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Deadly Domesticity:

Agatha Christie's 'Middlebrow' Gothic, 1930-1970

by

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Declaration

I declare that the work included in this thesis is entirely my own. I declare that this thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

This thesis examines the use of the Gothic - genre of literary production deeply implicated with a set of patently middle class anxieties concerning the home - in the 'middlebrow' detective fiction of Agatha Christie, particularly within her novels authored in the forty year period between 1930 and 1970. It is argued that there are five different 'types' of Gothic at work in Christie's fiction: the haunted house narrative; the Gothic village; Gay Gothic; Post-WWII Gothic; and Brontë Gothic. This thesis moreover suggests that Christie's employment and development of these Gothic sub-genres is often achieved via nineteenth-century interlocutors, with Christie's fiction drawing heavily upon, and in some cases 're-imagining', some of the cornerstones of Victorian Gothic literature. In doing so, this thesis sets out to problematise Alison Light's famous characterisation of Christie as a 'modernist [...] iconoclast' whose fiction nonchalantly shatters 'Victorian images of home, sweet home'. Instead, it is argued that Christie's use of the Gothic speaks of a relationship with nineteenth-century literary culture which far more complicated: a contradictory interplay of simultaneous desire and distance characteristic of the 'middlebrow' fiction produced by women writers of this time. This thesis reads Christie's use of the Gothic historically, seeking to both firmly situate her work within its contemporary historical contexts - particularly in relation to debates regarding the family, domestic space, and the birth of what Nicola Humble has termed the birth of 'the new cult of the domestic' after the First World War - and to elucidate the nineteenth-century contexts which she additionally draws upon. Ultimately, in reading instances of domestic Gothicism as they occur across her *oeuvre*, this thesis makes a case for the valuable historically-specific cultural critiques made by one who, at least in the popular imagination, is positioned as such an avowedly 'conservative' writer.

Introduction

It may be useful to begin with what this thesis is not about. It is not about the petals of the geranium flowers on a neurotic woman's bedroom wallpaper magically transforming from a mimetic scarlet to a horticulturally impossible cobalt, shocking the woman into an early grave.¹ Nor is it about a session of table-turning that correctly announces to those gathered on that winter's evening of the murder of a man living some six miles away in another town.² It also is not particularly concerned with three witches dwelling in a former inn with 'a mysterious and unusually wicked past history',³ who can be persuaded, for a fee, to use their dastardly powers to remotely dispatch anyone you require. It is, however, about Agatha Christie and the Gothic, but not, it should be said, in the sense that has been previously discussed. When the Gothic has been brought up in relation to Christie's detective fictions - principally in Susan Rowland's 2001 *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* - it has been precisely in terms of the author's evoking of supernatural forces and phenomena as a viable narrative option, only for these to be ultimately debunked in favour of a judicious, rational explanation for the deaths that have taken place. Specifically, Rowland argues that in Christie's fiction the Gothic functions as 'a threatening state which detecting is meant to map and recuperate',⁴ and thus Christie's use of the Gothic functions as a structural device required by the narrative to misdirect the detective and

¹ Agatha Christie, 'The Blue Geranium', in *The Thirteen Problems* (1932; London: Harper, 2002), p. 146.

² Agatha Christie, *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931; London: Harper 2002), pp. 24-25.

³ Agatha Christie, *The Pale Horse* (1961; London: Harper, 2002), p. 88.

⁴ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 116.

reader's suspicions away from the evil that lurks closer to home. For example, the preternatural metamorphosis of the floral wallpaper in 'The Blue Geranium' (1932) is simply a lovesick nurse's cruel but clever trick performed with litmus paper and cyanide-of-potassium crystals disguised as smelling salts. The other-wordly announcement of murder in *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931) owes to a rigged séance and some cross-country skiing across the moorland, allowing the killer to arrive at the victim's residence several hours before they are seen to have arrived on foot. At the brooding inn of the same name in *The Pale Horse* (1961), '[t]he wickedness was never there - not in the sense it was supposed to be. No fantastic trafficking with the Devil, no black and evil splendour. Just parlour tricks done for money' whilst wholesale murder is committed by a company of professional killers by far more ordinary means - poison.⁵ However, whilst critics such as Rowland may have commented upon this particular strand of Christie's Gothicism - what I would think of as pseudo- or parodic-Gothic - it is precisely the darkness, brutality, and evil to be found much 'closer to home' that I would argue marks Christie's true foray into the Gothic, and which is the subject of this thesis.

Even as early within the emergence of the field of Gothic studies as 1980's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies the problem that "'Gothic" has not been the most supple or useful of critical adjectives'.⁶ This, coupled with the disjunction earlier cited between those elements that other critics have identified in Christie's work as Gothic, and where I want to make the case that Christie's Gothicism resides, highlights the need to further clarify what precisely the term 'Gothic' means within the context

⁵ Christie, *The Pale Horse*, p. 330.

⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Arno, 1980), p. 1.

of this thesis. I propose that the Gothic is a genre of literary production deeply implicated with a set of patently middle-class anxieties concerning the domestic sphere. My insistence on the genre as having its foundations specifically in bourgeois culture might therefore be seen as presenting something of a paradox when it is considered that the early or 'original' Gothic fictions of the eighteenth century - works by Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis, and Ann Radcliffe, among others - depict events that took place long ago, in places far away, within the lives of aristocratic or royal families. However, what ought to be remembered is that these Gothic novels are not works of literary Realism, but rather that the Gothic is, and always has been, a highly metaphorical mode - 'a system of fantasy' as Paulina Palmer puts it.⁷ Employing the appropriately overblown diction of the genre itself, Eugenia C. DeLamotte urges recognition of the fact that, within the Gothic, there is a glaring sense in which 'the perils of the soul in its darkest night reflect, in magnified and revealing forms, the quotidian realities of life in the daylit world'.⁸ However, perhaps the clearest illustration of perfectly ordinary, perfectly domestic reality metaphorically represented by the outlandish and melodramatic Gothic mode comes from a satirical source: C.J. Pitt's sardonic mock-epic poem, *The Age; A Poem: Moral, Political, and Metaphysical with Illustrative Annotations*, published anonymously in 1810 towards the tail-end of the initial 'craze' for Gothic fiction.⁹ In book seven of Pitt's ten book poem, the poetic persona reflects on the magnitude of imagination needed for the writing of epic poetry: 'Blind Homer ne'er had seen a

⁷ Paulina Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (London: Continuum, 1999), p. 2.

⁸ Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. vii.

⁹ C.J. Pitt (Anon.), *The Age; A Poem: Moral, Political, and Metaphysical with Illustrative Annotations* (London: Vernor, Hood, and Sharpe, 1810). Line references are given in parenthesis in the text.

battle, | Yet best on paper makes it rattle' (lines 95-96). This then sweeps into a discussion of the epicist's modern-day living ancestor, the Gothic novelist:

And in these days, the Gothic sect
Can scribble with a good effect,
Whene'er these tales like a lighted match
Can fire imagination's thatch.
(lines 297-300)

Endowed throughout with voluminous (and often comically derisive) footnotes, this juncture of the poem even provides the reader with a table demonstrating the ways in which a Gothic novel might, 'by scratching out a few terms, and inserting others',¹⁰ be instantly made-over into a paradigmatic Realist novel and *vice versa*. To give just a few of Pitt's nineteen substitutive suggestions, all one need do is to replace a 'castle' with a '[h]ouse'; a 'blood-stained dagger' with a 'fan'; a 'knight' with a 'gentleman without whiskers'; '[a]ssassins' with '[k]illing glances'; '[m]ysterious voices' with '[a]bstruse words' ('easily found in a dictionary'); a 'gliding ghost' with an 'usurer, or an attorney'; and a 'midnight murder' with a 'marriage'.¹¹ However, in terms of a female protagonist, a 'lady who is the heroine, [...] [n]eed not be changed, being versatile'.¹² As is so often the case with satire, casting all comedy aside, the point being made here by Pitt is one which is *bona fide*: that, with a slight squint of the eyes, a slight change in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-10.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 210.

perspective, the Gothic world becomes the 'real' world.¹³ In light of such, it is possible to read a novel such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) as not 'really' about the plight of a fifteenth-century aristocratic maiden in the Apennines, but about a detrimental experience of domestic space - of intense unease within the family home - that would have struck a chord of acute recognition with the novel's original intended reader: the middle-class, Englishwoman of the eighteenth century.

For this reason, in addition to DeLamotte's study, the book that has been perhaps the most instructive in terms of what is meant by the term Gothic within this thesis is Kate Ferguson Ellis' influential *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (1989). Rather than contextualising the Gothic within debates regarding the aristocracy of the past (the ostensible subject of those early examples of the genre), Ellis makes clear that it is no coincidence that the Gothic, as a sub-genre of the English novel, emerges and subsequently flourishes during the second half of the eighteenth century, as this is precisely the same period in which the constitution of the ideal middle-class family home becomes a pressing cultural concern for those who were the intended readers of the genre. Ellis states that the 'typological conception of "domestic happiness" emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century, as the middle class home, distinct in ideology and increasingly in fact

¹³ Of course, another premier example would be Jane Austen's famous Gothic satire *Northanger Abbey* (1818), in which the Gothic dangers swirling around Catherine Morland's excited imagination are juxtaposed with, and in some sense stand in for, the very real dangers that she faces in everyday reality: deceitful friends, financial exploitation, and the neglectful and rather cruel treatment those male authority figures into whose care she has been entrusted (for example, her expulsion from Northanger and forced journey, unchaperoned, across the country). As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, Austen's 'apparently amusing and inoffensive novel [...] expresses an indictment of patriarchy that could hardly be considered proper or even permissible in Austen's day. [...] Austen shows her heroine penetrating the secret of the Abbey, the hidden truth of the ancestral mansion, to learn the complete and arbitrary power of the owner of the house, the father, the General'. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 128-35.

from the place where money was made, became a “separate sphere” from the “fallen” world of work.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Deborah Cohen underscores the quasi-spiritual dimension attributed to the middle-class domestic dwelling in her suggestion that, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, ‘[t]he gradual separation of workplace from residence had made the home a welcome sanctuary from the money-grubbing world outside.’¹⁵ Thus, from this period onwards,¹⁶ indicative of the cultural imaging of the home (Gothic or otherwise) is a fundamental insistence on the separation of the domestic household from what Leonore Davidoff, Jean L'Esperance, and Howard Newby term the ‘public life of power’,¹⁷ and the abuses and exploitations that are seen as inextricably linked with an experience of the public sphere. With this in mind, and as Ellis goes on to suggest, integral to the emergent concept of ‘the ideal home’ is a firm insistence that it is ‘a place in which coercion, on the one hand, and hypocrisy, on the other hand, are experiences that belong to the outer world only’.¹⁸ For the majority, however, the exclusion of violence and dissimulation from the domestic realm is only a fantasy of how the home ought to be, rather than a lived actuality. What I would therefore propose is that the Gothic novel concerns itself

¹⁴ Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. ix.

¹⁵ Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 89.

¹⁶ Indeed, the transformation of ‘house’ to ‘home’ - of a purely physical form of shelter to an imagined, aspirational domestic space - continues and arguably intensifies in the following century. Contemplating the architecture of his own abode in the 1970s, Jonathan Raban, elucidates the increased stress placed by the Victorians on the use of architectural space in the fashioning of middle-class identities, commenting that his house originates from the time ‘when the Victorian middle-class family was the strongest institution in the world, and when its houses reflected the imperial wealth and grandeur (not to mention the divine ordination) of its status’. See, Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (1974; London: Picador, 2006), p. 6.

¹⁷ Leonore Davidoff, Jean L'Esperance, and Howard Newby, ‘Landscape with Figures: Home and Community in English Society’, in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 140.

¹⁸ Ellis, *The Contested Castle*, p. 45.

precisely with those points at which, despite the ostensible separation of home life from a more cut-throat public life, brutality and unethical behaviour are found not to solely belong to the outer sphere, but exists very much within the sanctified interior of the middle-class home. In other words, the Gothic provides a useful metaphorical means of thinking through the dark and often clandestine underside of domestic interiority.¹⁹ The Gothic is, in that sense, a genre seemingly committed to the exposition of domestic violence, in both the broad and narrow senses of that term.²⁰

This point is well illustrated by Gavin Lambert's review of Christie's posthumously published *Sleeping Murder: Miss Marple's Last Case* (1976). Lambert writes that despite the author's characteristic

adherence to formula, Christie in one way transcends it. *Sleeping Murder* is not among her most skilful works, but it displays her personal sense of what she calls 'evil', of murder as a violation and an act of unique cruelty. She was not an imaginative or original writer to explore this, but when Miss Marple tells us that 'It was real evil that was in the air last night,' Christie makes us feel her curious primitive shiver.²¹

Whilst Lambert has, unfortunately, slightly misquoted the novel's original dialogue, which instead reads 'I think, Gwenda, that that is why your childish impression of what you saw remained so strong. It was real evil that was in the

¹⁹ My argument here is thus not dissimilar to Tania Modleski's insistence that Gothic novels 'are "domestic" novels too, concerned with the (often displaced) relationships among family members and driving home to women the importance of coping with enforced confinement and the paranoid fears it generates'. Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, CN: Archon, 1982), p. 20.

²⁰ Indeed, as Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling posit, cultural constructions of the 'ideal home' are absolutely dependent upon the knowing negation of any possibility of domestic violence or its implications for the members of the household that that violence is directed towards. See, Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 110, 125-26.

²¹ Gavin Lambert, 'Review of *Sleeping Murder*', *New York Times Book Review* (19 September 1976), p. 1.

air that night',²² the point nevertheless remains that, although ostensibly a detective story, there is something about what takes place within Christie's final Miss Marple narrative that causes its reader to shudder with deep-seated feelings of dread and disgust, to experience *the frisson d'horreur* that is the affective response of the Gothic novel. The 'real evil' to which Miss Marple refers is the brutal strangulation of a young wife within her own home by her half-brother, motivated by his consuming, incestuous passion for her: a heinous act traumatically witnessed, repressed, and subsequently remediated by the novel's heroine (the victim's step-daughter) almost two decades later when she comes into renewed contact with her former childhood home. The Gothic novel, I would argue, thus portrays a nightmare or inverted reflection of the family home, and, in doing so, tellingly exposes the fact that the concept of domestic interiority contains within it, and is, in a sense, constructed through, a number of middle-class fantasies: the capstone of which is that the family home represents 'an extreme of privacy in which individualism could flourish'.²³ Indeed, in her study of the use of privacy and its prerequisite accomplice, secrecy, in the structuring of family narratives, Cohen makes explicit that domestic confidentiality - the separation of the home from the invasive glare of the outer world - is a specifically middle-class aspiration. She argues that there exists a certain image of the working class which precludes them from the luxury of domestic privacy:

Crowded four and five to a room, in lodgings with paper-thin walls, the poor have, as one sympathetic Victorian reporter phrased it, 'no domestic secrets - no private affairs!' Barely shielded from the curiosity of their

²²Agatha Christie, *Sleeping Murder: Miss Marple's Last Case* (1976; London: Harper, 2002), pp. 298-99.

²³ Davidoff, L'Esperance, and Newby, 'Landscape with Figures', *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, p. 141.

neighbours, they had in addition to contend with the prying investigations of 'friendly visitors' from church and charity who from the late-nineteenth century fanned out across Britain under the banner of moral reform.²⁴

Thus, the careful management, via the twin processes of secret-telling and secret-keeping, of otherwise 'dangerous' knowledge for the purpose of bolstering illusions of a respectable domestic sphere is something that requires things which the working classes are, by definition of the term, lacking in: not only money but, equally important, leisure time. Indeed, in chapter two of this thesis, I will discuss the function played in Christie's novels by the (often careful) orchestration of gossip as a means of transmitting information about specific households, and, in particular, the way in which this common pastime is knowingly and advantageously manipulated by the novels' guilty parties. At the other end of the social scale, it is imagined that the aristocracy also suffer no such delusions over the existence of a cosy, inner-world of the private family home: their marriages are matters of state importance rather than the culmination of romantic feelings, and no decision they make is free from the scrutiny of a curious, prurient, and judgmental wider public. Thus, it is left for that class of people in between the two extremes, the class that Christie's fiction is almost exclusively interested in,²⁵ to negotiate the advantages and shortcomings of circumscribing the domestic sphere as one which is free from

²⁴ Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London: Viking, 2013), p. xviii.

²⁵ As Alison Light suggests, contrary to popular belief, not only is Christie's fiction remarkably 'indifferent to the doings of the upper classes', but that '[r]ead alongside Dorothy L. Sayers or Edgar Wallace, Christie's novels appear remarkably open-minded about that whole variety of lives which begin to fall under the provenance of an expanding middle class. Whilst her cast lists do include retired colonels and vicar's ladies, they also feature secretaries, commercial salesmen, shopkeepers, receptionists, shop-girls, nurses, solicitors, housewives, doctors and dentists'. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 80, 76.

public censure and intervention: a sphere within which privacy is not just desirable, but rather it is seen as a 'hallowed right'.²⁶

If the *beau ideal* of middle-class family life involves a continual process of keeping certain people and knowledge within the domestic interior and certain people and knowledge outside of it, then it is perhaps unsurprising that its nightmarish double - the Gothic - is very much a literature of incarceration, particularly for women. Ellis even suggests that the genre 'can be distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out'.²⁷ Certainly, heightened privacy, on the one hand, and incarceration, on the other, are not mutually exclusive phenomena and, thus I would further suggest that what the Gothic depicts is *precisely* the points at which privacy - something valued as healthy and beneficial to the configuration of family life - tips over into acts of imprisonment. For example, in many of the acmes of mid-nineteenth century Gothic, such as the works of the Brontë sisters and the sensation novels of the 1860s - including Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) - women are routinely locked in rooms against their will, spied upon, have their diaries read and personal correspondence intercepted, and their private chambers are repeatedly infiltrated by male intruders. Thus, through their seeming commitment to representing women's experience of a corrupted mode of normative domesticity, writers such as the Brontës, Collins, or Braddon aggressively explode the fantasies of blissful retreat embedded in the idealisation of the bourgeois family home. As these novels emphasise, the flip-side of the notion of the domestic interior as a site of individualism enabled by privacy, is that

²⁶ Cohen, *Family Secrets*, p. xiii.

²⁷ Ellis, *The Contested Castle*, p. 3.

domestic confidentiality also generates an arena within which an ill-willed individual can exercise malevolence and cruelty against subordinates: that, rather than keeping brutality 'in its place', the separation of the public sphere from domestic sphere in actual fact works to produce the conditions for new forms of brutality to be carried out within the family home. Precisely for this reason, as Ellis has observed, '[n]ot all enclosed spaces can become homes. Walls can confine as well as protect, and evil can flourish in a climate of privacy no less easily than good'.²⁸ This, as this thesis will demonstrate, near perfectly describes the functioning of domestic spaces within Agatha Christie's fiction.

In taking as its subject the flourishing of evil and cruelty with the domestic spaces portrayed by Christie's fiction, this thesis is both indebted to and builds upon a substantial and influential body of critical work concerning that which has - broadly and not without contention - been termed the 'Female Gothic'. Widely acknowledged as having been coined by Ellen Moers in her eminent 1976 work *Literary Women* (which this thesis directly refers to at some length in chapter 5), preceding her discussion of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Moers' explanation of the term and its parameters is straightforward and largely self-evident: that 'Female Gothic' is 'the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic'.²⁹ The 'problem' such as it is, as Moers explains in the sentence that follows is the difficulty in defining the Gothic itself, rather than any difficulty surrounding the use of 'Female' as a suffix.³⁰ However, since at least the 1990s, the critical insistence on a

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁹ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1976; London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 90.

³⁰ 'But what I - or anyone else means - by "the Gothic" is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear'. *Ibid.*

fundamental difference between male and female authored Gothic fictions has increasingly come under scrutiny and attack. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik write that, by the early 2000s, 'the categorisation of Female Gothic was being seen in some quarters as reductive in its tendency (or so the argument went) to psychologically universalize female experience or oversimplify the cultural function of Gothic as a mode of writing'.³¹ Similarly, in the introduction to their 2009 edited collection *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith suggest that criticisms of 'Female Gothic' as a useful term/genre can be seen as 'part of a wider critique of [...] a radically misguided tendency to privilege psychoanalytic interpretations above historicist ones in the criticism of Gothic texts',³² and Alison Milbank further agrees that, 'although [...] *Gothic Studies* published a special issue on the 'Female Gothic' in 2004, there has been a definite turning away from straightforward feminist interpretations as taking too essentialist an approach to the nature of gender, while psychoanalytic readings have given way to more historically contextualised approaches'.³³ This thesis does not pretend to offer a solution to the ongoing debate concerning the benefits and/or shortcomings of marking out 'Female Gothic' as a distinct and coherent sub-strata of Gothic fiction more generally. However, I do believe it fair to suggest that those key issues within Gothic fiction that this thesis particularly interests itself in - a fear of confinement within a domestic setting and the dismantling of the received image of the middle-class family as held together by mutual bonds of unquestionable affection (revealing the family to instead

³¹ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 'Female Gothic', in Anna Powell and Andrew Smith (eds), *Teaching the Gothic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 113.

³² Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, 'Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic', in Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (eds), *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-2.

³³ Alison Milbank, 'Gothic Femininities', in Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 156.

consist of series of ambivalent and often dangerously overwrought relationships) - tend to have a something of a higher prominence and a stronger purchase in Gothic texts authored by women. Furthermore, if, as Horner and Zlosnik suggest, the 'threat of obliteration of the female self - whether through psychological abuse, physical incarceration, or *actual murder* - is something which informs all works we might describe as Female Gothic and is a particular dimension of the fear we recognize as Gothic in its origins' (emphasis mine),³⁴ then it becomes clear that scholarly work on the subject of 'Female Gothic' greatly enhances any discussion of Christie's murder mystery fictions. For this reason, in addition to both Ellis' *The Contested Castle* and DeLamotte's *Perils of the Night* mentioned above (both of which, I would further argue, are certainly exempt from any accusation as to a lack of historical specificity within critical discussions of 'Female Gothic'), and Moers' *Literary Women*, this thesis is both informed by and directly engages with works including Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis of Gothic fictions including *Northanger Abbey* (1818), *Jane Eyre* (1847), and 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) in their pioneering *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982), essays from Juliann E. Fleenor's edited collection *The Female Gothic* (1984), and Paulina Palmer's discussion specifically of lesbian subjectivities in *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1999) and later journal articles.³⁵

³⁴ Horner and Zlosnik, 'Female Gothic', *Teaching the Gothic*, p. 114.

³⁵ Specifically, Paulina Palmer, 'Lesbian Gothic: Genre, Transformation, Transgression', *Gothic Studies* 6, 1 (2004), pp. 118-30.

With a career spanning six decades, resulting in the production of seventy-two full length novels,³⁶ along with an abundance of short stories, and a significant number of dramatic works, Christie is certainly one of the most prolific and, I would argue, most significant literary figures of the twentieth century: she is, as Martin Edwards puts it, 'a global brand'.³⁷ However, despite enthusiastic popular and biographic interest,³⁸ it has historically been the case that Christie's work is seldom analysed with the kind of fervency and exactitude befitting such a position of centrality within twentieth-century literary history. In other words, considering that Christie has produced such profusion of material available for analysis, been so culturally prominent, and intersected with many of the crucial social debates of the period within which she was writing (as this thesis will demonstrate), there has been a marked reluctance amongst critics to seize upon her work. Moreover, on those sporadic occasions when Christie has piqued the interest of literary criticism (which occurs particularly in the 1970s and 1980s), most of what has been produced about her has been specifically in relation to genre fiction - her adherence to, non-adherence to, the influence of earlier practitioners on, her influence on later writers using the accepted structures and conventions of detective and/or crime

³⁶ This includes both the sixty-six detective novels published under her own name, and the six romance novels - *Giant's Bread* (1930), *Unfinished Portrait* (1934), *Absent in the Spring* (1944), *The Rose and the Yew Tree* (1948), *A Daughter's a Daughter* (1952), and *The Burden* - that Christie published under the nom de plume 'Mary Westmacott'.

³⁷ Martin Edwards, *The Golden Age of Murder: The Mystery of the Writers Who Invented the Modern Detective Story* (London: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 57.

³⁸ Literature on Christie aimed at a popular, as opposed to scholarly, audience, has been far more copious both before and since the author's death in 1976. Alongside numerous biographies of the author, this popular literature would include what I call 'Christie guidebooks': works such as Charles Osborne's *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie: A Biographical Companion to the Works of Agatha Christie* (1982), Vanessa Wagstaff and Stephen Poole's *Agatha Christie: A Reader's Companion* (2004), and James Zembo's *The Detective Novels of Agatha Christie: A Reader's Guide* (2008). Whilst these books are not without a certain degree of usefulness - indeed, within the thesis, I cite from, or at least refer to, the three examples given here - they are nevertheless clearly not the same as intellectually rigorous scholarly criticism.

fiction. However, this thesis is not concerned with, and does not examine, Christie as a writer of detective fiction. It is thus very different to those discussions of Christie's work to be found in monographs such as Colin Watson's *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and Their Audience* (1971), David Grossvogel's *Mystery and its Fictions: From Oedipus to Agatha Christie* (1979), Robert Barnard's *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (1981) (which, as I will explain further in chapter one, despite its title functions as anything but an 'appreciation', and has even been notably damaging in terms of how Christie has been subsequently received), and Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan's, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (1981).

Although this thesis is not concerned with Christie's work as an example of detective fiction *per se*, it is still nevertheless crucial to acknowledge what has been termed the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction as an important historical context for understanding Christie's work. Indeed, although many critics see the 'Golden Age of detection as temporally delineated by the two World Wars (that is, from 1918 until 1937),³⁹ Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple argue even more specifically, and in a move that unequivocally foregrounds Christie's significance to the genre, that the 'Golden Age' of detection is instigated by the publication of Christie's debut novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) and concludes with Dorothy L. Sayers' final full-length novel in her Lord Peter Wimsey series, *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937).⁴⁰ Colin Watson argues that, qualitatively speaking, the identification of the interwar years as the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction 'is just. Novels of detection flowed from the presses month after month, year after

³⁹ See, for example, Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971), p. 95; Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 31.

⁴⁰ Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple, 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction', in Helen Carr (ed.), *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 40.

year, in an ever-increasing tide. The appetite for them seemed to be insatiable. [...] [T]he weekly ration of whodunnits came to be one of the staples of life for thousands of middle-class families'.⁴¹ Moreover, as Alison Light suggests, '[d]etective fiction [...] became enormously successful between the wars and had a wide heterodox appeal[.] [...] By 1939 one-quarter of all fiction published was detective fiction'.⁴² A major indication of the extraordinary and seemingly proliferating popularity of detective fiction in Great Britain after the First World War was the 1930 founding of the Detection Club, which elected 39 members between its inception and the close of World War II,⁴³ all chosen for their perceived excellence in the field of British detective fiction: members including Christie (who became the club's president in 1957 until her death in 1976), Dorothy L. Sayers, G.K. Chesterton and Anthony Berkeley. The establishing of the Detection Club was moreover responsible for the production of popular collaborative, 'round robin' novels by the club's members, such as 1931's *The Floating Admiral*, penned by fourteen members of the club, including Berkeley, Christie, and Sayers, and 1933's *Ask a Policeman* by Berkeley, Milward Kennedy, Gladys Mitchell, John Rhode, Sayers, and Helen Simpson.

However, in terms of this thesis, the most conspicuous, and, I would argue, most significant feature of the 'Golden Age' of detection in the years between the wars is its domination by women writers.⁴⁴ The majority of these

⁴¹ Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, p. 95.

⁴² Light, *Forever England*, p. 65.

⁴³ Edwards, *The Golden Age of Murder*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Light, *Forever England*, p. 69; Jeni Curtis, 'Queens of Crime: Ngaio Marsh and Women's Detective Fiction', in Carle Acheson and Carolyn Lidgard (eds), *Return to Black Beech: Papers from a Centenary Symposium on Ngaio Marsh, 1895-1995* (Christchurch, New Zealand: The Centre for Continuing Education, 1995), p. 56; Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, p. 15.

writers, the so-termed 'Queens of Crime',⁴⁵ found success particularly in the creation of a long-running series of novels featuring the same detective or detectives: Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* gives birth to the fifty-five year long career of Hercule Poirot, and Miss Marple makes her full-length debut in 1930's *The Murder at the Vicarage*; Sayer's 1923 *Whose Body?* commences the eleven-book-long series of murder mysteries featuring her sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey; Mitchell's 1929 *Speedy Death* introduces the renowned Mrs Brady, who would take the leading detective role in a subsequent 65 novels; and 1934 sees the publication of Ngaio Marsh's first novel in her popular Inspector Alleyn series, *A Man Lay Dead*. In terms of providing a convincing explanation for the remarkable popularity of detective fiction in Britain from the 1920s onwards, the strongest argument, I would suggest, comes from Gill Plain in her 2001 book *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*. Specifically, Plain proposes that the expeditious vogue for the genre owes to the trauma cast on British society by the First World War. As Edwards writes of members of the Detection Club, but which might be applied to all producers of detective fiction in the period more generally:

Nobody can understand the Detection Club without understanding how the war affected its members. Shadows cast by the conflict darkened [Dorothy L.] Sayers' life with Mac [Fleming], and the lives of most of her colleagues. To his dying day, [Anthony] Berkeley suffered from the effects of the Germans' use of chemical weapons of mass destruction. Ronald Gorell and Henry Wade were wounded in action, as were Agatha Christie's brother and Gorell's.⁴⁶

Thus, using Christie's fiction to make an argument about the postwar popularity of detective fiction more generally, Plain advocates that

⁴⁵ Curtis, 'Queens of Crime', *Return to Black Beech*, p. 48.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *The Golden Age of Murder*, p. 192.

[i]n the aftermath of the First World War, British society was unable or unwilling to engage with the all too familiar realities of death and destruction. [...] The dismembered bodies of the battlefield become the tidily reassembled corpses of Christie's fiction. There is a transition from fragmentation to wholeness that replicates a wider social need for the reinstatement of the rituals of death. [...] In the excess of death that characterises a world at war, the individual corpse is obliterated; it becomes impossible to mourn for each and every loss. But in detective fiction the reader enters a fantastical world in which the meticulous investigation of a single death is not only possible, but central to the narrative.⁴⁷

Thus, as Plain suggests, the appeal of the whodunit narrative in the period is that it provides the reader with an individual, 'grieveable' body as a replacement for the 'ungrievable' and traumatic mass-slaughter that characterised the preceding era of global conflict.

However, although the popularity of detective fiction during the middle decades of the twentieth century is significant in terms of historical context, as previously stated, this thesis is by no means concerned with reading Christie's work exclusively within the developmental trajectory of the detection genre, or solely in terms of the genre's acknowledged conventions. Instead, this thesis situates itself on the critical path begun by Nicholas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns' incisive but relatively neglected article, 'Agatha Christie: Modern and Modernist', in Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer's 1990 edited collection, *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory*, but significantly concretised by Alison Light's authoritative study of Christie in her well-known 1991 book, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. In their essay, Birns and Boe Birns suggest that Christie's flatness of characterisation and her 'emphasis on the "staged" quality of reality' links her work with that of her highbrow contemporaries,

⁴⁷ Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, p. 34.

including W.B. Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, and Wyndham Lewis,⁴⁸ ultimately making the case that Christie ought to be understood 'as not only chronologically modern, but as aesthetically modernist'.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, recognising that although the 'literary establishment [...] has always given "the popular" the short shrift [...] [t]here is something about Agatha Christie, however, which seems to mark her out for the especially cold shoulder',⁵⁰ Alison Light's study has been influential in dismantling the received view of Christie as a 'producer of harmless drivel' - an author whose bland and uncomplicated genre fiction, which, in its mindless reflection of (rather than resistance to) the various social injustices of its time, makes her unworthy of any sustained academic attention.⁵¹ The now eminent argument put forward by Light is that Christie's fiction ought to be recuperated within a canon of Modernist literature: that Christie's writing is animated by a discernible 'modernist spirit' and that the author is 'an iconoclast whose monitoring of the plots of family life aims to upset the Victorian image of home, sweet home'.⁵² Whilst they might not share Light's concern with a Modernist-revaluation of Christie, it nevertheless should be noted that her call for scholars to finally consider Christie as a formidable, worthwhile twentieth-century literary figure is, to a certain extent, responsible for the recent significant contributions to the study of Christie's fiction which have followed. All with their own particular emphases and areas of interest, this includes works such as Susan Rowland's earlier cited comparative study, *From*

⁴⁸ Nicholas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns, 'Agatha Christie: Modern and Modernist', in Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (eds), *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1990), pp. 123-24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁵⁰ Light, *Forever England*, pp. 63-64.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell, Plain's aforementioned discussion of corporeal issues in Christie's fiction in her *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction*, Angela Devas' comparison between Christie's original Miss Marple novel, the 1960s Margaret Rutherford adaptation, and the 1980s Joan Hickson adaptation in her *Feminist Media Studies* article, 'Murder, Mass Culture, and the Feminine: A View from the 4.50 From Paddington' (2002), and Kathy Mezei's *Journal of Modern Literature* article on narrative ambiguity and illusion in Christie, E.H. Young and Ivy Compton-Burnett, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll'.

However, whilst Light's challenge to the false image of 'cosy', conservative Christie is a critical act to which this thesis, like the work of those scholars cited above, is very much indebted, her suggestion that the best way of doing such is to situate Christie as in-dialogue with literary Modernism is one which, I argue, is now due for reconsideration. In this sense, my argument sits at the meeting point between the direction in which Light has taken criticism on Christie's work, and the strand of argument begun in John Ritchie's 1972 journal article 'Agatha Christie's England, 1918-39: Sickness in the Heart and Sickness in Society as Seen in the Detective Thriller', upon which this thesis interests itself, and builds significantly upon. Traditionally, when Christie's nineteenth-century inheritance has been talked about, it has been more often than not in terms of the somewhat superficial comparison that can be made between her Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings as an updated version of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson pairing.⁵³ Within his article, Ritchie advances a different argument: that Christie's twentieth-century detective fictions 'can further be seen as having a continuity with traditional English

⁵³ See, for example, Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), pp. 21-22.

domestic novels, the works of Mrs. Henry Wood, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Beatrice Harraden, Elizabeth Lynn Linton and Elizabeth Gaskell'.⁵⁴ He further suggests that '[i]t might well be worth considering that, although World War I marked a real break with the Victorian Age in so many ways, it did not constitute a watershed with these forms of literature'.⁵⁵ Ritchie's observation thus underpins my argument that Christie's use of the Gothic within her twentieth-century writing is, in many ways, indebted to particular recognisable strains of Victorian literary culture. Indeed, chapter four of this thesis is concerned with the influence of, and Christie's direct engagement with, the works of the Victorian sensation novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In terms of thinking not only about Christie's ostensible twentieth-century context, but about her possible *prior* contexts, more recently, but in a similar vein is Matthew Beaumont's 2009 article 'Cutting Up the Corpse: Agatha Christie, Max Ernst, and Neo-Victorianism in the 1930s', which stands as an important (though problematic) work of Christie criticism for at least two reasons. A comparison between Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and Ernst's collage novel of the same year, *Une Semaine de bonté*, Beaumont openly contests Light's call for Christie's recuperation with a modernist canon, even labelling Light's characterisation of Christie as a modernist iconoclast as 'an exaggerated claim'.⁵⁶ Thus, this thesis extends the work begun in Beaumont's piece in the sense that it too aims to problematise (though not to simply rebuke) Light's reading of Christie's work. The other point of major significance embodied by Beaumont's

⁵⁴ John Ritchie, 'Agatha Christie's England, 1918-39: Sickness in the Heart and Sickness in Society as Seen in the Detective Thriller', *Australian National University Historical Journal* 9 (December 1972), p. 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Matthew Beaumont, 'Cutting Up the Corpse: Agatha Christie, Max Ernst, and Neo-Victorianism in the 1930s', *Lit: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 20, 1-2 (2009), p. 13.

article is his explicit identification of Christie's work as 'neo-Victorian': he is, to my knowledge, the first and only critic to explicitly do so. Of course, such identification of Christie as 'neo-Victorian' is both problematic and to a great degree questionable given the most readily accepted definitions of the term. The general consensus among literary scholars is that neo-Victorian fiction is fiction produced in a later period but *set* (either fully or predominantly) within the years of Victoria's reign, further characterised by its use of self-reflexive, metafictional narrative techniques and its broadly post-modern skepticism about the possibility of any historical 'truth',⁵⁷ and, as Dana Shiller suggests, 'motivated by an essentially revisionist impulse to reconstruct the [Victorian] past by questioning the certitude of our historical knowledge'.⁵⁸ Beaumont's argument that Christie's fiction more generally, and *The Murder on the Orient Express* in particular, displays an invested interest in the British culture of the previous century is one that I find convincing, and is an argument that this thesis significantly develops upon - particularly chapters four and five, in which I focus on Christie's re-processings of particular works of nineteenth-century Gothic. However, with its overt present day setting (the early 1930s) lack the overtly revisionist inclination that critics such as Shiller posit as crucial to the genre, his identification of *The Murder on the Orient Express* as a work of neo-

⁵⁷ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn insist upon neo-Victorian fiction needing to display textual self-reflexivity/self-consciousness in addition to a Victorian chronologic setting, arguing that it 'is [the] "self-consciousness" about our own subject positions that we [...] see at the heart of what neo-Victorianism in its more defined, theorized, conceptualized, and aesthetically developed form offers to readers. This is what distinguishes contemporary and filmic neo-Victorian culture from other aspects of contemporary culture which embrace historical settings but do not involve themselves to such a high degree in the self-analytic drive that accompanies "neo-Victorianism"'. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 5.

