normalizing acceptance. After Miss Marple has been gifted a trip to the Caribbean by her nephew, he suggests that she let her house to a writer friend of his. Raymond assures her, “‘He’ll look after the house all right. He’s very house proud. He’s a queer. I mean—” He had paused, slightly embarrassed—but surely even dear old Aunt Jane must have heard of queers. He went on to deal with the next points” (3). Christie does not describe any reaction from Miss Marple to this news. In doing so, she makes the presence of a gay character a non-event, nothing that needs to be fussed over or extensive commentary. Someone who is gay is mentioned and the plot moves along. In this way, Christie normalizes homosexuality and shows a Britain that is becoming more accepting and diverse. In *Hallowe’en Party* (1969), she is one of the earliest modern popular detective fiction writers to use the term “lesbian.” The context is a
sympathetic one, with two males teens recalling the death of a teacher who had cared deeply for her female roommate. “‘Lesbian,’ asked Nicholas, in a man-of-the-world voice. ‘I shouldn’t wonder’” responded his friend Desmond. (123). Eighteen-year-old Nicholas and sixteen-year-old Desmond are aping the cool, casual tone of cosmopolitan adults, like the world-renowned Poirot with whom they are speaking. Their open tone, with their eventual role as heroes saving a young girl from being murdered by her father, shows them to be modern males in a positive light who reflect the positive aspects of a more inclusive society.

Beyond Christie’s attitude toward contemporary social concerns, critics have not addressed how skillfully Christie challenges the high/low cultural divide through her employment of meta-narrative, which provides insight into the mind of a writer of detective fiction who is, herself, engaging with issues of quality in literature and coping with how a writer should respond to her public. This meta-fiction, which Patricia Waugh defines as writing which “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality,” (2) allows Christie to comment on her craft and her relationship with her readers. Her work is informed by both the self-conscious aspect of writing detective fiction in her development of characters who are authors themselves and the self-referential nature of detective fiction, with its joking references to the way mysteries are solved in other books. George Dove, in his 1974 article “‘Shades of Dupin!’ Fictional Detectives on Detective Fiction” theorizes this is done “to suggest a contrast between THIS (the story in the reader’s hands, the real thing) and THAT (the world of fiction)” (13). This acknowledgement of other detective fiction increases readers’ enjoyment as they are able to share the inside jokes of the detective fiction conventions: the sometimes exaggerated plot devices and serendipitous discovery of clues.
Christie’s use of characters who are detective fiction authors, such as Ariadne Oliver, who appears in seven novels and two short stories, and Daniel Clancy, who is featured in *Death in the Air* (1935), enables her to comment on the difficulties of her craft and acknowledge the unease she felt over her role in delivering works of popular culture, not “literature.” Her self-consciousness elevates her stories to literary texts that are worthy of analytical discussion and uses her characters to emphasize the point. *The Body in the Library* (1941), featuring Miss Marple’s second appearance in a full-length novel, presents Peter Carmody, the nine-year-old member of a family whose adult members are all murder suspects, talking excitedly to the Scotland Yard detectives. When Superintendent Harper asks him if the murder interests him, the boy bubbles, “You bet it does. Do you like detective stories? I do. I read them all and I’ve got autographs from Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie and Dickson Carr and H. C. Bailey” (65).

These statements provide a way for Christie to reach out to her readers, with the sly wink of meta-narrative. Christie takes the opportunity to mock fellow detective fiction authors and lets her readers in on the joke, whether through Tommy and Tuppence Beresford joking about photographing a fairy in *Partners in Crime* (1929) or the forgetfulness of G.K. Chesterton in *At Bertram’s Hotel* (1965).

These meta-fictional aspects serve to increase the enjoyment of the reader. Because her audience is aware of the conventions of detective fiction, references to other detectives serve as a literary in-joke. This is seen most clearly in *Partners in Crime* (1929). The novel is comprised of multiple stories, each featuring a different detective, and the interweaving of these stories creates a complex narrative structure.

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20 After several family deaths, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle turned to spiritualism and supported two girls in the claim that they had photographed fairies in their garden. He wrote an article about the Cottingley Fairies in the December 1920 issues of *The Strand*, the magazine in which most of his Sherlock Holmes stories were featured.
a series of short stories, in which Tommy and Tuppence Beresford take over a detective agency that has been serving as a front for a spy operation. The short stories each focus on a case they solve during their tenure as the small staff of the International Detective Agency; in an attempt to get into the detective spirit, Tommy brings in a collection of detective fiction and they ape the characteristics of a different detective in each short story. As Sherlock Holmes, Tommy poorly plays a violin and deduces information about a client in “The Case of the Missing Lady.” Other references predominantly feature works by Detection Club members but—with the exception of “The Man in the Mist” in which Tommy acts as G.K. Chesterton’s Father Brown and “The Sunningdale Mystery” which Tommy and Tuppence solve in the personas of Baroness Orczy’s “The Old Man in the Corner” characters Bill Owen and Polly Burton—the alluded detectives are not familiar names to today’s audience. In the final case, “The Man Who Was No. 16,” Tommy starts talking about “the little grey cells” and a desire to retire and start growing vegetable marrows (217). Tommy takes on the role of Hercule Poirot in their final case. Christie’s parody is a gentle one, not meant to be mean-spirited, but to let her audience enjoy the joke. His characterization is limited to repetition of Poirot’s key phrases: calling Tuppence “mon ami” and reiterating the superiority of his “little grey cells” (228-229). This pleasure element of detective fiction is a marked characteristic of Christie’s ability to consider the experience her readers were having as they read her texts.

Christie’s popular modernist tendencies appear in meta-fictional aspects of her characters of Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, literary constructs which demonstrate an author responding to an audience that was adjudicating gender roles with main characters that, while their sex was clearly established, displayed characteristics that her audience would have associated as traditional characteristics of the opposite sex. Much of the detective fiction
marketed for women at the time was not taken seriously as a product of “literature” for the reading public. Christie took the concept of appealing to an open readership further through her creation of detectives who would blur lines of traditional gender stereotypes. In creating the often noted feminine Poirot and the occasionally masculine Miss Marple, Christie demonstrates a mutability of gender that complicates attempts to categorize her writing for a specific sex. She shows a more culturally diverse Britain in finding commonalities of modern self-consciousness by accepting and normalizing both the utter foreignness of the fussy Belgian Poirot and the ostensibly traditional English spinster mannerisms of Miss Marple. Both detectives display an awareness of the roles they play in the stories and show how they manipulate stereotypes of foreignness and the familiar to their advantage.

