

Christie's Silent Killers: Class Inequality and Gender Issues in Interwar Britain

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Ivona Šarić

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Interwar Britain**

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: doc.dr.sc. Borislav Berić

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U Osijeku, 27.9.2019.

Tomica Šarić, 0122218597

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To my beloved grandpa who left the vast meadows, opulent forests and savoury plum orchards of his forebears eternally inconsolable.

Abstract

Aside from cleverly crafted murder mysteries, Christie's novels – *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* – offer an insight into the by First-World-War affected society of interwar Britain. Despite being set in one of the most tempestuous periods in human history, the literature of that time avoids addressing the problems arising between the two world wars directly. Instead, it offers a short escape from the everyday turmoil by placing the reader in a comfort of domestic sphere run by feminine yet marginal detectives, Poirot and Miss Marple. To the careful eye it also unravels the ways in which the First World War changed the lives of Britain's society. Out of all changes, those in the domain of gender and class distinguish themselves as the most important ones and are, for that reason, discussed within the scope of this thesis. While for women these changes brought a liberation from their prescribed role, for the lower classes they meant the equalization of their social position with the upper and middle classes. Considering how easily the effects of the First World War snuck up on the unsuspecting society, it is no wonder that the interwar Britain succumbed so easily under its influence.

Keywords: murder mystery, Christie, *Vicarage*, *Styles*, interwar, gender, class

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Introduction

Nowadays, “a highly respectable proportion of all detective stories, including many of the finest, are written by women. This was not always so. The first seventy-five or eighty years of the genre produced only a handful of craftswomen who can be mentioned beside their masculine confreres, and even these require qualification” (Haycraft 128). The popularization of the detective fiction and the short story is primarily attributed to Arthur Conan Doyle and his famous private detective Sherlock Holmes who first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887:

In contrast to the serial publication of long novels, here each tale is self-contained, the detective’s solution providing full narrative satisfaction, but so managed as to stimulate an appetite for another, similar story— so much so that, notoriously, popular demand and apparently irresistible commercial pressures made it impossible for Doyle to kill Holmes off as he wished in 1893. (Priestman 43)

Since Conan Doyle’s short stories were read for leisure and considered trivial, it was acceptable for women to be writers of such lower-status literature (Bernthal 31-32). Some female writers even offered a humorous take on Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes; however, their thriving was prevented by constricted readership: “Being published mostly in university journals and private periodicals, these parodies and satires were constructed by and for educated or socially privileged women, so that even within this subgenre of detective fiction, women had limited literary voices and audience” (Bernthal 43).

With the beginning of the twentieth century and the outbreak of the Great War the position of women in the society slowly began to change and the traditional gender roles were brought into question:

Following the First World War, the gendered lines drawn between the domestic and public spheres became increasingly blurred as many women found themselves working outside the home for the first time or returning to the workforce after marriage as the demand for workers grew in the absence of conscripted men to fill such roles. Not only did women begin to assume a more prominent role in the male-dominated public sphere, they also gained access to jobs that would previously have been closed to them on the basis of gender, for example, in munitions factories, engineering and in offices and shops. (Hoffman 16)

However, the blurring of the private and public spheres in interwar Britain went beyond stereotypical male and female roles. Moreover, by encompassing all layers of society, it has shaken the foundations of hierarchal arrangement which has been ingrained in Britain's society throughout centuries:

Widespread social changes in Britain in the early twentieth century included the introduction of social security benefits (prior to the First World War); the Public Libraries Act in 1919, which gave more people of all classes access to books; and the introduction of cheaper paperback editions in the 1930s ... The spread of mass media communication, the introduction of national radio and television broadcasting also improved access to information for traditionally marginalised individuals and groups, thus narrowing the divide between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, and upper and lower classes. Regardless of these emergent trends, the shared beliefs and practices of the white English-speaking middle class remained dominant and were reflected in the mass communication of the society. This discourse is also reflected in the cultural artefacts of that society, such as the popular literature which included detective fiction and children's literature. (Coetzee 164)

Unmoved by the avant-garde and modernist literature, the readership after the First World War required quick and easy reads (Benrntal 35). At the time, detective fiction proved capable of satisfying the hunger for such reading. This literary period between the two World Wars in which the production of detective novels increased considerably is often referred to as the Golden Age of detective fiction. The detective fiction of that time seemed to distance itself deliberately from the chaos of the real world: "We would never guess, immersed in the world of golden age detection, that we were reading about a period of history during which there was, for example, rapidly increasing unemployment, the General Strike of 1926, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the rise of the European dictatorships" (Horsley 39). This distance can be interpreted as a means of escape from the harsh reality of the post-war period to which both the reader and the writer had trouble adapting:

The greatest paradox conceivable in the whole corpus of Christie's work, or rather in the whole genre of detective fiction, is the fact that the brutal termination of existence on this planet or to put it more crudely 'murder', is enclosed within a framework that is termed as escapist literature. Escapist literature is understood as light-hearted reading, which provides oblivion from the gross realities of one's life for the duration of a few hours and

does not require much absorption or perception on the reader's part. Now what clearly emerges as a paradox here is the fact that to escape from one's own existential hardship, we are entertained by reading about the end of someone else's existence. (Bajaj 158)

Despite the numerous male writers who contributed to the popularity of the detective novels, the genre itself is believed to become feminized in the years after the Great War (Horsley 51). The reason for this are the growing demands of female readership that needed to be satisfied:

The production and consumption of popular literature was growing as innovations in publishing allowed for the cheap production of novels and the number of lending libraries increased. With fewer children and labour-saving household technology such as the vacuum cleaner, many women had more time than ever before for leisure activities such as reading. Women who worked outside the home were more likely to have extra money to spend on luxuries such as books and clothing. (Hoffman 18)

However, there are also some other literary elements that contributed to the feminization of the genre: "What we particularly notice are such things as the domestic scale of the action, the politeness of the language, the effiteness of many of the detective protagonists, and their frequent association with kinds of knowledge traditionally considered to be feminine (for example, Poirot's intuitiveness)" (Horsley 38).

It is indisputable that the "British crime fiction of the 1920s and 1930s was largely innovated and developed by women" (Bernthal 52), but "it is unlikely that the genre would have developed along 'feminine' lines without Christie's successful contributions" (Bernthal 52). The works of both the American and European authors such as John Dickson Carr, Freeman Wills Croft, Anthony Berkeley, Ann Katherine Green, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and others are known to this day as the textbook examples of the classical crime fiction novels (Bajaj 14). However, none of these authors has ever come close to the memorable sales figures and the immortal characters of the Queen of Crime, the Mistress of Mystery, the Duchess of Death, the one and only – Agatha Christie (Curran 1-2). Considering Christie's contribution not only to the Golden Age detective fiction but also to the literature, it is not surprising that this paper will utilize precisely her novels – *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and *The Murder at the Vicarage* – in order to analyse the impact of the First World War on the change of traditional gender roles and societal power relations in interwar Britain. Like the silent killers, these changes came quickly and showed no obvious symptoms until it was too late to prevent the death of the society the world got so used to.

1. The Faces of Stigma and Marginalization

Christie's flamboyant Belgian refugee and the gossipy know-it-all spinster are untraditional detectives because they embody the true notion of stigma and marginalization. Like the social outcasts they are, Poirot and Marple do not fulfil the criteria for the prescribed gender roles of men and women nor are they concerned with doing so. Their complacency with the outcast status can be ascribed to the brilliant investigating techniques that stem precisely from their apparent alienation from the rest of the world but also border with the divine powers of modern superheroes that are, unlike theirs, neither feminine nor that small.