⁵⁸ Dana Shiller, 'The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel', *Studies in the Novel* 29, 4 (Winter 1997), p. 451. The necessity of a Victorian temporal setting in making a novel 'neo-Victorian' is further argued by Kate Mitchell who writes that neo-Victorian fictions 'remember the period not only in the usual sense, of recollecting it, but also in the sense that they re-embodiment, that is, re-member, or reconstruct it'. Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 7.

Victorian fiction is, I would argue, stretching the term beyond its widely accepted limits.

Another significant set of debates to which this thesis is in dialogue with, and which has, to a great degree, made this thesis possible is the consolidation of critical work surrounding the concept of ‘middlebrow’ fiction (of which ‘Golden Age’ detection is generally understood to be a sub-genre of).⁵⁹ Indeed, as Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch suggest, the term ‘middlebrow’, in relation to literary culture, has recently been privileged to ‘much energetic debate in academia and the broader public sphere’.⁶⁰ First coined in the 1920s as a neologism in relation to the more historically and culturally established term, highbrow,⁶¹ the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the often pejorative term ‘middlebrow’ is given as thus:

adj. [...] Of a person: only moderately intellectual; of average or limited cultural interests (sometimes with the implication of pretensions to more than this). Of an artistic work, etc.: of limited intellectual or cultural value; demanding or involving only a moderate degree of intellectual application, typically as a result of not deviating from convention.⁶²

‘Middlebrow’ fiction is thus most commonly conceived of as that which is designed as suitable reading material for a person of moderate intelligence; fiction that finds itself in the disadvantageous hinterland between high(brow)

⁵⁹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 12. Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 10.

⁶⁰ Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch. ‘Introduction: The Middlebrow - Within or Without Modernism’, *Modernist Cultures* 6, 1 (2011), p. 1.

⁶¹ See, Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, p. 1. My placing of ‘middlebrow’ in quotation marks throughout this thesis owes to its origin as a neologism.

⁶² Anon., ‘middlebrow, n. and adj.’ *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.warwick.ac.uk/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/252048>> [accessed 4 April 2016] (para. 2 of 2).

art and mass-produced, mass-consumed trash. As Sullivan and Blanch otherwise describe it, ‘Middlebrow practitioners and audiences during “the battle of the brows” repeatedly faced three main charges: that their allegedly second-rate entertaining tastes usurped the power of the highbrow, that their miscegenation of high and lowbrow cultures lacked substance or distinction, and that they succumbed to aesthetic ideals deemed necessary for sales or popularity by publishers or agents.’⁶³ This is certainly the sense in which the term is used by Virginia Woolf in her (in)famous essay on the subject of the ‘middlebrow’. Published in essay form in *The Death of the Moth* (1942), but originally a letter written, though never sent, to the editor of *The New Statesman* in 1932, after the paper neglected to employ the term ‘highbrow’ in a review of one of her recently published books, Woolf concludes her correspondence by thanking the paper’s

reviewer for his very courteous and interesting review[.] [However,] I ask nothing better than that all reviewers, for ever, and everywhere, should call me a ‘highbrow’. I will do my best to oblige them. [...] [But] if any man, woman, dog, cat, or half-crushed worm dares call me ‘middlebrow’ I will take my pen and stab him, dead.⁶⁴

The letter in its entirety, but particularly this ending, is marked by a trademark Woolfian irony, employing an outlandish and overblown tone of sarcasm, which inadvertently draws attention to what I would suggest to be the extreme earnestness of Woolf’s statement:⁶⁵ her genuine outrage at not having the prestigious descriptor of ‘highbrow’ used in relation to her writing. Woolf’s

⁶³ Sullivan and Blanch, ‘Introduction: The Middlebrow - Within or Without Modernism’, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, ‘Middlebrow’ (1932), in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), p. 119.

⁶⁵ Of course, far more overtly and unambiguously caustic is Q.D. Leavis’ tirade against ‘middlebrow’ culture both in her *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) and elsewhere. For example, in a review of the *Weather in the Streets* (1936) for *Scrutiny*, Leavis condemns Rosamond Lehman for being ‘the pseudo-sophisticated would-be cynical actually sentimental emotionally vulgarising middlebrow novelist who goes down so well nowadays with the educated public.’ Q.D. Leavis, cited in Selina Hastings, *Rosamond Lehmann* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), p. 168.

main objection to the producers and consumers of 'middlebrow' literary culture is that they lack what she posits as the genuine artistic integrity of either the highbrow or the lowbrow: 'They are betwixt and between. [...] The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, [...] mixed, indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige'.⁶⁶ However, what Woolf's letter moreover illuminates is the ways in which criticism on 'middlebrow' fiction and culture has been shaped by critiques of class and theories of ideology: in other words the ways in which the stratification of 'high-' 'low-' and 'middlebrow' readers and reading has been traditionally mapped onto the British class system. As Woolf makes clear, highbrows are very much the upper-middle-class - the social and cultural elite, with high levels of literacy and education - whilst lowbrows are positioned very firmly as the working classes. Woolf writes that 'I love lowbrows; I study them; I always sit next to the conductor in an omnibus and try to get him to tell me what it is like - being a conductor. [...] I always try to know what it is like - being a conductor, being a woman with ten children and thirty-five shillings a week [...] being a miner, being a cook, being a prostitute'.⁶⁷ Thus, the object of her derision - 'middlebrow' culture - is very much the culture of the middle-middle and lower-middle-classes. Indeed, as Nicola Humble has convincingly argued 'middlebrow' literature 'is also very much the literature of the middle classes, paying a meticulous attention to their shifting desires and self-images, mapping their swings of fortune at this most volatile stage in their history. As a result, it

⁶⁶ Woolf, 'Middlebrow', *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, p. 115.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

not only reflected shifts in middle-class opinion and ideology, but also inspired them'.⁶⁸

Thus, whilst attempts to critically reassess the value of popular writers (particularly women writers) of the interwar period whose works can be described as 'middlebrow', and who have habitually been locked outside the canon of literary Modernism, is evident in both Nicola Beauman's *A Very Great Profession: The Women's Novel 1914-39*, through Light's discussions of Compton-Burnett, Christie, Jan Struther, and Daphne du Maurier in *Forever England*,⁶⁹ it is really with Humble's groundbreaking *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (2001), that the drive towards the academic study of 'middlebrow' fiction has been properly legitimated. Of particular importance is Humble's underscoring of the ways in which 'middlebrow' fiction after World War I is implicated in the continual re-calibration of middle-class social identities. She suggests that, '[w]hile it is true that virtually all the literature of the time was intensely class-conscious, the [...] middlebrow was peculiarly devoted to the anatomizing of middle-classness'.⁷⁰ Humble offers a historical reason underlying the 'middlebrow' fiction's intense preoccupation with its own middle-classness, citing René Cutforth to make the case that

[o]ne reason that the middle class was subject to such intense analysis [...] was because it was becoming increasingly prominent in both social and political terms. The Edwardian aristocracy had been severely weakened by the First World War, with many of its sons killed, and its fortunes reduced by death duties and increased taxation. [...] By the 1930s with 'the upper class more or less relegated, like Red Indians, to

⁶⁸ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Indeed, it is Light who in fact crowns Agatha Christie as 'queen of the "middlebrows"'. Light, *Forever England*, p. 75.

⁷⁰ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 59.

reservations (mostly in Scotland)', public life, manners, and codes of conduct had passed largely into the hands of the middle class.⁷¹

Of course, as Raphael Samuel suggests, historically, but especially during the interwar period, middle-class identity is by no means a stable or fixed identity, but rather fluid, changeable, and heavily reliant upon internalised differentiation to both its own internal gradations and the class identities beyond its conceivable remit: 'The middle class between the wars was less a class than a society of orders each with its own exclusion rituals and status ideology, jealously guarding a more or less self-contained existence, and exquisitely graded according to a hierarchy of ranks.'⁷² However, Humble argues that it is precisely *for* such reasons that the novels she examines - such as Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931), E.F. Benson's *Mapp and Lucia* (1934), and Diane Tutton's *Guard Your Daughters* (1953), express such keen occupation with the problematic negotiation between upper-middle-, middle-middle-, and lower-middle-class identification: 'precisely because of the sprawling complexity of middle-class identities in the period that contemporaries retained a firm attachment to the binary model of middle class split into upper and lower sections. In an era in which almost every member of the middle class experienced grave anxieties about their class status, there was something deeply seductive in a mode that allowed you to confirm your own status by ruling others out.'⁷³

Since the publication of Humble's bible of 'middlebrow' studies, and especially since the founding in 2008 of the 'Middlebrow Research Network' -

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61; René Cutforth, *Later Than We Thought: A Portrait of the Thirties* (London: David & Charles, 1976), p. 37.

⁷² Raphael Samuel, 'Middle Class Between the Wars: Part One', *New Socialist* (Jan/Feb 1983), p. 30.

⁷³ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 84.

co-hosted by the University of Strathclyde and Sheffield Hallam University, and set-up with funding from the Arts & Humanities Research Council - many critics have seen that it is more than acceptable to write about the mid-twentieth century popular fictions that have evidently given them a lot of personal reading pleasure in a way that does not diminish their credibility as serious literary scholars,⁷⁴ and a strong corpus of contemporary scholarship on the subject of the 'middlebrow' has been produced.⁷⁵ Edited collections such as Erica Brown and Mary Grover's *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* (2011) and Kate Macdonald's *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read* (2011), as well as monographs devoted to individual authors who might be read as 'middlebrow', such as Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei's *Domestic Modernism, The Interwar Novel, and E.H. Young* (2009), Ina Habermann's *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow: Priestley, du Maurier and the Symbolic Form of Englishness* (2010), Erica Brown's *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor* (2013), and Jaime Harker's *Middlebrow Queer: Christopher Isherwood in America* (2013), have been instrumental in offering richer, more illuminating accounts of British and American literary production in the early to middle years of the twentieth century - accounts which are not circumscribed by the limits of canonical Modernism. By prioritising the fiction that was actually consumed by the 'average' reader of the time, rather than the highbrow fictions read by the

⁷⁴ Faye Hammill reflects upon the problems and possibilities arisen from the anxiety that an evident love for, and scholarly interest in, the products of 'middlebrow' culture may affect the way in which a scholar's 'intelligence' is perceived by the immediate colleges and the wider academic community. See, Faye Hammill, 'Afterward', in Erica Brown and Mary Grover (eds), *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 231.

⁷⁵ The homepage of the 'Middlebrow Research Network' can be found at <www.middlebrow-network.com> [assessed 14 August 2015]; A fuller account of the network's provenance is given in Hammill, *Afterward*, *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, pp. 231-32.

literary elite, these studies, as Humble puts it in a later piece, 'indicate an increasing critical awareness that there is something wrong with the way in which we have [traditionally] mapped the literary field of the first half of the twentieth century'.⁷⁶

Thus, there is a set of recent critical debates in place which allow this thesis to consider Christie as a serious author, without either reading her simply in terms of the detective genre or implanting her into a canon determined by an exclusively modernist criterion of literary value. However, despite the author's extraordinary and unrivalled popularity, Christie actually features as somewhat of a minor figure of the account given by Humble in *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, in which there are only a few tangential readings of a small number of Christie texts. In relation to the thematic concerns of her chapters, Humble's emphasis is far more on the fictions of Ferguson, Stella Gibbons, and E.M. Delafield. To a certain degree, this thesis acts as a reproof to this neglect, placing Christie right at the very centre of the 'middlebrow' literary culture leading up to, and following on from the Second World War. Lastly, the final set of critical developments to which this thesis is indebted are the recent reconsiderations of particular 'middlebrow' authors use of the Gothic, principally Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik's monograph *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (1998), their discussions of Gibbons and Barbara Comyns in their later *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (2005). However, as Horner and Zlosnik are not particularly concerned with the status of the writers as 'middlebrow', my approach dissents from the previous scholarship in that part of what I am investigating in this thesis is what I see as the inherent affinities and connections between the 'middlebrow' novel and the older literary

⁷⁶ Nicola Humble, 'Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading', *Modernist Cultures* 6, 1 (2011), p. 42.

tradition of the Gothic. In a sense, what I am ultimately doing in this thesis is using the fiction of Agatha Christie as a case study for the larger literary phenomena that I would term “‘middlebrow” Gothic’.

In terms of the way in which this thesis is structured, there are five chapters, which correspond to the five ‘types’ of Gothic that I argue to be at work in Christie’s fiction within the forty year period between 1930 and 1970. Across those chapters, seven Agatha Christie novels are analysed in extended detail - *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), *Murder is Easy* (1939), *The Moving Finger* (1943), *A Murder is Announced* (1950), *Dead Man’s Folly* (1956), *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968), and *Sleeping Murder* - and relevant reference is made to a wider selection of Christie’s fictional and dramatic output. Chapter one of this thesis introduces the idea of Christie’s Gothic households through close reading of the final Miss Marple novel, *Sleeping Murder*, which was published in 1976 after Christie’s death, but widely acknowledged to have been authored within the chronological scope examined by this thesis (the exact dating of the book is an issue explored within the chapter). After suggesting that an intense focus on houses and families provide one of the foremost intersections between ‘middlebrow’ fiction and the Gothic, I argue that Christie’s Gothicisation of both the novel’s emphatically ‘uncanny’ property - Hillside - and of the hugely dysfunctional family therein - the Hallidays - ought to be read within the context of the espousal of a return to domesticity that takes place after the close of the First World War. This chapter also lays foundations for those that follow in terms of discussing the mass-cultural dissemination of Freudian ideas pertaining to the family, and the refraction of this popularised, ‘watered-down’ psychoanalysis within women’s ‘middlebrow’ fiction of the mid-twentieth century. I end the chapter by making a case for the publication history of this

particular novel being intrinsically linked to its Gothic content and suggesting that a direct relationship exists between such mode of publication and the Gothic experience of the domestic sphere depicted within the pages of the novel.

Taking its cue from the re-evaluation of Christie's village settings in Ritchie's 'Agatha Christie's England' and Light's *Forever England*, chapter two interrogates the ways in which, contrary to the nostalgic and 'cosy' re-imagining of Christie's fictional villages within the popular imagination, the Christean village may be interpreted as a fundamentally Gothic space. Carrying the thread of discussion through from chapter one, I will argue that the Gothic's habitual exposition of the brutality and violence concealed with the would-be sanctuary of the middle-class home, can be escalated for the purpose of thinking about the larger spatial framework of the parochial country village. I make the case that within the novels *The Murder at the Vicarage*, *Murder is Easy*, and *The Moving Finger*, outdoor spaces do not offer the potential release from captivity that is set out in more traditional Gothic paradigms. Instead, the exterior landscapes surrounding and connecting individual dwellings within these novels work as a continuation of domestic interiority, and can thus act as able and even willing accomplices in the Gothic transformation of 'home' into 'prison'. By firstly examining the intensely invasive panoptic surveillance present within these villages, the outward extension of the private 'family romance' into more public cruelty and humiliation, and, secondly, commenting on the ways in which Christie's villages produce a psychogeographic loss of distinction between subject and space, ultimately, this chapter suggests that far from creating idyllic exemplars of English rurality, Christie's novels ultimately work to debunk the *beau ideal* of the English country village.

The discussion of Christie's village settings is continued in chapter three, which focuses specifically upon the village of Wynchwood-under-Ashe in *Murder is Easy*. I argue that, through its portrayal of the homosexual antiques shop owner, Mr Ellsworthy, it is within this novel that Christie's work most resolutely enters into the genre of Gay Gothic. With grotesque, oddly-coloured hands, that the reader is encouraged to see as somehow 'non-human', Mr Ellsworthy's divergence from 'natural' modes of male sexuality is, I suggest, refracted through his ghastly hands that Christie marks out as a site of repellent Gothic monstrosity. From this emphasis on Mr Ellsworthy's physiognomy, I then proceed to discuss the sexual geography that is established and considerably Gothicised within *Murder is Easy*, and propose that Christie's locating of a character such as Mr Ellsworthy in the provincial Wynchwood is grounded in a specific set of anxieties regarding male homosexuality that were permeating interwar British society at large: that Mr Ellsworthy might be understood as fleeing an intensification in strategic police activity that sought to clamp down on illegal homosexual intercourse in more urban areas. However, rather than simply reproducing the sexual geography in which the urban city (and specifically London) function as the looming and perpetually threatening double of the novel's countryside setting - serving as the principal site of everything 'queer' and non-heteronormative - *Murder is Easy* in fact subverts this geography, as the bizarre truths belying the Wynchwood murders is brought to light.

In chapter four I continue to demonstrate the studied attention that Christie, when required, pays towards the sociology and geography of her characters through my analysis of her portrayal of Mitzi: a refugee from Nazi persecution employed as a housekeeper at Little Paddocks in *A Murder is*

Announced. My argument in this chapter is that Christie employs the trope of the 'displaced person' (an 'uncanny' fragment of an inconceivable, and therefore frightening historical whole) as a way through which the increasingly Gothic reality of life lived within postwar English society may be articulated. However, in addition to my focus on housekeeper Mitzi, in terms of Christie's establishing of the trope of human displacement as a conspicuous feature of a heavily Gothicised postwar world, in the second half of this chapter I go on to make the case that Christie's novel can and should be understood as her deliberate attempt to re-imagine Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1862 work of Gothic sensation, *Lady Audley's Secret*. My argument is that, although Braddon's is a novel so paradigmatic of the culture and social anxieties of the 1860s, Christie nevertheless seems to find Braddon's breed of Victorian Gothic as both oddly admissible and significantly useful as an interlocutor at her own particularly fraught historical moment. By reading the dialogue between *A Murder is Announced* and *Lady Audley's Secret* in relation to the social context produced by the fallout from the Second World War, elements of both novels that either have not been seen in existing criticism, or that have been acknowledged but simply palmed off as being generically 'odd', are re-situated and re-evaluated in a way which underscores their vital importance. Specifically, picking up on the strands of my argument begun in chapter two, I underscore the importance of the novels' use and Gothicisation of the villages within which they are set, and the significance of the ways in which characters negotiate these rural village settings.

The final chapter of this thesis employs a very similar methodology to that of the previous, but leaves Miss Marple behind to make way for readings of the 1956 Poirot novel, *Dead Man's Folly*, and the 1968 Tommy and Tuppence

Beresford caper, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, as case studies of Christie's turn, near the end of her career, towards the genre of Brontë Gothic. I examine these novels within the context of the reinvigorated cultural, literary and biographical fascination with the Brontë sisters that emerges after the end of the First World War. My argument is that *Dead Man's Folly* and *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* re-appropriate nineteenth-century fiction to suggest that an understanding of the Victorian past is imperative to an understanding of their own contemporary moments. I suggest that both novels are self-consciously in dialogue with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), with *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* incorporating a Jane-Edward-Bertha story-arc as a warning that overly-sentimentalised images of Victorian gender need to be handled with caution. I then move onto *Dead Man's Folly* and argue that the novel is both a distinct forebear to the (postcolonial, feminist) project that Jean Rhys would later strive to achieve in her *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and part of a larger tradition of women's fiction that has re-assimilated the character of Bertha Mason within a new fictional narrative: that, a whole decade prior to the literary excitement caused by the publication of Rhys' novel, Christie has also found in Brontë's novel those elements that irritated Rhys so, and chosen to use her fiction to do something about it. Chapter five will conclude with a final statement on why, in light of recent critical developments, Light's reading of Christie's fiction is owed reconsideration, and how this thesis has contributed to that reconsideration

Chapter One - Myths of Origin: Agatha Christie's Gothic Households

All family secrets isolate those who share them. Secrets which derive from the play of fantasy, from rivalry, hatred and desire may be unconsciously transmitted across time and generation, achieving the status of a myth. Real secrets, real events that are concealed by some members of a family, may be matters of legal impropriety and thus connected to the social world outside the household; but both such secrets can also produce myths of origin that serve both to reveal and conceal what is actually hidden from view.

- Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986).¹

... the crack in the tea-cup opens | A lane to the land of the dead.

- W.H. Auden, 'As I walked out one evening' (1937).²

The Crack in the Teacup: The Houses and Families of 'Middlebrow' Gothic

'You *have* to be concerned with a house. With where people *live*',³ Agatha Christie tells Francis Wyndham in a 1966 interview for *The Sunday Times*. Not only is Christie's statement true in terms of the formulaic requirements in the kind of detective fiction she was known for producing - the need for a relatively 'closed' architectural space as a means of limiting the potentially endless number of possible murderers - but her words ring out with particular resonance when thinking of the twentieth-century 'middlebrow' novel (of which 'Golden Age' detection is a sub-genre) more generally. With this seeming concern over the ambivalent status of the house in mind, this chapter introduces the idea of

¹ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986; London: Virago, 2005), pp. 65-66.

² W.H. Auden, 'As I walked out one evening' (1937), *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 62. (60-62).

³ Agatha Christie, cited in Francis Wyndham, 'The Algebra of Agatha Christie (Interview)', *The Sunday Times* (27 February 1966), p. 25.

Christie's Gothic households (by which I mean the Gothicisation of both physical properties and the families therein) employing Christie's posthumously published *Sleeping Murder: Miss Marple's Last Case* (1976) as a case study. Nicola Humble suggests that 'the question of the ways in which the home is imagined is a crucial one for the middlebrow women's novel[.] [...] Repeatedly, in such novels from the 1920s to the 1950s, domestic space is described in obsessive, coded detail'.⁴ Owing to such seeming commitment to the representation of family life, and to the recitation of the domestic interior within its pages, I would add to Humble's observation by suggesting that portrayals of the home provide one of the foremost intersections between the 'middlebrow' novel of the twentieth century and the more archaic literary tradition of the Gothic. Following the disturbance to and, in some sense, suspension of family life caused by the First World War, notions of 'home' are, understandably, put under intense scrutiny and made a topic of considerable public discussion from the 1920s onwards. In contemporary historical accounts of the early-twentieth century, there has been contestation of what was previously a generally accepted idea that the rapid depletion of the male population coupled with women's adoption of more traditionally masculine roles created new, if temporary, freedoms for women: freedoms which allowed for female agency and identity *outside* the domestic sphere. The English novelist W.L. (Walter Lincoln) George sympathetically summed up the plight facing many women following the close of the First World War by suggesting that 'home is the organisation that changes the slowest. Kings rise and fall, religions wax and wane, but boiled bacon is still the same'.⁵ Less pithily, though with deeper historical

⁴ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 108.

⁵ W.L. George, 'What is a Home?' (1923), in Brian Braithwaite and Noëlle Walsh (eds), *Home Sweet Home: The Best of Good Housekeeping, 1922-1939* (London: Ebury Press, 1992), p. 36.

insight, Deirdre Beddoe proposes that for women in the interwar years 'winning the vote had not changed the world or heralded in a brave new era of sex equality [...] The reality is that socially and economically the lives of a vast majority of women remained much the same as before the First War. A woman's place was in the home'.⁶ Furthermore, as Cynthia L. White suggests, whilst many women were very much 'ready to consolidate' the feminist advances made during the period of global conflict, 'when the men came back from war they expected their womenfolk to resume their "rightful" position in society and to devote themselves to bringing to life the "dream of home" which had sustained them in the trenches'.⁷ Thus, in light of both the expectations placed on women from within the familial sphere and the attempts at the level of government - in the form of National Insurance Acts and workings of the dole office - to coax women back from public and into domestic spaces,⁸ it is unsurprising that this period sees the emergence of what Humble refers to as 'the new cult of the domestic'.⁹ This enthusiastic espousal of a return to domesticity was manifested in popular journalism, government propaganda, and advertisements which, as Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei put it, were implicated in a deliberate and 'facile glamorisation of the housewife, domestic tasks and new household equipment'.¹⁰ However, as a good number of historical and literary

⁶ Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home & Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 7.

⁷ Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines, 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), pp. 95-96.

⁸ See, Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, pp. 3-4.

⁹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 129.

¹⁰ Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, The Interwar Novel, and E.H. Young* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 6.

commentators have noted,¹¹ the most conspicuous indicator of the renewed valorisation of the home in the period of cultural retrenchment following the end of the war was the explosive and unrivalled proliferation of middle- and lower-middle-class women's magazines, many of which, even through their very titles, divulge a domestic predisposition. To give only a handful of examples, this includes the establishing of the monthly periodicals *Good Housekeeping* in 1922, *Woman and Home* in 1926, *Women's Journal* in 1927 (which later became *Women's Home Journal*), *My Home* and *Modern Home* in 1928, and *Wife and Home* in 1929, as well as the weekly publications *Woman's Own* in 1932, *Women's Illustrated* in 1936, and *Woman* in 1937.¹² The message of such publications was more or less unanimous: 'a woman's place is in the home and any normal woman should find cooking, shopping, sewing and mothering of all-absorbent interest [...] [and] accept domestic responsibility as an entirely worthwhile occupation'.¹³

The emergent cultural and commercial centrality of the domestic within mainstream middle-class English culture is strongly echoed in the works produced by 'middlebrow' women writers of the interwar period, regardless of whether such works are complicit with the views being propagated, or whether they resist such ideologies (either abstrusely or emphatically). As such, the frequency with which novels of this period situate the home, and, more specifically, the way in which female inhabitants experience their domestic surroundings as their central concern is highly conspicuous. As Briganti and Mezei identify, within numerous

¹¹ See, *Ibid.*, p. 4; White, *Women's Magazines, 1693-1968*, pp. 93-119; Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 124; Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 188; Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel, 1914-39* (1983; London: Virago, 1995), p. 109; Alison Ravetz and Richard Turkington, *The Place of Home: English Domestic Environments 1914-2000* (Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 1995), p. 8.

¹² White, *Women's Magazines, 1693-1968*, pp. 95-96.

¹³ Beauman, *A Very Great Profession*, p. 109.

works of 'middlebrow' fiction, '[b]y means of studied attention to the everyday and the domestic, customary relationships between background (the home as setting) and foreground (the adventures of the heroes and heroines) [...] are reversed'.¹⁴ It is certainly true that many 'middlebrow' novels of this period offer to their reader a primary architectural location whose presence, for good or for ill, dominates the narrative in such a way that these dwellings appear to have a personality that is irrespective of its inhabitants. Two of the most well-known examples are the Cornish seaside estate of Manderley in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and the rickety relic of Bellmotte Castle in Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* (1949). However, I would add to Briganti and Mezei's observation by suggesting that this reversal of focus between people and locale - between subject and space - which seems so indicative of mid-twentieth century 'middlebrow' domestic narratives is, in fact, the established jurisdiction of the Gothic novel. Referring to Horace Walpole's seminal *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Richard Davenport-Hines suggests that 'the hero of his novel is the castle itself [...] The battlements, cloisters, galleries, dungeons, underground vaults and trapdoors of Otranto provide the heroics'.¹⁵ This is in the sense that, within the novel, the actions of both the villainous patriarch, Manfred, and the supposed hero of the tale, Theodore, are rendered hugely ineffectual by the formidable power of the castle as a domestic structure itself: that these characters appear both weak and supine when viewed within the context of the castle as setting. I would also propose that, although she herself does not explicate the connection, the relationship between twentieth-century 'middlebrow' fiction and the Gothic is further accentuated by Humble's observation

¹⁴ Briganti and Mezei, *Domestic Modernism*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Richard Davenport-Hines, *Gothic: 400 Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), p. 117.

that representative of 'middlebrow' literary culture is its portrayal of 'the family as a profoundly eccentric organization': that

repeatedly, a particular sort of family is foregrounded and emerges in the spotlight, as a bizarre institution - idiosyncratic rather than normative; a place where social values are challenged rather than incubated. The family becomes a fundamentally ambivalent space, functioning for its (largely female) members as a source of both creative energies and destructive neuroses, simultaneously a haven and a cage.¹⁶

As I have already indicated in the introduction to this thesis, Gothic fiction habitually transfigures the domestic home from a sanctuaried interior into a raucous site of buried secrets, maltreatment, and paranoia. With this in mind, Humble's observation thus bears striking similarity to the argument which insists upon the Gothic's underscoring of the possibility that the 'home [...] could be a prison as well as a refuge', as Fred Botting succinctly puts it.¹⁷ Take, for example, Ivy Compton-Burnett's brutal domestic narrative, *A House and Its Head* (1935), in which the nineteen-year-old Sibyl Edgeworth orchestrates the gassing of the baby who is supposedly her half-brother, but who is actually at the same time both her first-cousin-once-removed *and* step-brother. Commenting on this novel, Francine Prose makes a critical appraisal which, I would argue, elucidates the Gothic-inflection of a whole range of women's 'middlebrow' fiction. She argues that the novel's portrayal of day-to-day domestic life serves to illuminate 'the fear of being humiliated, bullied, silenced, and ignored, the fear of eternal incarceration in the prison of the family'.¹⁸

As such, with a respectful nod towards W.H. Auden's famous crack in the teacup image given at the start of this chapter, I would certainly contend that, as a

¹⁶ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, p. 149.

¹⁷ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (1996; Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 128.

¹⁸ Francine Prose, 'Afterward', in Ivy Compton-Burnett, *A House and Its Head* (1935; New York: The New York Review of Books, 2001), p. 286.

genre in and of itself, the 'middlebrow' novel seeks to expose cracks in the *maquillage* of complacent domesticity. Moreover, it is precisely through these fissures in the surface of the familial, that what I shall henceforth refer to as the 'family romance' is granted visibility. The term originates from Sigmund Freud's 1909 essay, 'Family Romances', in which he describes a particular imaginative feat that a child undertakes once he or she has begun 'to doubt the incomparable and unique quality' that they once attributed to their parents.¹⁹ Freud suggests that, as a consequence of this emerging dissatisfaction with their own parents, a child imagines that they are actually the biological offspring of a couple of aristocratic or royal standing, who has been either adopted or 'stolen' by their current, more plebeian guardians. Thus, in the original coinage of the term, the 'family romance' refers only to this act, which, to Freud's mind, is normal though unfortunate. However, it is the broader implications of this act that have supplied the term with its more modern meaning. Unsurprisingly, for Freud this act has sexual, thus incestuous, underpinnings: through calling into question the legitimacy of their place within the family, 'the young phantasy-builder can rid himself of his forbidden degree of kinship with one of his sisters if he finds himself sexually attracted by her'.²⁰ Moreover, although Freud does not articulate it directly within the essay itself, the implication of a child's fantasy of 'getting free of parents whom he now has a low opinion of [...] [by] replacing them by others, who [...] are of a higher social standing',²¹ is that the child's initial ambivalence subsequently breeds a much more potent sense of resentment, perhaps even escalating into abhorrence. For these reasons, the term 'family romance', especially within the framework of

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Family Romances' (1909), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume IX* (Trans. James Strachey) (1959; London: The Hogarth Press, 1975), p. 237.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 238-239.

literary (and particularly Gothic) fiction, has therefore come to connote exceptionally maladjusted or overwrought familial bonds.²² As Margot Gayle Backus puts it, the 'family romance' may be identified precisely as the 'representation of marginali[s]ed and unspeakable experiences within families'.²³ Thus, when I invoke the term 'family romance' what I am referring to are the buried feelings of unease and hostility, and the hidden forms of violence bubbling away under the brittle surface of outwardly normative domesticity: the submerged agitations and secreted acts which perpetually threaten to erupt and devastate any and all of the family relationships in their path.

In a 1945 essay that Christie was commissioned to write by the Ministry of Information for the purpose of championing English detective fiction abroad,²⁴ the author herself acknowledges that her fiction is concerned precisely with 'the interplay of character upon character, the deep smouldering resentments and dissatisfactions that do not always come to the surface but which suddenly explode into violence'.²⁵ Thus, given Christie's evident fascination with the dark undercurrents awash beneath middle-class family life, the question of whether or not the author was directly acquainted with the work of Freud and, if she was, what level of comprehension she possessed with regard to his theories, has been a

²² Consider, for the example, the difficulty earlier expressed in accurately detailing Sybil Edgeworth's relationship to her murder victim in Ivy Compton-Burnett's *A House and its Head*, thus suggesting just how extremely displaced, overwrought, and maladjusted relationships have become within the Edgeworth family.

²³ Margot Gayle Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 17.

²⁴ This essay has been recently repurposed as the introduction to HarperCollins 2012 re-issue to the 1933 detective novel *Ask a Policeman*, which was authored collaboratively by 'Detection Club' members Anthony Berkeley, Milward Kennedy, Gladys Mitchell, John Rhode, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Helen Simpson. Doubtlessly this was done with eye to increasing sales through having the words 'Agatha Christie' prominently plastered across the front cover.

²⁵ Agatha Christie, 'Preface: Detective Writers in England' (1945), in Anthony Berkeley, Milward Kennedy, Gladys Mitchell, John Rhode, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Helen Simpson, *Ask a Policeman* (1933; London: HarperCollins, 2012), pp. xix-xx.

matter of some debate amongst critics. At one end of the scale, we have those who maintain that Christie's engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis is nothing more than cosmetic, such as John Ritchie's exclamation that '[h]er characters talk about Freudian psychology without understanding enough to be disturbed by it'.²⁶ More recently, however, commentators including Merja Makinen and Dewi Llyr Evans have challenged this view. Evans proposes that Christie's 'novels and short fiction are heavily informed by the theory of the unconscious as explained in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) and *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1910). Rather than unproblematically reproducing these theories, Christie dramatises their wider implications for the communities depicted in her novels'.²⁷ However, as interesting as the debate might be, the conclusion I have come to is that the question over whether Christie was well-versed in Freudian psychoanalysis in its original, 'pure' form is ultimately neither here nor there. Regardless of whether she came into direct contact with his work or not, Freudian ideas pertaining to the family were circulating extensively within the cultural climate within which Christie began her writing career. Indeed, the years following the First World War saw the rapid expansion of acquaintance with Freud's psychological theories within more mainstream culture. Among a number of historical commentators, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge date the mass-cultural dissemination of Freudian psychoanalysis to early within the interwar period, noting that, soon after the close of the war, Freudianism 'filtered down into people's minds, through translations, interpretations, glosses, popularisations, and

²⁶ John Ritchie, 'Agatha Christie's England, 1918-39: Sickness in the Heart and Sickness in Society as Seen in the Detective Thriller', *Australian National University Historical Journal* 9, (December 1972) p. 3; Dewi Llyr Evans recites and comments upon a litany of similar claims by critics including Anna-Marie Taylor, Robert Barnard, and Alison Light in his essay "A drop of water from a stagnant pool": Agatha Christie's Parapractic Murders', *Crime Culture* (Summer 2007) <<http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/Articles-Summer07/Christie.html>> [accessed 26 July 2014] (para. 2, 3, 4 of 14).

²⁷ *Ibid.* (para. 1 of 14).

general loose discussion'.²⁸ Nicola Beauman cites the 1920 publication, *Psychoanalysis: a Brief Account of Freudian Theory* - which was authored by British psychoanalyst and one of the founding members of the 'British Psycho-Analytical Society' Barbara Low - as one of the earliest examples of a book that set out to demystify Freudian theories for a general (non-clinical) readership:²⁹ in essence, a 1920s version of 'Freud For Dummies'. Specifically within 'middlebrow' literary culture, Freudian psychoanalysis is, as Humble observes, frequently 'treated with a comic irony', with a highly bowdlerised 'Freudianism without Freud inform[ing] a great deal of middlebrow women's fiction between the wars'.³⁰ For example, in the opening chapter of Stella Gibbons' *Nightingale Wood* (1938), the reader is introduced to the unhappy Withers family and to the especially unhappy spinster-daughter, Tina. As the chapter progresses, we are alerted to the fact that '[a]fter reading a book on feminine psychology called *Selene's Daughters* [...] Tina had decided to face the facts about her own nature, however disgusting, nay, appalling, those facts might be (the book warned its readers that the truth about themselves may disgust, nay appal them); and one of the facts she had faced was that she did not love her family'.³¹ As the sardonic, mocking tone of the narrator makes clear, here we are clearly invited to have some fun at Tina's expense. In particular, the deliberate paralleling of the words used in the reporting of Tina's actions with the words used in the reporting of what is written inside the psychology manual,

²⁸ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (1940; Melbourne: Hutchinson & Co, 1985), p. 103. Also see, L.S. Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology, 1840-1940* (Frome and London: Butler & Tanner, 1964), p. 292, and T.O. Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: English History 1906-1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 98.

²⁹ Beauman, *A Very Great Profession*, p. 148.

³⁰ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 228. Humble's examples include E.M. Delafield's *The Way Things Are* (1927), Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931), Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), E.F. Benson's *Mapp and Lucia* (1935), and Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935).

³¹ Stella Gibbons, *Nightingale Wood* (1938; London: Penguin, 2009), p. 6.

points the finger of comic derision at the unquestioning ease with which Tina appears to have interpolated the diction of psychoanalysis into her own. However, not only is *Selene's Daughters* noticeably Freud-esque in content, but, as is made clear in a later portion of the novel when the book is revealed to be the work of a Viennese *lady* psychologist, it is intended as a more direct parody of Freud and his works. Concerned about her own strained relationship with her peevish father, Tina turns to her trusted tome in the presence of her sister-in-law, Viola:

Tina looked up the chapter on Fathers and Daughters in the book on feminine psychology, but the things it said [...] did not seem to have much bearing upon her case. What they had warned you against was getting too fond of your father and letting him get too fond of you. As there seemed small danger of this situation arising between Mr Wither and herself, Tina book put book down with a little sigh; and Viola picked it up.