Through self-conscious aspects in the characters of Poirot and Miss Marple, Christie exhibits the negotiation of what constitutes Britishness in interwar Britain. The concept of Englishness, as Jed Esty claims in *A Shrinking Island*, is examining “its own autochthonous origin stories” (41) and focuses on a “preservationist national past” (42) that is based on

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21 In an effort to increase her appeal from the outset, Christie writes in her *Autobiography*, “I had wanted to write my books under a fancy name—Martin West or Mostyn Grey—but John Lane had been insistent on keeping my own name, Agatha Christie—particularly the Christian name: he said, ‘Agatha is an unusual name which remains in peoples’ (sic) memories.’ So I had to abandon Martin West and label myself henceforth as Agatha Christie. I had the idea that a woman’s name would prejudice people against my work, especially in detective stories; that Martin West would be more manly and forthright. However, as I have said, when you are publishing a first book you give way to whatever is suggested to you, and in this case, I think John Lane was right” (269).
indigenous English aspects of culture. Britishness is, as defined by Rebecca Langlands in “Britishness or Englishness? The Historical problem of National Identity in Britain,” more inclusive and reflects “the case that the ethnic populations of the British state have dual (or even multiple) political sentiments and historical memories” (63). Langlands simplifies the distinction in discussing “a collision of Englishness—defined in terms of rural localities—and Britishness—defined in imperial and urban industrial terms” (64). The cosmopolitan Poirot, with his foreign mannerisms, becomes part of the English landscape of detective fiction and demonstrates an interwar sense of Britishness that is more cosmopolitan and less xenophobic. Miss Marple plays with the idea of her role as a typical English spinster, which allows her to be both part of society and separate from it in the role of detective. There has also been a great deal of scholarship on the feminine aspects of behavior found in her most popular detective, Hercule Poirot, which I engage in arguing that Christie shows a reconsideration of masculinity as Poirot finds himself a necessary part of British society, solving crimes that British police were unable to solve. Christie criticism tends to focus on issues of feminism, particularly in the character of Miss Marple, and xenophobia, through the character of Poirot, but critics do not make the connection between Christie’s books playing with gender stereotypes and her categorization as a writer of modern British fiction who demonstrates aspects of self-consciousness through meta-narrative and a reexamination of Englishness in gender representations.

As Jessica Mann states in Deadlier than the Male: An Investigation into Feminine Crime Writing, “If Agatha Christie is the writer whose books have sold more copies all over the world than those of any other writer, then, rather than assuming that the world-wide public has degraded tastes, surely it would be more logical to accept that she was meeting a universal, spontaneous need, which is not recognised by the critics and editors who reflect and form
educated taste” (49). Christie responded to her public with a deliberate attitude that she was creating a product for her readers. As she states in her Autobiography, “Of course I knew that writing books was my steady, solid profession. I could go on inventing my plots and writing my books until I went gaga. I never felt any desperation as to whether I could think of one more book to write” (458). The formulaic aspects of Christie’s work gave her the comfort of never needing to worry about her ability to produce texts and satisfy publishing contracts and the demands of her public. This awareness of her craft, turning her writing from an artistic vocation to a utilitarian one, reflects a self-conscious aspect to her work, one of many characteristics she shared with her fellow female writers of detective fiction. Christie’s attitudes toward her career are not unique to her experience; they are representative of deliberate pragmatic choices made by other female writers of detective fiction.

Craft in Context

Putting Christie’s writing practices in context with those of her peers demonstrates that her attitude toward writing was not unique (Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, and Margery Allingham, like Christie, equated writing with financial stability, not necessarily searching for artistic fulfillment in their work) and highlights her success at writing for various levels of the British public. They treated writing like a profession, not an artistic calling, and translated literary success into financial terms. The changing society made it possible for the women known as the “Big Four” or the “Queens of Crime” to become proficient in their craft, pursuing their occupation out of financial necessity. Understanding how each woman coped with the demands of her profession creates a greater appreciation for the uniqueness of Christie’s talent in representing different levels of British society and being accessible to so many readers. Christie wrote her first novel on a dare from her sister, then continued writing to supplement her family’s
income during the war and post-war throughout her husband’s intermittent employment. After their bitter divorce, Christie needed the money to care for her family. Sayers’s husband’s employment was sketchy due to effects of being gassed in World War One; Ngaio Marsh never married and supported herself with her books; Margery Allingham maintained a household that encompassed her artist husband and a male friend who lived with them. While their writing sustained their households, for all but Marsh, their writing would provide an escape from their unhappy marriages. Sayers’s husband felt overshadowed by her career and her success. Christie’s first marriage famously fell apart. Her second husband cheated on her as well, marrying his mistress after Christie’s death. Allingham’s husband had a long-term affair with an actress. Allingham attempted to justify her choice of detective fiction to family friend and novelist William McFee: “It’s a fine detective story, a good painstaking piece of craftsmanship. . . . If a lady can’t write a detective story or any other story to buy herself a trousseau, when can she write one?” (Allingham qtd. in Martin 56). Biographer Richard Martin continues, “The cool awareness of the relationship between skillful writing and commercial success is characteristic of Marge’s business sense, which was to be of sustaining value over the decade to come” (Martin 56). Martin states that the “responsibility of being the sole breadwinner in a household that, from August 1934, consisted of four adults plus the domestic staff needed to take the burden of housekeeping off Marge’s shoulders, was often almost more than she could bear. Time and again her diary records her own fears about the desperately urgent need for money—fears which were never apparent to those who lived close to her” (72). Her commercial appeal would dictate the

22 After her husband asked for a divorce, Christie disappeared for eleven days and was eventually found in a spa registered under a pseudonym that incorporated the surname of her husband’s mistress. See Jared Cade’s *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days*. 
stories she wrote, as she “frequently found herself forced to write a more conventional novel when sales of her more imaginative renderings of the genre dipped” (Rowland 9).

Christie is set apart from female detective fiction writers during the period by her ability to reflect an inclusive Britain that was open to and featured people from different social strata. Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey was set in predominantly upper class London; Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn continues the upper class man turned police investigator motif; and Allingham’s Albert Campion fluctuated between the upper class and criminal class. In contrast, Christie represents all levels of British society—from Poirot’s titled friends to Marple’s servants and the middle class workers who peopled the Tommy and Tuppence Beresford stories, as well as Mr Parker Pyne’s varied clientele.

Female detective fiction writers of the time period became more dependent on the public’s acceptance of their work and strove to satisfy public’s needs. When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle became tired of Sherlock Holmes and wanted to focus on his other literary endeavors, he killed him off. Sayers and Christie knew that they could not do the same because they were responsible for providing a product. In a 1928 letter to Dr. Eustace Barton, Sayers’s correspondent for medical issues and co-author of The Documents in the Case, Sayers tells him of Lord Peter Wimsey, “I certainly don’t intend to kill him off yet, but I think it would be better to invent a new detective for any tales we do together. . . . Also, I’m looking forward to getting a rest from him, because his everlasting breeziness does become a bit of a tax at times! (qtd.in Reynolds 274). In a 1930 letter to friend Muriel St Clare Byrne, Sayers tells her that after finishing another Lord Peter novel, “I am getting a bit weary of Lord Peter, but I suppose he must be kept going, as he still seems to pay pretty well. But, as you must have noticed, he is growing older and more staid. There are times when I wish him the victim of one of his own
plots!” (310). All four women found themselves pigeonholed as writers of successful detective fiction and tried to escape in different ways, though Sayers and Christie’s efforts outside detective fiction are more well-known than those of Marsh and Allingham. Sayers, who had studied at Somerville College, Oxford, was well-known as a Christian philosopher and Dante translator. Christie writes in her autobiography that upon learning her first novel had been accepted for publication, she and her husband went out to celebrate and there “was a third party with us, though I did not know it. Hercule Poirot, my Belgian invention, was hanging round my neck, firmly attached there like the old man of the sea” (Autobiography 263). As “Agatha Christie,” she became tied to the detection genre, as well as the characters she had created.