1.1. Hercule Poirot

Christie's legendary detective Hercule Poirot, "featured in 33 novels and 65 short stories" (Rzepka and Horsley 418), is certainly one of her most remarkable and longevous characters. This longevity but also her "success in a traditionally masculine genre was largely down to reinvention" (Bernthal 53). In 1920, when Christie published her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, she "consciously ... tried to make the mythical Poirot markedly different from the 'tall and agile' Sherlock Holmes" (Bajaj 59). Poirot's unmanly and odd appearance is first brought to attention by Lieutenant Arthur Hastings in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*:

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. (ch. 2)

By being described as a dandy or as someone who puts a lot of care and effort into his physical appearance, Poirot is immediately marked as having somewhat female characteristics. This stigmata comes from a stereotype that women are overly concerned with how they look and what they wear. Moreover, while his shorter stature is not commonly found in men, his lameness may

be interpreted as an emasculating consequence of the First World War. In fact, while many soldiers after the war “found themselves penniless and in a condition that I am worth nothing to anyone and still less to myself, women continued to help bring the differentiation between genders into crisis, being more fit for manual work than disabled masculinity” (Bernthal 94).

Despite his injury, Poirot is everything but unfit for the job of a detective. As it turns out, he is amazing at what he does because he puts a lot of attention into small and seemingly unimportant details that some other detectives would simply disregard: “‘Peril to the detective who says: ‘It is so small – it does not matter. It will not agree. I will forget it.’ That way lies confusion! Everything matters.’” (Styles ch. 4). Poirot’s “‘feminine’ concern for domestic details in uncovering the solution” is therefore “‘allied to his ability to solve the mystery’” (Makinen 41). In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, for example, he is able to solve the case by noticing that the objects on the mantelpiece have been rearranged:

"Yes, my friend. That is where I discovered my 'last link,' and I owe that very fortunate discovery to you."

"To me?"

"Yes. Do you remember telling me that my hand shook as I was straightening the ornaments on the mantel-piece?"

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"No, but I saw. Do you know, my friend, I remembered that earlier in the morning, when we had been there together, I had straightened all the objects on the mantel-piece. And, if they were already straightened, there would be no need to straighten them again, unless, in the meantime, someone else had touched them." (ch. 13)

The fact that he possesses the characteristics of an unmanly, stubby and appearance-obsessed individual could, to a certain extent, be a sign of his homosexuality. Further evidence for this claim can be found in his overly personal conduct towards Hastings upon their greeting: “Suddenly clasping me in his arms, he kissed me warmly on both cheeks, and before I had recovered from my surprise ran headlong from the room” (*Styles* ch. 11). This sudden kiss has the same effect on Hastings as it would have on many men today: it leaves him shocked. After the war, the former worldview changed so much that “even physical interaction such as hugs, kisses, and caresses ... was identified as 'risky' behaviour” (Hoffman 42). Hastings' discomfort with Poirot's demeanour therefore indicates his awareness of that risky behaviour. According to Bernthal, bachelorhood is another stereotype often believed to be a sign of homosexuality. At that

time, men were extremely anxious in company of bachelors because they were considered to be a threat to the traditional masculinity (84). Considering Poirot's long-time bachelorship and the existent worldview, Hastings' exaggerated reaction may not be that surprising. Although "homosexuality may not have been discussed" openly, "its threat to white manhood was emphasized in terms that implied secret knowledge it was best not to have" (Bernthal 84). By refusing "to name 'homosexuality' while presenting recognizable 'homosexual' stereotypes", Christie "give[s] readers 'a choice' between 'know[ing] the codes' and 'innocence'" (Bernthal 96).

Unlike the traditional detective heroes, Poirot's character is a sort of mockery of the representation of masculinity: "He is a parody of the male myth; his name implies his satirical status: he is a shortened Hercules and a poirot – a clown. He is narcissistic, emotive, feline, apparently irrational, eccentric, quixotic, obsessed with the domestic, and socially "other" in that he is a Belgian. ... He is a feminine hero" (Makinen 419, as qtd. in Munt 1994:8). It should be noted that all of the features attributed to Poirot are just stereotypes that do not apply to women in general. As a matter of fact, most of them are often used in a negative sense when referring to women. The fact that Christie uses these often belittled and superficial features as Poirot's greatest superpower, could also be interpreted as an impetus to all women of that time who were ever hesitant about taking on a professions typically regarded as male. By creating a male detective who is extraordinary for having a feminine side, Christie, in her subtle way, tells her female contemporaries that men are in no way superior to them. While working shoulder to shoulder with men, all women are capable of being equal to or even unrivalled to them.

1.2. Miss Jane Marple

While the Golden Age detective fiction is largely impacted by female writers, in fiction, the female characters of that period, with the exception of Miss Jane Marple, have rather insignificant roles. In fact, the larger part of the Golden Age detectives are male:

The great majority of detectives in the Golden Age were men—and, indeed, if they were professional police officers, had to be male, since women at that time had a very limited role in policing. In general women characters who dabbled in detection were either

sidekicks or cheerful crusaders-in-arms to the dominant male hero, serving as either a Watson or a love interest, or both. (James 22)

Although Marple's presence in Christie's work cannot be neglected, it is not as remarkable as that of Hercule Poirot. Marple appears in "12 novels and 20 short stories, with her first appearance being in the short story *The Tuesday Night Club*, published in *The Royal Magazine* in December 1927" (Coetzee 134) .

In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the first novel featuring Miss Marple, the coexistence of her threatening character and harmless appearance is described by the narrator Leonard Clement, the vicar of St. Mary's Mead: "Miss Marple is a white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner—Miss Wetherby is a mixture of vinegar and gush. Of the two Miss Marple is much the more dangerous" (ch. 2). Although it might seem strange to some " , initially, to describe Miss Marple as dangerous, it is in fact a very appropriate description, because while she initially appears fragile and frail, she sees all, knows all, and is ruthless in her drive to expose the villain" (Coetzee 139). As the vicar later announces, it is precisely her discernment that makes him respect and admire her:

Of all the ladies in my congregation, I considered her by far the shrewdest. Not only does she see and hear practically everything that goes on, but she draws amazingly neat and apposite deductions from the facts that come under her notice.

If I were at any time to set out on a career of deceit, it would be of Miss Marple that I should be afraid. (*Vicarage* ch. 26)

Unlike the vicar, his wife Griselda finds Marple's omniscience to be almost sinister. She believes her to be "the worst cat in the village" who "always knows every single thing that happens—and draws the worst inferences from it" (*Vicarage* ch. 1). Like any other old lady or spinster, Marple is despised for her gossiping habits but, at the same time, these little gossips give her an opportunity to snoop around without creating any suspicion: "Christie uses social expectations of how a spinster should behave to give Marple power. The spinster observes society without being observed, as a socially marginal figure on the fringes of society" (Coetzee 137). Besides her gossiping powers, Marple also uses "[g]ardening ... and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses" as her most powerful investigating techniques (*Vicarage* ch. 2). Furthermore, while being aware of her wit as well as her marginal position in the society not only as a spinster but also as a woman, Marple deliberately makes herself appear somewhat foolish with the aim of disarming those around her and thus getting the information she wants without anyone noticing:

“‘I’ve no doubt I am quite wrong. I’m so stupid about these things. But I just wondered—I mean this silver is very valuable, is it not?’”(Vicarage ch. 23).