‘Good lord,’ she said, with a pink face, after a pause.

‘What’ve you found?’ laughing.

‘I say - who write this rot?’ She glanced at the cover. ‘Doctor Irene Hartmüller. Oh, a *German*.’

‘Viennese. Quite young, and brilliantly clever.’

‘Well, I think it’s bosh,’ but she continued to turn the pages gingerly. ‘Why - I say! - good *lord*! What a mind the woman’s got! Just like a German.’³²

Because narrative focalisation oscillates back and forth between the two female protagonists throughout Gibbons’ novel, in the excerpt above, it is more difficult to say where precisely the reader’s identification is being encouraged - with Tina’s buying into of psychoanalysis, or with Viola’s brusque dismissal. However, what I would point out is that, although her glaring inability to differentiate between Germans and Austrians (or otherwise her belief that Vienna is *in* Germany) seems to firmly position Viola as the object of the scene’s satirical gaze, at the same time it is *her* attitude to the material she has just encountered that is the more preeminently ‘middlebrow’. Viola is, of course, highly confident in her pronouncement of psychoanalysis as pure ‘bosh’, yet, at the same time, she cannot

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

help but 'gingerly' read on. Much like Gibbons' heroine, the overriding attitude towards psychoanalytic accounts of human behaviour by many 'middlebrow' novelists, including Christie, is fascination without commitment; opinion without full engagement. In light of this, a comment such as Richie's seems largely unfounded: Christie's characters most certainly *do* understand enough Freudian psychology to be able to appreciate its full implications. Her fiction fully acknowledges that the family unit is not held together through mutual and unquestionable love but rather through darker, more sinister forces: that the family can be a site greatly marked by forms of trauma.

Unspeakable Experiences: The Family Romance of *Sleeping Murder* (1976)

As will now be suggested, Christie's fiction can be seen to provide a plethora of heavily Gothicised representations of the home - representations in which family romances loom large. In *Sleeping Murder*, Christie incarnates the Gothic homestead *par excellence* in the form of Hillside: a Victorian seaside villa in the fictional village of Dillmouth. The novel's opening chapter depicts the purchasing of Hillside by Gwenda Reed: a recently married twenty-one-year-old New Zealander, who, under the misapprehension that she has never lived in England before, has travelled to the English countryside in order to purchase a home within which to begin married life with her husband, Giles. Gwenda stumbles across the villa in question after a week of motoring across the South of England and instantly succumbs to its charm, feeling 'a throb of appreciation - almost of recognition. This was *her* house! Already she was sure of it. She could picture the garden, the long windows - she was sure it was just what she wanted'.³³ In accordance with the Gothic tradition of the

³³ Agatha Christie, *Sleeping Murder: Miss Marple's Last Case* (London: Harper, 2002), pp. 10-11. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

anthropomorphised architectural structure, which I have discussed above in relation to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the implication of Christie's use of the term 'recognition' is that the house appears to both attest and subsequently *respond* to Gwenda's presence in the same way that Gwenda herself acknowledges, and is thus affected by, the ubiety of the house. This would thereby seem to raise the disconcerting question of whether it is truly Gwenda, or rather, whether it is Hillside itself that the narrative positions as the animated, 'active' subject during this exchange.

Gwenda subsequently makes an appointment to view the interior of the property with its current owner, Mrs Hengrave, the following day. Despite experiencing a seemingly unprompted, fleeting 'wave of irrational terror' when descending Hillside's main staircase (14), Gwenda does indeed decide to buy the house she has otherwise fallen in love with, and, in the weeks that follow, proceeds to oversee the redecoration of the property in order to prepare for Giles' return to England. In *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (2006), Deborah Cohen underscores the latently Gothic potential of interior redecoration. Referring specifically to the stories of M.R. James, she suggests that Gothic fiction often 'laid bare the dark side of the home decoration manual. [...] Houses were not cooperative, but obdurate, wilful, even possessed. [...] Most importantly, the appearance of a room provided no indication of the horrors that lay within'.³⁴ This, unfortunately, describes precisely the fate that awaits poor Gwenda and her attempts to transform the slightly run-down property into a homely yet fashionable retreat befitting of two newlyweds. Certainly, Gwenda's fervent attempts to modernise her new home have the paradoxical effect of igniting a seemingly continual 'dredging up' of the past. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958),

³⁴ Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. 166.

Gaston Bachelard, suggests the ways in which an individual's experience of their childhood home may become inscribed within the body of their adult self. On the subject of staircases, he states that

[a]fter twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways; we would recapture the reflexes of 'the first stairway,' we would not stumble on the rather high step. [...] [W]hen we return to the old house, after an odyssey of many years, [...] [we] find that the most delicate of gestures, the earliest gestures suddenly come alive'.³⁵

This suggestion of the encoding of repeated movements within the human body to the degree that this body is subsequently able to replay these movements with little or no conscious thought - what we would commonly call 'muscle memory' - is precisely the force which appears to be at work as Gwenda becomes acclimatised to her new abode. Gwenda, it seems, cannot quite shake the habit of trying to exit the drawing room straight through into the dining room, even though she knows full well that the dining room can only be accessed via the hallway. This prompts her to ask her team of builders if a handy additional door could be installed between the two rooms. What they discover, however, is that, beneath the topmost layers of the wall, a door between the dining room and the drawing room already exists:

How extraordinary, [Gwenda] thought, that I've always seemed to feel there was a door there. She remembered the confident way she had walked into it at lunch-time. And remembering it, quite suddenly, she felt a tiny shiver of uneasiness. When you came to think of it, it was really rather odd [...] There was no sign of it on the outside wall. How had she guessed - known - that there was a door just there? (26)

Gwenda's sense of 'uneasiness', as it is described in the passage above, subsequently escalates into a more full-throttle terror following the discovery that

³⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (trans. Maria Jolas) (1958; Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 14-15.

is made in the room in which she has taken to sleeping in until her husband's arrival: the first-floor nursery. Anne Williams contemplates the ways in which the Freudian typology of the mind can be charted against the architecture of the individual domestic dwelling, giving rise to specific domains of psychic equivalence.³⁶ She suggests that through a process of 'building walls and declaring boundaries [...] A house makes secrets in merely being itself, for its function is to enclose space. And the larger, older, more complex the structure becomes, the more likely it is to have secret or forgotten rooms'.³⁷ Moreover, although Bachelard's model of domestic verticality is ultimately at odds with the Freudian model - which is based on a dialectic between use and disuse - on the suggestion that the house functions as a repository of psychic material, there is a measure of accord. As Bachelard posits, 'thanks to the house, a great many memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated'.³⁸ As such, whilst those rooms affiliated with quotidian, day-to-day living function as a convenient metaphor for the conscious mind, the peripheral or otherwise under-utilised recesses in and around the domestic house (such as a nursery lacking young children to occupy it) correspond to the repressed fears and desires associated with the unconscious mind, and can thus very readily be transmogrified into spaces of terror. Christie's conflation of bedroom and nursery space in *Sleeping Murder* can be seen to suggest the legacy Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), in which an unnamed female narrator is heralded to the brink

³⁶ As I touch upon in my essay, 'Women *In the Cut* of Danger: Female Subjectivity, Unregulated Masculinity and the Please/Danger Symbiosis from the Gothic Romance to the Erotic Thriller', *Women: A Cultural Review* 23, 3 (Summer 2012), p. 290.

³⁷ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 44.

³⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 8.

of insanity by her enforced confinement - under the guise of 'rest cure' prescribed for what we would now recognise as post-natal depression - in the top-floor nursery of the colonial mansion that her husband has rented for the summer.³⁹ Originally published in the *New England Magazine*, and then reprinted in booklet form in 1899, Gilman's story was, within America, frequently anthologised throughout the twentieth century.⁴⁰ However, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' was not introduced to a British audience until 1948, when it was, in a sense, 'imported' by the American author and critic, Philip van Doren Stern, as part of his anthology of Gothic stories, *The Midnight Reader*. Published by The Bodley Head - Christie's own initial publisher before her defection to Collins in 1926 - van Doren Stern's collection situates 'The Yellow Wallpaper' alongside works by figures such as Algernon Blackwood, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, and Edgar Allan Poe.⁴¹ Gilman's story is thus a text that would have been available to Christie, and, in terms of the possible influence of the former upon the latter, the nursery room at Hillside shares with the room which provides the setting of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' the barred windows suggesting an architecture of enforced confinement that is indicative of the Gothic genre.⁴² These bars, as both works make explicit, are ostensibly present in order to prevent young children crawling out of the window. However, we as the reader might recognise that their presence, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

³⁹ Gilman's story is further discussed in relation to Christie's work in Chapter Five.

⁴⁰ For a full list of these, see, Julie Bates Dock, *'The Yellow Wall-paper' and the History of its Publication and Reception: A Critical Edition and Documentary Casebook* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 122-125.

⁴¹ Specifically, Blackwood's 'The Willows' (1907), Le Fanu's 'The Familiar' (1872), and Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843).

⁴² See, Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 45-46.

have pointed out specifically in relation to Gilman's story,⁴³ work to slyly transform these upper-floor interior spaces into ever-potential-asylums for the adult women currently installed in these rooms. Moreover, in addition to the overt attention given towards the nursery's window, the direct influence of Gilman's story upon *Sleeping Murder* is concretised beyond doubt when the reader's attention is directed towards the room's 'hideous mustard wall[paper]' (20),⁴⁴ which Gwenda plans to have removed in order to make way for '[s]omething bright and cheerful. Little bunches of poppies alternating with bunches of cornflowers... Yes, that would be lovely. She'd try and find a wallpaper like that. She felt sure she had seen one somewhere' (20). The nursery at Hillside also sports a built-in cupboard, the key to which has been lost somewhere down the line, and the cupboard itself painted over in the same unappealing mustard shade as the walls. Wanting to gain the functionality of the cupboard back in order to store her clothes, Gwenda asks her builders to wrench it open and, surely enough, when they do, the sight of its interior causes Gwenda to cry out in distress:

The inside of the cupboard revealed the original papering of the wall, which elsewhere has been done over in the yellowish wall paint. The room had once been gaily papered in a floral design, a design of little bunches of scarlet poppies alternating with bunches of blue cornflowers[.](29)

The opening of this cupboard thus acts as a form of conduit, enabling the world of the past to more fully seep into, and subsequently overcome, the space that is currently occupied by the world of the present-day. As a result, because her experience of the property as a present-day space becomes increasingly

⁴³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 90.

⁴⁴ The wallpaper in Gilman's story is, of course, 'a smoldering unclean yellow' [...] lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others'. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) in *The Yellow Wallpaper and Selected Writings* (London: Virago 2008), p. 6.

'inseparable from its past, both real and imagined',⁴⁵ those earlier, more momentary interruptions to Gwenda's subjectivity that began with her preceding encounters with the house, are now, after this discovery, escalated to a level of complete destabilisation, posing a direct threat to her psychological integrity:

She could explain [...] the connecting door as coincidence - but there couldn't be coincidence about this. You couldn't conceivably imagine a wall-paper of such distinctive design and then find one exactly as you imagined it... No, there was some explanation that eluded her and that - yes, frightened her. Every now and then she was seeing, not forward, but back - back to some former state of the house. Any moment she might see something more - something she didn't want to see... The house frightened her ... But was it the house or *herself*? She didn't want to be one of those people who *saw* things[.] (30)

Thus, following this incident, which, at least in the mind of the novel's heroine, may have been facilitated by supernatural forces, a petrified Gwenda attempts to leave the house by immediately accepting an invitation to visit her husband's cousins, Joan and Raymond West. However, although she may have been able to leave the spatial boundaries of the property, Gwenda finds that she categorically cannot escape Hillside's unsettling thrall, even as far away as London. The house's unwelcome influence on Gwenda culminates in a pivotal scene in which, along with Raymond's aunt, Miss Marple, she accompanies the Wests to a theatrical performance of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1614) at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. During the fourth act of the play, Gwenda suddenly screams out in fright when the actor playing Ferdinand delivers the line '*Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle, she died young...*' (34). These words, compounded by the unceasing influence of the house, leads to the reawakening of a repressed memory in Gwenda: that she has indeed lived at Hillside before, during which time she was witness to the murder of a woman in the front hallway - a woman whom she knows

⁴⁵ Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2001), p. 121.

to be called Helen. When accounting for her bizarre behaviour at the theatre to Miss Marple the following morning, Gwenda explains that:

I was back there - on the stairs, looking down on the hall through the banisters, and I saw her lying there. Sprawled out - dead. Her hair all golden and her face all - all *blue*! She was dead, strangled, and someone was saying those words in the same horrible gloating way. (39)

Deliberately never mentioned by Gwenda's New Zealand family, Helen, as it transpires, was a woman briefly married to Gwenda's father, but who is thought to have run off with another man, when in actual fact she was both murdered and buried at Hillside.

Given that, against extraordinary odds, Gwenda has managed to inadvertently install herself within her own childhood home, I would argue that Hillside functions as a very literal embodiment of the *unheimlich*, or 'uncanny'. This is in the sense that Hillside is a property that is deeply marked by what Freud conceives of as the unintended return: a location from which Gwenda's family fled under evidently traumatic circumstances, 'only to arrive by another *détour* at the same place'.⁴⁶ Looking back on the novel's opening chapter, there is a clear and deliberate bitter irony in Gwenda articulating her keen desire to purchase the property by saying to herself that '[t]his is *my* house [...] It's home. I feel already as though I know every bit of it' (11). She is, unknowingly of course, tragically accurate in this assessment. However, Christie's Gothicisation of Hillside as a property is bracketed by her Gothicisation of the family who once owned, and now, through Gwenda and Giles Reed, continue to own it.⁴⁷ As we have already seen,

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, "The "Uncanny"" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII* (trans. James Strachey) (1955; London: Hogarth, 1975), p. 237.

⁴⁷ Here, I am using the term 'family' in a broad sense to additionally include some of the characters implicated in the mystery of Helen's murder who may not be strictly be related by legal definition to either Helen or her husband, Kelvin.

within the novel, Christie noticeably toys with the knotted relationship between body and space: Gwenda's body remembers Hillside, even if her conscious mind does not, subsequently endowing her body with an intelligence that we, as 'enlightened', Cartesian readers invested in the hierarchal placement of intellect over physicality, are not quite comfortable with. However, further into the novel, the ambiguous relationship between body, psyche, and space is pushed even further to the forefront. Take, for example, the architectural metaphor that is used to describe Walter Fane: the man whom Helen jilted in order to marry Gwenda's father. When Gwenda tracks down and subsequently goes to visit the lawyer under the pretence of making a new will, she cannot help but notice his 'pale [...] weak and unfocussed' eyes - his 'queer blind stare' (145, 150). This leads Gwenda to further exclaim to herself: '[w]hat a very *quiet* face Walter Fane had. You might see a house like that - a house with all the blinds pulled down. That would mean a house with a dead body in it' (146). Although not explicitly articulated by Gwenda within this dark musing, the house which most obviously adheres to this description - the property which Walter's unnerving countenance thus resembles - is of course Hillside. Consequently, what comes across most strikingly from Gwenda's exchange with Walter is the marked interconnectedness between a property that is in some way unwholesome and deficient and a family that appears tarred with the very same brush.

Owing to the way in which, despite her family's best effort to place a great distance between the young child and the house in which her step-mother was strangled, Gwenda is subsequently and unwittingly re-directed back to the very same location, I have previously argued that Hillside is very much an 'uncanny' house, specifically in the Freudian sense of the term. However, the nightmarish experience of returning to the same place without conscious intention is arguably

part of a larger nexus of means through which feelings of ‘uncanny’ fear and trepidation are fostered: that which Freud terms the ‘convulsion to repeat’.⁴⁸ Within the context of Gothic fiction, this predisposition towards compulsive repetition is frequently manifested via the trope of the *doppelgänger* or double. With regard to *Sleeping Murder*, in the first instance, we witness the house functioning very much as a *doppelgänger* of itself owing to the fact that, between the first and second generation of the story, the property’s name has been changed from ‘St Catherine’s’ to ‘Hillside’.⁴⁹ However, this doubling of the house itself is mirrored by the disconcerting level of similarity and repetition that exists between numerous members of the extended Halliday family. Firstly, the character of Gwenda clearly suggests a *doppelgänger* of the murder-victim, Helen, with the two women, as Susan Rowland states, ‘becom[ing] increasingly linked until Gwenda risks the same fate’ as her step-mother.⁵⁰ Certainly, the novel places great emphasis on the similarity between Gwenda’s current age (twenty-one) and the age at which her step-mother - herself *also* still practically a newlywed - was murdered, with the reader constantly being reminded that Helen was a ‘young wife’ (73), ‘quite young’ (154), ‘[n]othing but a girl, really’ (154). Moreover, there is, of course, the marked assonantal symmetry between the names ‘Helen’ and ‘Gwenda’, and, furthermore, the novel does indeed, at least in places, entertain the notion that Gwenda in some sense embodies the spirit of Helen. At times, the question is raised of whether Gwenda’s efforts to discover the truth about what happened on the night she saw a strangled woman on the hallway floor are driven by Helen herself:

⁴⁸ Freud, “The “Uncanny””, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII*, p. 238.

⁴⁹ The renaming of a property as means of suggesting its Gothic ‘doubleness’ is a trope that Christie pushes to the *n*th degree in her 1968 novel, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, and is discussed further in chapter five.

⁵⁰ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 171.

whether Gwenda's 'childish memory [is] the only link she's got with life - with truth? Is it Helen who's using me [...] so that the truth will be known?' (180). It is precisely this idea of Gwenda's subjectivity being linked with Helen's that dominates the accusation levelled against Gwenda by the murderer just before their attempt to kill her too, when they ask her 'Why did you have to meddle? Why did *you* have to bring - *Her* - back? Just when I'd begun to forget - to forget. You brought her back again...' (289, emphasis mine).

Of equal importance to the novel's positioning of Gwenda and Helen as *doppelgängers* is the doubling that occurs between Helen's husband, Kelvin James Halliday, and the man who is eventually revealed to have been her killer, her half-brother, Doctor James Kennedy. Not only are the two men doubled in name, but they are doubled in the sense that, on the night of the murder, Kelvin Halliday is drugged by the unscrupulous doctor and, having previously confided in his brother-in-law that he has been experiencing dreams in which he is violent towards his wife, Doctor Kennedy makes use of this knowledge to manipulate the neurotic Kelvin into believing that he is the one who has murdered his wife in a frenzied rage (whilst the rest of the world believes she has simply deserted him). Indeed, the damning psychological effects of this manipulative deceit result in Kelvin's eventual suicide in an insane asylum. Doctor Kennedy's motive for strangling his half-sister turn out to be that ubiquitous staple underlining the Gothic family romance - incest. As Miss Marple explains at the novel's denouement:

Helen Halliday told Richard Erskine she had gone out [to India] to marry Walter Fane because *she wasn't happy at home*. Not happy, that is, living with her brother. [...] He wasn't normal. He adored his half-sister, and that affection became possessive and unwholesome. That kind of thing happens oftener than you'd think. [...] Those lines from *The Duchess of Malfi* were really the clue to the whole thing. They are said, are they not, by a brother who has just contrived his sister's death to avenge her marriage to the man she loved. (292-97)

James B. Twitchell suggests that the typical Gothic narrative is structured around a core of 'barely-disguised incestuous interaction'.⁵¹ Precisely for this reason, the truest acmes of the genre are precisely novels which depict a 'specific family romance run amok: "father" has become monstrous to "daughter." It seems to make little difference if the father role is shunted to uncle, priest, duke, landlord, [...] as long as his relationship with the young female is one of paternal dominance'.⁵² Of course, for our purposes, this most certainly could include a relationship between a domineering elder-brother and a vulnerable younger-sister. Indeed, because, as Twitchell goes on to suggest, the incestuous designs harboured by the paternal figure within the Gothic novel function to upset the young heroine's 'already vulnerable sense of sexual identity',⁵³ the incest-theme in the anterior storyline of *Sleeping Murder*, I would argue, throws significant light upon Gwenda's behaviour in the present day narrative, and particularly on Christie's reprocessing of the nursery of Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' as the spatial imaginary with which we most identify Gwenda. As I have previously noted, when Gwenda first moves into Hillside she makes the somewhat strange decision *not* to sleep in what will eventual be the master bedroom: '[t]hat could wait until Giles returned. She had chosen instead the end room, the one with the rounded walls and the bow window. She felt thoroughly at home and happy' (19). On the one hand, it cannot be denied that the allure of the room for Gwenda arises from the fact that (unbeknownst to her at this juncture) it was her own childhood nursery. However, I would also suggest that there is certainly more to Gwenda's continual association with this particular room than that. Contrary to her initial intentions, the novel implies that

⁵¹ James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 42.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Gwenda does not relocate her sleeping zone immediately upon Giles' return to England, but rather that she is only able to 'graduate' to the marital bedroom after the mystery of Helen's murder has been solved. What is thus captured in this avoidance of the master bedroom is an evident fear on Gwenda's part of what this room might represent: the reproduction of the same conditions that could hypothetically allow for the traumatic moment - a young girl witnessing the murder of her own mother figure - to take place once again.⁵⁴ Kate Ferguson Ellis argues that the Gothic provides a means through which expurgated aspects of social reality may be brought to the surface and therefore called to account: that the 'conventions of the Gothic novel [...] speak of what in the polite world of middle-class culture cannot be spoken'.⁵⁵ This might be precisely why women writers in particular have used the Gothic genre specifically to reflect on upon the threat posed to women by male sexuality in its aberrant or unregimented forms. Thus, although Giles Reed is presented as a rather lovely young man and certainly bears no resemblance - either physically or in temperament - to the older and more mentally suspect men in the story, his young wife is nevertheless a woman who has essentially grown fearful of male sexuality. During the portion of the novel when it seems most probable to the young sleuths that Helen was strangled by Kelvin, Gwenda sobs to her husband, '[w]hy didn't we leave it all alone? Why didn't we? It was my own father's voice I heard saying those words. No wonder it all came back - no wonder I was so frightened. My own father' (99). Thus, Gwenda's process of

⁵⁴ Indeed, Juliann E. Fleenor reads Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' as fundamentally being about women's dread of their own potential for maternity. She writes that, '[d]iseased maternity is explicit in Gilman's [...] Gothic story. The yellow wallpaper [...] suggests a disease within the female self. [...] My contention [is] that one of the major themes in the story, punishment for becoming a mother (as well as punishment for being female)[.] [...] The narrator is confined as if she had committed a crime'. Juliann E. Fleenor, 'The Gothic Prism: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Gothic Stories and Her Autobiography', Juliann E. Fleenor (ed.), *The Female Gothic* (Montreal: The Eden Press, 1983), pp. 234-35.

⁵⁵ Ellis, *The Contested Castle*, p. 7.

self-infantilisation by way of installing herself in the noticeably womb-like space of the nursery is highly suggestive of the fact that, having been truly traumatised by having borne witness to the murder of her closest female relation by a dangerous and sexually warped male, the marital bedroom is a sexualised arena - carrying with it the ever-perpetual threat of pregnancy - that she is simply not able to enter into in the way that a 'proper woman' ought to be able to. As such, I would suggest that one of the reasons why there is such overt doubling between Helen and Gwenda is that the novel is just as much the story of Gwenda's attempt to reassemble her identity - which has been fragmented, distorted, and rendered as 'incomplete' - as it is the story of how and why Helen Halliday came to be murdered. To put it otherwise, *Sleeping Murder* is both simultaneously a murder-mystery concerning Helen Halliday and the *bildungsroman* concerning Gwenda Reed.

Within the Gothic, the concept of the family secret is often intertwined with ideas concerning 'the origin'. As Paulina Palmer notes, '[i]n Gothic fiction the concept of secrets is particularly rich in implication. Three meanings which it commonly assumes are mysteries relating to identity or family origins, the enigma represented by the locked room or concealed chamber, and clandestine sexual relationships, either within the family unit or beyond its bounds'.⁵⁶ From this description, it is clear the Halliday family secret is deeply implicated with all three of these categories, as it involves the deliberate obfuscation of family ties, repressed memories (the psychological equivalent to the 'locked room' scenario), and the incestuous passions held by one member of a family towards another. To return to the evocative description from Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) - simultaneously both a biography of her mother and her own

⁵⁶ Paulina Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (London: Continuum, 1999), p. 131.

autobiography - with which this chapter commenced, the secret of Helen's 'disappearance' from Hillside (and, by extension, from the Halliday family narrative), functions in perfect accordance with the curiously Gothic paradigm that is set out by Steedman, and which draws so heavily on the trope of the 'house of secrets'. As the elimination of a woman positioned as the object of sexual desire within an erotic triangle, the Hallidays' is a secret that is very markedly 'derive[d] from the play of fantasy, from rivalry, hatred and desire'.⁵⁷ However, at the same time, the involvement of the police in the first initial search for Helen, the admission of Kelvin to a mental institution and, the confirmation of legal impropriety - which brings with it the re-involvement of multiple civic agencies - when Helen's actual buried remains are discovered on the grounds means that it is at the same time a secret that is by no means delimited to the confines of family space. Instead, it is thus rather emphatically 'connected to the social world outside the household'.⁵⁸ Ultimately, the Hallidays' family secret is one which threatens to efface the very meaningfulness of the supposed separation between intimate, private secrets and statutory, public secrets, and thus between private and public sphere more generally. Thus, it may be precisely because Helen's murder refuses easy categorisation as either private or public affair, that it is a secret which is so potent in its production of what Steedman terms 'myths of origin',⁵⁹ which, in terms remarkably similar to the rhetoric of the 'uncanny',⁶⁰ she argues 'serve both to

⁵⁷ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, p. 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ In the entry for '*heimlich*' in Grimm's dictionary that Freud cites from at length in "The 'Uncanny'" it is suggested that feeling of the un/canny are often created through the existence of a highly palpable yet barely concealed domestic secret that is continually at risk of revelation to outsiders: '*From the idea of "homelike", "belonging to the house", the further idea is developed of something withdrawn from the eyes of strangers, something concealed, secret*'. Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII*, p. 225.

reveal and conceal what is actually hidden from view'.⁶¹ As much as anything else, *Sleeping Murder* is a novel about a young woman whose origins have been falsified: a woman who was told by her family that she was born in India and moved to New Zealand when she was two, but who, in actual fact spent, a year or so living in England as a toddler. Such mythification of her early-life has come about precisely through her family's wish to conceal the debacle of Kelvin's brief and, in the eyes of the outer world, seemingly disastrous marriage to Helen, his mental instability, and the possibility that he was a killer. As Kelvin's final diary entry reads:

Thank God Gwennie's all right in New Zealand. They're good people. They'll love her for Megan's sake. [...] It's the best way... No scandal... The best way for the child. I can't go on. Not year after year. I must take the short way out. Gwennie will never know about all this. She'll never know her father was a murderer...'(118-19)

For Kelvin and all others involved in the cover-up the unpleasant affair, the Gothic credentials of *Sleeping Murder* mean that such a fantasy of perfect concealment remains precisely that: merely a fantasy. For as Valdine Clements explains, the pre-requisite structure of the Gothic narrative is that '[s]omething - some entity, knowledge, emotion or feeling - which has been submerged [...] because it threatens that established order of things, develops a cumulative energy that demands its release and forces it into the realm of visibility where it must be acknowledged'.⁶² In a Gothic novel, attempts to rid oneself of unpleasant and painful 'truths' will always fail spectacularly: all that is required is the passage of time.

Furthermore, the process by which the false history of Gwenda's early-life ultimately unravels brings us to the problematic concept of 'haunting', and the

⁶¹ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, p. 66.

⁶² Valdine Clements, *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from 'The Castle of Otranto' to 'Alien'* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 4.

semi-visual figure of the ghost. Certainly, when Gwenda first views the interior of Hillside with Mrs Hengrave, the sudden feeling of ominous dread that she experiences on the staircase leads her to ask her guide whether the house is known to be haunted (Mrs Hengrave, not wishing to jeopardise a sale, of course, answers in the negative). However, this would seem to raise the question of whether the ‘uncanny’, Gothic homestead - the way in which I have thus far described Hillside - is necessarily the same thing as a haunted homestead? And, if so, what exactly is the relationship of the haunted homestead to the figure of the ghost? Discussing the difference between more modern, twentieth-century tales of haunting and those of the Victorian era, Cohen argues that

[s]o redolent of Victoriana was the ghost story that critics such as Edmund Wilson marvelled at its survival in an era of electricity. Elizabeth Bowen, herself a practitioner, disputed Wilson’s presumption: ghosts ‘do well in flats, and are villa-dwellers. They know how to curdle electric light, chill off heating, or de-condition air’. [...] And yet there could be no doubt that the nature of haunting had changed since Victorian times. Fully materialized ghosts were less central to the genre than had been the case in the previous century. For clanking chains twentieth-century authors substituted vague and indefinable feelings of dread.⁶³

Cohen is quite right here in the sense that, without doubt, the ghost story - as a sub-genre of the Gothic - experienced a period of unrivalled vogue in the second half of the nineteenth century. As, arguably, the ultimate ‘manifestation of the “past-in-the-present”’,⁶⁴ Jarlath Killeen even suggests that the figure of the ghost might be seen as symptomatic of the challenges to traditional, theological accounts of time brought about by advances in Victorian geology, functioning to metaphorically denote ‘a breach in historical progression: in a stark reproach to

⁶³ Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. 166.

⁶⁴ Jarlath Killeen, *Gothic Literature 1825-1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 129.

the Victorian investment in notions of linearity and progress'.⁶⁵ However, as Cohen points out, although narratives of haunting far from disappear or 'die-out' in twentieth-century modernity, nevertheless the nature of the haunting depicted changes significantly. The comment that Cohen cites by Christie's contemporary, Elizabeth Bowen, is particularly illuminating in suggesting that the way in which the nature of haunting has altered is that, increasingly, writers are seen to situate architecture as the foremost cognitive element of the haunting process. Put otherwise, the suggestion is that it is places, rather than people, which are haunted, or, put alternatively, that haunting becomes more resolutely linked with the spaces of everyday, quotidian dwelling. In the twentieth century, modest flats and humble villas become the spaces haunted by the detrimental stranglehold of the past: a past which, in *Sleeping Murder* as in Bowen's scenario, makes its presence known through architecture and domestic technologies. Indeed, again characterising the nineteenth-century ghost story, Antonia Sanna suggests that

[b]y seeing previously unseen things and by undoing relations between events, the witness to the [spectral] apparition is able to know a previously unacknowledged and hidden aspect of reality, and particularly of his or her previous life and experiences. This experience, however, can result in a traumatic revival of memories which had been previously repressed by the ghost-seer.⁶⁶

Taking into account that *Sleeping Murder* is a novel about a woman whose traumatic early childhood has been deliberately overwritten, leading to its painful and ultimately dangerous remediation later in her life, Sanna's description could almost unwittingly function as a highly apt summation of Christie's novel. However,

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Antonio Sanna, 'Repressed Memories versus Pleasurable Revivals: The Traumatic and Joyful Encounters with the Spectre in Victorian Literary Ghostly Tales', in Ryan Barnett and Serena Trowbridge (eds), *Acts of Memory: The Victorians and Beyond* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 86.

the important difference is that Gwenda Reed is categorically not the 'ghost-seer' or 'witness' to an 'apparition' that Sanna describes, but rather, a woman that has simply come into contact with a particular architectural construct: Hillside. Thus, despite the seeming lack of any materialised spectres in the novel, not only would I argue that Hillside is nevertheless presented as an avowedly haunted house, but also that Christie's novel supports what we might think of as an alternate model of haunting: one which is centred on architecture. The implication of Christie's depiction of Hillside within *Sleeping Murder* would seem to be that material forms are predisposed to the recording and accumulation of human energy, and that, subsequently, when this energy is particularly malign or nefarious, this causes the material, 'like an analogue tape loop or stuck vinyl recording',⁶⁷ to habitually replay this energy, causing events to happen by virtue of themselves. Thus, in the case of Hillside the very materiality of the house has become imprinted with the original crime of Helen's murder. As a result, the house's only chance at achieving any sort of catharsis or redemption is to herald a repetition of this original action, employing the only means it has readily available: its own architecture. This includes both the nursery cupboard and connecting door between dining room and drawing room, but also the stone steps at the end of the terrace under which Helen's remains are eventually discovered. At the novel's close, Miss Marple explains to Gwenda and Giles the role played by the steps in the concealment and subsequent exposition of Helen Halliday's murder:

Come now, my dears, what struck you first of all when you came here - struck you Gwenda, I should say. The fact that from the drawing-room window, you had no view down to the sea. Where you felt, properly, that steps should have lead down to the lawn - there was instead a plantation of shrubs. The steps, you found subsequently, had been there originally, but had at some time been transferred to the end of the terrace. Why were they

⁶⁷ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 5.

moved? [...] It is, frankly, a stupid place to have steps down to the lawn. But that end of the terrace is not overlooked from the house except by one window - the window of the nursery on the first floor. Don't you see, that if you want to bury a body the earth must be disturbed and there must be a *reason* for its being disturbed. (257)

Bearing the house's seeming activity in mind, the argument that Hillside is a haunted domestic space is certainly supported by the novel's close, in which, the detective process - culminating in the rightful arrest of Doctor Kennedy - acts as a sort of narrative exorcism, purging the house (and the novel) of its indelible resonances of sexual and ethical transgression, thus restoring Hillside from a haunted house back into a site of domestic bliss. This, in a sense, is where Christie's novel departs from the earlier 'The Yellow Wallpaper', from which it has drawn. However you choose to interpret the ambiguous ending of Gilman's story (an issue discussed in detail in chapter five), it is beyond doubt that the marriage between the narrator and her husband is broken: that there is no possibility of a recuperative moment. In Christie's novel, by contrast, the reinstallation of heteronormative stability and accord is most strongly signalled by the conversation had by Gwenda and Giles in the final chapter of the novel on the subject of their cook, Mrs Cocker. In reply to Gwenda's question of whether Mrs Cocker will return to work for them after the ordeal they have all been put through, Giles suggests that '[s]he will if there is a nursery' (303), to which Gwenda responds by blushing. The inference of this exchange is that the couple are planning to conceive a child (if indeed Gwenda is not already pregnant), that Hillside will be their presumably happy family home for many years to come. Strongly echoing the way in which houses are situated in a significant number of other 'middlebrow' novels,⁶⁸ the house in Christie's novel quite literally frames the narrative: it commences with a

⁶⁸ For example, Rosamund Lehman's situation of 'the house next door' in *Dusty Answer* (1927), and du Maurier's situation of Manderley in *Rebecca*.

chapter straightforwardly but significantly titled 'A House', and the final image the reader is presented with functions precisely as a repetition of this. However, in the interim, something about the property has undeniably changed. As Gwenda's (and the novel's) final words make clear, Hillside is no longer a repository of familial shame and guilt, nor does it boast the climate of corrosive fear it once did, but rather '[t]here's just the house. And the house is fond of us. We can go back if we like...' (303).

The Mythic Origins of the Book: Gothic Form in *Sleeping Murder* (1976)

Sleeping Murder is therefore a prime example of what I have, in the first part of this chapter, described as 'middlebrow' Gothic. It is, moreover, an example in which a critique of women's vulnerable positions within the structures of home and family is pushed to the forefront. However, for all the ways in which this novel so typifies Christie's fictional outputs, as well as 'middlebrow' Gothic more generally, there is one key aspect of *Sleeping Murder* that makes it hugely idiosyncratic: its delayed, posthumous publication. Rather than seeing this detail as extraneous to understanding the Gothicism of Christie's novel - or indeed, to *any* understanding of the novel, as has traditionally been standard practice among commentators - I want to make a case for the publication history of the novel being intrinsically linked to its Gothic content: that a direct relationship exists between such mode of publication and the Gothic experience of the domestic sphere depicted within the novel's pages.

Until recently, there has been both critical and biographical accord that, although first published in October 1976, ten months after Christie's death, *Sleeping Murder* is not a product of the 1970s, but rather that it was written during

the Second World War and stored away for posterity.⁶⁹ This is owing almost entirely to comments made by Christie in the 1966 interview with Francis Wyndham which I discussed at the outset of this chapter. Referring to both *Sleeping Murder* and the final Hercule Poirot novel, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (1975), she tells Wyndham that 'I wrote them during the war, just after "The Body in the Library," when I was in London working in hospitals. I had plenty of time in the evenings; one didn't want to go out in the blitz'.⁷⁰ However, rather than accepting any such statement regarding *Sleeping Murder's* provenance as 'truth', I will, for the sake of argument, temporarily leave this information aside and instead concentrate on the ways in which it might be possible to date the novel from details contained within its own pages. On the one hand, there is a strong degree of unplaced contextlessness about *Sleeping Murder*, with references to wider social, political or cultural happenings or changes outside of the conduct of the novel's protagonists being unusually sparse. As a result, on first glance it seems feasible that the novel could well have been produced at *any* point in the fifty or so years before its eventual release. For example, Gwenda's desire to transform Hillside's 'dark back spare room into a couple of really up-to-date green and chromium bathrooms' (12), could really be alluding to anything from an 1920s art deco styled bathroom with moss-coloured walls juxtaposed with black and white tiles right through to the now much maligned avocado bathroom suites that were considered fashionable in the late 1960s and 1970s (the 'problem', as it were, is the lack of

⁶⁹ See, Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p. 196; Charles Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie: A Biographical Companion to the Works of Agatha Christie* (1982; London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 364-75; Janet Morgan, *Agatha Christie: A Biography* (1984; London, Fontana, 1985), pp. 229-31; Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, p. 170; Vanessa Wagstaff and Stephen Poole, *Agatha Christie: A Reader's Companion* (London: Aurum, 2004), p. 221; Laura Thompson, *Agatha Christie: An English Mystery* (London: Headline Review, 2007), p. 344; James Zembo, *The Detective Novels of Agatha Christie: A Reader's Guide* (Jefferson, NC: Macfarland & Company, 2008), pp. 408-09.