Christie and the High/Low Divide

Christie was self-conscious about her role as a writer of detective fiction and addressed the high/low divide by questioning whether what she wrote was “literature”. The development of detective fiction coincides with what Andreas Huyssen calls “the culture of modernity,” a time period that has been “characterized by a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture” (vii). This debate between artistic value and public prominence present in critical discussion of detective fiction since its inception. Christie understood that her name had become its own imprint for a formula in creating work of detective fiction and, when she wanted to write outside the detective fiction genre, she created a different authorial identity, which allowed her to experiment outside her genre without the self-conscious awareness that she had to demonstrate the conventions expected from an “Agatha Christie” detective story. In addition to her detective fiction (comprised of sixty-six novels and fourteen short story collections), Christie also published, under the pseudonym “Mary Westmacott,” six romances, and, under the name “Agatha Christie Mallowan,” a travel/autobiographical book and a book of religious stories. As
J.K. Van Dover states in *We Must Have Certainty: Four Essays on the Detective Story*, “Agatha Christie was a mystery writer, and a half-dozen romances published under the name of Mary Westmacott do not change her identity. She too felt compelled to write out a narrative of her detective’s demise, but though she wrote *Curtain* in 1940, she did not publish it until 1975; she knew that Poirot was her fate. The Golden Age writers were mystery writers, and banked upon being mystery writers” (Van Dover 38). Her *Autobiography* affirms early into her publishing career, “It had escaped my notice that not only was I now tied to the detective story, I was also tied to two people: Hercule Poirot and his Watson, Captain Hastings” (268). She knew her limitations as a writer and, unlike Sayers, who would be dropped from the position, turned down a chance to write propaganda during World War Two. Her *Autobiography* states, “Towards the beginning of the war, Graham Greene had written to me and asked if I would like to do propaganda work. I did not think I was the kind of writer who would be any good as propaganda, because I lacked the single-mindedness to see only one side of the case. Nothing could be more ineffectual than a lukewarm propagandist. You want to be able to say ‘X is black as night’ and *feel* it. I didn’t think I could ever be like that” (490-1). Christie’s *Autobiography* chronicles her struggles with her role as a writer of a commercial product and her ability to translate her writing into providing for her material needs.

She writes in her *Autobiography* that after her husband Archibald Christie ended their marriage, her financial difficulties mounted: “Ever since my mother’s death I had been unable to write a word. A book was due this year, and having spent so much on Styles I had no money in hand; what little capital I had had was gone in the purchase of the house. I had no money coming in now from anywhere except what I could make or had made myself. It was vital that I should write another book as soon as possible, and get an advance on it” (341). Her self-awareness that
she was not able to continue being dependent on someone else marks her transition from a person who writes to a writer: “I was driven desperately on by the desire, indeed the necessity, to write another book and make some money. That was the moment I changed from an amateur to a professional. I assumed the burden of a profession, which is to write even when you don’t want to, don’t much like what you are writing, and aren’t writing particularly well. I have always hated *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, but I got it written, and sent it off to the publishers. It sold just as well as my last book had done. So I had to content myself with that—though I cannot say I have ever been proud of it” (344). Christie’s remarks about her writing career indicate an awareness of both her strengths as a writer and the market during the interwar period which saw detective fiction sales rise. Christie had begun writing on a dare from her sister and the parallels between the Poirot/Hastings relationship and the Holmes/Watson relationship show an awareness on Christie’s part of the elements of a successful detective fiction story. Once Christie became confident in her abilities, however, she developed her own writing style and took pride in her contributions to the genre. She clarifies in her *Autobiography*:

Certainly, when you begin to write, you are usually in the throes of admiration for some writer, and, whether you will or no, you cannot help copying their style. Often it is not a style that suits you, and so you write badly. But as time goes on you are less influenced by admiration. You still admire certain writers, you may

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23 Jared Cade states in *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* that *The Mystery of the Blue Train* was written before and after her disappearance and not, as her *Autobiography* states, the year after her disappearance. (158). The fact that it sold as well as the previous book resulted from the lasting publicity her disappearance generated. The practical Christie, even in the throes of a humiliating scandal, responded to the clamoring public with a book.
even wish you could write like them, but you know quite well that you can’t. Presumably you have learned literary humility. If I could write like Elizabeth Bowen, Muriel Spark or Graham Greene, I should jump to high heaven with delight, but I know that I can’t, and it would never occur to me to attempt to copy them. I have learned that I am *me*, that I can do the things that, as one might put it, *me* can do, but I cannot do the things that *me* would like to do. (394)

Christie’s realization that she was good at her profession enabled her to translate her literary success into practical uses. As her writing improved she reflects, “I was gaining confidence over my writing now. I felt that I would have no difficulty in producing a book every year, and possibly a few short stories as well. The nice part about writing in those days was that I directly related it to money” (398). Christie saw a direct relationship between her creation of her novels and the material benefits of her success. She continues, “If I decided to write a story, I knew it would bring me in sixty pounds, or whatever it was. I could deduct income tax—at that time four or five shillings in the pound—and therefore I knew that I had a good forty-five pounds which was mine. This stimulated my output enormously. I said to myself, ‘I should like to take the conservatory down and fit it up as a loggia in which we could sit. How much will that be?’ I got my estimate, I went to my typewriter, I sat, thought, planned, and within a week a story was formed in my mind. In due course I wrote it, and then I had my loggia. . . . I was not getting the sums I was to receive later, but I could see them coming, and it seemed to me that all I had to do was to be industrious and rake in the money” (398-9). Christie links hard work and financial success, but she does not indicate any awareness that what she is doing in the production of her detective fiction novels is worthy of artistic value.
I disagree with this exemption and suggest that her plotting techniques, her sharp and accurate characterizations, and the way her writing reflected serious modern concerns of gender and nostalgia show a great deal of literary merit. Her role as a writer of genre fiction should not exclude her work from consideration of artistic quality, though Christie’s sense of herself as a writer did not translate to a change in her overall self-image as a writer of popular rather than high art. After marriage to her second husband, Christie states in her Autobiography:

I don’t think, even then, that I considered myself a bona fide author. I wrote things—yes—books and stories. They were published, and I was beginning to accustom myself to the fact that I could count upon them as a definite source of income. But never, when I was filling out a form and came to the line asking for occupation, would it have occurred to me to fill it in with anything but the time-honoured “married woman.” I was a married woman, that was my status, and that was my occupation. As a sideline, I wrote books. I never approached my writing by dubbing it with the grand name of “career.” I would have thought it ridiculous. My mother-in-law could not understand this. “You write so well, Agatha dear, and because you write so well, surely you ought to write something—well—more serious?” Something “worthwhile” was what she meant. I found it difficult to explain to her, and indeed did not really try, that my writing was for entertainment. (418)

Christie evaluated her own work in relation to the divide between high and low culture, a common issue in detective fiction. Christie saw herself as a popular author—not a serious one—in a developing genre that relied on audience enjoyment, not necessarily literary merit. Gertrude
Stein would define the genre as, “well, detective stories are what I read”, invoking the idea of pleasure and claiming that she found the stories “soothing” (qtd. in DiBattista “Lowly” 146).