Considering the position of women in the society at that time, Coetzee tries to answer the question how a woman, let alone a spinster, who is not in a police service, can become a detective that solves the cases on her own and to whom others members of the police refer for help:

[E]mphasising the marginal role of this character and the fact that the lonely unmarried and childless spinster is often the object of pity, and sometimes ridicule. The spinster is isolated and divided from society at large and does not conform to the heteronormative gender role expectations of wife and mother. However, elderly spinsters are sexually unavailable and assumed to be undesirable anyway, and this shifts the traditional balance of power from male authority into the hands of the spinsters because they offer no threat to male domination. ... In her depiction of the character of Miss Marple Christie manipulates the pity and ridicule invoked by the stereotypical spinster who is assumed to have no power or authority. But, as Christie’s novels about her prove, Marple does have power. By solving crimes, she exercises power over, and can be said, even, to emasculate those traditionally considered to have power, thus subverting traditional power relations. (137)

By remaining childless and unmarried she defies the society-imposed gender roles and becomes the embodiment of what is today known as an independent woman (Terenas 101). In spite of this, once the case is solved Miss Marple “quickly withdraws ... leaving the Inspector and police to claim fame in the public sphere, and Griselda and the vicar to begin their family” (Mezei 110). She, like many women before and after her, remains the figure from the shadow and does not get the credit for her achievements:

The trial of Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe is a matter of public knowledge. I do not propose to go into it. I will only mention that great credit was reflected upon Inspector Slack, whose zeal and intelligence had resulted in the criminals being brought to justice. Naturally, nothing was said of Miss Marple’s share in the business. She herself would have been horrified at the thought of such a thing. (Vicarage ch. 32)

Since coming from the shadow into the light would expose her for what she is, she prefers remaining unnoticed while using her powers to unravel the knot of a murder.

2. Interwar Britain as the Village of St. Mary Mead in *The Murder at the Vicarage*

The late-Victorian and Edwardian time “viewed women’s lives as solely defined within the terrain of domesticity and emotions” (Makinen 62). Moreover, there was an obvious prevalence “of intense gendered contention, with the agitation of the suffragettes and the suffragists, and New Woman novels that challenged the representation of feminine roles” (Makinen 8). Despite being often criticized for having some sort of nostalgia for the Victorian period in which she was born, Christie’s works proved themselves capable of challenging the old ways and presenting different types of women existing in that period: “In Christie, it is not only the challenge to Edwardian domesticity, spirituality and passivity that proves critically important but also the range of differing femininities that are made available and sympathetic” (Makinen 65). What is more, “Christie’s texts negotiate and produce a new, modern (and popular modernist) literature of inter-war cultural mores, and ... intervene in the cultural debates, debunking past values and introducing new ones in a moderate, comic mode” (Makinen18).

Given these facts, Christie’s novel *The Murder at the Vicarage*, could be interpreted as the representation of Britain after the Great War. In this representation, Britain would be confined to the village of St. Mary Mead and its residents would then portray the members of the society existent at the interwar time. The association of the murder with the war makes sense only when the village of St. Mary Mead and its residents are observed closely. During the investigation, that is, for the duration of the war, there is an evident commotion in the village. However, once the murderer is discovered, the villagers stand in front of the new world that is waiting for them to change it for the better. The greatest burden remains on the shoulders of women who still have a long way ahead fighting for their equal place in this new world.

2.1. Echoes of the Edwardian Time

Unlike his fellow villagers, Colonel Protheroe does not embody the personality traits of any person existent at the interwar time, for he can be associated with the “Edwardian morality” (Makinen 98). For the sake of this interpretation, his character will be interpreted as encompassing not only the Edwardian morality but the whole period whereas his murder would

then stand for the war and the beginning of the new time, the interwar period. At the beginning of the novel *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the vicar Clement begins his narration by stating “that anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service” (*Vicarage* ch. 1). Hearing such harsh statement from a laic let alone a vicar seems rather cruel, until more is given about the Colonel’s character: “Least liked in the neighborhood is Colonel Protheroe, who argues with other church officers, insists on going over the church accounts with the vicar, harasses a visiting archeologist, nearly comes to blows with a painter and finally ends up dead on the vicar’s study” (Terenas 115). Confronted with the news of the murder, Dennins, Clement’s nephew, declares that it is “[n]o wonder [Protheroe’s] first wife ran away from him” because he is a “[p]ompous old brute” (*Vicarage* ch. 1). Griselda, the vicar’s wife, is of the same opinion when she responds, “I don’t see what else she could do” (*Vicarage* ch. 1). When put into a historical context, her response supports the above given interpretation of Colonel Protheroe as the embodiment of the Edwardian period. As it turns out, until 1969 in Britain even if the marriage was not happy, women could not file for divorce: “And the 1969 Divorce Reform Act made the ‘irretrievable breakdown’ of the marriage the sole grounds for divorce, although it was necessary to prove this in one of five ways (unreasonable behaviour, desertion, adultery, two years of separation with consent, five years of separation without consent)” (Davis 3). In addition to numerous accusations made against Colonel Protheroe, the one made by his daughter is the most significant because, knowing him the best, her word should be the most reliable: “‘She went to see father that night and told him she was dying and had a great longing to see something of me. Father was a beast. He said she’d forfeited all claim, and that I thought she was dead—as though I had ever swallowed that story! Men like father never see an inch before their noses!’” (*Vicarage* ch. 32) It should be mentioned that his character was not the only reason that people did not like him. As a member of the army after the war, there was no one but him to be held responsible for the disastrous effect of the war:

It can be said that he is disliked in the private as well as in the public sphere as representative of the Army as an institution. After World War I the higher ranks in the Army were not much loved. Common folk blamed them for several reasons: being responsible for the waste of thousands of lives; being unprepared to deal with such situations as those as the world conflict had placed on their hands; knowing nothing about war strategies or logistics. (Terenas 115)

Murder like the war was shocking and terrific for all the villagers; however, the death of Colonel Protheroe was not mourned by anyone. He, just as the Edwardian period, left more of a

negative than a positive impact on the villagers. In lack of better words, he was a necessary evil. To portray a certain period as entirely negative or positive would be biased. There is always something that can be regarded as either positive or negative in every situation. However, if the positive prevails, then there would be no need for the change: “The crime presents an opportunity for the real truth about the society to be revealed – without the crime no one would have known about all the corruption under the surface” (Coetze 94).

2.2. Men Playing Women

If the end of the war signifies new beginnings, then it should also signify the change in men’s perception of women. However, as it is usually the case when it comes to any change, people need some time to adjust to it. Moreover, it does not affect everyone at the same time and speed. One such example are also the two representatives of the law, Inspector Slack and Colonel Melchett whose attitude towards women can sometimes be interpreted as misogynist. Besides them, although represented in the positive light, even the vicar Clement tends to act in a patronizing manner at some instances.

The character of the inspector Slack is described by the vicar as “rude and overbearing in the extreme” (*Vicarage* ch. 5). The reason for this is the constant refusal of any opinion of the murder that is different from his own. What is more, his claims are not based on any facts but merely on the first impression of the person in question and on prejudices. For example, after Mrs. Protheroe confesses to murdering her husband, he rejects her claims believing women act in a thoughtless manner. Furthermore, he accuses her lover Redding for the deed, claiming than unlike Mrs. Protheroe, he is actually wise enough to plan it: ““That’s different. She’s a woman, and women act in that silly way. I’m not saying she did it for a moment. She heard he was accused and she trumped up a story. I’m used to that sort of game. You wouldn’t believe the fool things I’ve known women do. But Redding’s different. He’s got his head screwed on all right. And if he admits he did it, well, I say he did do it”” (*Vicarage* ch. 10). Interestingly, if a woman confesses to committing a crime, that cannot be true, but when a man does it, he believes him. Another such instance can be observed when he blames Mrs. Lestrangle for murder. Although the vicar assures him it is not in her character to do such a thing, in his assessment of Mrs. Lestrangle it is not her character that is prevalent but her appearance: ““You don’t see her with the same

eyes as I do, sir. I may be a man—but I’m a police officer, too. They can’t get over me with their personal refinement. Why, that woman is the kind who could stick a knife into you without turning a hair” (*Vicarage* ch. 17). As it turns out, he made a mistake in both cases.