⁷⁰ Christie, cited in Wyndham, 'The Algebra of Agatha Christie (Interview)', p. 25.

information as to which parts of the bathroom are green and which parts are chromium). In other words, the description is worded in such a way that it broadly conjures up the image of a 'modern' bathroom without too much chronologic specificity. On the other hand, intermittent within this general historical vagueness are certain subtle textual details which seem to indicate a significantly more narrow window within which this novel could have been composed. Firstly, when Gwenda and Giles visit Saltmarsh House, the sanatorium in which Kelvin Halliday ended his life, there is a scene in which Gwenda encounters a mysterious, slightly incoherent, milk-drinking old lady concerned about a child secreted within the walls: '[i]s it your poor child, my dear?' she asks Gwenda. 'Behind the fireplace [...] But don't say I told you' (111-12). Within the context of *Sleeping Murder*, this scene is entirely surplus to requirement and serves no purpose, aside from - at a stretch - enhancing the eerie atmosphere of the sanatorium. However, this is a scene which was expanded and re-appropriated far more strategically and purposefully in Christie's 1968 novel *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, where, in this latter incarnation, Tuppence Beresford encounters our milk-drinking enigma at Sunnyridge: the nursing home in which her husband's aunt is installed. Christie's subsequent development of this fleeting, almost gestural concurrence into a fully-fleshed and hugely important episode which (as I will discuss further in chapter five) sparks the action for the remainder of its respective novel, I would suggest clearly situates the *Sleeping Murder* version of this scene as the former: almost as the prototypal 'try-out'. This would thus effectively rule out the possibility of *Sleeping Murder* having been drafted in the late 1960s or 1970s. Moreover, when Miss Marple returns from London to her home village, St Mary Mead, before proceeding to Dillmouth, there are cameo appearances by her friends Colonel and Dolly Bantry, owners of the local manor house, Gossington Hall, who debuted in

Christie's 1942 novel, *The Body in the Library*. However, Dolly Bantry later returns to Christie's fictional world in 1962's *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, significantly, as a widow and as having recently sold Gossington Hall to an American film star whilst she removes to its lodge. *Sleeping Murder* was thus evidently authored some time before Dolly Bantry's entry into widowhood - before around 1962. We can, however, get even more specific than that. When our sleuthing couple track down Edith Pagett, the former cook in service at Hillside at the time of Helen Halliday's disappearance, her living room walls sports framed pictures of 'the Princess Elizabeth and Margaret Rose' (151). With the notable exception of her historical crime novel, *Death Comes as The End* (1944), which is set in Ancient Egypt, the chronological setting of Christie's fictions are always roughly contemporaneous to the author's own at time of publication, give or take a year or two. This is perhaps one of the chief reasons why Alison Light contends that the sentiment which can be said to provide an inner coherence to Christie's extensive and disparate body of work, is 'not [...] an idealisation of the past, and certainly not [...] a planning of utopias, but [...] the desire to stay put *in the present*' (emphasis mine).⁷¹ Thus, because, bar the one notable exception, Christie does not write books in one period but set them in another, this reference to Princess Elizabeth, in conjunction with a later mention of a presently reigning 'King' (166), places the penning of the novel before the death of George VI and Elizabeth II's subsequent ascending to the throne in 1952.

Thus, in terms of Christie's explicit statement that she wrote *Sleeping Murder* during the period of sustained bombing that befell London during the Autumn of 1940, so far, so good: this certainly tallies well with the information outlined above, which suggests that the novel had to have been composed *at least*

⁷¹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 105.

before 1952. However, although they are absolutely accepting of 1940 as the date at which *Sleeping Murder* was composed, stating that '[i]t is well known that Agatha Christie wrote her last two published books [...] during the London blitz in the early years of World War II',⁷² Dennis Sanders and Len Lovallo at the same time raise some legitimate doubts about this account of the book's history. They suggest that Christie's

reason for holding back *Curtain* was perfectly logical; early publication would have truncated Poirot's career by several decades [owing to the his death within the novel]. But the delayed publication of *Sleeping Murder* is not so easily explainable. There seems to be no reason at all why it should not have appeared in the 1940s along with *The Body in the Library* [...] and *The Moving Finger* [...]. The book, unlike *Curtain*, had no gimmicks or surprises that would dictate that it had to be the last Marple novel. Since Christie wasn't killed in the war as she feared, why didn't she release the book afterwards, when a Marple novel would have nicely filled the gap between the 1943 *The Moving Finger* and the next Marple, the 1950 *A Murder is Announced*[?]⁷³

In light of such suspicions, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is at least one anomalous specific within the novel which can be argued as directly contesting Christie's own dating of the novel to the London blitz. This detail is the theatrical production of *The Duchess of Malfi* which frightens Gwenda out of her wits, and is said to star John Gielgud as the diabolical Ferdinand. Gielgud actually did star as Ferdinand in a production of Webster's tragedy, and he did so precisely at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, but not until April 1945.⁷⁴ Of course, this fact could never, against any and all contest, rule out Christie's imaginative casting of Gielgud as an authorial choice that coincidentally happened to pre-empt a real life actuality. However, in the same way that the simplest explanation of Gwenda being able to

⁷² Dennis Sanders and Len Lovallo, *The Agatha Christie Companion* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1984), p. 371.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 377-78.

⁷⁴ Sheridan Morley, *John Gielgud: The Authorised Biography of John Gielgud* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), p. 467.

have such a singular vision of Hillside's nursery covered in a poppy and cornflower wallpaper turns out to be the explanation that is true, it takes a Brobdingnagian leap of faith to believe that Christie settled on such precise and idiosyncratic detail for one of her novels in the Autumn of 1940, only for this detail, by complete and utter coincidence, to achieve a real-life incarnation in the Spring of 1945. Instead, the most logical explanation for this anomaly is that, contrary to what she may have later said, *Sleeping Murder* was penned some time after 1945.

The final nail in the coffin with regard to the previously accepted story of *Sleeping Murder* as the product of long evenings shut-up indoors during the London blitz comes not from within the novel itself, but from evidence external to it. John Curran's 2009 *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks: Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making* was authored with access to the collection of Christie's working notebooks which are stored at her former home of Greenway House. Christie's notebooks appear to provide evidence that the novel, then provisionally titled 'Cover Her Face',⁷⁵ or otherwise referred to by Christie as 'Cover Her Face (Helen)' was still in somewhat rudimentary planning stages as late as November 1948.⁷⁶ With this information at hand, Curran makes a convincing case that the novel should be dated around 1950, 'almost 10 years later than the supposed 1940 date'.⁷⁷ For Curran, the reason why this later dating of the novel is such a significant discovery is because, to use his own words, it provides a conceivable explanation for why *Sleeping Murder* is such 'a disappointing climax to Miss Marple's career',⁷⁸ and why the novel is simply 'not in the same class as other titles written in the

⁷⁵ John Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks: Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making* (2009; London: Harper, 2010), p. 250.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

early 1940s'.⁷⁹ As I will go on to suggest, it is indeed hugely significant that *Sleeping Murder* can now beyond reasonable doubt be identified as a post-war novel, rather than as a novel of the Second World War. However, this issue that Curran identifies regarding the novel's perceived 'quality' is certainly not the reason why.

It should be said, nonetheless, that Curran is not alone in his positioning of Christie's later years as a period of artistic decline, and in his low assessment of Miss Marple's supposed final escapade. Indeed, the marking out of Christie's later fiction as noticeably inferior to mid-career offerings is a process that begins even before her career has ended. In *A Catalogue of Crime* (1971), Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor suggest that, even by 1956, Christie's fiction demonstrates 'the author's weakening grip on action and dialogue'.⁸⁰ Even more severely, their entry for Christie's 1966 Poirot novel *Third Girl*, consists merely of a one-line recommendation that '[a]dmirers of the author will not blemish their vision of her by reading this late one'.⁸¹ However, it is Robert Barnard's *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (1980) that has been most instrumental in concretising the hard-to-shake understanding of Christie's career as following the trajectory of formative years, the 'classic Christie' era, and the years of decline. For Barnard, the 1950 Miss Marple novel *A Murder is Announced* is significant 'because the book seems to mark the end of Christie's classic period, those years when one could expect something satisfying, puzzling and entertaining from her. After 1950 one could only *hope*: there were some splendid successes, but they were interspersed with performances of embarrassing febleness'.⁸² It seems that,

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁸⁰ Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor, *A Catalogue of Crime* (New York, Harper & Row, 1971), p. 118.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁸² Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p. 96.

because there is in Christie's later fiction such thematic, structural, and tonal deviation from the accepted standard path of detective fiction - and specifically from the village-based mysteries that 'classic Christie' is essentially a byword for - it always requires some kind of pathology to explain its existence. Even in recent times, and in spite of what criticism has been produced that has argued very much against the Barnardian paradigm, Christie's late fiction seems to invite increasingly bizarre explanations. In 2009, Ian Lancashire and Graeme Hirst - a literary scholar and a computer scientist at the University of Toronto - gave a paper which presented the vocabulary changes from Christie's early to late fiction as evidence of her undiagnosed suffering of Alzheimer's disease. This research even making national newspapers in the United Kingdom,⁸³ based on analysis of 16 of Christie's novels from 1920 to 1973, Lancashire and Hirst's hypothesis is that the decreased vocabulary richness, increased repetition, and increased use of vague, indefinite words (such as, 'thing', 'something, or 'anything'), is consistent with the changes to language production brought about by the onset of dementia.⁸⁴ Whilst it is doubtless that the process of ageing would affect the output of any author, and certainly true that such vocabulary changes do occur in Christie's published work, with Lancashire and Hirst's methodology being far from the same thing as a medical professional observing a live patient, the case put forward is not particularly convincing. There is, to my mind, an entirely different way of looking at the perceived 'strangeness' of Christie's later fiction when compared to her mid-

⁸³ Alison Flood, 'Study Claims Agatha Christie Had Alzheimer's', *The Guardian* (3 April 2009) <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/03/agatha-christie-alzheimers-research>> [accessed 30 May 2015]; Kate Devlin, 'Agatha Christie "had Alzheimer's disease when she wrote final novels"', *The Telegraph* (4 April 2009) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/5101619/Agatha-Christie-had-Alzheimers-disease-when-she-wrote-final-novels.html>> [accessed 30 May 2015].

⁸⁴ Ian Lancashire and Graeme Hirst, 'Vocabulary Changes in Agatha Christie's Mysteries as an Indication of Dementia: A Case Study', *19th Annual Rotman Research Institute Conference Cognitive Ageing: Research and Practice*, Toronto, March 2009, <<http://ftp.cs.toronto.edu/pub/gh/Lancashire+Hirst-extabs-2009.pdf>> [accessed 30 May 2015] (para. 6 of 14).

career work. To return to Barnard, he writes of Christie's 1968 *By The Pricking of my Thumbs*, that the novel 'declines rapidly into a welter of half-real[s]ed plots and a plethora of those conventions, all too familiar in late Christie, which meander on through irrelevancies, repetitions and inconsequentialities to end nowhere (as if she had sat at the feet of Samuel Beckett)'.⁸⁵ Though the comparison between Christie's offering and the absurdist theatre of the Irish dramatist is clearly intended as an insult - that a detective novel that reads more like *Waiting for Godot* (1952) is a *failure* of a detective novel - actually, to my mind, this is precisely the key point: that the latter part of Christie's career sees the filtering down into more popular culture of the so-thought 'radical' literary experimentation associated, slightly earlier in the century, with highbrow Modernism. Thus, as opposed to seeing her later fiction as the result of an author in decline, instead my argument would be that 1950s onwards sees Christie at her most *avant garde*: that, nestled beneath the guise of the outwardly conventional and formulaic detective novel, Christie's work becomes increasingly experimental in form and content. Completed in around 1950, this, I would propose, is precisely what *Sleeping Murder* is: an experiment in Gothic form.

To return to this specific novel then, Barnard's view is that *Sleeping Murder* is a 'slightly somniferous mystery', then qualifying his pronouncement by posing the rhetorical question: 'But why would an astute businesswoman hold back one of her better performances for posthumous publication?'⁸⁶ Thus, his rationalisation as to why Christie deliberately selected *Sleeping Murder* as one of the novels she intended for posthumous publication is that the author's knowledge of her own phenomenal popularity meant that she was aware *any* novel of *any* quality could be

⁸⁵ Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, p. 191.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

released after her death to become an instant bestseller - which is exactly what took place when *Sleeping Murder* was released onto the market in 1976.⁸⁷ However, not only was Christie a smart businesswoman, as Barnard suggests, but an inventive and intelligent writer. What I would therefore argue is that the deferred publication of this novel was a deliberate move on Christie's part for the purpose of creating a noticeable parallel between subject matter and form. *Sleeping Murder* is, after all, a novel about a lost memory reactivated a generation later: a house that, after an appropriate amount of time has passed, decides to 'give up' its secret. Not only does Christie decide to thus defer the publication of this novel, but she goes one step further to deliberately falsify the origins of the book: Christie explicitly circulates the 'fact' that *Sleeping Murder* was written in the Autumn of 1940, when, as it turns out, it was not, just as Gwenda's guardians lead her to believe that her early years were spent in New Zealand, when they were actually spent in England. Thus, in a felicitous and hugely fitting parallel between external reader and internal protagonist, not only do the original 1970s readers of *Sleeping Murder* encounter its crime a generation after it was first committed, but they do so armed with a fabricated account of where this novel has come from. In other words, the mythic origins of the novel functions as a physical manifestation of the themes contained within its pages, thereby projecting onto the reader something of the uncanny, distressing, Gothic encounter with the domestic sphere experienced by the novel's heroine herself.

⁸⁷ John Sutherland argues that, although she may well be the very bestselling novelist of all time in terms of her *oeuvre* as a whole, the 1976 publication of *Sleeping Murder* was one of only two instances (the other being the publication of *Curtain* the previous year) that one of her novels could officially qualify as a 'bestseller' in its own right. See, John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 35-36.

Chapter Two - Village of the Damned: The Gothic Villages of Agatha Christie

It was very pleasant in the Vicarage garden. One of those sudden spells of autumn warmth had descended upon England. Inspector Craddock [...] sat in a deck chair provided for him by an energetic Bunch, just on her way to a Mother's Meeting, and, well protected with shawls and a large rug around her knees, Miss Marple sat knitting beside him. The sunshine, the peace, the steady click of Miss Marple's knitting needles, all combined to produce a soporific feeling in the Inspector. And yet, at the same time, there was a nightmarish feeling at the back of his mind. It was like a familiar dream where an undertone of menace grows and finally turns Ease into Terror.

- Agatha Christie, *A Murder is Announced* (1950).¹

'Unhomely' Counties: Domestic Space, Village Space, and the Facilitation of Cruelty and Crime

John Curran recently described Agatha Christie's 1930 novel, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, in which the elderly, amateur sleuth, Miss Marple makes her debut, as 'a typical village murder mystery of the sort forever linked with the name of Agatha Christie'.² Indeed, given the extraordinary longevity of Christie's career as a novelist (fifty-six years in total) it perhaps shouldn't come as a surprise that, for sake of variety, her *oeuvre* makes use of a vast range of 'closed' architectural spaces for the locations of her fictional murders and the accompanying action that precedes and proceeds them. These locations include seaside villas (as seen in the previous chapter) and the occasional country manor, along with the more esoteric examples of large-capacity modes of transportation (trains, planes, and boats), hotels both in London and abroad, student hostels, boarding schools, and even an 'extremely functional' 1960s apartment block in *Third Girl* (1966):³ a building so

¹ Agatha Christie, *A Murder is Announced* (1950; London: Harper, 2002), p. 162. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

² John Curran, *Agatha Christie's Murder in the Making: Stories and Secrets from Her Archive* (London: Harper, 2011), p. 149.

³ Agatha Christie, *Third Girl* (1966; London: Harper, 2002), p. 37.

unapologetic in its contemporaneity that one character imagines that it might 'have been lifted *en bloc* from the Great West Road and [...] have been deposited as a block of flats *in situ*'.⁴ However, as Curran's comment on *The Murder at the Vicarage* seems to gesture towards, somehow, despite this impressive range and ingenuity of setting, it is still very much those novels concerned 'with a series of murders in an ostensibly sleepy village' hazily situated within a forty mile radius of London, that has, in retrospect, been imaginatively marked out as the 'quintessential' Christie territory.⁵ With this in mind, this chapter interrogates the ways in which, contrary to the nostalgic and 'cosy' re-envisioning of Christie's fictional villages in the popular imagination,⁶ the Christean village may be interpreted as a fundamentally Gothic space. These villages include St Mary Mead, Wynchwood-under-Ash, Lymstock,⁷ and Chipping Cleghorn as portrayed, respectively, in the following

⁴ *Ibid.*; Examples of the kind of colossally-proportioned, un-ornamental, almost entirely glass-fronted post-war commercial architecture being alluded to in this description includes the buildings currently known as The Mile: 1000 Great West Road, WorleyParsons UK Head Office, the Chiswick Moran Hotel, GlaxoSmithKline House, and the Paragon campus of the University of West London.

⁵ Charles Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie: A Biographical Companion to the Works of Agatha Christie* (1982; London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 167. Also see, John Ritchie, 'Agatha Christie's England, 1918-39: Sickness in the Heart and Sickness in Society as Seen in the Detective Thriller', *Australian National University Historical Journal* 9, (December 1972) p. 3.

⁶ For example, as Alison Light has suggested, 'Christie's rural settings, which so many have seen as hermetically sealed, provide an especially empty security, apparently representing order and harmony but quickly revealed as a "cover" for its opposite'. See, Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 92.

⁷ Although Christie makes the distinction that Lymstock is technically a small town, she concurrently endows this space with pronounced 'village' nuances and atmospherics. Indeed, the problem of distinguishing between the two forms of domicile is even discussed by the novel's characters themselves. The narrator, Jerry, informs the reader that '[t]hat morning, by way of adventure, I was to walk down to the village. (Joanna and I always call it the village, although technically we were incorrect and Lymstock would have been annoyed to hear us.)' In light of such sentiments, I therefore consider Lymstock's inclusion in this chapter to be justified, particularly in light of the OED entry for 'town', in which it states that the term is '[s]ometimes also applied to small inhabited places below the rank of an "urban district" or its equivalent, *which are not distinguishable from villages* otherwise, perhaps, than by having a periodical market or fair ("market town"), or by being historically "towns" (emphasis mine). See, Agatha Christie, *The Moving Finger*, (1943; London: Harper, 2002), p. 21. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

novels: *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *The Body in the Library* (1942), *Murder is Easy* (1939), *The Moving Finger* (1943), and *A Murder is Announced* (1950).⁸

With sustained reference to Christie, in *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and the Audience* (1971), Collin Watson offers his invented 'Mayhem Parva' as a generic descriptor for the type of provincial locale that provides the settings for those novels mentioned above.⁹ According to Watson, 'the little world of Mayhem Parva' can be described as

a cross between a village and a commuter's dormitory in the South of England, self-contained and largely self-sufficient. It would have a well-attended church, an inn with reasonable accommodation for itinerant detective-inspectors, a village institute, library and shops [...]. The district would be rural, but not so uncompromisingly so - there would be a good bus service for the keeping of suspicious appointments in the nearby town, for instance - but the general character would be sufficiently picturesque to chime with the English suburb dweller's [...] hankering after retirement to 'the country'.¹⁰

At first glance the picture Watson paints seems accurate - he could very well be giving his reader a snapshot of St Mary Mead, Lymstock, or any of the country villages imagined by Christie. However, under closer scrutiny I would suggest that

⁸ Curran has suggested that her Christie's 1926 Poirot novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, is the earliest example of her 'village murder mystery' novel: the genre which this chapter is concerned with. The reasons for its absence from my discussion are twofold. Firstly, although there are some interesting parallels that can be drawn between Caroline Shepard and the 'servants and tradesmen [that] constitute her Intelligence Corps', with the ways in which Miss Marple receives and manages village gossip (Christie herself suggests Miss Marple as a subsequent development of the Caroline Shepard character in her autobiography), the novel's primary spatial imaginary is nevertheless the individual house of Fernley Park, rather than the village of King's Abbot itself. Thus, in contrast to Curran, I would instead contend that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* appears an interesting cross between the country house murder mystery and the village murder mystery, and that the latter, at least within Christie's work, doesn't develop into a fully-fledged genre in its own right until 1930's *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Secondly, in an unusual move for Christie, the village of King's Abbot is located in the North of England, somewhere between the nearby Manchester (thinly re-named 'Cranchester') and Liverpool, where the village's post is sent for sortation. In all of the novels I am interested in for the purpose of this chapter, the notional geography laid down by Christie situates their village settings very much within the English 'Home Counties'. Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926; London: Harper, 2002), p. 10. Also see, Curran, *Agatha Christie's Murder in the Making*, p. 148., and Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (1977; London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 449.

⁹ Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971), p. 169.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 169-70.

Watson's account of the typical village found in an Agatha Christie novel somehow fails to fully hang together. To begin with, it is important to note that, although very much within that late period of her career when she was only producing one book per year - the 'Christie for Christmas' as it became popularly known - Christie was nevertheless still an active novelist when *Snobbery with Violence* was first published. As such, it is important to consider to what degree Watson's assessment of Christie is an attempt to codify, rather than merely describe: a statement of what Watson would *like* Christie's work to be, rather than a description of what it actually is. Even laying this issue to one side, however, there still remains something about Watson's characterisation of Christie's village locations that simply does not ring true. If this disjunction stems not from Watson's physical description of the country village *à la* Christie (which, as I've just noted, is fairly accurate), then it does so from the label 'Mayhem Parva' itself. When used in English place names - for example, in the real villages of Appleby Parva (Leicestershire), Thornham Parva, and Linstead Parva (both Suffolk) - the affix 'Parva', which is derived from the Latin, *Parvus*, meaning 'small', refers to the size of the village in both geographical and populational terms (the size of the population, of course, often being roughly proportional to the availability of accommodation).¹¹ However, more than simply acting as a nod towards a real-life, historically rooted practice, in Watson's use of the term 'Parva' there is clearly a secondary set of resonances being crafted. By describing Christie's fictions as being set in 'the little world of Mayhem Parva', the suggestion is very much that the violent, disordered, malevolent elements of Christie's village communities are somehow themselves rather small-scale: that these villages are ultimately respectable, close-knit

¹¹ It is more often than not the case that these villages exist in close geographical proximity to a bigger and more populous 'sister village' whose name ends with the designation 'Magna' (meaning 'larger' or 'Greater').

communities in which instances of cruelty and crime are merely a narrow, temporary blip, rather than the norm. This, as I shall now argue, is not the case. To return to the excerpt from *A Murder is Announced* with which this chapter began, what interrupts Inspector Craddock's experience of a serene autumn day in the village of Chipping Cleghorn, is not the threat of some pint-sized form of malice; rather it is a far more portentous, seemingly palpable, and decidedly personified *Terror* (as indicated through Christie's use of capitalisation). In light of this, I would argue that John Ritchie makes a far more accurate appraisal of the Christean village through his observation that '[u]nder the honeysuckle scent there is corruption, a canker in the English rose'.¹² The suggestion conjured up here by Ritchie's horticultural metaphor of an unnatural, pathological growth - hidden deep down on the stem, slowly but successfully killing the beauty that dominates the surface above - is that social and ethical transgressions in Christie's villages are not on the superficial level that Watson's 'Mayhem Parva' caricature suggests, but that the village is victim to corrosively malignant forces on a much more basal level. Moreover, although it is not much more than a fleeting remark, Ritchie is, in fact, the first and only critic prior to this thesis to explicitly reference the Gothic tradition *specifically* in relation to Christie's rendering of her village locales (as opposed to her evoking of supernatural phenomena), in his proposal that '[w]ith Gothic violence and heraldic ferocity [...] [her village residents] blackmail, poison, stab, shoot and strangle' each other.¹³

As I have previously discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the bourgeois family home functions very much as the principal site of the Gothic. However, it is also my contention that the parochial village can be read as an

¹² Ritchie, 'Agatha Christie's England, 1918-39', p. 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

extrapolated version of the home owing to the fact that both arenas participate in the production of a highly ordered set of spatial and social relations. By logical extension, therefore, the Gothic's habitual exposition of the familial cruelty and violence that exists not only *in spite* of the middle-class's carving out of a quiet, blissful, private domestic sphere, but precisely *because* of it, can be escalated upwards for the purpose of thinking about the larger spatial framework of the village. Certainly, as Kathy Mezei elucidates in her précis of Leonore Davidoff, Jean L'Esperance and Howard Newby's 1976 essay, 'Landscape with Figures: Home and Community in English Society', both singular dwellings and the communal villages within which individual households are situated function through the establishment of power structures that are roughly analogous. She writes that 'both are perceived as idealised "organic" communities in which outsiders are not welcome, and which [are] hierarchical in structure, with a head, a heart and hands - father, mother, children and servants (house) or squire, vicar, labourers (village) - to maintain the life of the organism'.¹⁴ Thus, not only are home and village comparable in that they are both circumscribed, delineated spaces that mark off that which is outside from that which is inside by some sort of architectural or topographical feature - whether wall, fence, hedge, field, or road - but, moreover, both encampments denote 'two of the small units of territoriality upon which deference to traditional authority depend[s]'.¹⁵ In other words, home and village are both spatial nexus implicated in both the production and the legitimation of a set of tiered power-relations. Thus, bearing these structural and operational similarities between home and village in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that,

¹⁴ Kathy Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll', *Journal of Modern Literature* 30, 2 (Winter 2007), p. 105.

¹⁵ Leonore Davidoff, Jean L'Esperance, and Howard Newby, 'Landscape with Figures: Home and Community in English Society', in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 143.

despite being comprised of as much (if not more) outdoor, open-air public space - which, as part of the Romantic legacy, we almost cannot help but think of being 'free', unmonitored, unimpounding - as private interior space, Christie's country villages can feel just as confining, claustrophobic, and imprisoning as the Gothic homesteads of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Wilkie Collins' *Blackwater Park*, or Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Audley Court*.¹⁶

A Prison without Inside or Outside: Gothic Incarceration and Surveillance in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) and *The Moving Finger* (1943)

With the preceding discussion in mind, I would suggest that a pervading sense that outside, public space does not equate to any notion of freedom or safety underlies all of Christie's village-based novels. To give one example, the attempted murder of the proto-detective heroine Bridget Conway towards the close of *Murder is Easy* takes place in a copse of trees lying in the centre of several fields. The idea that cruel incarceration can extend beyond the walls of the family home into the village beyond is also strongly suggested through the Gothic imagery employed in 1930's *The Murder at the Vicarage*. The novel is set in St Mary Mead: a picturesque, parochial village located somewhere within the county of 'Downshire' - a fictionalised version of one of England's so-called 'Home Counties'. One Wednesday lunchtime, the novel's narrator, Reverend Leonard Clement, inopportunistically remarks to his wife and teenage nephew 'that anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe

¹⁶ For further discussion of the settings of sensation novels as translations of earlier forms of the Gothic mansion, see Chiara Briganti, 'Gothic Maidens and Sensation Women: Lady Audley's Journey from the Ruined Mansion to the Madhouse', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 19 (1991), pp. 189-211 and Chapter I 'Displacing the Gothic in *Lady Audley's Secret*' in Saverio Tomaiuolo, *In Lady Audley's Shadow: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Literary Genres* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 23-40 (esp. pp. 26-27).

would be doing the world at large a service'.¹⁷ Coincidentally, the very next evening, Leonard finds the local magistrate slumped over the writing desk in the Vicarage's study having been shot in the head. Although the Colonel's wife, Anne, and her lover, Lawrence Redding, both confess to the murder, they are quickly ruled out as suspects by the police as it appears that each one has only confessed because they suspect the other is the guilty party. The crime is eventually solved thanks almost entirely to the Clements' next door neighbour, Miss Jane Marple: the shrewd and remarkably canny spinster, who, in the words of the vicar's wife, Griselda, 'always knows every single thing that happens [in the village] - and draws the worst inferences from it' (12). Miss Marple helps the police to realise that, their first set of 'confessions' having been a double bluff, the patently *too* obvious Anne and Lawrence are indeed the culprits: the former having shot her husband with the revolver that the latter left *in situ* within the Vicarage. In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that live burial is at once both one of the most prominent motifs and one of the most salient thematic fixations of the genre.¹⁸ During the second half of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Leonard and Griselda accept an invitation to an after-dinner gathering at Miss Marple's home on occasion of a visit from her nephew, Raymond West: a 'highbrow' novelist who often functions as Christie's vehicle through which to poke fun at her Modernist contemporaries. During their time spent at Miss Marple's, Leonard becomes increasingly irritated by the foppish writer's repeated use of the expression 'buried down here as you are' (248). On the one hand, Raymond's offending utterance is simply the urbanite's patronising metaphor for articulating St Mary Mead's physical detachment from the nearest conurbations. Thus, in a sense, what you get

¹⁷ Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930; London: Harper, 2002), p. 7. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Arno, 1980), pp. 22-23.

here in terms of the language used by Raymond in this not uncommon expression is a metaphor of verticality, only in this context being played out along a horizontal plane. However, were we to read this metaphorical articulation of the distance between surface and subterrain - between daylight and darkness - actually along its original vertical axis, Raymond's remark is also suitably suggestive of the Gothic image of a casketed state of existence. Indeed, this idea is further accentuated by Raymond's response to Leonard's sadly ineffectual attempt to chide him, in which the writer, waving his cigarette in an ostentatious manner, confidently exclaims that St Mary Mead is 'a stagnant pool' (248). Here it is Miss Marple who picks up the mantle, reprimanding her nephew's naive flippancy far more effectively by criticising his sloppiness of expression. She suggests that '[t]hat is really not a very good simile, dear Raymond [...] Nothing, I believe, is so full of life under the microscope as a drop of water from a stagnant pool' (248). Thus, akin to the Gothic tomb found not to house the dead, but the living (or *re-living*), perhaps most famously in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), here the imagery used in relation to the village of St Mary Mead is almost that of *undeadness*: of a liminal state in which it is difficult to confidently differentiate between life and death; between activity and decay.

Bearing this image of village life as entombment in mind, it may be argued that Christie's villages differ from more traditional Gothic settings, such as those examples by Brontë, Collins, and Braddon cited earlier, in the sense that the tension structuring these settings is not a clear inside/outside dichotomy. Indeed, the difficulty in controlling access to the *individual* village properties is made explicit when it is commented that the residents of St Mary Mead leave their homes 'habitually unlocked' (214). On the contrary, it is life within the village *as a whole* that functions as something akin to an experience of Gothic incarceration. In these

novels, outdoor spaces do not represent the potential for release from captivity that is set out by the traditional Gothic paradigm. Instead, the exterior landscapes surrounding and connecting individual dwellings function simply as a continuation of domestic interiority, or, to put it otherwise, that the outside is contained within another inside: that of the borders of the village itself. As a more abstract, less architecturally-overt construct, the village borders are thus all the more difficult for those detained within these villages to conceptualise 'crossing-over', at least not in any significant or meaningful sense. Thus, because the true 'outside' in these novels is only present at one stage removed, I would suggest that Christie's country villages are even more dourly claustrophobic than the traditional Gothic homestead, for as Sedgwick goes on to posit, the prison which has no clearly defined outside or inside 'is self-evidently one from which there is no escape'.¹⁹ However, given that the characters in the novels I am discussing, although geographically isolated, are never actually 'locked up' in the literal sense of the term (save, of course, the guilty parties at the end of each novel) and are certainly at least free enough to take the occasional day-trip to places like London (as Griselda does on the day of the murder in *The Murder at the Vicarage*), the 'interiorfication' of the outdoor spaces that are present within Christie's villages - the transfiguration of these spaces into Gothic sites of cruel incarceration - is necessarily manifested via more subtle means than locked doors and barred windows.

To this effect, I would argue that the natural endpoint to the detaining of characters in domestic spaces against their will, the cutting off of their lines of communication, and the scrutinising of their every move that litters the pages of the Gothic novel can be found in the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham's

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

proposed design for his model prison - the Panopticon - as discussed in Michel Foucault's 1975 work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.²⁰ According to Foucault, the circular design of Bentham's 'apparatus of total and circulating mistrust' guarantees that,²¹ whilst each prisoner would be made unflinching aware of the presence of an 'inspector' whose task it would be to survey the prison from the advantageous position of the central tower, they would in turn never be able to ascertain if or when exactly the inspector was viewing them directly. As a consequence, each prisoner is forced into a process of self-regulating their own behaviour for fear of the consequences were they to be observed behaving disobediently. In this sense, the power dynamics implicated within the panopticon are both visible yet unverifiable: visible in the sense that 'the inmate will constantly have before them the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon' and unverifiable owing to the fact that 'the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so'.²² In the small village of St Mary Mead, as the vicar warns Lawrence Redding, 'everyone knows your most intimate affairs' (47), and they do so precisely because

²⁰ In a subsequent meditation on the panopticon, Foucault himself specifically invokes the genre of Gothic fiction in relation to Bentham's proposed prison structure. However, Foucault's reading of early Gothic fiction is very much that frustrating, very *literal* interpretation of eighteenth-century Gothic that I take issue with in the introduction to this thesis. Consequently, this leads Foucault to suggest that the panopticon serves as the *antidote*, rather than the endpoint of the Gothic. He suggests that 'Gothic novels develop a whole fantasy-world of stone walls, darkness, hideouts and dungeons which harbour [...] brigands and aristocrats, monks and traitors. [...] [T]hese imaginary spaces are like the negative of the transparency and visibility which it is aimed to establish. [...] In the Panopticon, [by contrast,] there is used a form close to that of a castle - a keep surrounded by walls - to paradoxically create a space of exact legibility'. My argument here is clearly very different. Indeed, a keep surrounded by walls that houses a space of exact legibility so perfectly describes what the Gothic novel - take away smoky and mysterious set-dressing - has *always* centred upon: the middle-class family home. Michel Foucault, 'The Eye of Power' (1977), in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977* (trans. Colin Gordon *et al*) (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 158; Paulina Palmer touches upon the strong parallels between Bentham's panopticon and Gothic genre's articulation of domestic space in her article, 'Lesbian Gothic: Genre, Transformation, Transgression', *Gothic Studies* 6, 1 (2004), pp. 118-30.

²¹ Foucault, 'The Eye of Power', *Power/Knowledge*, p. 158.

²² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan) (1975; London: Penguin, 1991), p. 201.

of far-reaching and seemingly continual surveillance of one another. For example, in chapter four, several members of the community are, much to the apparent dismay (and slight wry amusement) of the vicar, involved in tracking the movements of the village's enigmatic newcomer, Estelle Lestrangle, via a network of telephone calls:

Griselda came in at the moment.
'Miss Weatherby's just rung up,' she said. 'Mrs Lestrangle went out at a quarter past eight and hasn't come in yet. Nobody knows where she's gone.'
'Why should they know?' (50)

Griselda is evidently unperturbed by her husband's rather valid point:

'But it isn't to Dr Haydock's. Miss Weatherby does know that, because she telephoned to Miss Hartnell who lives next door to him and who would have been sure to see her.'
'It's a mystery to me,' I said, 'how anyone ever gets any nourishment in this place. They must eat their meals standing up by the window so as to be sure not to miss anything.'
'And that's not all,' said Griselda, bubbling with pleasure. 'They've found out about the Blue Boar. Dr Stone and Miss Cram have got rooms next door to each other, BUT' - she waved an impressive forefinger - '*no communicating door!*'
'That,' I said, 'must be very disappointing to everybody.' (50)

The forays into surveillance exhibited by women such as Griselda, Miss Weatherby and Miss Hartnell, however, utterly pale in comparison with the ruthless, scrutinising gaze of Miss Marple, who is the only resident truly worthy of comparison to the central inspector of Bentham's panopticon. As one of the three ground-plans provided in the novel illustrates, Miss Marple's house sits right at the very centre of the village (figure 1), and thus invites parallels with the inspector's observation tower at the heart of the panoptic scheme. Leonard even refers to a certain section of the the lane leading from the northern end of the village towards the back of the Vicarage - the section that passes by Miss Marple's back garden - as the 'danger point', narrating that 'I called in at a house further down the village and

returned to the Vicarage by the garden gate, passing, as I did so, the danger point of Miss Marple's garden' (37). By walking this route, a resident of St Mary Mead could never know for certain whether or not they have entered Miss Marple's field of vision, however, they must be aware that it is *always* a distinct possibility (not that they would be any safer walking the route past Miss Marple's front garden, where the same dilemma occurs). Indeed, the auspicious placement of Miss Marple's cottage (auspicious, that is, in terms of witnessing events elsewhere in the village) is something which is picked up upon by the police looking into Lucius Protheroe's murder. On the day after the murder, the Chief Constable, Colonel Melchett, comments to her that 'it seems possible that owing to the position of your house and garden, you may have been able to tell us something we want to know about yesterday evening' (100). Miss Marple responds that '[a]s a matter of fact, I was in my little garden from five o'clock onwards yesterday, and, of course, from there - well, one simply cannot help seeing anything that is going on next door' (101). Miss Marple's false modesty and employment of deferential speech - 'my little garden', 'one cannot help...' - belies her knowledge of how best to take advantage of her position of substantial power. For when the elderly sleuth is in her garden, she is a paragon of unrelenting surveillance, even armed with a pair of binoculars ('I was observing a bird', she insists) (104).²³ Indeed, it is precisely through such 'fortunate' observation of her neighbours' comings and goings that Anne Protheroe's initial confession is proved to be a false one. Anne's assertion that she shot her husband with a gun she had taken with her is mooted by Miss Marple's

²³ For further discussion of Miss Marple's use of deferential speech, see, Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech', pp. 103-20 (esp. pp. 109-10); In *The Body in the Library*, Miss Marple even utilises door-to-door charity collection as a means of gaining access to view the interiors of particular homes so that she might confirm or deny her suspicions. See, Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library* (1942; London: Harper, 2002), pp. 233-35. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

insistence to Colonel Melchett that 'you know what young women are nowadays. Not ashamed to show exactly how the creator made them. She hadn't so much as a handkerchief in the top of her stocking' (106). Given that *The Murder at the Vicarage* is a novel preoccupied with the conflict between different perspectival vantages - competing angles of perception - incidents such the one I have just cited function as a sort of synecdoche: Miss Marple's eventual solving of the murder, but in miniature form. Bearing in mind that the elderly spinster is neither the novel's narrator, an investigating officer, nor in any position of social authority, these small victories - what Leonard elsewhere terms the 'grudging tribute[s]' he is often forced to pay the shrewd busybody (38) - helps to install Miss Marple, not only as a panoptic force, but as *the* panoptic force, thus serving 'as a cue to the reader to pay closer attention to Miss Marple's verbal and visual observations'.²⁴

Thus, although St Mary Mead as portrayed in *The Murder at the Vicarage* is a site of perpetual surveillance, invasive panoptic scrutiny is, perhaps owing to Leonard's droll narrative style, generally given a light-hearted and comic framing: for instance in the exchange between Leonard and Griselda cited above. However, the panoptic village from which there appears to be no escape is given a much darker, more resolutely Gothic fashioning in a slightly later book in Christie's 'Miss Marple' series: 1943's *The Moving Finger*. The title of this novel is derived from Edward FitzGerald's translation of Omar Khayyám's eleventh-century poem that begins 'The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, | Moves on'.²⁵ However, from our perspective here in the post-Foucauldian world of the early-twenty-first

²⁴ Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech', p. 107.