Critics including Maria DiBattista have given perspective with which to judge Christie’s work. DiBattista claims in “The Lowly Art of Murder: Modernism and the Case of the Free Woman,” a chapter of High and Low Moderns, that detective fiction functions in the same way as other examples of modern literature: to explore issues of gender and to understand how the detective story provides the same meaning as the modern novel. She maintains that “where the novel and detective story meet, there Apollo and Dionysus, intellectual and primordial being, reencounter each other on modern ground. In their renewed antagonism a new realism is born, enlightened by modern methods of thought, yet riddled with a troubled knowledge of women” (191). Modern detective fiction, according to DiBattista, represents gender issues in a serious way. DiBattista is correct in denouncing the clear delineation between ideas of high and low moderns. She states in the introduction that “such adversarial models of high and low and the conflictual binarism on which they are based obfuscate the complicated, often surprisingly productive, relations—material and intellectual—between literary moderns of high and low persuasions” (“Introduction” 9). However, what DiBattista does not discuss are the financial aspects of writing that became key in motivating Christie’s to write and produce her stories.

Christie’s writing offered her more than simply entertainment; it became a means by which she supported herself and was able to fulfill her goals. Christie found a way to amuse herself and appeal to her audience. Christie claims that in her writing, “When I began writing detective stories I was not in any mood to criticize them or to think seriously about crime. The detective story was the story of the chase; 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” (424).
Christie works through issues stemming from the war through detective fiction by relying on the genre’s inherent sense of prevailing justice. The detective fiction novel allowed her to present issues without moral ambiguity. A crime was committed; the villain had acted out of evil motivation (greed, lust, anger) and the villain was punished for it and removed from society. She continues in her Autobiography, “At that time, the time of the 1914 war, the doer of evil was not a hero: the enemy was wicked, the hero was good; it was as crude and as simple as that. We had not then begun to wallow in psychology. I was, like everyone else who wrote books or read them, against the criminal and for the popular victim” (424). As Christie’s writing grew more popular, she understood that, even though she may not have enjoyed the creation as much, she was still responsible for creating a product, even stating that as she continued, her writing “was now becoming more professional and therefore a great deal less enthusiastic. It had been exciting, to begin with, to be writing books—partly because, as I did not feel I was a real author, it was each time astonishing that I should be able to write books that were actually published. Now I wrote books as a matter of course. It was my business to do so. People would not only publish them—they would urge me to get on with writing them. But the eternal longing to do something that is not my proper job, was sure to unsettle me; in fact it would be a dull life if it didn’t. What I wanted to do now was to write something other than a detective story. So, with a rather guilty feeling, I enjoyed myself writing a straight novel . . .” (455-6). Detective fiction writer has become her profession and Christie feels guilt for doing something that gives her pleasure. Her five novels24 in search of literary merit and personal artistic fulfillment proved a

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24 Giant’s Bread (1930), Unfinished Portrait (1934), Absent in the Spring (1944), The Rose and the Yew Tree (1947), A Daughter’s A Daughter (1952), The Burden (1956)
modest success, even though her name would not be attached to them until 1949 when news leaked that Mary Westmacott was actually Agatha Christie.

The Self-Conscious Author

Agatha Christie, like Dorothy L. Sayers, would find other ways of dealing with the self-conscious aspect of tailoring a product: the solution of inserting a version of herself into the mystery to allow her to comment on the mystery’s action, though Sayers and Christie did so for different reasons. Christie and Sayers coped with the pressure by creating characters like themselves, detective fiction authors, who complained about writing to suit the needs of their public. This aspect of self-consciousness has manifested itself in detective fiction previously with a tendency to reference other works of detective fiction. Through Ariadne Oliver and, to a lesser extent Daniel Clancy, Christie’s self-aware role as a writer demonstrates her pragmatic attitude toward her craft. She wrote detective fiction novels that she understood as precisely that: works that did not offer themselves as serious literature but forms of popular entertainment; she did not expect to be artistically satisfied in their creation. The tendency of writers of detective fiction to self-consciously talk about other works of detective fiction encourages an engagement with the audience that acknowledges the fictionality and invites the reader to join in the game. Sayers developed the character of Harriet Vane, a mystery writer who would become the love interest of Lord Peter Wimsey, a handsome, wealthy, antiquarian character whom Sayers’s friends teased her about being in love with. Through Harriet Vane, Sayers could voice her concerns about being a modern woman who was faced with the seemingly exclusive choice between a career and family. Christie’s Ariadne Oliver, friend of Hercule Poirot and writer of popular detective fiction stories featuring a foreign detective, allowed her to comment on the problems she faced as a writer, particularly through Oliver’s frustrations in dealing with her
detective, the Finnish Sven Hjerson. Christie describes Oliver as “a lucky woman who had established a happy knack of writing what quite a lot of people wanted to read” (Elephants 16-17).

Through Ariadne Oliver, Christie is able to express her frustration with being pigeonholed into writing for a character she has come to tire of as well as to respond to and comment on the state of detective fiction. In poking fun at herself through meta-fictional elements, Christie persists in evaluating her work in relation to the high/low cultural divide, making no claim to the quality or categorization of her popular writing. First appearing in Mr Parker Pyne, Detective (1932), Ariadne Oliver has been employed creating plots for a detective agency. Pyne suggests that an idea for getting two clients to meet and fall in love was not original and she responds:

‘I think not Mr Pyne. You see, people are used to reading about such things. Water rising in a cellar, poison gas, et cetera. Knowing about it beforehand gives it an extra thrill when it happens to oneself. The public is conservative, Mr Pyne; it likes the old well-worn gadgets.’

‘Well, you should know,’ admitted Mr Parker Pyne, mindful of the authoress’ forty-six successful works of fiction, all best sellers in England and America, and freely translated into French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Finnish, Japanese and Abyssinian. (35)

Christie uses Ariadne Oliver to explore her difficulties with her own fame as a popular, even formulaic, writer. Oliver recalls attendance at a literary luncheon, and highlights her shyness: “I get all worried and nervy and I should probably stammer or say the same thing twice. I should not only feel silly, I should probably look silly. Now it's all right with words. You can write
words down or speak them into a machine or dictate them. I can do things with words so long as I know it's not a speech I'm making” (*Elephants* 15). Christie’s own shyness made her a nervous public speaker, even to the extent that when elected President of the Detection Club, she would only take the post if a co-president was elected. Ronald Gorell Barnes, Lord Gorell, took the post. Christie’s self-consciousness is manifested again when Ariadne speaks about meeting her fans and her relief when one man “had said very nice things about her books, and had had the tact to say things that did not make her feel embarrassed, which so many people could do almost without trying. He had mentioned one or two reasons why he had liked one or other of her books, and they had been the right reasons, and therefore Mrs. Oliver had thought favorably of him for that reason” (16). Ariadne honestly tells herself, “She was not unduly modest. She thought the detective stories she wrote were quite good of their kind. Some were not so good and some were much better than others” (16). Christie’s realistic summary of her skills grants her credibility and makes her characters more believable.