Soon “‘after 1871, the census showed that there were slightly more women than men in the population. This imbalance increased between 1871 and 1911 and was made still larger by the loss of male lives in the First World War” (Hoffman 40, as qtd. in D’cruze 1995:56). In his conversation with the vicar about the case, Colonel Melchett blames the increased number of rumours on women as they are stereotypically believed to be prone to gossip: “‘No,’ I said. ‘You can take it from me that it was something quite different, but I can’t say more at the present juncture.’ He nodded and rose. ‘I’m glad to know. There’s a lot of talk. Too many women in this part of the world” (*Vicarage* ch. 7). It is possible that Colonel Melchett is not only concerned about the gossip but also about the fact that men are truly outnumbered by women and therefore in an unfavourable position. After the war, “the higher public profile and activities of women were found to be threatening to a return to ‘normalcy’ for the nation” (Hoffman 23).

When it comes to the vicar, there are some instances in which he appears rather condescending in his behaviour towards women and especially his wife. One such example can be observed in the conversation with his wife Griselda:

“He mayn’t have known what time Protheroe got here. Or he may have simply forgotten about the clock being fast.”

Griselda disagreed.

“No, if you were committing a murder, you’d be awfully careful about things like that.”

“You don’t know, my dear,” I said mildly. “You’ve never done one.” (*Vicarage* ch. 6)

The vicar completely discards his wife’s opinion by claiming that she cannot know anything about the murder because she has never committed one herself; however, he is constantly the one who, next to Miss Marple, meddles with the course of the investigation as well as makes assumptions about the case and the suspects. His relationship with her is often like the one a man should have with his child but certainly not with his woman:

“Pompous old brute,” said Dennis. “No wonder his first wife ran away from him.”

“I don’t see what else she could do,” said my wife.

“Griselda,” I said sharply. “I will not have you speaking in that way.” (*Vicarage* ch. 1)

Considering the character of Colonel Protheroe and the position of women in an unhappy marriage, Griselda's comment is in no way wrong. Yet, the vicar decides to reprimand her and not his young cousin Dennis for saying almost the exact same thing.

2.3. Women Choosing Their own Roles to Play

Makinen describes Griselda as a “‘modern woman’ rejecting outmoded domestic and maternal roles for women” (11). Her rejection of the roles imposed on her by the society actually makes the vicar believe that “celibacy is desirable for the clergy” (*Vicarage* ch. 1). Choosing him as a spouse, however, was a matter of ‘power’ for Griselda. Out of all the wooers she had, he was the one who simply could not resist her charm: “‘But I’m everything you most dislike and disapprove of, and yet you couldn’t withstand me!’” (*Vicarage* ch. 1). By her husband, the vicar, Griselda is described as immature and difficult: “She is most distractingly pretty and quite incapable of taking anything seriously. She is incompetent in every way, and extremely trying to live with. She treats the parish as a kind of huge joke arranged for her amusement” (*Vicarage* ch. 1). This can also be seen when she declares “‘Tea and scandal at four thirty’” to be her only “‘duty as the Vicaress’” (*Vicarage* ch. 1) and, in such way, also makes fun of her husband’s religious calling. By claiming that she is “‘evidently not a housekeeper by nature’” (*Vicarage* ch.1), Griselda denies the belief according to which domestic affairs are innate to every woman. Moreover, she insists that housecleaning and poor quality food are not important enough to cause problems in one’s marriage: “‘Bad food and lots of dust and dead wasps is really nothing to make a fuss about’” (*Vicarage* ch. 1). By saying this, Griselda not only shows her progressive views of marriage but also of a wife’s role in it. She may not have “looketh to the ways of her household” (*Vicarage* ch. 1), but she was attentive to her husband’s other needs: “‘Darling,’ said my wife affectionately. ‘Tell me about him. What was the trouble?’” (*Vicarage* ch.1). After all, it is love and not homemaking that makes any wife a “good” wife: “‘I’m a very good wife. I love you dearly. What more do you want?’” (*Vicarage* ch. 32). Despite being very different at first, Griselda and the vicar turn out to be good for each other: “Such a mismatched couple functions well because of the equality of their relationship, once Len accepts the impossibility of an old-fashioned ‘forming’ of a wife’s ‘mind’” (Makinen 112). After she is revealed to be pregnant, Griselda is ready to once again have a try at becoming the ideal wife. Although deciding to give

another change to her prescribed role, Griselda's remark on her newly-bought books suggests she may be returning to her old ways in the near future:

And, Len, I've decided that now I'm going to be a real 'wife and mother' (as they say in books), I must be a housekeeper too. I've bought two books on Household Management and one on Mother Love, and if that doesn't turn me out a pattern I don't know what will! They are all simply screamingly funny—not intentionally, you know. Especially the one about bringing up children." (*Vicarage* ch. 32)

Mrs. Anne Protheroe is initially believed to be "a quiet, self-contained woman whom one would not suspect of any great depths of feeling" (*Vicarage* ch. 3). Such description of "an English lady" desexualises her body by linking it with the cultural stereotype of a well-behaved, dispassionate upper-class English woman" (Hoffman 103). Once she is accused of murdering her husband, it is precisely this stereotype that makes her innocent in the eyes of the gullible men:

"Is that exactly how it was?" asked Colonel Melchett.

"I think exactly."

"Then can you tell us, Mrs. Protheroe, just exactly where the Vicar was in the room when you looked in?" asked Inspector Slack.

"The Vicar? I—no, I'm afraid I can't. I didn't see him."

Inspector Slack nodded.

"That's how you didn't see your husband. He was round the corner at the writing desk."

"Oh!" she paused. Suddenly her eyes grew round with horror. "It wasn't there that—that—" "Yes, Mrs. Protheroe. It was while he was sitting there."

"Oh!" She quivered. (*Vicarage* ch. 12)

By playing a role of a proper English lady, not only does Mrs. Protheroe get the Inspector Slack to answer his own questions for her but she also leaves the vicar moved with compassion towards her:

The vicar presents a convincing picture of the "distressed" colonel's widow through his choice of the adverbs "suddenly," "round with horror," and of the verb, "quivered," reinforced by his representation of her hesitation and stuttering. Ironically, emphasis is placed upon angle of vision, that is, what Mrs. Protheroe saw or did not see. We are therefore diverted into a misguided view of the murder scene. After all, it is not what Mrs Protheroe saw through the window that matters, but what she did. By directing our

attention, inadvertently, to her gaze, we miss the significance of her words, her omissions, and her lies. (Mezei 109)

After being caught in the arms of her lover, Anne's true character finally comes to the surface: "She unapologetically tells the vicar that she intends to marry her lover, thanks him for discouraging them from eloping previously and defines acutely her feelings about her rather difficult step-daughter. The vicar is left respecting her frankness" (York 120). The vicar appreciates Anne's honesty because he knows that her "husband is an irascible and tyrannical character who obviously deserves to lose his wife" (York 120). Yet, what he does not know is that Anne is actually far from an innocent and tortured woman she presents herself to be. As it turns out, she is a cold-hearted killer. Since eloping from her husband is not enough, Mrs. Protheroe and her lover Lawrence Redding commit a premeditated murder in order to inherit Colonel Protheroe's money. Contrary to the opinion that "[a]rsenic's more in [women's] line" (*Vicarage* ch. 12), it is Mrs. Protheroe and not her lover who "takes the pistol from the bowl where it is waiting for her, comes up behind [her husband] and shoots him through the head" (*Vicarage* ch. 30). As it turns out, "in a world structured and imbued with meaning by men, women must wear a mask, femininity, in order to succeed, hiding their own desire for masculine power" (Hoffman 143, as qtd. in Riviere 1929: 456).