²⁵ Edward FitzGerald, *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 41. Characteristic of Christie, however, as the novel progresses, the phrase 'The Moving Finger' also procures a secondary meaning, which is that the author of the poison pen letters typed the addresses on the envelopes in an amateurish fashion using only one finger at a time in order to disguise the fact that they are a person who frequently uses a typewriter within their professional capacity.

century, the image of Khayyám's constant yet heedless 'moving finger' might be said to resemble the field of vision of the Panopticon's central inspector as it indiscriminately passes over each cell of the prison in turn. *The Moving Finger* is narrated by Jerry Burton, a wounded pilot encouraged by his doctor to remove from London and to 'go down to the country, take a house, get interested in local politics, in local scandal, in village gossip. Take an inquisitive and violent interest in your neighbours' (8-9). Having taken this advice, accompanied by his sister, Joanna, urbanite Jerry arrives in the 'placid backwater' of Lymstock, taking residence at Little Furze (9): a picturesque house on the outskirts of the village. However, the much needed rest and repose that the doctor ordered is not what Lymstock has in mind for Jerry, and, shortly after their arrival, the siblings become the newest victims of what appears to be a particularly corrosive spate of poison pen letter receipt. The Burtons have not been installed in the village more than a fortnight when Jerry receives an anonymous, defamatory letter in the morning post that accuses Joanna of being his lover rather than his blood-relation. Although the siblings initially laugh the incident off, with Joanna, for example, exclaiming that the exploit is 'frightfully funny' (20), the darker, more malevolent implications of the letter begin to dawn on the pair soon afterwards. Taking his cue from Joanna's subsequent re-assessment of the incident, Jerry tells the reader that

I thought to myself as I smoked my breakfast cigarette that [Joanna] was quite right. It was nasty. Someone resented our coming here - someone resented Joanna's bright young sophisticated beauty - somebody wanted to *hurt*. To take it with a laugh was perhaps the best way - but deep down it wasn't funny[.] (21)

This rupture of spite and malice in the otherwise serene surface of life in the peaceful country village has come as a shock to Jerry and Joanna who have been duped into believing that Lymstock is '[s]o sweet and funny and old-world. You just

can't imagine anything nasty happening here' (15). Clearly, the siblings have been fooled by the deceptive façade of the countryside: its capacity for cloaking-over the evil contained therein beneath a shroud of benign amicability. However, now far more aware of the ill-feeling that can be fomented precisely *through* prolonged detainment in the insular, claustrophobic, and inward-gazing environment of the small country village, during the second half of the novel, Joanna attempts to appropriate something of the anonymous letter writer's frame-of-mind, pondering whether 'if I weren't young and reasonably attractive and able to have a good time, if I were - how shall I put it? - behind bars, watching other people enjoy life, would a black evil tide rise in me, making me want to hurt, to torture - even to destroy?' (196). Not only is Joanna's presupposition here almost uncannily perspicacious, but, I would suggest that it could almost come to stand as emblematic of the Gothic-inflection of Christie's village novels as a whole, in its deft consolidation of imagery of incarceration with those of continual surveillance and of unearthly, sinister, macabre phenomena.

As previously noted, the Burtons are far from the only victims of the 'outpouring of vindictive spleen' harrying Lymstock, and, in fact, nearly every notable resident of the village has received at least one offensive letter (53).²⁶ Foucault argues that what the design for Bentham's Panopticon demonstrates is that 'real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation'.²⁷ In other words, the prison induces 'a state of consciousness and permanent visibility' in the prisoner *irrespective* of whether he or she is actually being observed.²⁸ A strikingly

²⁶ Indeed, the failure of one particular person in Lymstock to receive an anonymous letter is one of the idiosyncratic details that helps to eventually unmask the culprit. As Miss Marple suggests, it was the guilty party's 'one weakness. He couldn't bring himself to write a foul letter to the girl he loved. It's a very interesting sidelight on human nature - and a credit to him, in a way - but it's where he gave himself away.' (291-92)

²⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 202.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

similar effect is achieved by the poison pen letters in *The Moving Finger* due to the fact that, like the Burtons' note, most of the letters appear to be wildly inaccurate. On the one hand, this appears somewhat counterintuitive: surely the fact that the letters appear to be motivated by seemingly unbridled malice, rather than any real insight into the private lives of their recipients, should help alleviate fears that their author has any substantial knowledge of others' guilty secrets? However, the actual effect of the letters upon the residents of Lymstock is precisely the opposite, in the sense that it is the very indiscriminateness of the accusations being made that works to ferment a growing fear over continual invasive observation: that, as the 'moving finger' of suspicion passes from resident to resident, it becomes not so much a question of *if* the author of the letters will accurately conjecture at someone's hidden secret, but rather a question of *when* they will correctly guess. In fact, this is a conclusion that Owen Griffith, the local doctor, arrives at early within the novel, prophesising that 'crude, childish spite though it is, sooner or later one of these letters will hit the mark. And then, God knows what may happen!' (24). Jerry himself later re-capitulates this thought as '[s]ooner or later the shot in the dark went home' (88).²⁹ This is precisely what appears to have taken place when Mona Symmington is found dead one Wednesday afternoon, seemingly having taken her own life by way of cyanide after receiving a note insinuating that her youngest son was fathered by someone other than her current husband, Richard.

The Symmingtons, despite their surface appearance as 'a placid, happy couple devoted to each other and their children' (92), are one of Christie's most notable family romances. This is primarily owing to the disquieting presence of Megan Hunter - Mona's twenty-year-old daughter by her first marriage - within the

²⁹ Between these, a third variation on this image is offered by Maud Dane Calthrop who comments to Jerry that the poison pen letters seem to be motivated by '[b]lind hatred... yes, blind hatred. But even a blind man might stab the heart by pure chance... And then what would happen, Mr Burton?' (86).

Symmington household, which otherwise consists of Mona, Richard, and their two sons, Brian and Collin. As Joanna comments to her brother, the despondent and socially maladroit Megan is ‘an awkward sort of creature to have about the house. She disturbs the pattern - the Symmington pattern. It is a complete unit without her’ (59). Joanna’s remark appears particularly salient in light of widespread changes to family size and patterning that took place within the British population after the First World War. In stark contradistinction to what Nicola Humble terms the sprawling, ‘multitudinous, [...] uneconomic family’ of the nineteenth century,³⁰ the model of normative domesticity that rose to such a visible prominence in the interwar period was the small, far more sharply contained nuclear family consisting of mother, father, and their small number of children.³¹ Furthermore, as Deborah Cohen argues, it is precisely ‘against a backdrop in which the nuclear family with its two children was becoming the norm, [that] the very last thing that [...] parents wanted was anything that made them stand out from their neighbours, a peculiarity that required explanation’.³² This, of course, is exactly what Megan functions as: a member of the household who doesn’t ‘really’ belong, a member whose provenance and position is not immediately legible but very much necessitates elucidation to interested outside parties. Ultimately, Megan’s prolonged presence within the Symmington household very much disrupts the culturally prevalent notion of what constitutes ‘proper’ domesticity.

³⁰ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s-1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (1981; London: Longman, 1989), p. 187; Jane Lewis, *Women in England: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Hemel Hemstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1984); Leonore Davidoff, ‘The Family in Britain’, in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950: Volume II, People and Their Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.103.

³² Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London: Viking, 2013), pp. 119-20.

As I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Davidoff, L'Esperance, and Newby suggest that one of the shortcomings of the alignment of the home with aspirations of staunchly private sanctum, is that such 'good' aspirations carry with them a 'dark, exploitative underside' in which 'bad' forms of household governance are also not called up to account.³³ Owing precisely to such freedom of rule, they argue that more normative, moderate forms of parental care can easily escalate into 'either overbearing officiousness or even tyranny; on the other hand it [can] justify self-centred neglect of subordinates' welfare'.³⁴ Living with a mother and step-father who do not even bother to ensure that their daughter has enough pairs of stockings in wearable condition, or that she is always provided with an evening meal, gross parental neglect is indeed the appalling family situation that Megan finds herself in. For example, when Jerry goes to see Richard on legal matters, he says to the lawyer that 'I walked down the hill with your step-daughter' (40). Subsequently it is narrated that, '[f]or a moment Mr Symmington looked as though he did not know who his step-daughter was' (40). During the period within which Megan goes to stay with the Burtons following her mother's death, the point is reenforced even further. After unexpectedly encountering Richard in the High Street, Jerry relays to the reader that he 'took a dislike to Symmington then which I never quite overcame. He had so obviously forgotten all about Megan. I wouldn't have minded if he had actively disliked the girl - but he didn't dislike her, he just hardly noticed her [...] Symmington's complete indifference to his step-daughter annoyed me very much' (114-15). Unfortunately, Megan's own mother is little better than her husband in her neglect of her biological offspring's welfare. This is

³³ Davidoff, L'Esperance, and Newby, 'Landscape with Figures', *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, p. 145.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

made explicit in the exchange that takes place between a concerned Joanna and hugely indifferent Mona and the Symmington's bridge party:

The red glint was still in Joanna's eye. She said as we sat down again at the bridge table:

'I suppose she'll be going to parties and all that sort of thing. Are you going to give a dance for her?'

'A dance?' Mrs Symmington seemed surprised and amused. 'Oh, no, we don't do things like that down here.'

'I see. Just tennis parties and things like that.'

'Our tennis court has not been played on for years. Neither Richard or I play. I suppose, later, when the boys grow up - Oh, Megan will find plenty to do. She's quite happy just pottering about, you know. Let me see, did I deal? Two No Trumps.' (58-59)

Not only is it the case that Mona would rather not have her firstborn present within her current her domestic setup - a feeling that Megan herself has picked up on and internalised - but, even worse, neither is she willing to invest any amount of time, energy, or much money into helping Megan into her own family home. Megan's prospects are thus being cruelly limited, through sheer neglect rather than anything else, with Mona needlessly hemming in her daughter's romantic possibilities in a way that she evidently would never dream of doing for either of her two sons. The Symmingtons' treatment of Megan, I would suggest, thus throws light upon the brief, but oddly significant reported nineteenth-century episode concerning the Burton's landlady, Emily Barton. When Mr Pye has the Burtons over for tea, he feels compelled to tell his guests all about the elderly Miss Barton's mother:

But, my dears, you *ought* to have known that family! When I came here the old mother was still alive. [...] A *monster*, if you know what I mean. [...] The old-fashioned Victorian monster, devouring her young. Yes, that's what it amounted to. She was monumental, you know, must have weighed seventeen stone, and all five daughters revolved around her. "The girls"! That's how she spoke of them. [...] "Those stupid girls!" she used to call them sometimes. Black slaves, that's all they were, fetching and carrying and agreeing with her. [...] She despised them, you know, for not getting married, and yet so arranged their lives that it was practically impossible

for them to meet anybody. [...] And then the dreadful old woman died, but of course it was far too late *then*. They just went on living there and talking in hushed voices about what poor Mamma would have wished. (47-48)

Imaged by Mr Pye as cannibalistic and corporeally excessive (to such a degree that her kept-nearby offspring appear more like appendages than fully human subjects in their own right), Mrs Barton functions very much as the monstrous parent of the Gothic narrative, whose cruel and even downright torturous treatment of her own flesh-and-blood is read very much as 'a gross violation of a more fundamental natural law, one that promotes the health and survival of young'.³⁵ Although Mrs Barton has certainly lived an opulent, comfortable, and well-attended life, this lack of any want has come precisely at the expense of the lives of her daughters, particularly Emily. In the first instance, Mrs Barton's parasitic over-dependence on her daughters has meant that they have simply not acquired any skills necessary for supporting themselves financially as the family's money reaches depletion. This, in the novel's present day, effectively forces Emily out of her own home, with her needing to be taken in by a former servant so that she can make a small income by putting Little Furze up for rent. Moreover, there is, within the novel, a very poignant sense of the loneliness that such a sacrificial relationship between a daughter and her mother produces. Reflecting on Emily's comment that it was very kind and obliging of him 'to come to such a feminine meal as tea' (151), Jerry comments that

Emily Barton, I think, has a mental picture of men as interminably consuming whiskies and sodas and smoking cigars, and in the intervals dropping out to do a few seductions of village maidens, or to conduct a liaison with a married woman.

When I said this to Joanna later, she replied that it was probably wishful thinking, that Emily Barton would have liked to come across such a man, but alas had never done so. (151-52)

³⁵ Valdine Clements, *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from 'The Castle of Otranto' to 'Alien'* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 38.

Now herself an old woman, the damage done to Emily through her mother's cruel treatment and extreme selfishness is sadly irreversible. Significantly, the grotesque, monstrous Victorian mother, as a recognisable figure, is certainly not limited to Christie's novel, but crops up within a significant number of 'middlebrow' fictions of the period. One obvious example would be Mrs Starkadder (or otherwise Aunt Ada Doom) of Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), the characterisation of whom I will discuss more fully in chapter five. However, perhaps the most damning indictment of the figure is to be found in Rachel Ferguson's *Alas, Poor Lady* (1937). In exploring the role played by neglectful and supremely self-centred Victorian mothers in the production of lonely and financially struggling elderly spinsters ('distressed gentlewomen' like Christie's Emily Barton) in the mid-twentieth century, Ferguson's novel, as Persephone Books claim in the publicity for their 2006 reprint, is written very much 'in the Lytton Strachey tradition of furious anger with those who had gone before'.³⁶ However, whilst novels such as Gibbons' and Ferguson's certainly suggest the detrimental legacy of a particularly Gothicised form of Victorian parenting as still being firmly felt in the present day of the mid-twentieth century, I would argue that, in Christie's novel, Mona's treatment of her daughter goes one stage further, illustrating that the selfish Victorian mother is not a hangover from the past who can be laughed away (*à la* Gibbons), but that she still exists, is still powerful, and still risks devastating the lives of her offspring in greedy pursuit of her own comfort and happiness. Mona Symmington is therefore very much the twentieth-century counterpart of a woman like old Mrs Barton: that, as Jerry puts it, her 'anaemic, slighted, faded prettiness concealed [...] a selfish and grasping nature' (58). Thus, although nowhere near as overtly presented through

³⁶ Anon. 'Alas, Poor Lady by Rachel Ferguson', <<http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/alas-poor-lady.html>> [accessed 16 September 2014] (para. 2 of 7).

the trappings of the grotesque, Mona's lack of interest in many aspects of her daughter's wellbeing nevertheless renders her very much as a frightening distortion of the fantasy of what a mother ought to be.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that Megan is presented throughout the novel as diffident, marginalised, and painfully jealous of the affection lavished on her two young half-brothers. In this sense, Megan functions very much as the archetypal Gothic heroine, who, as Tania Modleski posits, 'always feels helpless, confused, frightened, and despised'.³⁷ However, Megan's victimisation is not confined within the boundaries of her own family home, but, significantly, extends outwards into the wider social space of the village. Davidoff, L'Esperance, and Newby suggest that the outward extension of - in a sense, the next level *up* from - parental rule devolving into either cruelty towards or outright neglect of those in need of looking after is that 'close-knit sociability lapse[s] into cruel gossip'.³⁸ Very much in contrast to the way in which such activity is presented in a novel like *The Murder at the Vicarage*, in *The Body in the Library* Christie throws light upon the much darker side of insatiable tongue-wagging, suggesting just how Gothic an experience it can be to find yourself positioned as the subject of sadistic gossip. In chapter thirteen of the novel, the usually spirited and flamboyant Dolly Bantry - a woman adept at taking everything in her stride with good humour - is nevertheless compelled to speak out most unequivocally about what she sees as the protracted emotional and socially traumatic effects of the gossip currently circulating about her husband. With a 'sudden bitter note' she tells her friend Miss Marple that

³⁷ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, CN: Archon, 1982), p. 65.

³⁸ Davidoff, L'Esperance, and Newby, 'Landscape with Figures', *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, p. 145.

I'm not altogether a fool. You may think, Jane, that I don't know what they're saying all over St Mary Mead - all over the country! They're saying, one and all, that there's no smoke without fire, that if the girl was found in Arthur's library, then Arthur must know something about it. They're saying that the girl was Arthur's mistress - that she was his illegitimate daughter - that she was blackmailing him. They're saying anything that comes into their dammed heads! And it will go on like that! Arthur won't realise at first - he won't know what's wrong. He's such a dear old stupid that he'd never believe people would think things like that about him. He'll be cold shouldered and looked at askance [...] and it will dawn on him little by little and suddenly he'll be horrified and cut to the soul[.] (215-16)

Indeed, there are two things that resonate most acutely from Dolly's lament: the first of which is the almost child-like innocence of her husband, existing in sharp contrast to the seeming inhumanity of the rest of the village, whose genuine lack of empathy for their neighbour in the face of the pleasure to be had from hypothesising as to how a dead body ended up in his library, is truly startling. The second is the way in which the act of gossip might be seen as powerfully Gothic in its production of a distinct loss of control over one's own identity, actions, and appearance. Finding oneself the subject of gossip robs an individual of their ability to fashion their own coherent subjecthood, rendering the self as both fractured and unstable, and producing a frightening sense of the self as somehow escaping the boundaries of the individual human frame: a sense of the self as being determined somewhere external to where we think it ought to be. This is precisely the predicament facing Megan in *The Moving Finger*, who frequently finds herself the subject of unfeeling Lymstockian gossip. In her case, the village's intrusive fascination with Megan owes to the seemingly widespread knowledge that her father was a criminal. In an enactment of 'the Gothic theme that the sins of the father are visited on the offspring',³⁹ Aimée Griffith, in just one example from a slew of similar comments made by various characters throughout the novel, explains to Jerry that Megan is '[a] great disappointment to her mother. The father [...] was

³⁹ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (1996; Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 129.

definitely a wrong 'un. Afraid the child takes after him. Painful for her mother' (38). The Gothic's preoccupation with inheritance - both material and psychological - is very much the idea that the novel explores through the relationship between Megan and her absent father. Towards the close of the novel, Jerry stumbles upon an unlikely meeting taking place by the bridge at the edge of the village between Megan and Miss Marple: the 'expert' on 'human wickedness' purposefully invited to Lymstock by her friend, Maud Dane Calthrop (285). After Megan walks off in the other direction, Jerry's attempt to go after her is thwarted by Miss Marple who, rather than explain the truth of the situation, simply tells him: 'No, don't go after Megan just now. It wouldn't be wise[.] [...] She must keep her courage intact' (273). Thus, despite having fallen in love with Megan and even asked for her hand in marriage by this particular juncture of the novel, with all the gossip that he has heard about her playing on his mind, even Jerry cannot help but interpret the scene before him as Miss Marple encouraging Megan to confess to the police that she is the poison pen author (and thus, in some sense, responsible for her mother's suicide), when, in actual fact, Miss Marple is enlisting Megan's help to set a trap for the real culprit. Jerry's growing fear that the woman he loves may have been motivated to such spiteful behaviour by a criminal insanity passed down through her paternal bloodline is conveyed through the dark, quasi-dreamlike sequence that opens the sub-chapter following Megan and Miss Marple's secret parley, in which lines that Megan has spoken to him previously in the novel - including at her initial refusal of his marriage offer - come back to haunt Jerry with new and sinister significance:

Where do one's fears come from? Where do they shape themselves? Where do they hide before coming out into the open?

Just one short phrase. Heard and noted and never quite put aside:
'Take me away - it's so awful being here - feeling so wicked...' [...]
No, no, not *Megan*.

Heredity? Bad blood. An unconscious inheritance of something abnormal? Her misfortune, not her fault, a curse laid upon her by a past generation?

'I'm not the wife for you. I'm better at hating than loving.'

Oh, my Megan, my little child. Not *that!* Anything but that. And that old Tabby is after you, she suspects. She says you have to have courage. Courage to do *what?* (275-76)

However, in addition to the looming threat of an inherited insanity, Christie's Gothicisation of Megan is also given form in the novel's exploitation of the connections traditionally made between 'weak' femininity and the ghostly. Megan, who does not even consider herself to be a 'real person' (74), is portrayed for much of the novel as a quasi-spectral figure, almost completely lacking in human agency. In particular, Megan's seeming lack of both intent and animation in her movement from location to location around the village is distinctly ghost-like in its lethargic shiftlessness. We see Megan 'moon[ing] about' the village (37), 'slouch[ing]' in and out of rooms, 'standing aimlessly' (143), 'shuffling along in an aimless manner' (238), and 'mooch[ing] about' (240). Moreover, Megan's surprise entry into the Symmington's bridge party is particularly significant in this respect, and is staged by Christie in an almost cinematically Gothic mode that makes striking and significant use of the ghost's equally incorporeal, interchangeable sister-trope of the shadow:⁴⁰

Tea was laid in the dining-room, round a big table. As we were finishing, two hot and excited little boys rushed in and were introduced, Mrs Symmington beaming with maternal pride, as was their father. Then, just as we were finishing a shadow darkened my plate, and I turned my head to see Megan standing in the French window. (56-57)

⁴⁰ Indeed, I would argue that the interchangeability of these two tropes is of particular purchase in terms of connoting feeble and submissive femininity. For example, in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), the enraged Mrs Danvers taunts the nameless heroine-narrator that 'She's the real Mrs de Winter, not you. It's you that's the shadow and the ghost'. Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (1938; London: Virago, 2007), p. 275.

In terms of Megan's entry into the dining room, what we first see - what first enters our visual 'frame', as it were - is the shadow, not the person: the darkness cast, rather than the 'thing' itself. In doing so, in deferring our encounter with Megan's actual physicality in preference for the literal and metaphorical 'darkness' she casts over this scene of happy, normative domesticity, Christie's suggestion is that Megan, in some sense, *is* the shadow, rather than the flesh-and-blood being. Thus, bearing the novel's ghostly couching of Megan in mind, it is telling that upon Jerry's suggestion to her that she is old enough to move away from her parents' home and to earn her own living elsewhere, Megan's angry response is inflected by a rhetoric of haunting and exorcism:

Why should I go away? And *be made to go away*? They don't want me. But I'll *stay*. I'll stay and make everyone sorry. I'll make them all sorry. Hateful pigs! I hate everyone here in Lymstock. They all think I'm stupid and ugly. I'll show them. I'll show them. (78, first emphasis mine)

What is being expressly articulated here - what Megan has, in a sense, internalised - is the village's collective agreement that *she* is the disturbance, the distortion, the 'disharmonious element' in the house (256): that it is Megan that must be forced beyond, firstly, the boundaries of her own home, and secondly (as per Jerry's suggestion), the borders of Lymstock as a village in its entirety in order for a cordial and harmonious atmosphere to be achieved. However, the chief irony underlining the novel is that, although it is Megan's unhappiness and emotional distance from the rest of Lymstock society - her position 'behind bars, watching other people enjoy life', as Joanna describes it - which makes her the perfect candidate for the hateful letter sending that may have induced her mother to take her own life, the real culprit is actually her step-father. Presented throughout the novel as the 'acme of calm respectability' (39), it is Richard Symmington who, infatuated with his sons' young and beautiful governess, Elsie Holland, planned

(and succeeded) in the dispatch of his neurotic wife by poison, using the anonymous letters merely as a diversion. Foucault has noted that, as opposed to the actual bricks-and-mortar building that Bentham's proposes, panopticism more generally, although certainly a powerful tool of oppression, it is not a disciplinary schema that is beyond being subverted. He argues that in panoptic culture 'one doesn't have [...] a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised'.⁴¹ Thus, as with Anne Protheroe and Lawrence Redding in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, who have noticed that Miss Marple is 'a noticing kind of person' (361), and thus attempt to orchestrate what they *want* her to see (Anne's inability on the evening of the murder to conceal a gun about her person), Richard's intention with his poison pen letter scheme is to utilise the village's susceptibility to circulating mistrust to reconfigure the panoptic system to his advantage: cunningly orchestrating the behaviour of the residents of the village to throw everyone off the scent of what he plans to do. Specifically, by arranging for an outbreak of malicious, defamatory letters - letters from which himself and his wife are not exempt - Richard is able assume the appearance of a powerless prisoner when he is, at least in his own mind, the mighty inspector. However, because, as Foucault suggests, no one individual can ever be granted complete immunity from panoptic scrutiny, Richard ultimately fails to get away with murdering his wife, or with the subsequent murder of his servant, Agnes, owing to the evidently superior surveillance of Miss Marple, who realises that 'putting aside the letters, just one thing happened - Mrs Symmington died. [...] So, then naturally,

⁴¹ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 156.

one thinks of who might have wanted Mrs Symmington to die and of course the very first person one thinks of in such a case is, I am afraid, the *husband*' (287).

'[D]eaths and village customs and general gruesomeness':⁴² Christie's Dark Distortions of the 'Great Good Place'

Given that Richard Symmington's evoking of the ritualistic act of sending poison pen letters - a deed carried out with quasi-mechanical repetition, with a prescribed linguistic and structural formulae, and one which has occurred in other provincial communities across the country (as the village doctor notes) - in order to deflect suspicion away from himself and onto the village's socially disaffected, it would be fair to say that the murder of Mona in *The Moving Finger* is firmly aligned with notions of ritual and ceremony. In his famous essay on detective fiction, 'The Guilty Vicarage', which first appeared in the May 1948 issue of *Harper's Magazine* and outlines the conventions of what we might now refer to as the 'Golden Age' detective story, not only does W.H. Auden champion the small, rural village as one of the superior settings for a detective novel, but he emphasises the importance of this setting as a ritualistic, ceremonial space. He suggests that '[t]he detective story writer is [...] wise to choose a society with an elaborate ritual and to describe this in detail. [...] The murderer uses his knowledge of the ritual to commit the crime and can only be caught by someone with equal or superior familiarity with it.⁴³ One of the foremost manifestations of the ceremonial dimension of the country village *à la* Christie is the idea - common to all of the novels under discussion in this chapter

⁴² Agatha Christie, *Murder is Easy* (1939; London: Harper, 2002), p. 71. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

⁴³ W.H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage' (1948), in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 151.

- of provincial life as a kind of performance. In *The Moving Finger*, for example, on receipt of their venomous note, the Burton siblings discuss the way in which they should respond. However, this response is not discussed in terms of any kind of genuine emotionality, but in terms of a pre-scripted act, with Jerry elucidating to his sister that, on receipt of a poison pen letter, 'The correct procedure, I believe [...] is to drop it into the fire with a sharp exclamation of disgust' (20). This is itself a rather 'uncanny' response in that it is so devoid of any seemingly authentic emotion on the part of these individuals that it actually somewhat dehumanises the Burtons.

However, it is in the later novel, *A Murder is Announced*, that I would suggest Christie utilises the performativity of village life to its most discomfiting, Gothic effects. Set in and around the village of Chipping Cleghorn, somewhere in the fictional county of 'Middleshire', one morning a notice playing on the tradition of the marriage announcement appears in the village's local newspaper, stating that 'A murder is announced and will take place on Friday, October 29th, at Little Paddocks at 6.30pm. Friends please accept this, the only intimation' (14). Having seen the advertisement in her own morning's reading of the paper, Letitia Blacklock, mistress of the property in question, realises that come six o'clock that evening a good number of friends and neighbours will arrive on her doorstep, thinking they have been invited by her, or her mischievous live-in relation, Patrick Symmons, to a social function where they will play a game resembling 'Murder in the Dark'. As the clock approaches the hour, Letitia asks Patrick to move an occasional table with a tray of olives, cheese straws, and pastries out of sight into the other half of the through-lounge, exclaiming that 'I am *not* giving a party! I haven't asked anyone. And I don't intend to make it obvious that I expect people to turn up' (42). When Letitia's instructions have been carried out, the telling

response by Patrick's sister, Julia, is that '[n]ow we can all give a lovely performance of a quiet evening at home [...] and be quite surprised when somebody drops in' (42). With half of the village now present in Letitia's lounge, as the clock strikes the half-hour, the lights fuse, the door to the room flies open revealing a gun-wielding robber. In the dark, two shots are fired and when the power is restored it appears that one bullet is firmly lodged in the lounge wall, having grazed Letitia's ear, whilst the other is lodged in the body of the thief himself (either, it is assumed, by accident, or with a deliberate suicidal intent). For one person more than anyone else, the calamitous events of this particular evening take the form of an elaborate and committed 'performance': Letitia herself, who has orchestrated the entire rigmorole to look like a bungled hold-up of herself and her neighbours for the purpose of having the opportunity to kill Rudi Scherz (the man posing as the thief) whom she fears being blackmailed by, whilst simultaneously making herself look like the intended victim. What is significant here, is that this crime has been facilitated precisely through Letitia's substantial knowledge of the rituals and social practices of the village in which she lives. In other words, her scheme to rid herself of her potential blackmailer can only function successfully because of the fact that Letitia knows beyond all doubt that curiosity will get the better of her neighbours, and thus they will turn up to her home and unwittingly act as the witnesses that she requires for her villainous scheme to succeed. Indeed, once the solution to the novel is known, the reader can appreciate the distinct irony, on the night of the murder, of Letitia glancing at the clock and commenting that the time is now '[t]wenty-past six. Somebody ought to be here soon - unless I'm entirely wrong in my estimate of my neighbours' (41). Thus, Letitia's cunning stage-management of village customs in *A Murder is Announced* is highly illustrative of the fact that, in Christie's work, the guilty culprit

is almost certainly never the ostracised outsider or 'foreigner', but rather a duplicitous individual on the interior of social respectability, who, as Nicholas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns put it, 'is manipulating the tolerable conventions of English society to his or her own advantage'.⁴⁴

Auden additionally suggests that village rituals are intimately connected to both ethical and aesthetic doctrines. Owing to the fact that participation in ritual is, by definition, voluntary and thus complicit, a ritual, Auden argues, is 'is a sign of harmony between the aesthetic and the ethical, in which body and mind, individual will and general laws, are not in conflict'.⁴⁵ Auden further develops his case for the significant role played by aesthetics within detective novels, by suggesting that with regard to the book's setting, 'it should be the Great Good Place; for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of the murder [...] The corpse must shock not only because it is a corpse but also because, even for a corpse, it is shockingly out of place'.⁴⁶ This effect of 'pulling-the-rug-out' from beneath the ethical expectations created by a particular kind of aesthetic is imperative to the Gothicism of Christie's village novels. In *The Body in the Library*, this notion is made strikingly visible because the stumbling upon of a tremendously out-of-place corpse is precisely the premise on which the novel begins. In the opening pages, we find ourselves in the master bedroom at Gossington Hall: the country mansion currently owned by Arthur and Dolly Bantry, located about a mile and a half from St Mary Mead proper. The tail-end of a restful night's sleep for the couple is disrupted, on what ought to have been a perfectly pleasant and ordinary

⁴⁴ Nicholas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns, 'Agatha Christie: Modern and Modernist', in Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (eds), *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 122.

⁴⁵ Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, p. 151.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

September morning, by the maid's discovery of the body of a young women lying inert on the library's hearth rug:

A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening-dress of white spangled satin. The face was heavily made-up, the powder standing out grotesquely on the blue swollen surface, the mascara of the lashes lying thickly on distorted cheeks, the scarlet of the lips looking like a gash. The finger-nails were enamelled in deep blood-red and so were the toenails in their cheap silver sandal shoes. (21-22)

The dead body discovered by the maid is aesthetically non-coherent, with an unsettlingly inorganic appearance that is fostered, in particular, through a deliberate interplay of excess and want - too little colour in the hair, too much colour on the face, too little fabric on the back. However, what marks the body out as truly sinister is its stark incongruity with the surrounding environment of Gossington. The Bantrys' library, with its 'big sagging arm-chairs, and pipes and books and estate papers laid out on the big table' (21), is a room that, in the soft autumnal light, appears 'dim and mellow and casual. It spoke of long occupation and familiar use and of links with tradition' (21). Thus, the stiffened body of a gaudily made-up teenage girl functions as a pronounced and blackening rupture within the olde-worlde aesthetics of the scene that has been laid out before us. Indeed, even the very dreams of Dolly Bantry - which the discovery of this unsightly body interrupts, and with which the novel itself begins - are so paradigmatically quaint: 'Mrs Bantry was dreaming. Her sweet peas had just taken a First at the flower show. The vicar, dressed in cassock and surplice, was giving out the prizes in church' (9).

However, although *The Body in the Library* very much literalises Auden's body-out-of-place motif, I would still contend that it is in her 1939 novel, *Murder is Easy* that Christie most committedly toys with the idea of the base, Gothic

distortion of the Eden-like 'Great Good Place'. The novel is one that is very much within the style and vein of Christie's Miss Marple novels.⁴⁷ However, in this case, and in contrast to all the novels discussed thus far in this chapter, it is not one which features the elderly sleuth herself. Thus, structurally speaking, what you get in *Murder is Easy* is a sort of Miss Marple surrogate: Luke Fitzwilliam. Luke is a former police officer who has recently returned to England after several years away working in the Mayang Straits: an imagined district of 'hot stifling nights, [...] blinding sun and tropical beauty of rich vegetation' hazily located somewhere in 'the East' (9, 16). After mistakenly alighting from his train at 'Fenny Clayton Junction for Wynchwood-under-Ashe', rather than at his intended destination of London, Luke is forced to board a later train heading for the capital, upon which he ends up seated next to, and becoming the captive audience of, the elderly and loquacious Wynchwood resident, Lavinia Pinkerton. Lavinia explains to Luke that she is on her way to Scotland Yard because her local police simply will not take seriously her claim that a spate of recent deaths in the village, 'quite a cycle of bad luck' (58), were in fact not accidents but the handiwork of one homicidal maniac. Luke appears to listen to her ramblings intently, but secretly believes she is 'just letting her imagination run away with her like old ladies sometimes do' (26). However, when Lavinia is run-down by a car in London and, soon afterwards, Doctor John Humbleby, the man she suggested to Luke would be the killer's next target, is also reported to have died, Luke, who learns of these deaths through obituaries in *The Times*, decides to investigate. Luke's friend Jimmy Lorrimer

⁴⁷ Indeed, in *A Catalogue of Crime* (1971), Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor mistakenly refer to Miss Marple in their entry for *Murder is Easy*, suggesting that the novel is '[u]nquestionably one of [Christie's] triumphs. The murders are excellent, though numerous. Miss Marple is credible and does not irritate by fussiness. The love story is very good, and the hocus-pocus with demonology and Black Mass is entirely apposite'. Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor, *A Catalogue of Crime* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 120; Additionally, the novel has more recently been re-fashioned - with a tremendous amount of changes to both plot and character - as a Miss Marple story for a 2009 Episode of ITV Television's *Agatha Christie's Marple* (2004-2013), starring Julia McKenzie as Miss Marple and Benedict Cumberbatch as Luke Fitzwilliam.

suggests that he descend on Wynchwood under the pretence of conducting research for a book on belief(s) in the supernatural in the English provinces, investigating the 'deaths and village customs and general gruesomeness' from which this sub-chapter derives its title (71). Jimmy further assists Luke by arranging for him to stay in the village with his cousin, Bridget Conway, and her fiancé (and former employer), Gordon Whitfield: self-made man and Wynchwood's self-styled Lord of the Manor. The first description of the village is given as Luke approaches Wynchwood from the brow of a hill in his rented motorcar, and establishes a near ludicrous serenity which is prime for a Gothic inversion: 'The summer day was warm and sunny. Below him was the village, singularly unspoilt by recent developments. It lay innocently and peacefully in the sunlight - mainly composed of a long straggling street that ran along under the overhanging brow of Ashe Ridge' (35). As we descend with Luke into the heart of the village itself, Wynchwood's concordance with Auden's call for the charming, olde-worlde aesthetics of the 'Golden Age' village space is further augmented:

Wynchwood, as has been said, consists mainly of its one principal street. There were shops, small Georgian houses, prim and aristocratic, with whitened steps and polished knockers, there were picturesque cottages with flower gardens. There was an inn, the Bells and Motley, standing a little back from the street. There was a village green and a duck pond, and presiding over them a dignified Georgian house which [...] was the museum and library (36).