This act of meta-fiction draws the audience in because it is clear that Ariadne Oliver is being drawn from Christie’s conflicts as a popular writer and is incorporated to talk about the business of creating detective fiction: “you have to plan things. And then one gets stuck every now and then and you feel you’ll never get out of the mess—but you do! Writing’s not particularly enjoyable. It’s hard work like everything else. . . . It feels very like work to me. Some days I can only keep going by repeating over and over to myself the amount of money I might get for my next serial rights. That spurs you on, you know. So does your bankbook when you see how much overdrawn you are” (*Cards* 148). Oliver echoes Christie’s pragmatic attitude toward her work, relating her fictional output directly to financial concerns. However, Oliver makes claims that Christie could not make in relation to how the plotting is directly affected by
financial concerns. “I can always think of things. . . . What is so tiring is writing them down. I always think I've finished and then when I count up I find I've only written thirty thousand words instead of sixty thousand and so then I have to throw in another murder and get the heroine kidnapped again. It's all very boring (Cards 148-9). In showing that the plot is altered when the book is short on length, Christie’s credibility as a writer of a quality product of detective fiction would be threatened were it not clear that her ability allowed the insertion of another murder to feel like an organic aspect of the story. Nicholas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns claim in “Agatha Christie: Modern and Modernist” that in a cavalier attitude toward plot, Christie should not “be criticized for doing what all successful fiction does—make the reader partially aware of how and why it is made” (121-122). Christie demonstrates a modern distrust of authority, even to the extent that she encourages questions about her skill and the nature of creating the detective fiction narrative, which turns out to be motivated by money instead of plot quality.

The character of Daniel Clancy, detective fiction author who appeared in Death in the Air (1935), also demonstrates Christie’s self-conscious attitude toward her craft. Upon meeting Poirot, Clancy starts to babble about his own private investigator character Wilbraham Rice: “The public have taken very strongly to Wilbraham Rice. He bites his nails and eats a lot of bananas. I don't know why I made him bite his nails, to start with; it's really rather disgusting, but there it is. He started by biting his nails and now he has to do it in every single book. So monotonous. The bananas aren't so bad; you get a bit of fun out of them—criminals slipping on the skin (131). Clancy echoes Ariadne Oliver’s complaints that having made her detective a vegetarian, she was tired of having to feature it in every book. (Mrs. McGinty’s Dead 126) Through these characters, Christie expresses the frustration at having to respond to public tastes that may not have been in keeping with what she found creatively stimulating.
Christie’s self-consciousness manifested itself in her narratives with great frequency in the presence of comments about detective fiction. Thus, the reader can identify with characters who criticize works in the genre, like Nurse Leidner who, in *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1935) recounts that “reading *Death in a Nursing Home* [is] really a most exciting story—though I don't think the author knew much about the way nursing homes are run! At any rate I've never known a nursing home like that! I really felt inclined to write to the author and put him right about a few points” (58). Encouraging criticism of detective fiction in the fictional text acknowledges the conventions of detective even when the text is being criticized, as done by Superintendent Battle in *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925): “Detective stories are mostly bunkum. . . . But they amuse people. . . . And they’re useful sometimes. . . . They encourage the universal idea that the police are stupid. When we get an amateur crime, such as a murder, that’s very useful indeed” (157).

By incorporating the element of meta-fiction, Christie comments on the conventions of detective fiction: the matter-of-fact manner in which characters respond to horrific murder, the larger-than-life plot devices, and not-quite-so-random discovery of the right clues at the right time and encourages her audience to share the humor at recognizing these events. This allows her audience and her characters both to experience the world of the mystery story with a shared background of awareness of detective fiction history, through references to Holmes and Watson as well as detectives created by her fellow Detection Club members, and the sense that they are living through the discovery of a murder, even though, as she says with a wink in *Murder at Hazelmoor* (1931), “That sort of thing only happens in books” (68). This reflexive representation aligns the reader with the novels’ protagonists, allowing the reader to engage more fully with the stories. Though Christie acknowledged and experimented with conventions of detective fiction, there was a seriousness behind her work. Her most popular character, Hercule Poirot, was based
on Belgian refugees she met during World War One. Through him, she demonstrates a popular modernism by encouraging a reappraisal of standards of Britishness.

Poirot: A Foreign Brit

In the character of Poirot, Christie creates a new sense of modern Britain, a more cosmopolitan character who, though not British-born, is able to fit into British society and reflect post-war changes to ideas of Britishness. Poirot seems to be an affront to English masculinity, but is actually emblematic of the post-war Britain, with its more diverse population. Because his methods work and he is able to bring justice to cases in England, she is showing how extending the national identity improves British life. Colin Watson suggests in “The Message of Mayhem Parva” that Poirot’s foreignness is represented in such a way that makes him recognizably English in construct. Watson asserts that Poirot “was as English a creation as one of the new ‘Moorish’ picture palaces, or boarding-house curry, or comic yodelers. Personifying native concepts of continentals, he was immediately familiar to readers and therefore acceptable” (Watson “Mayhem” 99). I agree with Watson’s account of Poirot’s foreign characteristics as recognizably English and reflective of English preconceptions of continental characters. Through the characterization of Poirot, Christie is demonstrating British ideas of foreignness. As a creation of Agatha Christie, Poirot is a British character through the representation of British ideas of foreignness and, as such, is a recognizable depiction of British culture. However, I extend Watson’s argument by claiming that through Poirot, Christie represents a new and more inclusive idea of what it means to be British, not just a British representation of the foreign, but a new and foreign element of Britishness to advance diversity and extend a sense of national identity. Poirot reveals to the audience that he is deliberately playing the part of a foreigner, exaggerating his speech and occasionally demonstrating a poor grasp of the English language.
which not only demonstrates the folly of xenophobia from his fellow characters, but also 
highlights the modern sense of self-consciousness.