Not everyone can tell what is going through the mind of Lettice Protheroe, the daughter of the deceased Colonel Protheroe. At first glance, Lettice leaves an impression of a forgetful teenager with no care in the world: "How tiresome. I know I've left them somewhere. And I've lost the dog. And my wristwatch is somewhere, only it doesn't much matter because it won't go. Oh! dear, I am so sleepy. I can't think why, because I didn't get up till eleven. But life's very shattering, don't you think?" (*Vicarage* ch. 2). Although described as "completely vague" (*Vicarage* ch. 2), Lettice is not "as dim as she seems" (Rowland 51). Her vagueness is only a mask which she uses to hide her real thoughts and intentions: "'She's a queer sort of girl,' he said. 'Always seems in a kind of dream, and yet underneath I believe she's really rather practical. I believe all that vague stuff is a pose. Lettice knows jolly well what she's doing'" (*Vicarage* ch. 4). Her shrewdness became evident when she "deliberately dropped Anne's earring by the desk" so that the police would accuse her stepmother of murder (*Vicarage* ch. 32). Because of her provocative manner, the vicar refers to her as "something of a minx" (*Vicarage* ch 2). Next to the murder, the main topic in the village is the fact that Redding was painting Lettice in her sunbathing dress. While her behaviour is condemn by many, Lettice's logic is flawless: "'Why shouldn't I be painted in my bathing dress? If I go on a beach in it, why shouldn't I be painted in

it?””(*Vicarage* ch. 2). By questioning the ridiculous moral principles of the society she lives in, she makes the first step in becoming a modern woman of the future. In the end, “the destruction of the patriarch enables the formation of a new family unit that, while perhaps differing from conventional definitions of ‘the family’, creates more space for agency because it frees Lettice to live where she ‘belongs’ and allows her to drop the lethargic act she had cultivated to hide her thoughts when she was in her father’s house” (Hoffman 68-69).

Just like her daughter, Mrs. Lestrangle is a mystery herself and even her name suggests it: “‘Makes one think of detective stories. You know—“Who was she, the mysterious woman with the pale, beautiful face? What was her past history? Nobody knew. There was something faintly sinister about her”’ (*Vicarage* ch. 1). Correspondingly, she is later represented by the vicar as “a well-bread woman” who “would stick at nothing” (*Vicarage* ch. 3) to get what she wants. His assumption later proves itself to be true when it is revealed that Mrs. Lestrangle is actually the first Mrs. Protheroe who not only left her husband but also her daughter because she did not want to stay in an unhappy marriage. The reason for her unexpected revisit of the village turns out to be precisely her daughter Lettice with whom she wanted to spend some more time before she dies from a fatal disease. Such independent and mysterious woman poses a threat to the patriarchal masculinity. While interrogating her, Inspector Slack becomes more and more agitated by her calm demeanour and detachment from the situation to the point that he bursts in anger. Confronting a woman who is not intimidated by him and who does not let him overpower her, first baffles him but then later makes him treat her with more respect:

“This is a serious matter, Mrs. Lestrangle. I want the truth—” He banged his fist down on a table. “And I mean to get it.”

Mrs. Lestrangle said nothing at all.

“Don’t you see, madam, that you’re putting yourself in a very fishy position?”

Still Mrs. Lestrangle said nothing.

“You’ll be required to give evidence at the inquest.”

“Yes.”

Just the monosyllable. Unemphatic, uninterested. The Inspector altered his tactics.

(*Vicarage* ch. 15)

At the end of the interrogation she reveals to the reader that her cold exterior is just a mask she had to put on for her role in the murder: ““You see, it is too late for advice now. I have chosen my part”” (*Vicarage* ch. 15).

3. Matriarchate at the Styles Country House

As already mention above, with the coming of the First World War and the great number of men fighting on the front, the labour market opened its door to the new workforce - women. These women were urged to step in as a replacement in working places typically regarded as male such as factories or public service. In addition, “[f]atality, shell-shock, and the low cost of female labour meant that women continued to ‘show their grit’ in traditionally masculine roles throughout the 1920s” (Bernthal 47). Since women not only proved themselves capable of performing the same jobs as men with equal or better efficacy but also “spoke their minds ... postponed or eschewed marriage, and renounced familial obedience” (Mafi 158), the “questions surrounding what constituted ‘manly’ or ‘womanly’ behaviour were raised” (Bernthal 47).

Interestingly, “Christie’s debut, *Styles*, was supposed to be ‘an orthodox detective story’. Christie did not mean for it to be an innovation; she wanted it to sell” (Bernthal 45). However, “[t]he world of *Styles* reflects contemporary changes in gender dynamics. It is the first of many novels set in a matriarchal country house where women are both conventionally and modernly feminine” (Bernthal 45). As a matter of fact, they are independent in the sense that they are able to provide for themselves financially either through work or heritage; in their relationships, they cannot be regarded as a weaker or subordinate sex; they are unapologetic in their actions and unshakeable in their decisions; they are not passive observers but active participants in their lives and the lives of those around them; moreover, they are nothing like the stereotypical women the society wants them to be.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles “relies on constructions of conventional womanliness and – more so – manliness in order to present ‘professional’ or ‘manly’ women along fashionable lines. However, the way that Christie uses fashionable gender constructions is strategic; readers’ prejudices around these stereotypes inform the mechanics of the plot” (Bernthal 49). By leading on the reader into believing that these stereotypes are true, Christie not only manages to hide the murderer in the plain sight but also educates the reader on the dangers of such standardized ideas. Considering the complexity of sex and gender, one cannot simply expect all people to fulfil the made up requirements of masculine or feminine spheres and then condemn them when they fail to do so. In terms of colours, this spherical division cannot be labelled as either black or white. The colour in question is grey and, as such, has many different nuances.

3.1. Manly Women

Based on her assigned sex, Miss Evelyn Howard's behaviour and appearance do not seem to be in accordance with the gender stereotypes of her time:

Miss Howard shook hands with a hearty, almost painful, grip. I had an impression of very blue eyes in a sunburnt face. She was a pleasant-looking woman of about forty, with a deep voice, almost manly in its stentorian tones, and had a large sensible square body, with feet to match—these last encased in good thick boots. Her conversation, I soon found, was couched in the telegraphic style. (*Styles* ch. 1)

Although Miss Howard is described as a woman who has both the intelligence and perceptiveness, Poirot takes pity on her for lacking the physical beauty as well: “‘Ah, I am glad she has come. There is a woman with a head and a heart too, Hastings. Though the good God gave her no beauty!’” (*Styles* ch. 5). In Poirot's eyes, not being stereotypically beautiful withholds Miss Howard from achieving her full potential as a woman. Such backward views can be attributed to the equation of woman's worth with her physical appearance. Reddy argues that “‘women, to be interesting, must be desirable objects to men, hence young, beautiful, and marriageable” (Rzepka and Horsley 194). That means, if they are not beautiful, all the other qualities they may possess, turn out to be completely futile and unimportant.

Despite being, so to speak, limited by her physical appearance, the “manly” Miss Howard not only manages to find a man for herself but also hatches a murderous plan with him. It is Poirot who later reveals to the reader that Miss Howard thought of the plan herself, while her lover, Mr. Inglethorp, only performed the deed: “‘I am inclined to think that Miss Howard was the master mind in that affair. ... Yes, it was a clever idea! If they had left it alone, it is possible the crime might never have been brought home to them’” (*Styles* ch. 13).

Interestingly, for a short time, Miss Howard even manages to transform herself into Mr. Inglethorp to provide him with an alibi and is not recognized by anyone: “‘No suspicion attaches to her. No notice is paid to her coming and going in the house. She hides the strychnine and glasses in John's room. She puts the beard in the attic. She will see to it that sooner or later they are duly discovered’” (*Styles* ch. 13). In this way, she does not stop by only echoing typically masculine characteristics, but rather goes as far as actually becoming a man by replacing him in every aspect. Christie's choice of such surprising denouement may be deliberately used as a

mockery of traditional masculinity that was threatened by the New Woman. In fact, “[e]ven at the time, suggestions that women could be masculine appeared in propaganda principally to encourage ‘cowardly’ men to prove their manliness to a higher degree in the military, thus confirming basic gender binaries” (Bernthal 48-49). By creating a woman who is manly, intelligent and murderous, Christie brings this threat to life.