With invitingly well-maintained domestic dwellings, attractive outdoors spaces, and a profound sense of historical rooting that is swiftly but effectively evoked through the calculated reference to the museum and library, Wynchwood both matches, and arguably trumps the other villages under discussion in terms of its outward prettiness. However, the reason why Luke's excuse gives for visiting Wynchwood raises no eyebrows - in a sense, the reason why his 'disguise' is one

which is convincing - is that despite its superficial appearance as a 'very charming place' (121), the village has long standing associations with witchcraft, black magic, devil-worship, and the supernatural. As Jimmy explains to Luke, Wynchwood 'has got rather a reputation that way. One of the last places where they had a Witches' Sabbath - witches were still burnt there in the last century - all sorts of traditions' (33). In light of such information, it is fair to say that, in Christie's naming of the village, the suggestion is very much that the name Wynchwood would have transmuted over time from 'Witches Wood': an idea that is concretised when we are alerted to the subtle, yet illuminating fact that the Georgian mansion which is now the village's cultural heritage centre is not called Wynch Hall, but rather 'Wych Hall' (70). Thus, given the village's shadowy and suspicious reputation, to a certain extent, one of Luke's primary functions in the novel, much like that of Jane Austen's Catherine Morland (*Northanger Abbey*, 1818), 'is to disentangle Gothic fiction from a Gothic-inflected actuality',⁴⁸ or, to perhaps put it even more accurately, to dismantle all of the pseudo-Gothic set dressing to reveal a more *genuinely* Gothic experience of village life latent underneath.

Temporarily laying all of the suspected supernatural phenomena aside, the fact that remains is that a lot of people who live in Wynchwood have recently died. The sheer number of recent suspicious deaths within this one, small village is itself quite alarming, and certainly exceeds the number of deaths in any of Christie's other village-based novels. So much so that, a third of the way through his investigation, Luke composes a victims list, which consists of the following persons plus another three further possible cases of murder:

Amy Gibbs: Poisoned.

⁴⁸ This is Susan Rowland's characterisation of the function performed by Miss Marple in *They Do It with Mirrors* (1952). Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 123.

Tommy Pierce: Pushed out of window.
Harry Carter: Shoved off footbridge (drunk? drugged?).
Dr Humbleby: Blood Poisoning.
Miss Pinkerton: Run down by car. (98)

Such a litany of untimely deaths very firmly suggests the outward progression of the violence and hostility from the private, domestic arena to the hybridic, semi-private space of the village. Moreover, this violent and rather dreadful recent-history exists in direct and, on Christie's part, deliberate contrast to the village's beautiful, chocolate-box facade, leading Luke to expound in frustration, '[t]his damned village - it's getting on my nerves. So smiling and peaceful - so innocent - and all the time this crazy streak of murder running through it' (123). Although it is conceivable that no pun may have been intended, the choice of the word 'damned' on Luke's (and ultimately Christie's) part is nevertheless doubly redolent, as it not only connotes Luke's annoyance but, moreover, the suggestion is that Wynchwood is, quite literally, a hell-like village *of* the damned. Writing on the urban environment, Jonathan Raban suggests that to find the city 'irredeemable is only the other side of the coin to expecting it to be Paradise: utopias and dystopias go, of necessity, hand in hand'.⁴⁹ However, I would suggest that not only is the same sentiment true of the country village, but that it is even truer, owing to the aesthetic qualities of the English countryside which lend themselves so amply to imaginative comparison with Paradise (with a capital P). Thus, to return to Auden's 'The Guilty Vicarage', as perhaps arguable to most outwardly attractive and idyllic of Christie's village locations, with, on first glance, 'no contradiction between the aesthetic individual and the ethical universal',⁵⁰ it is largely unsurprising that it turns out to be perhaps the darkest, most vicious, most degenerate of her village

⁴⁹ Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (1974; London: Picador, 2008), p. 13.

⁵⁰ Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, p. 150.

locales, as the more utopic the ideal, the greater must be the fall from Grace be by logical extension.

Robert Barnard comments that, compared with other novels penned by Christie, *Murder is Easy* is 'shorter than most on detection'.⁵¹ I interpret this as suggesting that, for the vast majority of the narrative, the possible murders, possible suspects, and possible motives only seem to proliferate, almost uncontrollably, when, strictly speaking, a certain proportion of the detective plot (a greater proportion than we get in *Murder is Easy*) should involve some kind of *contraction* of these elements. Whilst Barnard rationalises this as arising from the amateur status of the novel's detective characters, I would instead suggest that it is perhaps an attempt made on the level of narrative structure to recreate something of the Gothic image of the unnatural, pathological growth: or, to bring us back to John Ritchie's terminology, the canker. Indeed, the lack of progress made in the filtering down of suspects leads Bridget Conway, who ends up assisting Luke in his investigation, to articulate the redundancy of trying to identify the killer through some easily discernible abnormality: someone 'who gives you a creepy feeling down the spine, or who has strange pale eyes - or a queer maniacal giggle' (94). Instead, she comes to the conclusion that 'It may be any one [...] the butcher, the baker, the grocer, a farm labourer, a road-mender, or the man who delivers the milk' (95). A strikingly similar remark is made by Jerry in *The Moving Finger*, when, after the second murder (of the Symmingtons' servant, Agnes) he states that 'it was most unlikely that any stranger had killed Agnes [...] Somewhere, then, in Lymstock, walking down the high street, shopping, passing the time of day, was a person who cracked a defenceless girl's skull and driven a sharp skewer home to her brain' (221-22). There exists an entrenched cultural fantasy that because a village

⁵¹ Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p. 199.

is a relatively small geographical demarcation that it is ultimately 'knowable': the kind of fantasy that Raymond Williams has in mind when he discusses the supposed essential 'transparency' of village life, commenting on the assumption 'that a country community, most typically a village, is an epitome of direct relationships: of face-to-face contacts within which we can find and value the real substance of personal relationships'.⁵² After all, a village does not have a topography that is difficult to conceive of in the mind's eye, nor does the number of people who dwell within the average village cause you to shudder with sublime trepidation as you are likely to do when you attempt to envision the millions of citizens residing in the modern city. Importantly, this 'knowability' is invariably a major part of the persuasive allure of country village life: the very things that historically have, and, in our own times, still continue to encourage urban- and suburbanites to undertake rural relocation. However, what the harrowing statements made by Christie's characters illustrate is that, despite the outwardly comfortable familiarity and sense of ritual that presides over these small, communal spaces - people seemingly well-known to each other working, shopping, socialising, or in other ways enacting their daily routines in close proximity - the country village is, much like its urban counterpart, ultimately characterised by an absolute blank unknowability. Whilst this can already be identified as 'uncanny' in that it is a dark and unsettling perversion of the commonplace and the familiar, I would also further suggest that, in Christie's novels, this blank unknowability has the Gothic effect of destabilising the subjectivities of the village's inhabitants. This is owing to the idea that human beings are supposed to be in control of, and possess mastery over, their supposedly inanimate environments. Indeed, in the previous chapter I discussed at length - particularly in relation to Gwenda Reed's

⁵² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), p. 256.

fraught relationship with Hillside - the ways in which Gothic fiction confuses the traditional hierarchy which places the agency of people over the assumed non-agency of place. However, in *Murder is Easy* the village of Wynchwood in its entirety functions as something akin to the traditional Gothic mansion in this respect. This is particularly so in the sense that not only does Christie seem to endow the village with its own character, its own subjectivity, its own *genus loci*, but she does so with one that is specifically malignant. Indeed, whilst in the early descriptions of the village, which occur at more of an aerial vantage, Ashe Ridge functions almost to protectively frame the village, when situated deep in the village itself, the 'looming mass' takes on an altogether more threatening character (131), functioning very much as the novel's locus of its articulation of space as a psychological impulse. Significantly, shortly following his pronouncement of Wynchwood-under-Ashe as a 'damned village', we are told that Luke

glanced back down the length of the High Street - and he was assailed by a strong feeling of unreality.

He said to himself:

'These things don't happen...'

Then he lifted his eyes to the long frowning line of Ashe Ridge - and at once the unreality passed. Ashe Ridge was real - it knew strange things - witchcraft and cruelty and forgotten blood lusts and evil rites[.] (123)

As with those descriptions of Gwenda's encounters with Hillside upon her arrival in England, the defining feature of the passage above is its anthropomorphism: its presentation of the rural landscape as having neurological functioning (its 'frowning line') and of possessing a capacity for memory (its knowing of 'strange things'). Thus, the suggestion is that, more than it simply being the case that a series of mysterious deaths just so happened to take place in this particular location, but that the very material landscape Wynchwood itself has somehow actively borne witness to these events; has been complicit with these events; in a

sense, has acted as a knowing *accomplice*. Thus, the villagers' relationship with their communal landscape is precisely that of Gwenda Reed's relationship with Hillside, but on a grander scale. The residents of the village appear increasingly to be anything but in control of their own destinies, and are instead frighteningly at the mercy of their surroundings. This is in the sense that it is totally in the hands of one nameless, indiscernible, malevolent force emanating from somewhere within the village - so well secreted that, at times, it appears to be a force not *in*, but *of* the village - whether they are allowed to live or die.

The killer in the novel turns out to be perhaps the *most* unassuming of the village's citizens, the seemingly pleasant old lady, Honoria Waynflete. Her reason for the murders is her markedly psychotic plan to frame Gordon Whitfield, who jilted her many years ago, by killing anybody who he was known to be on bad terms with, to the extent that he himself believes that his detractors are being struck down by supernatural, even divine, intervention. Not only is Honoria, until the last thirty-one pages of a 320 page novel, the most innocent seeming of Wynchwood's residents: a woman who takes in the pet cats of her recently deceased friends and who volunteers part-time in the village's library. More importantly, however, she is the person who is most linked with the village of Wynchwood itself: the person who most 'belongs' to its geography, 'belongs' to its landscape. When Luke first descends into the village, he in fact mistakes the mansion now housing the museum and library for his destination of Gordon Whitfield's home, Ashe Manor. However, we later find out that the museum building, when it the private residence of Wych Hall, was the family home of Honoria Waynflete, whilst Gordon Whitfield's 'appalling and incongruous castellated mass' of a house is actually a modern addition to the village (37). In this sense, the properties in question thus come to stand in for their associated

characters: the macabre horrors plaguing the village seem to be the wish-fulfilment of the man in the ugly, brooding castle, but in actual fact they are the handiwork of a member one of Wynchwood's oldest and most socially respectable families - 'Gordon - just a common boot-maker's son [...] daring to jilt *me* - Colonel Waynflete's daughter! I swore I'd pay him out for that! (293). Ultimately, the truth of the mystery is that Honoria is both the Wych, and the *witch*, of the Witches' Wood.

Wynchwood, as with the instances of St Mary Mead, Lymstock, and Chipping Cleghorn previous discussed, is therefore a far cry from being the idyllic exemplar of English rurality - of a peaceful life spent in a 'Home County' village surrounded by amiable and attentive friends and neighbours - that it is outwardly presented to be. Within her imagined villages of the interwar, World War II, and immediate post-war period, by forming a synecdoche between highly duplicitous individuals and a spatial framework marked by the same deceptive, concealing qualities in order to represent a fallen ideal, Christie absolutely debunks the *beau ideal* of the country village, instead imbuing this space with an inherent Gothicism arising from her metaphorical positioning of the village as always the perverse *doppelgänger* of itself. By 'mapping out' the forms of domestic Gothic habitually characteristic of her novels with a much sharper focus on individual households (such as *Sleeping Murder*) against the larger spatial imaginary of the village, Christie's fiction works to unmask the dark, 'unhomely' core that lies buried at the very heart of 'Home Counties' England.

Chapter Three - '[T]here will be gay doings in the Witches Meadow tonight':¹ Homosexuality, Monstrosity, and the Sexual Geography of *Murder is Easy*

'One must be mad - deliciously mad - perverted - slightly twisted - then one sees life from a new and entrancing angle.'

- Mr Ellsworthy, in Agatha Christie's *Murder is Easy* (1939). (133)

Writing and Reading at the Sexual Margins: Homosexuality and the Gothic

Simply put, Gothic always proceeds from the margin towards the centre. The prevailing structure of a Gothic narrative is the return (however temporary) to a position of centrality of something that the governing culture has attempted to thrust out towards the periphery of lived experience, and the registration of the fears and instability elicited by either the threat or the actuality of this 'homecoming'. In its original manifestation - that is to say, late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Gothic - the bundling together of this genre with ideas of existence on the periphery is evident in terms of the temporal, geographical, and religious marginality on display in the novels of Ann Radcliffe; in the gender marginality manifested through women being the primary producers and consumers of this new genre of terror and fright; and even in the political marginality embedded in the works of the radically left-wing authors William Godwin and Mary Shelley. However, it is important to note that Gothic can also be argued as marginal in terms of sexual identity. Although Michel Foucault has convincingly argued that homosexuality as a coherent category of sexual identity

¹ Agatha Christie, *Murder is Easy* (1939; London: Harper, 2002), p.222. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

did not emerge until a particular point in the nineteenth century,² at least two of the Gothic's earliest practitioners, Horace Walpole and William Beckford, were (notoriously in Beckford's case) in relationships with men that we would now, at least retrospectively, categorise as homosexual.

It is precisely this biographical approach to the inherent linkage between homosexuality and Gothic that George E. Haggerty has repeatedly made his object of enquiry in a series of books and critical essays.³ For instance, in one of the earlier pieces, his 1986 journal article 'Literature and Homosexuality in the Late Eighteenth Century: Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis', he proposes that '[s]exuality in the Gothic novel is harrowing in its "aberrant" nature and in its association with the perversion of power'.⁴ Whilst, on the one hand, this is assuredly true, I am less convinced by Haggerty's subsequent elaboration, in which he suggests that the 'homosexual basis of such fantasy is surely no accident'.⁵ In fact, what Haggerty's argument seems to lack is any kind of explanation of the inherent connections between homosexuality and Gothic. In other words, he fails to suggest to us the precise ways by which we might become more certain that it is 'no accident' that representations of aberrant sexuality in the Gothic novel often have homoerotic overtones. In some sense, this is because Haggerty relies exclusively on biographical information about the writers whose work he examines, thus

² I am, of course, alluding to the famous assertion in *The History of Sexuality* that 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species'. See, Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (trans. Robert Hurley) (1976; London, Penguin, 1998), p. 43.

³ These include the book-length studies, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), *Queer Gothic* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006) and the shorter pieces, 'Literature and Homosexuality in the Late Eighteenth Century: Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis', *Studies in the Novel* 18, 4 (Winter 1986), pp. 341-52, and 'Queer Gothic', in Paula Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia (eds), *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 383-93.

⁴ Haggerty, 'Literature and Homosexuality in the Late Eighteenth Century', p. 343.

⁵ *Ibid.*

producing the argument that the homosexuality of the authors is somehow - in some hazy yet indelible way - reflected in the fictions they produced, and that this is the chief affiliation between homosexuality and the Gothic. Indeed, it seems to me quite odd that, in an article that devotes a third of itself to Beckford's novel *Vathek* (1768), there is no mention of what is, for want of a better term, the novel's 'gay kiss' scene, in which the novel's titular villain, when given a powerful potion by a mysterious yet grotesque stranger (a satanic envoy), 'leaped upon the neck of the frightful Indian, and kissed his horrid mouth and hollow cheeks, as though they had been the coral lips and the lilies and roses of his most beautiful wives'.⁶

However, having stated such, to a certain extent I *do* find it plausible that Walpole's development of the Gothic novel and Beckford's later adoption of this particular form may have been related to an attempt to give narrative expression to a form of sexual desire that social pressures demanded the concealment of to a lesser or greater degree. To otherwise adopt Paulina Palmer's phrasing, I certainly believe that the Gothic can indeed make 'an excellent vehicle for the coded representation of homosexuality'.⁷ Be that as it may, I am at the same time aware of the limitations and shortcomings of an overly biographical reading. For this reason, I would argue that subsequent critics such as Palmer, Steven Bruhm, and Ellis Hanson, have been more successful in their respective attempts of defining the genre of Gay Gothic and of explicating the intricacies of the dialogue between homosexuality and its Gothic representation. Bruhm, for example, insists on a symbiotic mutualism existing between homosexuality and the Gothic, arguing that it is not only the case that '[s]exuality [...] is nothing short of Gothic in its ability to

⁶ William Beckford, *Vathek* (1768; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 15.

⁷ Paulina Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (London: Continuum, 1999), p. 11.

rupture, fragment, and destroy [...] the coherence of the individual subject',⁸ but, scrutinising it from other direction, that

[l]ike the queer episteme itself, the Gothic disrespects the borderlines of the appropriate, the healthy, or the politically desirable. It resists the authority of the traditional or received and insists, with more or less gleeful energy, on making visible the violence underpinning the sexual norms that our culture [...] holds most sacred.⁹

On the other hand, in what I would argue as the most creative, most innovative attempt to theorise Gay Gothic to date, Ellis Hanson poses the question not of what the appeal of the Gothic is to the homosexual *writer* (as Haggerty does), but rather what the appeal of the Gothic is to the homosexual *reader*. This gives rise to Hanson's positioning of Jane Austen's Catherine Morland of as a sort of champion of the gay reader. Initially, this comparison seems somewhat preposterous: Austen's adventurous-but-naive (and evidently heterosexual) heroine may indeed be the last person to spring to mind when asked to conjure an image of the 'gay reader'. However, despite the fact that '[s]he betrays no accomplishments as a hysteric, a paranoid psychotic or a sexual pervert, the three paradigms [...] [conventionally] set down for our understanding of those [...] obsessive characters who populate Gothic fiction',¹⁰ Catherine is nevertheless addictively enthralled by books suffused with the uncovering of disturbing secrets, sexual transgression, and perilous scenarios. This leads Hanson to suggest that, identifying with Catherine's '[f]urtiveness, passionate over-determination, shame, disappointment - the queer reader instantly recognises [her] predicament as she seeks through disreputable fiction to give hasps and hallways to a fantasy life hopelessly irrelevant to the

⁸ Steven Bruhm, 'Gothic Sexualities', in Anna Powell and Andrew Smith (eds), *Teaching the Gothic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁰ Ellis Hanson, 'Queer Gothic', in Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 175.

society at hand'.¹¹ Through its vested interest in exploring the discarded effluence of the traditional realist narrative, instead turning its attention to those 'dimensions of existence that realist texts tend to ignore' or actively suppress,¹² it would appear that Gothic fiction therefore allows the young and sheltered Catherine a space in which to both exercise her desire for excitement and in which to experience a heightened state of bodily arousal (in both the sexual and non-sexual resonances of the term). So too for the homosexual reader, even if they must ultimately resign themselves to what Hanson, re-appropriating the image from Austen's novel itself, calls 'the washing-bill of realism',¹³ the narrative space of the Gothic novel provides an alluring if temporary respite from both a deeply heterocentric social reality - in which their romantic and sexual desires are, at best, considered 'irrelevant' (as Hanson puts it) or, at worst, outright pathologised - and the literary Realism which is very much bound-up with the committed reproduction of this social perspective.

Known to be Known: Homosexuality, Fiction, and the Public Imagination, 1920s - 1960s

From the novels I have discussed thus far, it would seem that the genre of Gay Gothic is most usually associated with literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This, I would argue, owes greatly to the fact that critical commentary on the representation of homosexuality in the fiction of the first half of the twentieth century has traditionally been overwhelmed by discussions of Radclyffe Hall's

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹² Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic*, p. 9.

¹³ Hanson, 'Queer Gothic', *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, p. 174.

notorious and, excepting its concluding chapter (which sees its heroine seemingly encircled by an army of spirits belonging to dead homosexual men and women), mostly realist *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). To a certain extent, the critical emphasis on Hall's novel is understandable: it was, within three months of its first appearance, banned from publication in Britain until 1948 under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act. Because of this well-documented controversy, Hall's 'bible of lesbianism' (as the cover of many Virago reprints have proclaimed it) has thus subsequently been written up as *the* homosexual novel of the first half of the twentieth century. In her 1993 *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* Terry Castle even goes as far as to assert that '[v]irtually every English or American lesbian novel composed since 1928 has been in one sense or another a response to, or trespass upon, *The Well of Loneliness*'.¹⁴ However, I must insist that Castle's claim is largely unfounded. In fact, the clear irony of the furore surrounding Hall's novel is that *The Well of Loneliness* is by no means the only book of its period to offer a 'daring' or 'courageous' portrayal of homosexual characters and relationships. In the fiction of the first half of the twentieth century, there are other literary homosexualities - other modes of homoerotic depiction - that, contrary to Castle's assertion, exist both independently and irrespective of Hall's notorious tome: modes which the overdetermination of *The Well of Loneliness* within the history of gay and lesbian fiction has until recently worked to obscure. One such mode is a turn within 'middlebrow' literary culture towards the genre of Gay Gothic.

Nicola Humble explicitly compares the reception of Hall's 'highbrow' treatment of lesbianism to that of Rosamond Lehmann's bestselling novel of the previous year, *Dusty Answer* (1927). Significantly, what Humble's reading of the

¹⁴ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 52.

two novels suggests is that Lehmann's narrative signalling of the sexual activities of her homosexual characters is more frequent, more 'daring', and more evocative than Hall's brief and noncommittal 'and that night they were not divided'.¹⁵ The question is thus raised of why it is then that, only a year later, Hall's novel falls subject to such intense moral and legal scrutiny, whilst Lehmann's book is free to become one of the bestselling novels of that year. In seeking an answer, it is worth turning to James Douglas' contemptuous and much cited 1928 *Sunday Express* editorial on Hall's novel. In his tirade against the book, Douglas responds to the claim, on the part of advocates of Hall's novel, that *The Well of Loneliness* ought to be read for its literary quality, if not for its homosexual content, such as was suggested by Havelock Ellis in his preface to the novel.¹⁶ Douglas, however, deliberately citing Ellis' preface and twisting the vocabulary used in order to suit his own agenda, passionately contends that '[i]t is no excuse to say that the novel possesses "fine qualities" or that its author is an "accomplished" artist. It is no defence to say that the author is sincere, or that she is frank, or that there is delicacy in her art. The answer is that the adroitness and cleverness of the book intensifies its moral danger'.¹⁷ The issue here is thus precisely that of cultural stratification - of perceived artistic quality. Given, as I have already indicated, that

¹⁵ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 231-32; Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928; London: Wordsworth, 2005), p. 284.

¹⁶ Specifically, Ellis writes that 'I have read *The Well of Loneliness* with great interest because - apart from its fine qualities as a novel by a writer of accomplished art - it possesses a notable psychological and sociological significance. So far as I know, it the the first English novel which presents, in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us today. The relation of certain people - who, while different from their fellow human beings, are sometimes of the highest character and finest aptitudes[.] [...] The poignant situations which thus arise are here set forth most vividly, and yet with such complete absence of offence, that we must place Radclyffe Hall's book on a high level of distinction'. Havelock Ellis, 'Commentary' (1928), in Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (eds), *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on 'The Well of Loneliness'* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 35.

¹⁷ James Douglas, 'A Book That Must Be Suppressed', *Sunday Express* (19 August 1928), in Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (eds), *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 37-38.

Hall is not alone at this particular time in pushing the boundaries of homosexual representation, what the seemingly unwarranted emphasis on Hall's specific novel seems to suggest is that, as a work of 'highbrow' literature, *The Well of Loneliness* has the ability to corrupt the moral compass of its reader precisely because it is 'good writing'. In a sense, Hall is very much a victim of her own established reputation as a serious, well-respected literary author. On the other hand, dismissed by the cultural elite as vacuous and inconsequential 'bad writing', a 'middlebrow' novel like *Dusty Answer* therefore appears to possess an astounding capacity for the free and unpoliced representation of non-heteronormative sexualities and alternative domestic arrangements. It is, for example, difficult to imagine even someone in possession of Douglas' level of puritanical sociopathy declaring that they would 'rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid' than a novel like Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*, or Molly Keane's knowingly frivolous lesbian farce, *Devoted Ladies* (1934).¹⁸ Thus, because of the critical disregard for the products of 'middlebrow' literary culture, numerous portrayals of homosexual relationships that are equally, if not *more*, frank than those found in Hall's novel, have been able to pass unproblematically into the public arena, often entirely under the radar of censorship: portrayals that can be found in novels such as Dorothy L. Sayers' *Unnatural Death* (1927), Kate O'Brien's *Without My Cloak* (1931), Ivy Compton-Burnett's *More Women than Men* (1933), E.F. Benson's *Lucia's Progress* (1935) (and other novels in the 'Mapp and Lucia' series), Mary Renault's *The Friendly Young Ladies* (1944), as well as those other novels mentioned above. The popular literary marketplace of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s was in fact well suffused with novels exhibiting explicitly homosexual-themes, with a good deal of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

novels that were, as Humble describes them, for all intents and purposes, 'out'.¹⁹ This, I would argue, is a more appropriate and likely context within which to examine Agatha Christie's use and development of the genre of Gay Gothic, rather than within the shadow of a novel like *The Well of Loneliness*.

On the subject of homosexuality in Christie's fiction, here specifically in terms of the possibility of reading the relationship between Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings as a sexual relationship, Robert Barnard argues that

[t]he suggestion (made jocularly, one hopes) that the friendship of Poirot and Hastings is a very special sort of friendship rings even less true than similar innuendos about the Holmes-Watson relationship. At least Holmes is very much a figure of the [eighteen-] 'nineties, and the suggestion gains certain plausibility from the historical context (however impossible to justify in the text). Poirot has no such context, nor can one begin to think in terms of a sexual life for him and Hastings. In fact one cannot imagine Poirot getting Hastings to understand what homosexuality was.²⁰

Barnard's resonantly uncomfortable (seemingly even paranoid) statement speaks volumes in terms of its inconsistencies - particularly in terms of his continual need to qualify even broaching the subject in the first place. His act of anticipating, with the deliberate intention of stalling in its tracks, a suggestion that no one to our (or his) knowledge has yet made, then attempting to dismiss the entire debate as one that has been entertained merely for humour's sake, would indeed, despite his best efforts, seem to provide credence to interpreting the Poirot-Hastings relationship in this way. What is therefore made apparent is that the homoerotic interpretation of this relationship has indeed occupied Barnard's mind in a manner that is more than cursory, and Barnard's reader is left to ponder the textual features which

¹⁹ Nicola Humble, 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow', in Erica Brown and Mary Grover (eds), *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 226.

²⁰ Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p. 100.

might have encouraged this interpretative feat to transpire. However, much more so than the homoerotic potential of the specific pairing at hand, what, for me, is most significant about Barnard's statement is the way in which it is assumed that, in direct opposition to the *fin-de-siècle* and the production of Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes' novels and short stories, there is no historical reason why Christie would be interested in implicating homosexual attraction between her foremost detective and his sidekick: that, within the interwar years, the consensus is that male homosexuality was not as prevalent within mainstream public consciousness as it was at the end of the nineteenth century.

This, however, is categorically untrue, and I would further suggest that the increasing appearance of male homosexual characters within Christie's fiction has distinct historical grounding. As Deborah Cohen puts it, throughout the twentieth century, but particularly following the First World War, 'sex between men was the open secret par excellence. It was both known to be known, and assiduously, though inevitably imperfectly, hushed up. Officially proscribed, it was nonetheless omnipresent.'²¹ Nicola Humble has noted the persuasiveness of the cultural dissemination of Freudian psychoanalysis in the representation of sexualities in the literature of the interwar period. She argues that the 'increased popular awareness of psychological theories, particularly those of Freud, in the years after the war also made openness about sexuality more acceptable, and homosexuality more visible.'²² Indeed, in terms of granting homosexuality more prominence and fostering a greater degree of tolerance towards homosexual persons, I would argue that the precise significance of the Freudian understanding of sexuality as acquired

²¹ Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London: Viking, 2013), p. 144.

²² Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, p. 227. See also, Humble, 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading', *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, p. 223.

(rather than innate), is that, in contrast to the historically entrenched understanding of homosexuality as inherently evil, sinful, or degenerate, Freud positions homosexuality simply as one of the various outcomes that can occur as the result of an individual's psychosexual development. In treating homosexual patients, Freud explicitly states that the role of psychoanalytic therapy is to resolve the patient's 'neurotic conflict' - having the patient come to terms with their sexual-object inclination - and categorically *not* to attempt converting 'one variety of the genital organi[s]ation of sexuality into the other'.²³ Further illustrative of an increasingly progressive cultural climate, Freud even goes as far as to compare being asked by anxious parents or spouses to 'cure' his patients of their homoerotic desires to the situation 'of a prospective house owner who orders an architect to build him a villa according to his own tastes and requirements, or of a pious donor who commissions an artist to paint a sacred picture in the corner of which is to be a portrait of himself in adoration'.²⁴

However, whilst the filtering down of Freudian psychoanalysis into the public consciousness may have aided an overall more receptive understanding of homosexuality, at the same time it also meant that the spread of this increased acceptance was not quite even in terms of the divide between male and female homosexuals. In addition to the obvious legal difference between male and female homosexuality in the period,²⁵ I would argue that the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis might be implicated as a major contributing factor to the generalised sweep that occurs within the imaging of homosexuality in the

²³ Sigmund Freud, 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman' (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII* (trans. James Strachey) (1955; London: Hogarth, 1975), pp. 150-51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁵ Of course, homosexual intercourse between men was a criminal offence in Britain between 1885 and 1967, whilst homosexual intercourse between women has never been illegal in the United Kingdom.

'middlebrow' fiction produced after the First World War, which is the borderline amiable treatment of lesbianism in opposition to the representation of male homosexuality as inscrutable and unwholesome. In his famous 1933 essay entitled 'Femininity', Freud seeks to answer the question of why exactly it is that '[a] man of about thirty strikes us as a youthful, somewhat unformed individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the possibilities for development opened up to him by analysis', whilst '[a] woman of the same age [...] often frightens us by her physical rigidity and unchangeability'²⁶ By way of an answer, Freud suggest that by the time a female has unconsciously become aware of her lack of penis, subsequently identified herself with the mother, then turned around and blamed the mother for her lack of penis, fallen victim to 'envy for the penis',²⁷ renounced the mother as object of desire and transferred these feelings onto her father, developed a wish for a baby as replacement for the missing penis, projected this wish onto her father, married someone else as a replacement for the father, had a baby, and then had all her suppressed hostility towards her mother brought to the surface again through becoming a mother herself (especially if the child is a girl),²⁸ she is burned out: an expended physical and mental wreck. By contrast, although the psychosexual development of a man is not devoid of traumatic moments (for example, the threat of castration), in comparison it is a relatively smooth process because the male child never gives up the mother as object of desire. Accordingly, when a man approaches his thirtieth birthday, he appears to be entering the prime

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity' (1933), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXII* (trans. James Strachey) (1955; London: Hogarth, 1975), pp. 134-35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁸ According to Freud, the birth of a son, as opposed to daughter, can, in some cases, actually work to end the neurotic chain: 'Her happiness is great [...] if the baby is a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him. [...] A mother can transfer her to her son the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself, and she can expect from him the satisfaction of all that has been left over in her of her masculinity complex.' *Ibid.*, pp. 128-33.

of his life. The standard critique of Freud's theory - his complete negation of any of the economic or material aspects of women's lives as to why a woman might burn herself out before the age of thirty - although important in its own right, is not my concern here. My concern instead is his hazy, dangling, half-articulated suggestion that if this winding and torturous path to normative female sexuality is just *one* of several paths that can be taken from the 'turning-point' of a girl's unconscious discovery of her own castration, then it is clearly not the 'line of development' that any sensible woman would take.²⁹ Even though it seemingly goes against the grain of his own argument, Freud nevertheless seems to have far more admiration for the woman of a more masculine 'constitution' (always a positive for Freud) who, on realising her lack of male genitalia, takes the sager option of simply refusing to 'recognize the unwelcome fact and, defiantly rebellious',³⁰ ultimately declines to relinquish the mother as the object of their sexual desire. In essence, the underlying suggestion of Freud's essay is that lesbianism could very well be women's 'natural' sexuality - the easier and healthier option. In other words, Freud's essay might be read as suggesting that homosexuality is as natural to women as heterosexuality is to men, owing to the fact that, for both genders, the mother is always the child's first object of desire.

To some extent, this emphasis is reflected in the fact that, within the 'middlebrow' novel, it is male homosexuality, rather than lesbianism, that often draws the short straw, with authorial management of the male homosexual often being particularly unsympathetic. Consider, for example, Stella Gibbons' satirical treatment of her elderly homosexual character Mr Spurrey, in her 1938 novel *Nightingale Wood*. Mr Spurrey, who 'had always been suspicious of women and

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

rather afraid of them',³¹ finds himself head-over-heels in love with his newly appointed chauffeur, Saxon. However, he is rather indifferently dispatched only two chapters after his introduction into the narrative, victim to a fatal chill that was caught having fallen asleep over a new Dorothy L. Sayers novel: the image of the devout detective fiction reader, as Angela Devas posits, functioning in the period as shorthand for 'a rejection of masculinity and its values'.³² Moreover, in addition to comic satire as a mode, it is precisely this idea of men's homosexual identity of the less 'natural' of the two possible forms which has meant that, at least within interwar 'middlebrow' fiction, it is the depiction of the male homosexual that has lent itself more readily to the genre of Gay Gothic. There are, as always, exceptions to the rule. For example, Molly Keane's *Devoted Ladies* is a parodic, lesbian recasting of the Gothic Romance narrative that would, four years later, come to be typified *par excellence* in Daphne du Maurier's acme of 'middlebrow' Gothic, *Rebecca* (1938). It is, moreover, a particularly problematic example of the attempt to calibrate homosexual identities within the 'middlebrow' fiction of the period. Within the novel, on the one hand, Keane decisively employs aspects of Gothic monstrosity in relation to the novel's most unswervingly homosexual character: the aggressive, predatory, wolf-like Jessica. However, the deliberate paralleling, in the second half of the novel, of Jessica with the ugly but heterosexual Piggy, culminating in their twined death at the novel's climax, would seem to suggest that imagery of the monstrous body is not used in relation to Jessica because she is homosexual *per se*, but rather because she, like Piggy, is a sexually unattractive

³¹ Stella Gibbons, *Nightingale Wood* (1938; London: Virago, 2009), p. 305.

³² Angela Devas, 'Murder, Mass Culture, and the Feminine: A View from the 4.50 from Paddington', *Feminist Media Studies* 2, 2 (2002), p. 253. Devas also argues that, in addition to feminisation, the construction of the detective fiction reader as 'the antithesis of the active, muscular Englishman' is also achieved via processes of Orientalism, which certainly chimes in well with the Gibbons' image of Mr. Spurrey 'lying small and yellow, like a Chinaman' on his deathbed. See, Gibbons, *Nightingale Wood*, p. 310.

woman, who, by the novel's close, is desired by no other character, male or female. Thus, ultimately, Keane's employment of the Gothic in *Devoted Ladies* is implicated far more heavily in the spinster debates of the 1930s rather than in discussions regarding homosexuality.³³

Much like Molly Keane's fiction, the calibration of homosexual identity specifically within Agatha Christie's work is also markedly problematic. The chief predicament is that, within her vast repertoire of novels, plays, and other works, there are comparatively few identifiably gay characters: enough that a discussion of Christie's representation of homosexuality cannot be overlooked, but certainly not enough to even begin to make any kind of comfortable, 'easy', coherent patterns out of. Within her work, homosexual characters appear sporadically rather than regularly, and particularly from the 1930s onwards. Christie's treatment of these characters, however, toes no intelligible party line. For instance, in 1943's *The Moving Finger*, we find camp Mr Pye: 'an extremely ladylike plump little man, devoted to his *petit point* chairs, his Dresden shepherdesses and his collection of bric-à-brac';³⁴ a man who additionally greets the novel's handsome male narrator 'with every evidence of delight' (202). As a comic figure-of-fun, poor Mr Pye has somewhat of a rough ride. His quasi-spiritual worship of his domestic sphere falls under the umbrella of his perceived femininity, which is precisely what allows him to *still* be considered as one of the novel's chief suspects, even when cod-psychoanalysis has told both the official and unofficial detective characters of the novel that the poison pen author must be a woman. For example, Joanna asks Jerry to consider that Mr Pye is 'the sort of person who might be lonely - and unhappy -

³³ For a more detailed discussion of Molly Keane's employment of the Gothic in relation to the spinster debates of the 1930s, see my article, "'I'm scared to death she'll kill me": *Devoted Ladies*, Feminine Monstrosity and the (Lesbian) Gothic Romance', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 8 (June 2012) <irishgothichorrorjournal.homestead.com/DevotedLadies.html>

³⁴ Agatha Christie, *The Moving Finger* (1943; London: Harper, 2002), p. 45. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

and spiteful. Everyone, you see, rather laughs at him. Can't you imagine him secretly hating all the normal happy people, and taking a queer perverse artistic pleasure in what he is doing?' (195). Superintendent Nash, meanwhile, elucidates that he doesn't 'think a man wrote the letters - in fact, I'm sure of it - and so is Graves - always excepting of course our Mr Pye, who's got an abnormally female streak in his character' (213). On the other hand, the elderly lesbian couple, Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd in *A Murder is Announced* (1950) could not be treated more differently. As John Curran remarks, the 'picture of the Chipping Cleghorn couple is matter of fact and, as far as the villagers are concerned, unremarkable; and after the murder of Murgatroyd, moving'.³⁵ Perhaps most complicated of all is Christie's use of a homosexual character for the purpose of upholding and venerating the institution of marriage in her little-known play, *The Rats*, which opened at the Duchess Theatre, London, on 20 December 1962. The character in question, Alec Hanbury, is described in the stage directions as '*a young man of twenty-eight or nine, the pansy type, very elegant, amusing, inclined to be spiteful*'.³⁶ Curran comments that, as opposed to the encouragement we are given to laugh at camp Mr Pye, or the sorrow and pity we feel for Miss Hinchcliffe and the cruelly murdered Miss Murgatroyd, the emotional contract that we, as audience, form with Alec, is one of fear, describing Alec as 'unequivocal[ly] [...] sinister'.³⁷ To borrow a term from elsewhere in Christie's *oeuvre*, within this play Alec performs the role of a fierce and avenging 'nemesis', who, although he has to commit murder to do it, nevertheless, brings justice down upon the play's adulterous protagonists,

³⁵ John Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks: Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making* (2009; London: Harper, 2010), p. 179. Curran also notes that, according to her working notebooks, Christie considered including a gay male couple in her 1952 novel, *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*, but ultimately discarded the idea.