Poirot’s first description by his chronicler Captain Arthur Hastings in *The Mysterious 
Affair at Styles* (1920) reads:

> Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, 
> four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape 
of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very 
> stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a 
speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this 
quaint dandyfied little man who, I was sorry to see, now limped badly, had been 
in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. As a 
detective, his *flair* had been extraordinary, and he had achieved triumphs by 
unraveling some of the most baffling cases of the day. (Christie *Styles* 16-17)

His diminutive height and his dapper sensibilities serve to remind the reader that he does not fit 
the British trope of the tall, masculine detective in the mold of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes 
or R. Austin Freeman’s Dr. John Evelyn Thorndyke. As Sherlock Holmes is the standard by 
which all detectives are judged, particularly British ones, I employ comparisons in what follows 
to demonstrate Christie’s mastery of technique in how far she was able to take a character who, 
though initially based on Holmesian methods with a Watson-like narrator, makes the very British 
Golden Age of Detective Fiction encompass a character who is an Other beyond any conceived 
in British detective fiction. Paradoxically, Christie’s Belgian Poirot, so different from the solidly 
British characters created by her Detection Club counterparts, is one of, if not the most, well-
known and popular detectives from the Golden Age. Her Belgian character, so separated from
others in the stories by his non-native origins, his mannerisms, and his detecting activities, has
come to represent the quintessential Golden Age detective. His foreignness and fussiness are key
elements of his character and Christie reiterates these elements. When Christie introduces Poirot
in his second appearance, 1923’s *Murder on the Links*, he is described in this way:

> An extraordinary little man! Height, five feet four inches, egg-shaped head carried
> a little to one side, eyes that shone green when he was excited, stiff military
> moustache, air of dignity immense! He was neat and dandified in appearance. For
> neatness of any kind he had an absolute passion. To see an ornament set
> crookedly, or a speck of dust, or a slight disarray in one’s attire, was torture to the
> little man until he could ease his feelings by remedying the matter. ‘Order’ and
> ‘Method’ were his gods. He had a certain disdain for tangible evidence, such as
> footprints and cigarette ash, and would maintain that taken by themselves, they
> would never enable a detective to solve a problem. Then he would tap his egg-
> shaped head with absurd complacency, and remark with great satisfaction: ‘The
> true work, it is done from within. The little grey cells—remember always the little
> grey cells, mon ami!’ (*Links* 6-7)

Poirot’s tidy habits and dandy mannerisms contribute to the sense of his fussiness which is very
different from the masculinity of other creations by Detection Club members. Even G.K.
Chesterton’s priest-detective Father Brown, who is described in negative fashion in his first story
as a “celibate simpleton,” aggressively pursues criminals ("Blue Cross” 20). In contrast, Poirot
eschews action and prefers to sit and think. David Grossvogel states in his article “Agatha
Christie: Containment of the Unknown” that: “The author was aware of the faintly ridiculous
figure cut by Poirot when she baptized him. She named him after a vegetable—the leek (*poireau*,
which also means a wart in French)—to which she appended the (barely) Christian name Hercule, in such a way that each name would cast ridicule on the other” (263). His foreign name is the first clue to readers that he is not in the mold of the traditional British detective. This foreignness is compounded by his physical features and temperament. “Virtues that might have been British in someone of normal stature were undercut by Poirot’s height—five feet four inches. His moustache, characteristic enough of the military class at a time when the razor was making its presence felt among most other classes of British society, lacked an adequate body for virile support. The elegance one would have expected of an Englishman could only “dandify” a body that was not up to standard requirements. And the last resort of dignity was reserved, traditionally, for men of tolerable size” (Grossvogel 263). In British society, Poirot is clearly an outsider, more so than the usual detective whose investigatory activities and the act of judging others keep him from being part of society. His manner of investigation, far from displaying Holmes’ active dash into the middle of the action, displays a definite preference for and awareness of the domestic.

As Stephen Knight states in Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity: “Poirot’s claim on rational and psychological mastery is a Holmes-like front for a simpler method; but here it is not male clerical-style observation, but the types of knowledge that are classically and stereotypically, female. . . . Before Miss Marple is invented Poirot already represents a heightened version of female domestic knowledge as a weapon against fictional disorder” (91). The various descriptions introducing Poirot emphasize his lack of masculinity and his fussiness. Upon returning from an investigation, his first thoughts are: “It is necessary that I attend to my moustaches—they are deplorably limp from the heat of traveling. Also, without doubt, there is dust on my coat. And my tie, I must rearrange” (Links 120). For Poirot,
lack of tidiness even becomes a suspicious insight into a suspect’s personality when he complains that the murders are not following enough of a pattern. As a result, the stolidly unimaginative and thoroughly British Hastings twits Poirot about his thoughts: “Isn’t that because you’re rather biased on that subject, Poirot? . . . You yourself are normally methodical and orderly. It’s almost a disease with you.’ ‘No, it is not a disease! Quelle idee! But I admit that I may be over-stressing that point. Passons!’” (The A.B.C. Murders 368). Poirot’s fussy habits ultimately function to his credit as he is able to understand the method behind the seeming randomness of the pattern. Poirot’s sense of the domestic, decidedly not in accordance with masculine ideas of Englishness, functions to his advantage as it allows him insight into clues that the other detectives miss. Susan Rowland states in From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction that Poirot is an “affront to English masculinity in his neatness, fussiness, demands for fine food and central heating, Poirot is frequently to be found reflecting negatively on English habits and sentimentality. . . . It is frequently his specifically non-English habits which prove successful against Hastings’s mundane taking of stereotypical characters at face value” (Rowland 63). Rowland’s claim that Poirot’s non-Englishness makes him successful is supported by Poirot’s skill as a detective. I argue that his non-Englishness, which makes him so successful and such an integral part of his setting in inter-war Britain, is a reflection of British society as it reflects a more cosmopolitan membership.

Poirot functions as both a serious representation of post-World War One Britishness and an element of self-conscious popular modernism that reminds the audience that he is a construct of popular detective fiction and represents Christie’s concerns with the high/low divide. In doing so, he invites the audience to share the joke of his fictionality with him, through statements like “When my friend, Mrs. Oliver, asks me to do anything, I always have to do it” (Christie
Hallowe’en 84). Poirot is able to put on a performance of otherness for other characters in an attempt to manipulate them. When his inconsistent speech patterns are noticed by the character Egg Lytton Gore in *Murder in Three Acts* (1935), Poirot states:

> It is true that I can speak the exact, the idiomatic English. But, my friend, to speak the broken English is an enormous asset. It leads people to despise you. They say—a foreigner—he can’t even speak English properly. It is not my policy to terrify people—instead I invite their gentle ridicule. Also I boast! An Englishman he says often, ‘A fellow who thinks as much of himself as that cannot be worth much.’ That is the English point of view. It is not at all true. And so, you see, I put people off their guard. Besides, he added, it has become a habit. (252)

Poirot does, in fact, think very highly of himself. Though he will never blend into British society, he is part of modern, cosmopolitan Britain. He is able to effectively solve crimes that stump British police and he receives authority from the because of it. The police do not mistake Poirot for a hairdresser as often do his neighbors (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*) or other suspects (*Murder in Mesopotamia, Evil under the Sun*). But by incorporating his non-Englishness as a self-conscious part of his disguise, Poirot is able to establish a position that sees him fitting in and becoming a contributing member of British society. He advocates for a reappraisal of notions of Britishness through his presence as a foreigner who fits into British society and performs a necessary function: the restoration of peace and justice in situations of chaos. Poirot’s fussiness echoes that of a stereotypical old lady, but his mannerisms are usually genuine, in marked contrast to many of those put on by Christie’s other well-known character, Miss Jane Marple.