Just like her companion Miss Howard, Mrs. Emily Inglethorp is nothing like the traditional woman of Edwardian time. Despite being old, she is described as being evidently dominant in manner: “a handsome white-haired old lady, with a somewhat masterful cast of features, stepped out of it on to the lawn” (*Styles* ch. 1). Upon her reencounter with Hastings, it is Mrs. Inglethorp and not her husband who seems to be in charge in their relationship and this can be noticed immediately:

A man followed her, a suggestion of deference in his manner.

Mrs. Inglethorp greeted me with effusion.

"Why, if it isn't too delightful to see you again, Mr. Hastings, after all these years. Alfred, darling, Mr. Hastings—my husband."

I looked with some curiosity at "Alfred darling". (*Styles* ch. 1)

Nowadays, to see a woman exiting the door before her husband, introducing him to the guest and referring to him as “darling” would not bring the power dynamics of the couple into question. However, from Hastings’ point of view it can be visible that, in interwar time, such behaviour could have been regarded as somewhat strange and even degrading to her husband. Social conventions such as these did not seem to bother Mrs. Cavendish because she “was a lady who liked to make her own plans, and expected other people to fall in with them” (*Styles* ch. 1). Her self-will is mostly visible in her decision to marry a man that is much younger than her, despite her family’s disapproval:

But you could have knocked us all down with a feather when, three months ago, she suddenly announced that she and Alfred were engaged! The fellow must be at least twenty years younger than she is! It's simply bare-faced fortune hunting; but there you are—she is her own mistress, and she's married him."

"It must be a difficult situation for you all."

"Difficult! It's damnable!" (*Styles* ch. 1)

Although her self-will eventually led her into death, she managed to live according to her rules.

Interestingly, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, women are the one having jobs while their men remain unemployed. One such example are also Mary Cavendish, who “works as a land girl certain days of the week”, and Cynthia, Mrs. Inglethorp’s protegee, who works as “a pharmaceutical dispenser in a hospital” (Makinen 81). Poirot praises these women’s decision to work by saying that “[w]omen are doing great work nowadays” (*Styles* ch. 9). Although generally accepted, their entrance into the world of work is, at that time, regarded as something new and remarkable, meaning that it will need time for the society to accustom itself to the idea of women becoming an equal part of the public sphere. Until then, “these women might, perhaps, not be described as ‘career women’, since the jobs are a voluntary part of the war effort” (Makinen 82). By presenting his audience with the female characters who are willing to work, Christie refuses “to accept the secondary status of women” (York 68) but also marks the change in “attitudes to middle-class women and work” (Makinen 82).

Mary Cavendish, in a sense, turned out to be a “manly” woman not only because she was determined to work but also because she put her “womanly” feelings aside and entered into a loveless marriage with John out of benefit. At that moment she only saw him as “a way of escape from the insufferable monotony of [her] life” (*Styles* ch. 10). Although, she made her feelings clear from the beginning, once she found out about his affair, she was ready to get revenge on him by developing a friendship with Dr. Bauerstein. Moreover, despite her newly discovered feelings for her husband, she even planned on leaving him for good:

"I mean that I am not going to remain at Styles."

"You and John are not going to live here?"

"John may live here, but I shall not."

"You are going to leave him?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

She paused a long time, and said at last:

"Perhaps— because I want to be—free!" (*Styles* ch. 10)

Although she is aware of the hardships her decision might entail, as a New Woman, she prefers leaving her husband than staying in a marriage in which she will be cheated on and in which her feelings will not be reciprocated. By referring to Styles as a “prison” she also implies that she feels the same about her marriage in which an orphan but also a woman like her would, to a certain extent, be forced to stay for having rather limited choices.

3.2. Womanly Men

Bernthal describes men in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* as “less robust and popular than the women” (48). Such assessment can be attributed to their underrepresentation in the novel, which is otherwise a characteristic of the majority of female characters in Golden Age fiction. At the Styles country house, however, men are the ones who have somewhat imperceptible roles, while their characters are only depicted on the surface.

In like manner, not much is revealed about Alfred Inglethorp besides his unnatural and theatrical appearance:

I looked with some curiosity at "Alfred darling". He certainly struck a rather alien note. I did not wonder at John objecting to his beard. It was one of the longest and blackest I have ever seen. He wore gold-rimmed pince-nez, and had a curious impassivity of feature. It struck me that he might look natural on a stage, but was strangely out of place in real life. His voice was rather deep and unctuous. (*Styles* ch. 1)

York suggests that this “theatricality is actually a lack of real identifiable character” (44). As a matter of fact, Alfred Inglethorp exists only in association with his wife, Mrs. Emily Inglethorp. At the beginning of the novel, she presents him as her husband in a manner in which a stereotypical housewife and a homemaker would be presented to the guests by her husband; a gesture which Hastings regards as demeaning towards Mr. Inglethorp who, in his mind, should actually be the one posing himself as a housefather of the Styles country house. Furthermore, it is Mrs. Inglethorp who gives him the position of a secretary in one of her societies, suggesting that she even supports him financially, while he “surround[s] his wife with little attentions, placing a cushion at her back, and altogether playing the part of the devoted husband” (*Styles* ch. 2). Their marriage, therefore, throws the traditional gender roles of a husband and a wife off balance. In this way, he becomes her trophy husband, a term which is usually associated with women and not with men. After the murder of Mrs. Inglethorp, “Alfred plays the part of the grieving husband, pretending to be totally oblivious to the fact that he is the prime suspect” (Rzepka and Horsley 155). Although the real reason behind this acting is actually a need to hide a gruesome murder, even here Mr. Inglethorp has “a subsidiary part in the triumphs of the [female] hero” (James 22), Mrs. Evelyn Howard. He might be the one who killed Mrs. Inglethorp, but it is Mrs. Evelyn who orchestrated the whole thing.

According to Lieutenant Hastings, the brothers John and Lawrence Cavendish live under “the whip hand, namely: the purse strings” (*Styles* ch. 1) of their step-mother Mrs. Inglethorp. After the death of their father, Mrs. Inglethorp inherited the Styles country house and the majority of his earnings. Hastings finds this settlement to be “distinctly unfair to his two sons” (*Styles* ch. 1) probably because it left them to the mercy of their step-mother. Being left to the mercy of a woman, is intimidating not only to Hastings but probably to Mrs. Inglethorp’s sons as well. This particularly refers to John Cavendish who planned on finding a place on his own, when he married Mary, but was not able to do so because his step-mother restricted his allowance. Although they consider her to be their real mother, such arrangement, again, puts the power in the hands of a woman and causes discomfort among men. This is probably the reason why “Poirot notes that the willful, officious, and domineering woman is not much missed by those she leaves behind” (Rzepka and Horsley 153). As John has practised for a barrister, there might have been some other way of getting the money; however, the problem is not in the lack of means but in a woman who is taking away from him something that he is entitled to and the fact he cannot do anything about it:

Yes, it's a fine property. It'll be mine some day – should be mine now by rights, if my father had only made a decent will. And then I shouldn't be so damned hard up as I am now."

"Hard up, are you?"

"My dear Hastings, I don't mind telling you that I'm at my wit's end for money."

"Couldn't your brother help you?"