³⁶ Agatha Christie, *The Rats: A Play in One Act* (London: Samuel French, 1963), p. 11. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

³⁷ Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*, p. 290.

Sandra Grey and David Forrester, punishing them for their 'crimes' against marriage. Having unwittingly gathered Sandra and David at the Hampstead flat of mutual acquaintances, Alec tricks the adulterous lovers into both handling a Kurdish knife before 'accidentally' dropping this knife through the open window. When Alec leaves the flat supposedly to retrieve the artefact, Sandra and David find that, not only are they locked in, and not only does the knife remain on the street below, but that Sandra's husband John, having been stabbed, has lain casketed in a large bride's chest the entire time they have been present in the flat. Unsurprisingly, under the stress of being 'caught like rats in a trap' (22), the couple's relationship begins, with astonishing rapidity, to come apart at the seams:

SANDRA. I might as well just say that you killed him. (*She rises*) You came here, met John, killed him, put him in the chest and then went away, watched for me to arrive, and came back.

DAVID. Oh, for God's sake don't talk such rot. (*He moves to below the R end of the divan*) The trouble with you is that you're so damnably stupid.

SANDRA (*furiously*) You're saying what you really think now, aren't you? None of your famous charm. You're a louse, that's what you are - a louse and a rat!

DAVID. What about you? How many men have you hopped into bed with, I should like to know?

SANDRA. You bastard! You filthy, rotten bastard! (18)

Once the pair realise that it is Alec who has slain John, the function played by his homosexuality within this revenge scheme is made explicit. Alec, it is revealed, has always (rightly) suspected Sandra of pushing her first husband, Barry, off a cliff top, rather than it having been an accident. Thus, as David tells Sandra, '[y]ou said he was devoted to your first husband, Barry. You've only got to take one look at Alec to see what kind of devotion that was' (20). Ultimately, as the lights black out on the stage and the curtain falls, we leave David backed against the wall in fear and Sandra '*laugh[ing] hysterically*' (24), as the pair face the choice between the police breaking down the door and arresting them for John's murder, or jumping to their

certain deaths out of the open window. In terms of genre, *The Rats* does indeed contain rather pronounced Gothic elements: the obstinate refusal of the past to leave the present at peace, the stifling and almost palpable sense of claustrophobia created from its one (locked) room setting, the intrusion of the improperly buried dead in the space occupied by the living, and, perhaps above all else, the prospect of David and Sandra's five-storey drop to the pavement below as an inevitable and 'uncanny' repetition of Barry's fall from the cliff top many years ago. I would propose that its marked deviation from the generic expectations placed upon Christie at this mid-late stage of her career is precisely one of the primary reasons why *The Rats* has fallen into obscurity. There is murder, and there is, to a certain extent, mystery, however, *The Rats* is nevertheless categorically not a murder mystery, as is, say, Christie's world famous *The Mousetrap* (1956). Instead, what we get in *The Rats* is very much 'a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space' which mutually fortify one another to produce a prevailing structure of what Chris Baldick posits as the 'sickening dissent into disintegration' that exemplifies the Gothic narrative.³⁸ As I have discussed at the opening of chapter two of this thesis, the post-war London block of flats which this play uses as its setting, although an increasing fixture in Christie's work of the 1960s, owing to its increasing reality as a viable, even desirable, domestic space for the stratum of the British population that Christie is interested in, is hardly the architecture that, for many, springs to mind when asked to imagine the Christean milieu. Furthermore, one need only glance at the dialogue, such as that in the passage cited above, to see how far we are in this play from the popular imagining of 'cosy' Christie territory.

³⁸ Chris Baldick, 'Introduction', in Chris Baldick (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (1993; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. xix.

Queer Hands: Mr Ellsworthy's Gothic Body

As significant as *The Rats* is both in terms of Christie's experimentation with genres outside her more canonical remit and in terms of her treatment of homosexual characters and themes, I would also suggest that it is not through her representation of avenger Alec, but rather through her depiction of the antiques shop owner - the disreputable Mr Ellsworthy - in her 1939 novel *Murder is Easy*, that Christie's work most resolutely enters into the genre of Gay Gothic. In examining the uses of the human body within twentieth-century crime fiction, Gill Plain proposes that 'Christie's living bodies are as complexly coded as her dead ones'.³⁹ Nowhere, I would argue, is this statement more manifest than in her portrayal of Mr Ellsworthy. From his first appearance in the book his homosexuality is made plain enough: 'Mr Ellsworthy was a very exquisite young man dressed in a colour scheme of russet brown. He had a long pale face with a womanish mouth, long black artistic hair and a mincing walk' (79).⁴⁰ It is slightly later, however, that descriptions of Mr Ellsworthy begin to become elided with aspects of Gothic monstrosity. Most overtly, there is, throughout the text, studied attention to his ugly, grotesque hands, which the reader is encouraged to view as being somehow 'non-human'. When Luke and Bridget leave Mr Ellsworthy's shop after Luke's first visit there, it is reported that 'Mr Ellsworthy accompanied them out to the door, waving his hands - very unpleasant hands, Luke thought they were - the flesh seemed not so much white as faintly greenish' (81). Repeating this imagery at a later juncture of the novel, Bridget makes her own feelings towards

³⁹ Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 43.

⁴⁰ Citing police reports for men arrested for unlawful homosexual soliciting in the 1920s and 1930s, Matt Houlbrook lists 'mincing' as one of the terms commonly used by law enforcers in identifying the homosexual male body and its faculties. See, Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 148.

Mr Ellsworthy known, expounding to Luke that 'He's got such nasty hands [...] they're not just white - they're green' (137-138). This imagery of bodily abnormality both signals and precipitates a loss of bodily cohesion which in turn renders Mr Ellsworthy's physiognomy as hybridic, fractured, and agonisingly incoherent: all those characteristics that critics, including Kelly Hurley, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and Catherine Spooner, have identified as typifying the monstrous, Gothic body.⁴¹ What is routinely witnessed in the Gothic narrative is the replacement of the cohesive, integrated human body with what Spooner describes as 'mannequins arbitrarily fashioned out of bits and pieces that are simultaneously corpse-like and unreal'.⁴² This, I would argue, is certainly the effect which is achieved via the novel's descriptions of Mr Ellsworthy's hands. Moreover, in terms of the 'middlebrow' fiction of the period, Christie is not alone in utilising the image of unsightly hands - incongruous to the body to which they are attached - in reference to male homosexual characters. Even Ivy Compton-Burnett, whose 'astringent' narratives are considered idiosyncratic precisely because of their 'increase[d] [...] proportion of dialogue to narrative and description',⁴³ which often involves a deliberate negating of the external appearance of characters, takes steps to ensure that the reader is made acutely aware of the 'long pale hand[s]' of Felix Bacon in her 1933 novel *More Women than Men*.⁴⁴ Felix, by his own admission, does 'not have the power of making a woman happy' (25), and is a character who,

⁴¹ See, Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) pp. 3-19, and Catherine Spooner, *Fashioning Gothic Bodies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

⁴² Spooner, *Fashioning Gothic Bodies*, p. 102.

⁴³ Barbara Hardy, 'Lying Cruelty, Secrecy and Alienation in I. Compton-Burnett's *Elders and Betters*', in Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve (eds), *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 151, 135.

⁴⁴ I. Compton-Burnett, *More Women Than Men* (1933; London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951), p. 20.

at the start of the novel, is very unambiguously in a romantic relationship with a man nearly double his age. Tony Baring, meanwhile, in Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*, is, from his admission into the narrative, immediately identified as posing a threat to the successful advancement of the Judith-Roddy romance plot. During the fireworks party at which point Judith meets her rival for Roddy's affection for the first time, the following observations are made by Judith in collaboration with the external narrator:

Tony Baring [...] had a sensitive face, changing all the time, a wide mouth with beautiful sensuous lips, thick black hair and a broad white forehead with the eyebrows meeting above the nose, strongly marked and mobile. When he spoke he moved them, singly or together. His voice was soft and precious, and he had a slight lisp. He looked like a young poet. Suddenly she noticed his hands, - thin unmasculine hands, - queer hands - making nervous appealing ineffectual gestures that contradicted the nobility of his head.⁴⁵

Again, here, the overriding impression that is fostered by such a description of a noticeably homosexual male character is that of hybridism: of mis-matched features and appendages. In all three examples given, the hands of these men somehow diverge, in ways either subtle or radical, from the implied consensus that appears to exist between reader and narrative of what a man's hand ought to look like: they are too narrow, too elongated, too vacillating in their movement, too pallid, or otherwise they have a wholly alarming pigmentation. As Cohen contends, even if '[a]ny kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body [...] for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, *sexual*' (emphasis mine).⁴⁶ As such, although the augmentation of sexual aberration into a form of aberration that is bodily is hardly a trope that is new to a writer such as Compton-Burnett, Lehmann, or Christie, it is,

⁴⁵ Rosamond Lehmann, *Dusty Answer* (1927; London: Virago, 2009), pp. 95-96.

⁴⁶ Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, p. 7.

however, given form *par excellence* in the representation of the hands of their male homosexual characters. Thus, within these narratives, variance from 'natural' modes of male sexuality becomes metaphorically reflected in the way in which the bodies of these men diverge from what we would think of as a 'natural', unified bodily configuration. The question remains, however, of why exactly, within these novels, it is hands that function as the locus of anxiety with regard to homosexuality, as opposed to any other part a man's body. Plain answers this question via a psychoanalytic route that specifically builds upon the work of Luce Irigaray. She asserts that '[t]he hand is a powerfully gendered symbol of agency [...] not simply masculine agency but the very foundations of phallic sexuality'.⁴⁷ Within this conceptual framework, the male hand functions as a displaced penis, and thus to apply this notion to the kinds of fiction that I have been discussing, it would seem that the reason why writers like Christie, Compton-Burnett, or Lehmann draw such heavy attention to the hands of their male homosexual characters is because the (formal, if not thematic) 'politeness' of the interwar 'middlebrow' novel does not allow them to directly discuss their genitalia and the 'unnatural' usages that they are put to. However, whilst there might certainly exist an element of this metaphoric displacement in these author's imaging of men's hands, my argument would be that this simple 'trade-off' between mens' hand and their genitals far from tells the whole story. What Plain is certainly right to acknowledge is that the hand is very much a redolent symbol of human agency, in the first instance, and specifically of human *sexual* agency, in the second. In her history of touch as one of the five physiological senses, Constance Classen suggests that, owing to 'its special ability to grasp and manipulate', the hand has traditionally

⁴⁷ Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, p. 123.

been seen as a 'clear indication of human superiority'.⁴⁸ Thus, because it is precisely through our hands that we as humans construct, fashion, and impose our desires on the world around us, our hands have come to metonymically denote what it means to be at the top of the evolutionary chain, with all the reverberations of power, control, and authority that come forthwith. In a sense, the possession of these particular appendages endows the human being with a right to sovereignty, and this, I would stress, includes sovereignty over our own sexual desires and behaviours. As Classen has elsewhere argued, '[t]he underlying heterosexual fear of homosexual touch is that it is self-referential, directed towards one's likeness, and therefore seemingly involuted and unproductive rather than exteriorised and begetting'.⁴⁹ With regard to Mr Ellsworthy's unsightly hands, this is absolutely the key point, and, for this reason, I would suggest that when authors such as Christie, Compton-Burnett, or Lehmann are talking about the hands of their homosexual male characters, they are *actually* talking about their hands, rather than using hands as a metaphor for other body parts, as Plain's reading suggests. Bearing Classen's comment in mind, I would argue that, within Christie's novel, underlying the imaginative rendering of Mr Ellsworthy's hands is an acute discomfort with the way in which he uses these hands are used to make sensual contact with other men's bodies, and even more so with the assertion of sexual autonomy implicated in this act. The fear, in other words, is not particularly over the sex-act itself, but over Mr Ellsworthy's statement of his own power made via his sensual touching of male partners, and even more so with the notion that this strange kind of sexual power forever risks escalating to become a form of social power. After all, one of

⁴⁸ Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. 104.

⁴⁹ Constance Classen, 'Male Bonding', in Constance Classen (ed.), *The Book of Touch* (New York, NY: Berg, 2005), p. 156.

the strongest associations of the colour green is that of stagnancy. To this effect, I would suggest that the reason why the locals of Wynchwood tend to see (or, one could argue, imagine) a greenish hue emanating from the skin of Mr Ellsworthy's hands is because they 'read' in those hands a form of sexual desire that they interpret as fundamentally entropic and degenerated: a sexuality that does not propagate the human species; that is not implicated in the outwards and downwards energetic spreading of a family line; a desire that, in other words, has no potential social function - a desire that just is. Ultimately, it is precisely what the other characters in the novel view as Mr Ellsworthy's disturbingly powerful refusal to participate in the maintenance and reproduction of the existing social order that is being refracted through his ghastly, green hands, marking them out as such a site of repellent Gothic monstrosity.

However, in addition to the imaging of his hands, in terms of the homosexual coding of Mr Ellsworthy's body, Christie also employs slightly more subtle techniques of monstrosity also belonging to a tradition of Gothic fiction. For example, when, on leaving the home of Rose Humbleby, Luke spots Mr Ellsworthy walking towards him, it is reported that, Mr Ellsworthy's

eyes were on the ground and he was smiling to himself. His expression struck Luke disagreeably. Ellsworthy was not so much walking as prancing - like a man who keeps time to some devilish little jig running in his brain. His smile was a strange secret contortion of the lips - it had a gleeful slyness and it was definitely unpleasant. (132)

The similarity between the way in which Mr Ellsworthy is described in the passage above and Robert Louis Stevenson's depiction of the eponymous Mr Hyde in his *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) is, I would insist, too strong to be of no consequence. With a 'displeasing smile' that gives off the 'impression of

deformity without any notable malformation,⁵⁰ the other characters in Stevenson's narrative are at a loss to articulate what exactly is wrong with Mr Hyde: that the adverse, repulsive reaction he elicits seems to owe to some feature of his body that outmanoeuvres the linguistic store of those attempting to describe it. In precisely the same vein, so too for the people of Wynchwood is Mr Ellsworthy's deviance from a fully human subjecthood somehow inscribed across his facial features and countenance in a way that is obscurely evident, yet not straightforwardly understandable. It is even arguable that Mr Ellsworthy's Gothic body resides on the edge of the peripheral, in the sense that his body is only partial in its difference to a 'normal', 'healthy' human form. In other words, it is precisely Christie's exploitation of a *lack* of bodily difference that renders him, like Stevenson's Edward Hyde, as a genuinely frightening figure. However, having earlier cited the truism that the bodily abnormality of a character often functions as a metaphor for their sexual abnormality, I now would like to interrogate this idea in more depth, by posing the question of what exactly the level of material alterity evident throughout the descriptions of Mr Ellsworthy's disconcerting physiognomy has to do with his sexual-object inclination.

One way in which it may be possible to answer this question is to examine the dialogue between Christie's novel and the more archaic Gothic cornerstone of Stevenson's novella to see how, and for what reasons, Christie has adapted Stevenson's imaging of Mr Hyde in her rendering of Mr Ellsworthy. Indeed, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is a text which has produced a significant number of critical interpretations which argue, to a greater or lesser degree, that the text ought to be read as a parable of homosexuality. The most well known of these,

⁵⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 15. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

perhaps, is Elaine Showalter's attempt to force Stevenson's text into a paradigm of homoerotic desire in her 1990 study *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-siècle*. Her analysis of the novel is predominantly based on a calculated misreading of an 1885 painting of Stevenson and his wife by John Singer Sargent, in which it is maintained that what is plainly a front hallway with a visible staircase and front door is a 'closet' which Stevenson appears to be walking out from.⁵¹ Showalter also invests imagery from Stevenson's text with sexual connotations that are far from convincing: for example, when, with no supplementary evidence, she insists that the 'chocolate-coloured pall' affecting London (24), and the darkness akin to the 'back-end of evening' (24) are coded references to anal intercourse.⁵² If, as I would instead suggest, Stevenson's imagery is viewed in the light of the hugely influential visual imagination pertaining to London that comes to sweep through the literary production of the period, it is increasingly difficult to see how the cocoa-tinted murk hanging over Stevenson's cityscape is in any way more or less (homo)sexual than the 'thick, brown air' that Isabel Archer encounters as she traverses the 'foggy London street[s]' on her way back from Euston Square in Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* (1881),⁵³ the 'dense drizzly fog' resembling '[m]ud-colored clouds' in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1890),⁵⁴ or the sky that hangs 'low and murky' in George Gissing's unceasingly foggy London in *The Nether World* (1890).⁵⁵ Perhaps owing then to the extraordinary pervasiveness of the image of the dimly-lit, treacherous, foggy London street - the vast range of authors

⁵¹ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), pp. 106-08.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵³ Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady* (1881; London: Vintage, 2009), pp. 328-29.

⁵⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (1890; London: Penguin, 2007), p. 22.

⁵⁵ George Gissing, *The Nether World* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1890), p. 201.

relying on this visual shorthand and, by extension, the wildly disparate cast of characters who are forced to navigate their way through the grim, muddy darkness - the question of whether brownish fog has sexualised resonances is one which, quite rightly, is simply not up for debate in these novels. This in turn makes Showalter's staunch insistence on the homoeroticism of Stevenson's particular use of this cluster of images appear all the more arbitrary.⁵⁶ Four years prior to Showalter's study, William Veeder published a more nuanced, better-faring attempt to explore the potential homoerotic dimension of Stevenson's text, although it should be noted that, even within this account, there is still a slight tendency to overdetermine particular images as latently homosexual: for example, Mr Hyde's key to Dr Jekyll's abode possessing 'obviously erotic aspects of whipping out and going in'.⁵⁷ Veeder does, however, concurrently argue that, rather than 'genital intercourse', what Stevenson's novella does boast is an 'aura of homosexuality'.⁵⁸ This, I believe, is a rather perceptive way of putting it: that if homosexuality does reside in Stevenson's text, then it does so not in Edward Hyde's physical irregularity or his emotional and financial stranglehold over Henry Jekyll, nor in the architectural duality of Henry Jekyll's house and laboratory (or its outward extension into the spatial duplicity of the London streets), but rather in a nebulous, unformulated, almost gaseous form that cannot, and *should not*, be pinned down to any one feature or trope employed by Stevenson's narrative itself.

⁵⁶ That is not to say, however, that the ubiquity of the foggy-London tableaux within the *fin-de-siècle* is purely mimetic, as opposed to symbolic. For example, in terms of the 'Jack the Ripper' murders, the visual imagination which links fog with criminality has unflinchingly persisted in the imagining and *re*-imagining of the Whitechapel murders, very much in spite of the historical fact of the air being clear on all but one of the nights on which the canonically accepted 'Ripper' crimes took place. Christine L. Corton, 'From Fog to Smog: A Literary Journey' (Lecture), Guildhall Library, 30 April 2014.

⁵⁷ William Veeder, 'Children of the Night: Stevenson and Patriarchy', in William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch (eds), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde After One Hundred Years* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 146.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

Thus, although Christie has clearly borrowed heavily from *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in her characterisation of Mr Ellsworthy, I would also suggest that it is Christie and *not* Stevenson who positions the ‘unreadable’ male body with a capacity to frighten the onlooker as symptomatic of homosexual identity. In examining the influence of post-Darwinian degeneration theory in a selection of non-realist fiction of the late nineteenth century - including both Stevenson’s novella and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) - Alexandra Warwick observes that the ‘crucial problem of the characteri[s]ation of homosexuality resides in the problematic logic of difference that runs through degeneration theory. Homosexuals are both same and other - both like one another and their “original” heterosexual counterparts, but “other” in sexuality’.⁵⁹ In some sense, to use the fittingly Gothic cliché, this is exactly the problem that has ‘haunted’ criticism on *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* since its publication: the problem of whether the images used in relation to Mr Hyde’s body are to be read as markers of degeneration (more generally) or markers of homosexuality within the context of degeneration theory (more specifically). For this reason, within critical discussions of Stevenson’s novella, a good deal of ink has been spilled in numerous attempts to determine whether, by 1886, the word ‘queer’ possessed connotations of homosexuality. This is done for the purpose of ascertaining whether Mr Enfield’s famous declaration in the opening chapter, that ‘the more it looks like Queer Street, the less I ask’ (8), can be interpreted as irrefutable proof of a homosexual sub-text. The results of these attempts vary somewhat, however, I am inclined to agree with Wayne Koestenbaum’s suggestion that, in the *fin-de-siècle*, the word ‘queer’ ‘nearly

⁵⁹ Alexandra Warwick, ‘Unnatural Selection: Variation, Deviation, and Excess at the Fin de Siècle’, in Markku Salmela and Jarkko Toikkanen (eds), *The Grotesque and the Unnatural* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011), p. 178.

meant “homosexual”:⁶⁰ a claim that is substantiated with reference to the fact that, the year before his evidence was proved instrumental bringing about Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment under charges of ‘gross indecency’ in 1895, the notoriously homophobic John Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensbury, ‘accused a group of prominent men of being “Snob Queers”’.⁶¹ However, advance some fifty-one years from the publication of *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* to the publication of *Murder is Easy* and it can be confidently argued that ‘queer’, although not universally,⁶² could, within certain circumstances, signify ‘homosexual’ most decidedly. In his caustic chapter on homosexuality in his exposé of London’s sexual underworlds, *The Cloven Hoof* (1932), Taylor Croft lists ‘queer’ as meaning ‘homosexual’ in his appended glossary of vocabulary pertaining to homosexual peoples and practices.⁶³ Thus, here again, specifically on the level of language, is another crucial difference between Stevenson’s indeterminately homosexual Mr Hyde and Christie’s decisively homosexual Mr Ellsworthy. Indeed, although the term ‘queer’ appears throughout almost all of Christie’s fiction, employed in the more traditional sense of meaning ‘odd’ or ‘unusual’, it is never used with such frequency and with such determined direction towards one particular character as it is within *Murder is Easy*. The term ‘queer’ is routinely employed in reference to Mr Ellsworthy, for instance, when he is described as having a ‘queer, sly, triumphant smile [...] on his face’ (134). However, it is Bridget who drives the point home most fervently, passionately expounding to Luke that ‘Of all the people down

⁶⁰ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 147.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² For example, Alan Sinfield, illustrates how the teacher, writer and critic T.C. Worsley appeared to have no comprehension of either ‘queer’ or ‘bent’ as connoting homosexuality when employed at Wellington College, Berkshire, during the 1930s. See, Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Oscar Wilde, Effeminacy and the Queer Moment* (London: Continuum, 1994), p. 134.

⁶³ Taylor Croft, *The Cloven Hoof: A Study of Contemporary London Vices* (London: Denis Archer, 1932), p. 65.

here, he's the only one who is definitely queer. He *is* queer, you can't get away from it!' (137). Thus, to return to Warwick's quote, which, incidentally, could almost stand as a tailor-made description of Mr Ellsworthy himself, the reason why Mr Ellsworthy's Gothic body has the power to disturb both the reader and the other characters in the novel is precisely because of this uneasy, jarring interplay of sameness and difference. On the one hand, Mr Ellsworthy does indeed resemble the other young(ish) men in the novel: his heterosexual counterparts, such as Luke and Doctor Geoffrey Thomas. At the same time, however, his 'queer' sexuality inscribes itself, however obscurely, across his physiognomy, marking him out as in some way sexually different to these other men.

Frightfully Queer Friends from London: Criminally Sexual Bodies and the Escape from the Urban Labyrinth

Historically speaking, homosexual sub-cultures have been strongly linked to the urban environment. This, it has been argued, is owing to the idea that the city offers its dwellers a heightened degree of anonymity and the ability to live in close proximity to other people, but in a vastly uninterested state: the mentality that Mr Ellsworthy himself terms the 'inhuman you-mind-your-own-business-and-I-will-mind-mine of a city!' (80). The consequence of this prevailing climate of an almost unnaturally apathetic attitude is that, as long as one is relatively circumspect, the city dweller can partake in whatever sexual practices take their fancy, legal or otherwise.⁶⁴ As Jonathan Raban alternatively puts it, it is often thought that, with

⁶⁴ For an alternative reading of the relationship between homosexuality and the city space, one which focus instead on amenity provision, please see David J. Bell, 'Insignificant Others: Lesbian and Gay Geographies', *Area* 23, 4 (December 1991), pp. 323-29. Although focusing on amenity provision may be a valuable means of reading the relationship between homosexuality and the urban milieu, to my mind it does not quite answer the question of what the original draw of the city was for a large homosexual community, thus warranting the first wave of specialised amenity provision.

regard to large cities, 'size and anonymity and the absence of clear communal sanctions licence the kind of behaviour that any village would stamp out at birth'.⁶⁵ This afforded 'licence' is, of course, a double edged sword: both part of the utopic potential of the urban milieu, but also the central aspect of its deep-seated Gothicism (that if you, as urbanite, have the freedom to behave as you wish to behave without close scrutiny, then so does everybody around you - and these fellow city dwellers may harbour intentions that are markedly villainous). Specifically regarding the homosexual urbanite, following a repugnant depiction of the gay 'quarter' that had, by the 1970s, materialised around the Earl's Court area of London, Raban goes on to point out that

people who hate cities [...] are surely right when they interpret cities as the enemies of decent family life, of community constraint, of 'public morals'. It is possible, however, to prefer the freedom of a place like this, with all its hazards, to the forced constrictions of the small town[.] [...] No-one in their right mind would see anything utopian in Earl's Court: its freedoms are badly scarred, commercially exploited, licentious. It affords indifference not tolerance; it is a tribal wilderness not a community. [...] Yet here, for the lucky and the provident, a kind of private life is possible, a life of small freedoms away from curiosity and censure. That, given we have lost so much elsewhere, seems a good which should not be undervalued.⁶⁶

Thus, bearing in mind that, at the time of the original publication of *Murder is Easy*, homosexual acts between men were still punishable by law, despite the myriad of other difficulties and 'hazards' the prospect of living in a crowded city may pose, the urban environment nevertheless still seems to offer a sought-after level of sexual privacy that simply cannot be attained in more rural spaces.

Consequently, a character such as Mr Ellsworthy seems to be somewhat out-of-place in the sleepy backwater village of Wynchwood: he is the singular homosexual resident in a rural province which is, as I have argued previously in

⁶⁵ Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (1974; London: Picador, 2008), p. 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

chapter two, an inward-gazing, claustrophobic, and panoptic space that, on surface level, appears to afford its residents very little confidentiality. However, as opposed to interpreting Mr. Ellsworthy's seeming incongruity to his surrounding environment as simply Christie's way of creating a pariah figure to *misdirect* suspicion onto (although, structurally speaking, this is, at least in part, his function in the novel), I want to suggest that Christie's decision to locate a character such as Mr Ellsworthy in a provincial location like Wynchwood is grounded in a specific set of anxieties regarding male homosexuality that were permeating interwar British society at large. Indeed, whilst the term 'sex-crime panic', has become most strongly associated with the characterisation of 1950s United States of America,⁶⁷ throughout the 1930s, it seems that Britain was experiencing its own sex-crime panic: a panic which, I want to suggest, heavily informs the sexual geography that is established and considerably Gothicised in Christie's novel. Certainly, in the years following the First World War there was a marked and progressive increase in both the number of individuals arrested for, and the number of individuals convicted of sex-crimes. In 1919, there were close to 300 arrests for sex-crimes, most of which resulted in criminal conviction. However, in 1938, the year prior to the publication of *Murder is Easy*, the figures for arrests tripled to an astounding 1,200, around half of which resulted in conviction.⁶⁸ The formative position played specifically by homosexual crimes within the generalised increase in sex-crimes across the interwar years cannot be overestimated, and speaks of an increasingly infectious public paranoia about homosexuality within the period. In *The Night Haunts of London* (1920) - a book length series of journalistic vignettes exposing (among

⁶⁷ See, for example, Neil Miller's *Sex-Crime Panic: A Journey to the Paranoid Heart of the 1950s* (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Books, 2002).

⁶⁸ See, 'Graph 1. Changes to Sex Crimes in England and Wales (1919-1938)', in Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe, Volume I & II: Berlin, London, Paris 1919-1939* (New York: Algora, 2006), p. 310.

other things) gambling dens, brothels, hustling fortune tellers, and sexual trafficking in the metropolis - Sydney A. Moseley draws his reader's attention to

a number of strange night haunts given up to particular vices. For instance, at one establishment one may see a crowd of young men so made-up that it is not easy to guess their sex at first venture. Their perfume, carriage, and high-pitched voice would make a normal man sick; but their purpose is known to the police, who are powerless to take action without definitive evidence.⁶⁹

Here, Moseley paints a picture of the law enforcement officers with their hands tied, unable (or perhaps simply disinclined) to intervene with regard to gatherings that are doubtless deigned to facilitate illegal homosexual practices between men. This seeming lack of state intervention, however, changes drastically by the decade's close. As Jeffrey Weeks suggests, there is a marked vicissitude that occurs across the course of the 1920s and 1930s in terms of the primary concern for both morality organisations and, by extension (doubtless owing the pressure of the former), law enforcers and the legal system on a wider scale. He argues that as 'forms of female prostitution became more discreet, increasingly male homosexual offences came to the fore. This was often conceptualised in terms of an increase in the instances of homosexuality, but almost certainly was a consequence of increased anxiety'.⁷⁰ I will comment upon the wider implications of Weeks' latter remark shortly. In the meantime, Florence Tamagne provides a fuller demystification of the statistics pertaining to homosexual sex-crimes in the interwar years, stating that between 1919 and 1938, recorded instances of 'unnatural offences' increased by 185 per cent and cases of 'indecent' by 155 per cent.⁷¹ However, the most significant statistical increase is actually that which

⁶⁹ Sydney A. Moseley, *The Night Haunts of London* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1920), p. 43.

⁷⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (1981; London: Longman, 1989), p. 220.

⁷¹ Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe*, p. 307.

occurs in relation to 'attempts to commit unnatural offences': the indefinite blanket-term which, as Weeks elsewhere suggests, most 'male homosexual acts were generally subsumed under'.⁷² Within regards to this offence, Tamagne proposes that, there 'was a startling increase of 902% in the number of cases, 92 in 1919, but 822 cases in 1938!'⁷³ This would therefore mean that attempts to commit 'unnatural offences' accounts for approximately 69 per cent of all the sex-crime arrests for that one year. From the end of the First World War to the beginning of the Second, the increase that takes place in the arrests of those attempting to commit 'unnatural offences' was the direct result of an intensification in strategic police activity that sought to 'clamp down' on illegal homosexual intercourse.

Whilst these heightened attempts to suppress homosexual soliciting provide the immediate context within which, as I shall go on to suggest, Mr Ellsworthy's implied backstory should be read, in some sense the triangulation between sex, urban space, and the state that buttresses both this specific sexual panic and its imaginative refraction in *Murder is Easy* is a more deep-rooted one. Indeed, I would propose that there exists a striking similarity between the police attitudes and practices employed with regard to homosexual soliciting in the 1930s and those employed with regard to suspected prostitutes in the wake of the Contagious Diseases Acts (three separate pieces of parliamentary legislation dating from 1864, 1866, and 1869, which were eventually repealed in 1886), in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Not only do the Contagious Diseases Acts mark what I would identify as *the* most significant moment in the history of state

⁷² Jeffrey Weeks, 'Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes: Male Prostitution and the Regulation of Homosexuality in England in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in Salvatore J. Licata and Robert P. Peterson (eds), *The Gay Past: A Collection of Historical Essays* (New York: The Haworth Press and Stein and Day, 1981), p. 117.

⁷³ Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe*, p. 307.

intervention in the sexual lives of urban Britons, but I would even suggest that modern urban subjectivity cannot be properly understood, at least not within a British context, without considering the colossal impact of these laws. Justified as a means of curbing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (mainly syphilis) throughout the British Army and Navy, these acts meant that any woman who might be wandering the streets merely suspected of being a prostitute could be forced to undergo a compulsory medical examination, resulting in enforced detention in a Lock Hospital for up to three months under the original 1864 Act, this period increasing by a further three months with each subsequent Act that was passed.⁷⁴ In terms of the discernible parallels linking these two temporally-separated criminosexual panics, firstly, it is certainly worth underlining the fact that the lead figure in the campaign to have the Contagious Diseases Acts repealed, Josephine Butler, was certainly of the opinion that the unfair victimisation of female prostitutes was nothing more than a cover-up for homosexual practices within the armed forces themselves. In *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (1980), Judith R. Walkowitz cites an 1870 letter from Butler to the Naval captain, Vernon Lushington, in which Butler gives a recent example of a ship aboard which

70 men were found affected by recent venereal sores of a bad kind, not one of them having seen the face of a woman for more than a year. To such dissolute soldiers the cowardly officer says, "Inform, inform us of the woman who has infected you." The men shamed to confess that they had infected each other point to any woman who comes first.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Tabitha Sparks, 'Medical Gothic and the Return of the Contagious Diseases Acts in Stoker and Machen', *Nineteenth-Century Feminisms* 6 (Fall/Winter 2002), p. 88.

⁷⁵ Josephine Butler, cited in Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 130.

Given the vehemence of Butler's opposition to the implementation of the Acts, one possible way of reading the contents of this excerpt is to see this 'ship' as a rhetorical device (and a markedly dramatised one at that) that Butler uses in order to advance her own argument and agenda, rather than as fact. However, the suspect nature of the example aside, Butler's story still nevertheless works to underscore the way in which many did suspect that the problem of widespread cases of syphilis among enlisted men resulted from homosexual intercourse whilst at sea, rather than heterosexual sex with prostitutes whilst docked, and that this had been knowingly downplayed by those involved in pushing the Contagious Diseases bills successfully through Parliament. Additionally, Weeks has pointed out that the nineteenth-century Contagious Diseases Acts and the continued criminalisation of homosexuality in the early-twentieth century elicited objection from similar political campaign groups. He states that '[a]s early as 1921 the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (the successor to Josephine Butler's campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts) stated that private homosexual acts between consenting adults should be legalised'.⁷⁶ However, I would both add to, and push beyond, those linkages between the enforcement of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the paranoid obsession with homosexual sex in the 1930s that have already been identified by Walkowitz and Weeks, by proposing that, significantly more so than homosexual practices themselves, what, above all else, provides a continuity between these two historical episodes - and reveals them as sharing precisely the same moral, criminal, and medical matrix - is the shared emphasis on the relationship between criminality (or more specifically, the criminal body) and visibility, or the act of looking. What it is crucial to note is that it was not until 1905 that the causative agent of syphilis, *Treponema Pallidum*, was first identified by

⁷⁶ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 221.

Fritz Schaudinn and Erich Hoffman, German zoologist and dermatologist respectively, which in turn facilitated August Paul von Wasserman's invention of the first serological test for detecting syphilis in 1906: the Wasserman test or Wasserman reaction.⁷⁷ Thus, during the period of the contagious diseases debacle, after a woman had been identified as a suspected prostitute, as there was no biological test the doctor could perform during the medical examination - the examination that took place was of a purely visual nature. This, of course, is highly problematic owing to the fact that the kinds of symptoms looked for - such as a lymphatic countenance or pallor of the skin - could be symptomatic of multiple kinds of infection (venereal or otherwise), or, indeed, even of no infection at all.⁷⁸ Moreover, even genital inspection using a speculum was highly inconclusive for, as Mary Spongberg explains, the work of the French doctor Alexandre Paret-Duchatelet highlighted the gynophobic underpinnings of many medical examinations 'by suggesting that it was often impossible to tell the difference between the vagina of a hardened prostitute and that of a virgin.'⁷⁹ Thus, with no decisive means of diagnosis, the female patient was utterly at the mercy of both the doctor's visual scrutiny and his own prejudices. In short, if the doctor *decides* that she has syphilis, for all intents and purposes she now essentially has syphilis and can be 'treated' (or rather, punished) appropriately.