*A Modern Marple*
Miss Marple’s power comes from her ability to manipulate and transcend the scatterbrained old lady stereotype by using an unexpected strength, a self-conscious awareness of how she is perceived. Christie’s creation of the Miss Marple character stemmed from a spinster character in her fourth Poirot book, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). Christie relates in her *Autobiography* that, “I think it is possible that Miss Marple arose from the pleasure I had taken in portraying Dr. Sheppard’s sister in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. 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. When the book was adapted as a play, one of the things that saddened me most was Caroline’s removal. Instead the doctor was provided with another sister—a much younger one—a pretty girl who could supply Poirot with romantic interest” (420-1). The idea of a pretty girl, some fluffy character who is in the book to serve as a romantic interest, is far from the purposeful character that Miss Marple would develop into. Rowland states that, “Miss Marple’s first appearance in a novel is in a collective of stereotypical Englishness: as one of a selection of gossipy elderly women entertained by the vicar’s wife to tea in *The Murder at the Vicarage*” (63). Through the Marple character, Christie toys with the convention of what society expects from an old woman and develops a character who is both part of society and removed enough to be able to comment accurately on it. Miss Marple takes her old lady characteristics and turns them into her strengths. Her fussiness, her inquisitiveness, and her awareness that these characteristics are her own disguise permit a manipulation of her femininity in a way far different from most women of detective fiction. She would certainly not be considered a femme fatale, but her ability to dissolve into the background enables her to understand and detect criminal behavior. She can be part of society—and hence
not be noticed—in a way that the foreign, outsider Poirot is not and in a way that even the police cannot be. Miss Marple ponders in *Nemesis* (1971)\(^{25}\) that she:

> had no doubt for one moment that she had the capacity to find out things. She was one of those chatty, fluffy old ladies whom other people expect to talk, to ask questions that were, on the face of it, merely gossipy questions. She would talk about her childhood and that would lead to one of the sisters talking about theirs. She’d talk about food she had eaten, servants she had had, daughters and cousins and relations, travel, marriages, births and—yes—deaths. There must be no show of special interest in her eyes when she heard about a death. Not at all. Almost automatically she was sure she could come up with the right response such as, ‘Oh dear me, how very sad!’ She would have to find out relationships, incidents, life stories, see if any suggestive incidents would pop up, so to speak. It might be some incidents in the neighbourhood, not directly concerned with these three people. Something they could know about, talk about, or were pretty sure to talk about. Anyway, there would be something here, some clue, some pointer. (84-85)

As often happens with Christie’s stories, her masterful technique in plotting mysteries means that her reader falls victim to, as Miss Marple states in *The Moving Finger*, “Misdirection, you see—everybody looking at the wrong thing” (245) and fails to observe Christie’s creation of a character whose paradoxically “fluffy” mannerisms and steely nature urge a reconsidering of the British and familiar.

\(^{25}\) It is the last book Christie wrote that features Miss Marple, though not the last published Marple. Christie, fearing she would die during the Blitz, had written a Marple and a Poirot for her husband and daughter to have something enjoyable to read after her funeral.
The purposeful self-awareness of Miss Marple is a reflection of Christie’s choices in creating a character who would appeal to an audience identifying some aspects of Miss Marple as recognizable and relatable, while also finding an unexpected core of strength and purpose behind the chatter. As Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanecker state in their 1991 book *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, “Miss Marple was to remain a favorite detective with Christie, more so than Poirot who grew tedious and whom she tried on several occasions to kill off. . . . Part of Miss Marple’s appeal to Christie, and to her readers, was that unlike Poirot, who is an outsider and usually a visitor in the world of the crime, Miss Marple belongs to the criminal society, which in her case is paired down to the microcosm of a village. It is of the essence of Miss Marple’s amateur status that she is a member of the community she will investigate, that, unlike professional detectives, she doesn’t have to be ‘called in’ from an outside world” (Shaw and Vanacker 2). Christie’s character is able to be part of the action, a member of the society that the criminal belongs to, and not a disruptive foreign force in a story which has already been disturbed by crime. Her familiarity, the seemingly typical little old lady, is part of her appeal in that she seems to be a relatable figure. Yet is able to bring justice to the stories, an everywoman character who is able to see people, relate them to a figure from her beloved village St. Mary Mead, and understand and predict complex patterns of behavior, all based on her ability to play the part that she is, or at least starts out as: a garrulous, nosy spinster. Shaw and Vanacker claim that throughout the novels:

> Jane Marple similarly develops throughout the novels from a rather comic, gossipy old lady into a much more formidable figure, a Nemesis who becomes an avenger of the innocent and Christie’s instrument of justice in the detective novel of passion. What better figure to choose to defend the innocent than the
admonitory figure of childhood, of fairy-stories and the morality tale: the maiden aunt, the spinster schoolteacher, the wise woman of the village? Relieved of sexuality and undistracted by close emotional bonds, such a figure cannot but see things clearly and act impartially as an agent of moral law. (4)

Miss Marple is able to deliver justice because she is both a part of the village setting and separated by the passionate nature of the crimes through her spinster status. Having been kept asexual and dispassionate in the face of village drama, she gains power through her ability to be an impartial judge and to see the motivation of other characters without the cloud of her own emotions. Miss Marple is incredulous at the idea that she can be powerful and act in a cold-blooded fashion. The plot of Nemesis involves a character from a previous story sending her a postcard while on his deathbed. The postcard asks her to look into an unspecified crime, which, if she solves, will earn her £20,000. A tour of stately homes and gardens has been arranged for her by now-deceased millionaire Jason Rafiel with no more specific request other than that she “serve the cause of justice” (Christie Nemesis 26). When Miss Marple first recalls her time spent with Rafiel, their brief bond strikes her with one word, a word which surprises her: “‘Surely,’ said Miss Marple, aghast at an idea that had come into her mind, ‘there can’t be any bond of ruthlessness between us?’ Was she, Jane Marple—could she ever be—ruthless? ‘D’you know,’ said Miss Marple to herself, ‘it’s extraordinary I never thought about it before. I believe, you know, I could be ruthless...’ (9). When her companion overhears and tells her she was too kind to be ruthless, Miss Marple replies, “All the same. . . I believe I could be ruthless if there was due cause. . . . In the cause of justice” (9). The reader then learns how Miss Marple scared a boy she had caught torturing animals and her companion Cherry recalls, “Seeing you with your wool and the pretty things you knits and all that anyone would think you were gentle as
a lamb. But there’s times I could say you’d behave like a lion if you was goaded into it.” (9). Christie makes sure that the impression of Miss Marple as an extraordinary woman is balanced by other characters’ feelings of her which create a sense of familiarity, such as that of the solicitor who presents her with the offer commenting, “She looked at him with the directness, the severity that one of his own aunts might have done” (20-21). Christie makes sure that her reader understands that Miss Marple’s helpless little old lady mannerisms are exaggerated and that Miss Marple purposefully embellishes them to manipulate and deceive others. Later in the story, the text relates how “Miss Marple sat down in the chair indicated to her, fluttering a little in the restless manner she adopted when slightly flustered—or at any rate, when she was seeming to be slightly flustered. In this case it was misleading, since things had happened exactly as she had hoped they would happen” (39).