"Lawrence? He's gone through every penny he ever had, publishing rotten verses in fancy bindings. No, we're an impecunious lot. My mother's always been awfully good to us, I must say. That is, up to now. Since her marriage, of course —" he broke off, frowning. (*Styles* ch. 1)

When it comes to Lawrence, his unmanliness is mostly depicted in the choice of words Hastings ascribes to him. He refers to him as “delicate” and “shy”, the adjectives that would usually be used when speaking of a woman. Although it is often believed that men are the ones who remain brave in hard and stressful situations, during his interrogation Lawrence does not show strength in the face of fear. Instead, he is “turning a sickly greenish colour”, while “stammer[ing] pitifully” (*Styles* ch. 11). Moreover, after Cynthia takes the matters into her own hands and kisses him, he is incapable of saying anything to Poirot and Hastings. Instead, he blushes timidly.

4. Class Distinction

In the Edwardian era, a clear distinction was made between the three existing layers of society - upper, middle and working classes. The divide ran so deep that the importance was put even on the most mundane occurrences with the sole purpose of retaining such rigid class structure. The preposterousness of that division goes so far as to include “everything from paint colour to curtain fabrics, or even the flowers that were planted in the garden” (Terenas 39). With the outbreak of the First World War, “[t]he standard of living of both the upper and middle classes saw a steep decline” (Bajaj 38), while the belief of their moral and cultural predominance over the working classes was brought into question:

English high society was able to survive the war, but they never regained their former level of power and influence. Mainly after the war a new era of egalitarianism dawned and the days of country houses and aristocratic lifestyles became the stuff of rosy reminiscences. The ability to host the lavish social affairs of previous times was lost. At the same time staffs grew smaller, because the working classes had no intentions of returning to servitude after having fought side by side with their former masters and realizing that after all they were just human beings, like themselves. In result of these new perspectives and the death rate, especially concerning young men, after the Great War there was a shortage of servants in London. (Terenas 39)

Despite the “a marked rise in the popularity of socialism in Britain” (Coetzee 168), members of the upper and middle classes found it hard to adjust to the newly created changes in the social order of interwar Britain, while looking back at the old times with sentimentality. As a result, the “discrimination against individuals of lower classes was widespread in the early twentieth century” (Coetzee 168).

Being a child of the Edwardian time, Christie not only felt that longing but also portrayed it in her works: “Christie, like most of her major characters, was of her class; she never escaped from it – she neither wanted nor tried to – and so the prejudices of that class occasionally appear in her fiction” (Coetzee 170, as qtd. in Bargainnier 1980:34). Besides the apparent nostalgia for the pre-war period, Terenas also notes that Christie’s fiction is, in a way, restricted to the world of upper and middle classes because that is the environment she was familiar with and in which she was brought up. Therefore, writing about something outside of the scope of what she was acquainted

with, would make her produce works that are neither credible nor authentic (Terenas 38). Terenas reiterates this idea even more by claiming that even “[t]he characters are set in a scenario built up of three different kinds of buildings, each one of them representative of a social order” (119). In her works, accordingly, “lower classes, especially professional criminals, play very minor roles. The criminal comes from among the social circle of the victim, and servants are very rarely guilty – and if so will usually be in some form of social disguise” (Rzepka and Horsley 78). As it is the case with Mr. Protheroe in *The Murder at the Vicarage* and Mrs. Inglethorp in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, “[t]he victim will be a man or (quite often) a woman ... of little emotive value; he or she is not mourned, nor is the real pain and degradation of violent death represented” (Rzepka and Horsley 78).

4.1. Keeping up With the Upper Classes

Terenas suggests that for “those belonging to the middle and upper classes, the War came to represent a complete break with a century-long tradition of gradual prosperity, progress, social reform and consolidation. The leisure and quiet of Edwardian days were killed off for good. The break was subtle, but erosion had begun” (37). Once carefree and ostentatious middle and upper classes now had to save every penny, if they wanted to keep their lavish estates solely in their possession. Those that were not as fortunate were forced to sell their long-lived heritage:

After World War I the estimation is that about eight million acres in Britain changed hands, far more than in any other time in the country’s history. The ‘sacred’ inheritance handed over from father to son, was sold to strangers, as there were no heirs to carry it on, because many of them had died in the world conflict. Those who survived had to make financial options: some sold the house, for schools or institutions, and the park separately, others were simply brought down. (Terenas 39)

This decay of Edwardian values after the First World War is visible even in the Styles country house. While the maid Dorcas refers to the time after the First World War as “dreadful”, Mrs. Inglethorp concludes that a “war household”, such as hers, is in no position to be wasteful in any way. Aside from the decrease in wastefulness of upper classes, one can also note the reduced number of servants employed in their households:

How many gardeners are employed here, by the way?"

"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!" (ch. 4)

In the Edwardian time, the number of people held in servitude mirrored the social standing of that household as well (Coetzee 170). To some, three gardeners might seem a lot, especially when, in addition to them, the household employs two more maids and one cook. However, in the eyes of the British nobility, these newly formed figures are simply devastating.

With disregard of the new order of things, the upper classes did everything that was in their power to maintain the illusion of their social superiority. As emotional reactions of any kind befitted the lower classes and therefore servants as well, this also meant that the outward display of emotions needed to be masked at all times:

The reaction after a shock is always trying, and I think we were all suffering from it. Decorum and good breeding naturally enjoined that our demeanour should be much as usual, yet I could not help wondering if this self-control were really a matter of great difficulty. There were no red eyes, no signs of secretly indulged grief. I felt that I was right in my opinion that Dorcas was the person most affected by the personal side of the tragedy. (*Styles* ch. 6)

Crossing the line of what is seen as an acceptable demeanour is beneath the upper classes and therefore often disapproved by many. For example, Poirot finds Mary Cavendish's interference with Mrs. Inglethorp's marital problems to be not only strange but also unworthy of her social position: "It seems incredible that a woman like Mrs. Cavendish, proud and reticent to the last degree, should interfere so violently in what was certainly not her affair.' 'Precisely. It was an astonishing thing for a woman of her breeding to do'" (*Styles* ch. 5). In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, likewise, Miss Marple condemns Major Hargraves, "a churchwarden and a man highly respected in every way" for "keeping a separate second establishment—a former housemaid ... [a]nd five children" (*Vicarage* ch. 11). It seems that such arrangement seems to be "a terrible shock to his wife and daughter" (*Vicarage* ch. 11) not so much because Major Hargraves is revealed to lead a double life but because he disgraced his wife and daughter by marrying a woman out of his social standing and fathering five children with her (Coetzee 174). When referring to the lower classes, Inspector Slack too separates himself, the member of the

middle class, from the lower class by saying that he “‘know[s] how to manage them’” (*Vicarage* ch. 12), suggesting that he considers himself to be more worthy and , in general, better than the lower classes.

Despite the fact that lower classes are not to be mixed with the upper ones, their presence in the lives of the latter is very much needed. People of higher “social standing accepted as normal the idea of having servants who cooked, cleaned and cared for them” (Coetzee 173). For that reason, although not completely satisfied with her servant Mary, Griselda “‘find[s] it better to leave things to Mary and just make up my mind to be uncomfortable and have nasty things to eat’” (*Vicarage* ch. 1) than to be left without a servant, or even worse, forced to train another one:

“Mary. She’s given notice.”

I really could not take the announcement in a tragic spirit.

“Well,” I said, “we’ll have to get another servant.”

It seemed to me a perfectly reasonable thing to say. When one servant goes, you get another. I was at a loss to understand Griselda’s look of reproach.

“Len—you are absolutely heartless. You don’t care.”

I didn’t. In fact, I felt almost lighthearted at the prospect of no more burnt puddings and undercooked vegetables.

“I’ll have to look for a girl, and find one, and train her,” continued Griselda in a voice of acute self-pity. (*Vicarage* ch. 20)

In order to keep her useless maid by her side Griselda is ready to go so far as to “manipulate the situation and persuade ... the vicar to take pity on Mary and convince her not to resign, even though neither she nor the vicar appear to have any real pity for Mary” (Coetzee 172). Griselda’s gesture is in no way selfless or nice. As a matter of fact, such “[a]cts of kindness shown by the upper class can be perceived as being condescending and patronising towards the lower classes thus reinforcing their superior position” (Coetzee 183). Since upper and middle classes treat their subordinates with kindness only if they need something, the vicar can easily notice the deceitfulness and of Miss Hartnell’s conduct:

On my way home, I ran into Miss Hartnell and she detained me at least ten minutes, declaiming in her deep bass voice against the improvidence and ungratefulness of the lower classes. The crux of the matter seemed to be that The Poor did not want Miss Hartnell in their houses. My sympathies were entirely on their side. I am debarred by my

social standing from expressing my prejudices in the forceful manner they do. (*Vicarage* ch. 14)

4.2. Good Servant-Bad Servant

Christie either failed or did not want to see the bigger picture and therefore believed that the servants were actually really content with their position in Britain's society (Coetzee 172, as qtd. in Christie 1993:27). Since most of the servants were "silent, discreet and efficient beings who did not speak out of turn and who disappeared into the background" (Coetzee 173), such false view was, at that time, quite common among the individuals of upper and middle classes. As mentioned above, in her writing, servants have minor roles and can usually be found in the background. This is why her "portrayal of servants can be linked to an element of nostalgia that is often evident in her writing – her longing for the time in which she grew up in a large country house populated by several servants" (Coetzee 171).

In Christie's novels – *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and *The Murder at the Vicarage*— one can notice two different types of servants, Mary and Dorcas. Out of the two, Dorcas is the one who "conforms to social expectations and behaves in a formal and submissive manner" (Coetzee 176). In her appearance but also in her demeanour, Dorcas exemplifies the traditional servant of the Edwardian time: "Dorcas was standing in the boudoir, her hands folded in front of her, and her grey hair rose in stiff waves under her white cap. She was the very model and picture of a good old-fashioned servant" (*Styles* ch. 4). As such, she is very discreet when it comes to discussing the confidential matters of her mistress and is, therefore, determined to keep the secrets of her mistress safe, even after she passed away:

"Then I will begin by asking you about the events of yesterday afternoon. Your mistress had a quarrel?"

"Yes, sir. But I don't know that I ought—" Dorcas hesitated. Poirot looked at her keenly.

"My good Dorcas, it is necessary that I should know every detail of that quarrel as fully as possible. Do not think that you are betraying your mistress's secrets. Your mistress lies dead, and it is necessary that we should know all—if we are to avenge her. Nothing can bring her back to life, but we do hope, if there has been foul play, to bring the murderer to justice." (*Styles* ch. 4)

Contrary to Dorcas, the “fine specimen ... of the old-fashioned servant that is so fast dying out” (*Styles* ch. 8), Christie portrays Mary “as overtly challenging and resisting expectations” (Coetzee 176). Aside from the fact that “nobody else would have her” (*Vicarage* ch. 10), Mary does not seem to have any other qualities. She “‘can’t cook’”, “‘has ... awful manners’” and her “‘meals are never punctual’” (*Vicarage* ch. 10). What is more, she does not address her masters properly: “‘Is it quite out of the question to induce Mary to say sir or ma’am?’ ‘I have told her. She doesn’t remember. She’s just a raw girl, remember?’” (*Vicarage* ch. 10). In the character of Mary, like with many other servants in her novels, Christie “reinforces the established belief that servants and lower classes are unintelligent and uneducated by having them use poor grammar” (Coetzee 177). While being questioned by the vicar about the shots in the woods, Mary too uses the poor grammar:

“Now, Mary, what I want to ask you is this: Are you quite certain you didn’t hear the shot yesterday evening?”

“The shot what killed him? No, of course I didn’t. If I had of done, I should have gone in to see what had happened.” (*Vicarage* ch. 10)

Although “[t]he standard of education is a yardstick often used to distinguish between individuals of different classes” (Coetzee 177), Mary refuses to accept that she is less worth than her masters and is always ready to contradict them, when she feels that they are underestimating her: “‘No, I can’t. I’ve got my work to do, haven’t I? I can’t go on looking at clocks the whole time—and it wouldn’t be much good anyway—the alarm loses a good three-quarters every day, and what with putting it on and one thing and another, I’m never exactly sure what time it is’” (*Vicarage* ch. 10). After realizing she’s unsatisfied with her working conditions, Mary decides to resign. Moreover, while talking to her boss, the vicar, she shows that she is not only unapologetic in her resignation but also unwilling to settle for less:

“Er—good afternoon,” I said nervously.

Mary looked up and snorted, but made no other response.

“Mrs. Clement tells me that you wish to leave us,” I said.

Mary condescended to reply to this.

“There’s some things,” she said darkly, “as no girl can be asked to put up with.”

(*Vicarage* ch. 20)

By behaving differently from the way the society expects her to, Mary paves the way for the new type of servant whose worth goes beyond his or her class and profession.

Conclusion

Even more than one hundred years after putting her first mystery into words, Agatha Christie continues to hold the attention of generations after the generations of readers: addressed by different honorary titles and unrivalled by all, she truly holds the crown. Immersed in Christie's kingdom of crimes, one can easily notice all the ways in which the First World War shook the up until then firm foundations of the Edwardian worldview. With respect to the post-war changes, those caused in the domains of gender and class seem to be the most prominent ones.

When it comes to gender, Christie successfully plays with the stereotypes often attributed to men and women not only with the intention of diverting reader's attention from the real murderer but also to debunk the long-held beliefs surrounding Britain's society. After returning damaged from the war, men found themselves replaced but also rejected by women. More than ever before women were ready to provide for themselves; they renounced the outmoded principles that tied them to the institution of marriage and questioned their innate affiliation to the domestic sphere.

This was the period when the readership was in search of some light reading as an escape from all the harmful consequences of the war, the time when the crime fiction made it possible for women to distinguish themselves as the writers of the genre, previously regarded as male. Since woman's meddling with the trivial literature, such as this one, was not considered threatening to the traditional masculinity, more and more women decided to have a try at crime fiction. Despite all male writers who made their contribution to the genre, the crime fiction of the interwar period primarily established itself as a female genre, the genre of women, written for women and by women. This feminization of the genre was caused not only by the writers who opted for feminine means of investigation, but also by the female readers who, having more time on their hands, were now able to read books more frequently, while identifying themselves with the methods of rather feminine and marginal detectives, such as Poirot and Miss Marple.

The middle and upper classes allowed themselves to be overcome by the new-arisen nostalgia for the glorious Edwardian days. For that reason, they continued to insist that the society should be functioning according to the same principles from the past. While they were not ready to denounce their servants and the social status that came with employing them, the upper and middle classes continued to depreciate the worth of lower classes. Regardless whether it came to literature or reality, the lower classes were considered to be inferior and of lesser importance. In

spite of that, the efforts of upper and middle classes to uphold the old order turned out to be futile: the differences between the previously clearly defined and separated layers of society now started to disappear gradually. The members of the upper and middle classes had to face the loss of their property, while simultaneously struggling to keep up with their previous lifestyles. In addition, their social superiority soon started to be questioned by the lower classes.

All of these changes might seem small and irrelevant to some; however, their significance surpasses the effects they had on the society of interwar Britain. As every change starts with a small step, it is what came afterwards that counts. For women this meant embracing the “masculine” kind of behaviour that was, up until then for them, socially and culturally unacceptable, as well as realizing that there is more to life than just being a mother and a wife. For the lower classes, the First World War marked the shift from their representation as the lower forms of human beings to equal member of society. By questioning and challenging the ways of the past, the course of the history could eventually be changed for the better.

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