Miss Marple’s self-consciousness awareness that she is playing a part reflect an aspect of popular modernism in Christie’s writing. Miss Marple is conscious of how she appears to other characters and uses their responses to help her solve the mystery. She is both the familiar British spinster and the unknown, who is aware she is manipulating the other characters to follow her narrative. She also tells herself, “‘An old tabby. . . . Yes, I can see I’m quite recognizable as an old tabby. There are so many old tabbies, and they’re all so much alike. And, of course, yes, I’m very ordinary. An ordinary rather scatterbrained old lady. And that of course as very good camouflage. Dear me, I wonder if I’m thinking on the right lines. I do, sometimes, know what people are like. I mean, I know what people are like, because they remind me of certain other people I have known. So I know some of their faults and some of their virtues. I know what kind of people they are. There’s that” (49). For an “old tabby,” she greets tales of wrongdoing with composure, not fainting or going into hysterics. She hears the story of a young woman who was
taken from home, strangled, and “afterward her face and head had been disfigured by some heavy stones or rocks, presumably to prevent her identity being made known.” Christie records the response, “‘Not a very nice business,’ said Miss Marple, in her most old-ladylike tone” (129). Miss Marple incorporates her disguise as part of her response; neither repulsed nor saddened, she is brisk and cold-bloodedly does not dwell on the murder. Neither does she dwell on the man who was accused of murder, whom she finds was the son of the millionaire Rafiel.

Miss Marple’s calm rejoinder to violence and cruelty disconcerts the men who expected more squeamishness in line with the persona she presented. Her even response to the man, trained as both a psychologist and pathologist, telling her story startles him and he asks why she describes it so calmly. She responds, “It is how it seems to me. . . . I don’t like that sort of thing. I never have. If you expect me to feel sympathy, regret, urge an unhappy child-hood, blame bad environment; if you expect me in fact to weep over him, this young murderer of yours, I do not feel inclined so to do. I do not like evil beings who do evil things” (129). Faced with a tale of assault and murder, she foregoes hysterics and calmly sits in judgment. After she solves the mystery, she accords it to “feeling. . . . It wasn’t really, you know, logical deduction. It was based on a kind of emotional reaction or susceptibility to well, I can only call it atmosphere” (253). The psychologist agrees with her in the presence of the Home Secretary, an official from the Public Prosecutor’s Office, the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard, and the Governor of Manstone Prison.

As a single woman, Miss Marple becomes an object of stereotype by her fellow characters, which proves dangerous when she behaves contrary to what was expected. Miss Marple physically embodies the typical spinster, one of many in Agatha Christie’s Britain. Kathy Mezei recounts in “Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole,
and Miss Jekyll” that the 1851 census recorded 405,000 more women than men and that after World War One, “there were 1,098 women for every 1,000 men” (104). However much Miss Marple may resemble her fellow spinsters, Christie’s unique characterization creates a woman who demonstrates a decidedly modern attitude toward murder, sex, and theft. DiBattista states, “Classic detective fiction. . . was in league with the ‘New Realism’ of the late 1890s and early modernist period in taking a more candid look at sexual mores, focusing especially on the marriage question and the protocols, both private and public, affecting the social fate of women” (“Lowly” 185). The unmarried Marple inhibits the tendency to pigeonhole women like her, which causes unease and disconcerts those who are expecting certain behavior from her. After she leaves, Prison Governor Sir Andrew McNeil states, “That old lady gives me the creeps,” to which the Assistant Commissioner concurs, “So gentle and so ruthless.” The Home Secretary joins in, calling her “The most frightening woman I ever met. . . . a very frightening woman” (264). The final touch to complete Miss Marple’s image of a fluffy little old lady is, literally, a fluffy pink scarf. As the men reflect on the final scene and apprehension of the murder to each other, the official from the Public Prosecutor’s Office relates that when one of the female security agents helping Miss Marple, “threw open the door of the wardrobe and came out, there was the old lady sitting up in bed with a pink fluffy shawl round her neck and a perfectly placid face, twittering away and talking like an elderly schoolmarm. They said she gave them quite a turn” (264-265). The psychologist remembers that the fluffy pink scarf had made an appearance in Rafiel’s narrative of his first meeting with Miss Marple; she had been wearing it when catching another murderer during the case on which they had met. The juxtaposition between steely and determination caused the psychologist to utter, “I like the touch of the pink woolly scarf. . . . I like that, very much” (265). Christie used the idea of the powerless, superfluous
woman and turned her into a crusader, who took a more personal view of administering justice than Poirot. Miss Marple is a strong character who apes mannerisms of fussiness, which Poirot genuinely displays, for the purpose of deceiving her enemies into thinking her a foolish old woman.

In the characters of Poirot and Miss Marple, Christie displays new ideas of modern Britain: the foreigner who becomes a ubiquitous force in British detective fiction and the familiar spinster who acts with a self-aware core of morality and curiosity. Both detectives represent a reimagining of Britain and a self-consciousness, typical of popular modernism. In opening up post-war society to new standards of Britishness, Christie reflects a range of national and gendered identities that don’t fit a sense of Englishness but have since become quintessential aspects of detective fiction.

In their detective fiction texts, Sayers and Christie addressed serious issues that greatly affected inter-war Britain. Sayers focused on shell-shock and offered detective fiction as a treatment for the illness which affected her life so strongly that its influence appeared in her work. She questioned ideas of masculinity and created a hero whose psyche was scarred by his war experiences. In the creation of Harriet Vane, Sayers examined the role of the feminist movement and idealized the concept of a modern marriage of equals. She broke rules of detective fiction she helped to create, rules that urged emotion and love be kept out of the detective story. In doing so, she changed the genre by crafting a romance of intellectual equals. Like Sayers, Christie took the guidelines of detective fiction and transformed the genre. In creating the foreign character whose name would be forever linked with hers, she advocated a reappraisal of Britishness that addressed the changes in national identity as a result of the World War One. Christie also played with stereotypes of Englishness, taking the quintessential English
spinster and showing a steely resolve for truth and a passion for justice. In his essay “the Guilty Vicarage,” W. H. Auden referred to his love of detective stories as an “addiction”; he claimed that his enjoyment of their formulaic nature, usually with a British setting, the quality and quick pace of the plot, and the excitement that made him eagerly pick up a text (though quickly casting it aside if he had already read it) made him believe that “detective stories have nothing to do with works of art” (15). He then gives reasons that the detective story, with its focus on crime and the human character, is no different from any text that offers an escape and the comfort of a tidy ending with a restored peace (24). Both Sayers and Christie played roles in making critics of a burgeoning genre reassess ideas of quality in literature; they created modern mystery novels with themes that are relevant to audiences more than seventy years after their publication. Analyzing their works offers the opportunity to demonstrate how relevant their works are and how capably both women used the genre of detective fiction to make insightful commentaries on Britain from World War One to after World War Two.
Works Cited