This idea of the (allegedly) sexual urban body utterly powerless to defend itself against the invasive visual scrutiny of the authorities has a distinct legacy in the first half of the twentieth century and the cultural climate in which Christie was

⁷⁷ Adrian Mindel and Claudia Estcourt, 'Syphilis', in Lawrence R. Stanberry and David I. Bernstein (eds), *Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Vaccines, Prevention and Control* (London: Academic Press, 2000), p. 388. Also see, Claude Quétel, *History of Syphilis* (trans. Judith Braddock and Brian Pike) (1986; Cambridge: Polity, 1990), pp. 140-41.

⁷⁸ See, Mary Spongberg, *Feminizing Venereal Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 40.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

writing. The key point is that, analogous to this penalisation of a potentially innocent woman at the hand of law enforcers and medical professionals before the development of the Wasserman test, so too for a gentleman accosted for soliciting in the 1930s, there was no concrete way of ‘proving’ his intent to commit a homosexual sex act: that a man’s experiencing of sexual desire for another man is not something that can be ‘tested’ for. As such, again in a seeming replaying of the attitudes and practices prevalent in the wake of the Contagious Diseases Acts, within the interwar years the human body appears to provide an interpretative framework that can be used by the authorities in order to ‘figure out’ a person’s relationship with a form of sexuality that has been declared criminal. Consequently, so-called ‘proof’ of unlawful homosexual soliciting was often simply a case of the police officer making assumptions based on a series of visual codes: a particular kind of countenance, a certain way of dress, the wearing of cosmetics, the suspect being in a certain location (usually a men’s public lavatory). Indeed, in his 1968 memoir, *The Naked Civil-Servant*, Quentin Crisp recounts the period that he spent as a male quasi-prostitute at the end of the 1920s. With regard to the legal climate, he recalls of the period that

[t]he attitude of the law was arbitrary - bordering on slapdash. Boys arrested for soliciting were found guilty before they had spoken. If they did get a chance to say anything, the sound of their voice caused the presiding magistrate to increase their sentences. I think the boys were right in assuming that they were being condemned for effeminacy.⁸⁰

Effeminate mannerisms, it therefore appears, were posited as something that would ‘betray’ a man’s homosexuality, and, as Matt Houlbrook illustrates, were precisely the sort of identification which police might have used in order to make

⁸⁰ Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968: London: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 29-30.

arrests.⁸¹ However, effeminacy and homosexuality are, of course, not necessarily the same thing, which demonstrates the frustrating difficulty experienced in trying to 'prove' sexual intention or desire. Thus, the frame-of-mind evoked here by Crisp, of those individuals whose job it was to enforce the law, goes a significant way to explaining the other considerable shift evident in the figures for sex-crimes during the period 1919-1938 which I earlier highlighted: the change in the relationship between the arrest rate and the conviction rate. Whereas in 1919 the difference between the number of arrests and the number of convictions is more or less negligible, in 1938 there is a colossal disparity between nearly 1,200 arrests and only around *half* the number of criminal convictions resulting from those arrests. To return to Weeks' earlier point, this disparity would seem to suggest that, it is not the case that the substantial rise of homosexual sex-crimes across the 1930s was simply the result of an increased number of homosexual men in the British population, nor is it the case that the policing of homosexuality is more effective or more 'successful'. On the contrary, the police making a huge number of arrests which lacked the evidence needed to successfully obtain criminal convictions implies a high level of rashness, hastiness and seeming paranoia: an amplified cultural anxiety regarding homosexuality which, as Weeks suggests, bears little relation to any actual 'instances of homosexuality'.

Thus, the public articulation of the repression and control of a particular kind of sexualised body within a particular kind of urban locale that started with the Contagious Diseases Acts clearly did not die out with their eventual repeal in 1886, but had a presence within the sexual geographies of mid-twentieth-century Britain. The implementation of the Contagious Diseases Acts fundamentally transformed a certain demographic of the female population's relationship to the

⁸¹ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 148.

city space, meaning that in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the entrenched metaphorical articulation of the city as a labyrinth gained both renewed emphasis and a renewed Gothicism in light of the minotaur/prey dichotomy that comes to characterise the relationship between the female urbanite and the law enforcement.⁸² As such, further indicative of the ways in which the cultural panic regarding unlawful acts of homosexual intercourse in the interwar years appears as an almost direct replaying of the enforcement of the Contagious Diseases Acts, the imperative thing to note - in relation to Christie's *Murder is Easy* - is that, so too was a prey/predator relationship with police the case for the homosexual male of the 1930s. For reasons earlier outlined, it is perhaps unsurprising that the bulk of this systematic spate of intensified anti-homosexual policing was concentrated in Britain's conurbations: not only London, but also the cities of Southampton, York, and the built-up area encompassing Blackpool, Blackburn, and Preston.⁸³ As the twentieth century progressed, increasingly it is the male homosexual who was positioned in the disadvantageous role of the minotaur's prey within the urban labyrinth. This then perhaps goes a long way to explaining Christie's locating a homosexual male character, such as Mr Ellsworthy, in the pretty, rural village of Wynchwood: that, in a sense, Mr Ellsworthy might be seen as a refugee figure, fleeing persecution from an increasingly intolerant police regime in more metropolitan environments. It is explicitly stated within the novel that Mr Ellsworthy is not a native of Wynchwood, but rather that he has, within the last decade, emigrated to the village from a major city, which is most strongly

⁸² For a detailed discussion of the centrality of metaphor with regard to the way in which individuals perceive and articulate the city, please see, chapter five, 'The Moroccan Birdcage', in Raban, *Soft City*, pp. 101-47; According to ancient Greek mythology, King Minos annually ordered seven young men and seven young maidens to be sent into the labyrinth under his palace at Knossos, essentially to provide food for the Minotaur. See, Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology* (trans. Robin Hard) (1997; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 136-38.

⁸³ Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe*, pp. 308-09.

suggested to be London. Moreover, even if the other villagers had chosen not to discuss Mr Ellsworthy's provenance with Luke, Christie's descriptions of Mr Ellsworthy's bold and outlandish dress sense, such as that earlier cited, speaks volumes in terms of crystallising his status as both sexual and geographical 'outsider': for as Houlbrook notes, influenced by 'the material culture of femininity' homosexual men "manipulated their bodies" physicality to create an arrestingly colourful persona, a striking and often undeniable *urban* presence' (emphasis mine).⁸⁴ Furthermore, London would be the obvious choice for Mr Ellsworthy's provenance since several 'middlebrow' novels featuring homosexual characters make use of a heavily sexualised geography concerning the capital. Within these novels, the production of space within the text can be seen to occur according to a schematic of sexual identity. For example, the latter portion of Keane's *Devoted Ladies* sees the London-based lesbian protagonists holidaying in the Irish countryside near to the ancestral home of their friend Sylvester. Unbeknownst to Jessica, Jane plans on soon abandoning their turbulent, abusive relationship in favour of marriage to the pleasant-but-dull George Playfair. Thus, when Jessica informs Jane that their cosmetic-wearing, *Chanel* perfume borrowing, brocaded handbag sporting valet, Albert, may have entered into a new homosexual relationship, her response is as follows:

'He can't have an affair here. He just *can't* be romantic here.' Jane was too upset by the idea. Nasty Albert. His affairs belonged to another life where they were faintly amusing and anyhow did not matter. But here - Jane leant out into the open window into the faint adventurous autumn evening [...] Here she would not have such rudeness. No, she would deny it all, all. This life and that were a world apart; one could escape, surely one could escape.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 148.

⁸⁵ Molly Keane, *Devoted Ladies* (1934; London: Virago, 2007), pp. 205-06.

In a novel that, at least superficially, appears to resolutely delight in the glorification of the homoerotic/non-heteronormative (of which the terms 'rude' or 'rudeness' are consistently shaded by Keane to signify),⁸⁶ not only is Jane's reaction to Albert's holiday romance illustrative of the double-standard of the 'middlebrow' handling of male homosexuality as opposed to its female equivalent, which I have earlier discussed, but, perhaps even more significantly, the most striking feature of this passage is just how highly spatialised the writing is. This passage, although ostensibly about the sexual antics of a particular character, is strongly marked by the language of distances, measures, and geographical movement. The most frequently employed word in the passage is 'here' (meaning the Irish countryside), which, by its very definition, involuntarily presupposes its opposite - 'there' (meaning London). This is significant when it is considered that London of the 1920s and early 1930s is a place where, at least for people of the social demographic that the novel's characters belong to, entry into a homosexual relationship was not just seen as acceptable, but, as Weeks argues, actually considered to be somewhat chic.⁸⁷ With regard to *Murder is Easy*, as I have discussed at length in chapter two, Christie's village novels ultimately expose the country village as a fundamentally corrupt, barbaric and morally diseased space. However, before this exposition takes place, the notion of the outsider as a threat to the conventional order of English village society is often employed. Thus, although the action of only one and a half chapters of *Murder is Easy* actually transpires in the metropolis (in total, a mere seventeen pages out of 312 pages of prose in the current Harper edition of the novel), Christie's story is nonetheless punctuated by

⁸⁶ Polly Devlin interprets Keane's use of the term 'rude' in a similar, although not so explicitly homosexual vein, suggesting that 'the word "rude" is used throughout the book to denote shocking and aberrant emotion'. Polly Devlin, 'Introduction', in Keane, *Devoted Ladies*, p. v

⁸⁷ Weeks, *Sex, Politics & Society*, p. 199.

continual references and allusions to England's capital, so much so that London is, in a sense, made conspicuous precisely through its absence. Moreover, in terms of those seventeen pages of the novel that do take place in London, it is worth bearing in mind what the content of the majority of those pages is: which is the chapter in which Luke learns of Lavina Pinkerton's and John Humbleby's deaths whilst lodging with his friend, Jimmy Lorrimer (Chapter Two, 'Obituary Notice').⁸⁸ Whist I am categorically not suggesting that Luke's relationship with Jimmy is anything resembling a sexual or romantic one, nor that we could, or should, attempt to make it seem such by way of interpretation through a homoerotic lens, it is still, nevertheless, a depiction of two young, unattached men warmly sharing a home together. The significant point, I would argue, is that this is a domestic arrangement that emphatically does not take place in Wynchwood-under-Ashe: that there are no two men who live together without the presence of at least one other female occupant, nor is there ever suggested to have been in the village's history as far back as it is discussed in the novel. Indeed, in terms of Luke's development as a character, after his arrival in the village, he spends a striking proportion of the novel specifically in the company of Bridget Conway, with whom he unsurprisingly falls in love, finally confessing his blindingly obvious feelings for her about halfway through the novel.⁸⁹ Thus, one of the things that comes across most clearly from this story arc is that, as a spatial setting, Wynchwood does not seem to encourage, nor allow the room, for forms of male-male bonding to take place and therefore, like Keane's *Devoted Ladies*, the novel evidently has a kind of sexual geography in play, which sees London functioning almost as the double of

⁸⁸ This chapter accounts for twelve of those seventeen pages. The other five pages are within Chapter Eighteen, 'Conference in London'.

⁸⁹ Bridget, being a markedly realistic woman who is well aware of her financial situation and what she sees as her modest looks, refuses Luke at this particular juncture, on the grounds that her marriage to her employer, the haughty and much older Gordon Whitfield, will bring her great wealth for only the slightest increase in effort on her part.

the novel's countryside setting, serving as the principal site of everything that is *not* a heteronormative relationship between a man and a woman, including affectionate friendships between men.

Bearing this geography in mind, spatial references to Britain's capital city therefore take on particular importance with regard to Mr Ellsworthy's association with the occult, and the ways in which Christie's narrative seems to offer occultism as a metaphor for homosexuality. When the subject of Mr Ellsworthy comes up in conversation between Luke and Rose Humbleby, the latter confides in Luke, with the word 'queer' again functioning as a *double entendre*, that

I think he's dreadful [...] There's a lot of talk about him. I was told that he had some queer ceremony in the Witches Meadow - a lot of his friends came down from London - frightfully queer-looking people. And Tommy Pierce was a kind of acolyte [...] He had a surplice and a red cassock' (129).⁹⁰

Similarly, when Luke repeats his newly-learned information to Bridget, he does so in the following terms: 'it seems that he has a kind of little coterie - a band of nasty friends. They come down here from time to time and celebrate [...] I suppose they worship the devil and do obscene dances' (138). Specifically in Luke's verbalisation of what he has heard from Wynchwood natives, not only is his suggestion that Mr Ellsworthy is a devil-worshiper particularly inflammatory, bringing with it a wealth of specifically anti-Christian associations of godlessness, inhumanity, and damnation, but it is moreover important to note that his use of the word 'coterie' may be tinged with deliberate homosexual undertones. As Weeks has suggested, when applied to a group of well-heeled men between the 1880s and the end of the 1930s, the term, more than simply connoting a select group of friends bound together through shared interests, or 'clique', carries with it unpleasant suggestions

⁹⁰ Significantly, in *The Moving Finger*, Mr Pye is - in highly similar semantics - reported as sporadically receiving 'very strange visitors' at his Lymstock home: 'Strange acquaintances' which catch the eye of, and subsequently worry, his Lymstokian neighbours (154).

of an informal, often private and domesticated, ring of male-male prostitution.⁹¹ From such sentiments it is clear that, in the minds of the novel's characters, it is the city of London that serves as the principal site of homosexual identity: that London is the place from which the depraved, 'queer' people originate, then violently invading village space, disrupting (or perhaps even destroying) Wynchwood's complacent heteronormativity in the process.

Moreover, Tamagne asserts that, in light of the renewed public and legal panic over homosexuality, it was during the 1930s that the 'myth of the homosexual as a corruptor of youth, a satyr or a criminal gained new life'.⁹² This statement throws light upon Christie's decision to make clear that the village's troublesome teenager, Tommy Pierce (who recently met his end when he fell out of one of the top-floor windows of the village library after being contracted as a window cleaner), was involved with these homosexual-cum-occultist gatherings. This is in the sense that, although disliked by his elders in the village to such a degree that the prevailing attitude is that he was 'a thoroughly nasty child [...] [and] the removal of him might have been conceived as a public duty' (106), Tommy represents a certain mode of youthful, pre-sexual 'innocence' that is imaged as being particularly susceptible to targeting by homosexual 'perverts'. When Luke speaks to Tommy's mother with the intention of finding out more about his death, she tells him that 'Tommy was always good at imitations. Make us hold our sides with laughing the way he'd mince around pretending to be that Mr Ellsworthy at the curio shop' (118). Mrs Pierce may be laughing at the memory, but, for the reader at least, it is a very uncomfortable kind of laughter. Her use of the deictic pronoun 'that' when she makes reference to 'that Mr Ellsworthy' (as

⁹¹ Weeks, 'Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes', *The Gay Past*, p. 127.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 239.

opposed to simply 'Mr Ellsworthy', or something even more proximal, such as 'our Mr Ellsworthy') implies a significant level of unfamiliarity and distance, leading the reader to infer that Mrs Pierce does not know Mr Ellsworthy particularly well. Her son, however, was evidently *very* well acquainted with Mr Ellsworthy, and has spent a lot of time with him to the point at which he is able to start mimicking his mannerisms and way of walking. In other words, Tommy and Mr Ellsworthy seem to have had a relationship of which Mrs Pierce seems utterly unaware. As the description above makes clear, Mr Ellsworthy seems to have exerted a high level of influence over the teenager, and the key point, I would suggest, is that not only is Tommy emulating Mr Ellsworthy's behaviour in general, but he has begun specifically to emulate his habit of 'mincing': a practice that, as previously discussed, according to the rhetoric of both the text and its wider historical context - particularly taking into consideration Crisp's recounting of the cultural conflation of effeminate mannerisms with a particular sexual orientation - is expressly understood as symptomatic of his homosexuality.⁹³ Thus, the lingering suggestion within the novel seems to be that the reason why Mr Ellsworthy takes such a keen interest in Tommy is because he recognises that, deep down, the teenager is 'of his kind' (even if Tommy is, as of yet, unaware of his 'true' sexual inclination), or otherwise that so much time spent with the antiques shop owner has *distorted* Tommy's innate heterosexuality and, in a sense, 'made' him gay. In either scenario, what remains unchanged is that contact with Mr Ellsworthy has been a form of sexual corruption for the supposedly innocent child, and thus, structuring the intergenerational friendship between Tommy and Mr Ellsworthy is a lucid predator/prey model of relations.

⁹³ Similarly, in *The Moving Finger*, Mr Pye, of course, has a *penchant* for 'skipp[ing]' down the streets of Lymstock (206).

Tamagne's proposition of a cultural tendency to imagine the homosexual male as a 'satyr' is exceptionally relevant in light of the fact that, as I have discussed at length in the previous chapter, *Murder is Easy* is a novel that implicates a highly malevolent *genus loci* in what superficially appears to be beautiful, picturesque countryside. As such, I would insist the other major intertext, aside from *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, punctuating Christie's novel is Arthur Machen's grotesque masterpiece *The Great God Pan* (1894): a story utterly unrivalled in its capturing of what it is like to experience base, primordial fear. Machen's novella depicts the supernatural havoc wreaked by the half-human daughter of the Ancient Greek God of the wild, initially within a small rural community near the Welsh border, then spreading to the heart of London. This, significantly, is precisely the *reverse* trajectory of that which, for the majority of the Christie's novel, is imagined by the provincial inhabitants of Wynchwood: that evil and unnatural forces are born in the urban metropolis, but then spread to infiltrate the innocent and vulnerable countryside. In ancient mythology, satyrs, such as Pan, were the hybridic, goat-like male attendants of Dionysus, and were associated with an excessive degree of sexual behaviour.⁹⁴ Thus it is arguable that, ultimately, what Christie does is to subvert the cultural imaging of male homosexuals as satyr figures, owing to the fact that the end of the novel reveals that, despite his grotesque, admixed body it is not Mr Ellsworthy who comes to be associated with the image of the satyr, but Wynchwood's 'true' monster: the murderous lunatic, Honoria Waynflete. At the novel's climax, having supposed that Bridget's fiancé and employer, Gordon Whitfield, *must* be the murderer, as all the victims have in some way 'wronged' him, Luke deposits Bridget within the 'calm interior' of Miss Waynflete's residence thinking that the woman he loves will remain safe under

⁹⁴ See, Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, p. 222.

Honorias sage guardianship (279). Having a strong aversion to tea but not wanting to offend her elderly host, Bridget pours the tea that has been made for her out of the sitting-room window at the first available opportunity. However, thinking that Bridget has indeed ingested her drug-laced tea, Miss Waynflete asks her to help deliver some old clothes to a neighbour a few fields over, where, in reality, she plans to slit her throat with a Moroccan Riff knife that was handled by Lord Whitfield earlier that day. When the pair reach a shady copse after the first two fields the reader is told that Honorias 'was smiling. It was not a nice smile. It was sly and not very human' (290). This leads Bridget to the realisation that Miss Waynflete is

like a goat. God! how like a goat she is! A goat has always been an evil symbol! I see now why! I was right - I was right in that fantastic idea of mine! *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned*.... That was the start of it - it's all there. (291)

The intended murder of Bridget Conway - the woman who was due to marry the man who jilted Honorias an indeterminable number of years ago - is the crowning and most personal touch in her enormously maniacal scheme of revenge. She confesses to Bridget that 'it had to be something better than just killing [Gordon]. And then I got this idea. It just came to me. He should suffer for committing a lot of crimes of which he was quite innocent. He should be a murderer! *He* should be hanged for *my* crimes' (294-95). The heavily Gothicised sexual geography that has thus been in play (and increasingly cemented) throughout the entire novel now unravels before the readers very eyes. The monster, such as it were, is not that 'queer' Londoner with the ghastly hands and disturbing smile, getting up to a whole manner of 'ungodly' activities with others of his kind deep in the Witches Meadow. The monster is Wynchwood born and bred: the last surviving member of one of the villages oldest families. The monster is heterosexual.

Thus, in a novel which places so much emphasis on 'deviant' sexual behaviour and identity, it certainly cannot be of little significance that all of the heinous activity plaguing Wynchwood ultimately comes back to the patently heterosexual plot of the-revenge-of-the-neurotic-spinster. Indeed, the increased significance and visibility of this particular plot-line as the novel hastens towards its conclusion is very much exemplified by the lines of poetry (from Francis Cornford's 1910 'To a Fat Lady seen from a Train') that spring into Bridget's mind just before Honoria pulls out her secreted weapon: 'O why do you walk through the fields in gloves | O fat white woman whom nobody loves?' (289). However, I am not asserting that, through the sudden switch-over of monstrosity from Mr Ellsworthy to Miss Waynflete, Christie is making an obvious point about homophobia by way of pointing the finger of suspicion most decidedly at Mr Ellsworthy but then revealing him to be innocent of Wynchwood's crimes. This is because, in some sense, Christie's attempt to close down her narrative with the exposition of Miss Waynflete as the true villain of the story is, I would argue, not entirely successful. In terms of further interrelations between homosexuality and the Gothic, Ellis Hanson observes that, although the genre 'often reproduces the conventional paranoid structure of homophobia and other moral panics over sex [...] it can also be a raucous site of sexual transgression and excess that undermines its own narrative effort at erotic containment'.⁹⁵ This, I would argue, is precisely what transpires in the experience of reading *Murder is Easy*: that Christie's rendering monstrous of the abhorrent yet fascinating Mr Ellsworthy is too hefty and too potent to be easily dispelled by the single gesture of proving him to have been innocent of Wynchwood's murders. Moreover, although it is the broken heterosexual union between Honoria and Gordon that instigates the spiral of

⁹⁵ Hanson, 'Queer Gothic', *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, p. 176.

depraved, monstrous, traumatic events, and not anything in the least to do with Mr Ellsworthy's sexuality, the way in which Christie seems to keep purposefully elevating the level of ridiculousness as the truth of all questionable deaths in Wynchwood comes to light works to severely undermine our ability to take all this seriously as the 'fitting' conclusion to the novel. From Honoria's nonsensical act of strangling of her pet canary, which causes Gordon to break off their engagement in the first place, through her enacting of a completely ludicrous revenge plot, to the almost pantomime devilry that is portrayed as she tries to kill Bridget, the truth at the heart of the Wynchwood mystery becomes more and more nonsensical and outlandish. Thus, in addition to the actual solution to the mystery aspect of the novel, I would argue that it is as equally important to identify what it is about *Murder is Easy* that strikes the reader most vividly after the crimes have been solved, an acceptable level of social order has been restored to the village of Wynchwood-under-Ashe, Luke and Bridget have been left free to pursue a relationship, and the novel is put down by the reader? The answer to which, I would argue, is the disconcerting protracted memory of Mr Ellsworthy's distorted, 'queer' body above any other element of the novel.

In her recent monograph re-evaluating the sexual politics of Christopher Isherwood's writing and challenging the increasing recuperation of his work into a canon of 'gay-' or 'queer Modernism' over past four decades, Jaime Harker suggests an affinity between homosexuality and 'middlebrow' literary culture, particularly with regard to the ways in which they are both similarly positioned as foibles in relation to other, more monolithic institutions. After pointing out that 'queer' and 'middlebrow' both, of course, have a history of being pejorative terms, she goes on to argue that '[q]ueer theory frames heterosexuality as institution that could only be created through the foil of "the homosexual" [...] [...] Similarly, modernism, and

other systems of fixed aesthetic hierarchy, can also be destabili[s]ed by the middlebrow, clearing the way for the much more vibrant, diverse, and interesting cultures of letters in twentieth-century [...] writing'.⁹⁶ My own sense of the relationship between 'homosexual writing' - which, I should point out, need not only signify literature produced by homosexual authors, but which may also include writing implicative of homosexual characters, motifs, or themes - and the 'middlebrow' is similar, though not identical. Thus, in relation to *Murder is Easy*, despite the fact that Christie's depiction of Mr Ellsworthy appears so inescapably caught up with various aspects of the cultural panic surrounding homosexuality that permeated 1930s English society at large, it would be hugely reductive, not to mention entirely beside the point, to try and identify on the basis of this whether the novel, or by customary extension, the author herself is homophobic or otherwise. Indeed, the making of a gratuitous nod towards a perceived homophobia on Christie's part still has the misfortune of being something of a prevalent trend in scholarly considerations of her fiction.⁹⁷ However, it instead seems obvious to me that not only would it be erroneous to confuse and conflate the overriding attitudes and opinions emanating from a fictional work with Christie's own personal beliefs (whatever these may have been), but that even if we were to approach the subject of homophobia in Christie's fiction in the methodological approach befitting of her own detective personae, there is simply not enough evidence available to make a convincing case either way. In light of this,

⁹⁶ Jaime Harker, *Middlebrow Queer: Christopher Isherwood in America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), pp. xiv-xv.

⁹⁷ Even as recently as 2010, Phyllis Lassner, in hypothesising the reasons why Christie's work has received a relative degree of academic neglect outright accuses Christie of being homophobic: a rather rash and unfounded remark that mars an otherwise well thought-out discussion of the nuanced depiction of empire in Christie's novels set abroad. See, Phyllis Lassner, 'The Mysterious New Empire: Agatha Christie's Colonial Murders', in Robin Hackett, Freda Hauser, and Gay Wachman (eds), *At Home and Abroad in the Empire: British Women Write the 1930s* (Newark, DL: University of Delaware Press, 2010), p. 31.

what I would certainly suggest is that a novel such as *Murder is Easy* is illustrative of the fact that there is something about the inherent 'middleness' of the 'middlebrow' - a certain kind of suppleness - which means that writers on this rung of the cultural ladder are simply not confined to using only one method of representation in relation to homosexuality (whether across their *oeuvre*, or even within a singular work itself). In a work of 'highbrow' literature, we as readers assume that the words on the page must be buoyed up by an intended 'meaning'. For example, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* appears so *purposefully* written that we cannot help but position the novel as a deliberate attempt at legitimising lesbian sexual identity and a plea for greater tolerance towards homosexuals. In contrast, however, because the 'middlebrow' novel is, first and foremost, supposed precisely to be what many find Hall's novel distinctly not to be - a book that is in some way *pleasurable* to read - there seems to be an elasticity that is afforded by the 'middlebrow' approach to cultural production. Consequently, 'middlebrow' novelists - whether widely acknowledged as homosexual, like E.F. Benson, known to have sporadically entered into homosexual relationships, like Daphne du Maurier, or, by all accounts, ostensibly heterosexual, like Christie, Molly Keane, or Rosamund Lehmann - can fluctuate, almost unashamedly, between different modes of representation. The 'middlebrow' novelist is free to, and often does, fluctuate between efforts at psychologically convincing depictions of homosexual characters - attempts that seem to consider the possibility of homosexuality as a valid, even alluring, alternative to heteronormativity's stranglehold over life and its fictional rendering - and resorting to degrading (though often amusing) caricature. In Christie's *The Moving Finger*, for example, even the ill-fated lobster that the vicar's wife, Maud Dane Calthrop has bought to boil up for her dinner is thought to be more 'manly' than the village's lone homosexual resident - 'very virile and

handsome, isn't it? [...] Have you ever seen anything so unlike Mr Pye?' (258). These authors are also, at the same time, free to borrow from the Gothic tradition in their representation of homosexuality by portraying their gay characters as monstrous beings, whose bodies noticeably deviate from a 'normal' human physiognomy. Ultimately, in a novel such as *Murder is Easy*, the 'middlebrow' predisposition (in relation to homosexuality) towards fluid characterisation and a lack of obligation to be consistent, means that Christie is on the one hand free to poke fun at homosexuals and convey them morally corrupt and morally corrupting individuals, whilst on the other to express a seemingly genuine sympathy for their plight in the face of continued criminalisation, social prejudice, and bigotry.

Chapter Four - '[T]hese displaced persons':¹ *A Murder is Announced* and the Gothic Condition of Post-war England

Wartime London [...] saw Gothic tropes becoming literal. People were buried alive in their own homes, night streets turned into a bizarre dreamscape where 'banshee' sirens wailed and death howled downwards in the form of wailing bombs, shelterers took refuge in open coffins and even familiar structures hid new and unexpected horrors, like the ice cream vans commandeered to carry human blood. Corpses, shop mannequins and butcher's meat lay scattered in the streets, all queasy doublings of the living.

- Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (2010).²

Through the door there surged a tempestuous young woman with a well-developed bosom heaving under a tight jersey. She had on a dirndl skirt of a bright colour and had greasy dark plaits wound round and round her head. Her eyes were dark and flashing. [...] Sometimes [Miss Blacklock] thought it would be preferable to do the entire work of the house as well as the cooking rather than be bothered by the eternal nerve storms of her refugee 'lady help'. (33)

- First description of Mitzi in Agatha Christie, *A Murder is Announced* (1950).

Out of Place, Out of Time: Fragments, Displacement, and 'Uncanny' Experience

One of the criticisms habitually levelled against Agatha Christie is the perceived shallowness of her characterisation: her preference for easily repackaged and reusable stock-figures, or character 'types', as opposed to the 'fully unfolded interiorities' expected of the characters who populate twentieth-century non-genre

¹ Agatha Christie, *A Murder is Announced* (1950; London: Harper, 2002), p. 82. All page numbers, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

² Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

prose fiction.³ This assumed lack of individualisation or idiosyncrasy is crystallised by Robert Barnard's suggestion that Christie

has a stock repertoire of characters whom she wheels on and off stage to perform their stock gestures: the pompous and boring Anglo-Indian colonel; the acid-tongued spinster; the vulgar, newly rich businessman; the egotistical actor or actress; the ne'er-do-well young man. It is almost as if she had a pack of cards with a series of types badly characterized, and before beginning a new book she shuffled and dealt herself ten or twelve to make up a cast-list of suspects.⁴

However, as I hope to have demonstrated in the previous chapter by highlighting the studied attention that Christie pays towards the geography and sociology of the homosexual Mr Ellsworthy in *Murder is Easy* (1939), there is in various places across her *oeuvre* a marked distinctiveness of characterisation. The same singularity that we find in Mr Ellsworthy could also be identified in Mitzi: the housekeeper in Christie's 1950 'Miss Marple' novel, *A Murder is Announced*. The idiosyncrasy of Christie's characterisation of Mitzi is that, in a move significantly not found elsewhere in her work, she specifically decides to make the housekeeper at Little Paddocks a Central European refugee who arrived in England during or shortly before the Second World War in order to escape Nazi persecution. My argument in this chapter is that Christie uses the trope of the 'displaced person' (who functions as an 'uncanny' fragment of an incomprehensible, thus frightening whole) as a means of articulating the increasingly Gothic reality of life lived in immediate post-war England. However, in addition to her portrayal of housekeeper Mitzi, I will also argue that her primary means of achieving this articulation is via her attempt at re-imagining Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1862

³ Nicolas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns, 'Agatha Christie: Modern and Modernist', in Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (eds), *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 124.

⁴ Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p. 5.

novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*: a novel that Christie appears to find both strangely relevant and particularly useful as an interlocutor at this, specific and specifically traumatised, historical moment. Thus, I argue that not only does Christie's treatment of displaced characters in *A Murder is Announced* have an immediate context in terms of the Second World War and the immediate post-war years, but that it also has a simultaneous prior context in mid-nineteenth-century apprehensions concerning women, mobility, and place. Both Christie's and Braddon's novels have a critical history dominated by attempts to interpret these works in terms of their adherence (or otherwise) to genre: respectively, 'Golden Age' detection and the sensation novel. However, my argument will be that reading the dialogue between these two novels in relation to a particular historical moment allows for elements of these novels - especially their use of village settings and the significance of the ways in which characters interact with these settings - that either have been entirely overlooked, or have been seen but simply dismissed as 'odd' in terms of genre, to come to light and to demonstrate their importance.

In chapter one of this thesis I introduced the 'uncanny' as that which haunts, repulses, or disturbs in spite of (or precisely *because of*) its ostensive familiarity. However, specifically in terms of the relationship between displacement and the 'uncanny', in one section of Freud's much cited essay on the topic, he contemplates the implications of discovering human limbs in a location other than a unified human body, suggesting that '[d]ismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist [...] have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when [...] they prove capable of independent activity'.⁵ In subsequent meditations on the 'uncanny', the Gothic, and the numerous intersections between them, Freud's

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "The "Uncanny"" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII* (trans. James Strachey) (1955; London: Hogarth, 1975), p. 244.

foundational image has been re-appropriated or 'opened out' for the purposes of thinking about the role that the fragment found dislodged from its spatial or temporal origins performs in creating 'uncanny' experience. For example, Nicholas Royle argues that it is not only the case that feelings of 'uncanny' discomfort occur when faced with 'something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context', but moreover, they occur, with equal dynamism, when confronted by 'something strange and unfamiliar arising in a familiar context'.⁶ Employing a strikingly similar rhetoric, in his study of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction, Robert Mighall argues that much of the genre's capacity to startle its reader arises from its exploitation of the 'situation of distance within the proximate, and the strange within the familiar'.⁷ Perhaps most overtly of all, the architectural historian James Risser suggests that an 'uncanny space is [...] first of all a space of displacement':⁸ a space now curiously devoid of the object or imagined activity that it was (quite literally) structured around, or, alternatively, a space now harbouring something which disrupts its perceived architectural coherence. Thus, although it might be nuanced slightly differently in each of the four examples I have just provided, it is nevertheless clear that the broad spectrum of 'uncanny' experiences evoked here by Freud, Royle, Mighall, and Risser, are, at heart, all united through the trope of displacement: the trope which dominates, and which is employed by Christie to particularly startling effect in *A Murder is Announced*.

⁶ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.

⁷ Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (1999; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 43.

⁸ James Risser, 'Siting Order at the Limits of Construction: Deconstructing Architectural Space', *Research in Phenomenology* 22 (1992), p. 70.

This Servant Problem: Gothic Displacement and Post-war Horror

As I indicated in Chapter Two, the investigation that takes place in *A Murder is Announced* is initially into the death of Rudi Scherz. The young Swiss appears to have met his end - either by accident or in remorse-motivated suicide - after attempting the armed robbery of Letitia Blacklock's home, Little Paddocks, in the village of Chipping Cleghorn. With a shot having been fired at the mistress of the house during the hold-up, after it is subsequently discovered that the rarely used dummy door in the second half of the through-lounge has been oiled and recently unlocked, the police begin to view events through a rather different prism. Their suspicion is that Scherz was actually put up to the burglary stunt by someone present at Little Paddocks on the night in question: somebody who could have slipped out of the lounge through the second door, fired a shot at their intended victim, Letitia, before turning the gun on their expendable scapegoat. Inspector Craddock and Sergeant Fletcher work on the basis of this theory for the majority of the novel, and seem to be justified in doing so, particularly when two more murders take place - when Letitia's friend and companion, Dora Bunner, is poisoned by some adulterated aspirin tablets she took from Letitia's bedside, and when Amy Murgatroyd, the only person standing behind, rather than in front, of Scherz's torch on the night of the hold-up (and so might have witnessed something she should not have) is strangled to death with her own washing. Victim of Scherz's *penchant* for doctoring cheques at the nearby Royal Spa Hotel, where he worked as a receptionist, Jane Marple descends upon Chipping Cleghorn upon reading of his death, installing herself at the vicarage where her close friends' daughter, Bunch Harmon, is the vicar's wife. It is, of course, the shrewd busybody who directs Craddock and Fletcher towards the true solution to the mystery of the crimes

plaguing the village - a solution that I shall later discuss. As I have already indicated, this chapter is concerned with the displacement of human beings as a Gothic phenomenon. As such, when the term 'displaced persons' is first employed in Christie's novel, it is done with reference to the character of Mitzi: the emotional and often aggressive European refugee housekeeper in employment at Little Paddocks, the particularly evocative first description of whom I have given as one of this chapter's headers.

Connoting an undesirable state of geographic, social, and national liminality, the term 'displaced person' first became popular towards the beginning of the Second World War, and was escalated to become a specific legal classification in 1944.⁹ Owing to the diversity of wartime backgrounds, the spectrum of people who came to be legally certified as 'displaced' is broad and, as Mark Wyman lists, included among others, 'thousands whose war years were spent with the anti-Nazi resistance - guerrilla units hiding in the marshes of northeastern Poland, [and] loosely linked bands raiding in the Italian Alps'.¹⁰ However, most commonly, and certainly the sense in which the term is used by various characters in *A Murder is Announced*, the 'displaced persons' of the Second World War are people of Jewish extraction who were forced to flee their homes in central Europe and emigrate to countries such as Great Britain after Hitler came into power in Germany in 1933. These émigrés arrived in the United Kingdom either directly or in a roundabout way usually from Germany and Austria, although some originated slightly further afield from countries that include Czechoslovakia and Hungary.¹¹

⁹ Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951* (1089; Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1998), p. 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹ Daniel Snowman, *The Hitler Émigrés: The Cultural Impact on Britain of Refugees from Nazism* (2002; London: Pimlico, 2003), p. xvi. From this point onwards the terms 'émigrés' and 'refugees' will be used interchangeably.

Under the rule of the Nazi party, Hitler's 'Aryanisation' programme further intensified in the years following 1933, eventually spreading to Austria, which was successfully annexed by Germany in 1938.¹² In terms of Hitler's scheme of Jewish persecution, of particular consequence was the event which began on the night of 9 November 1938, continuing into the early morning of the following day: that which has now come to be referred to as *Kristallnacht*, or 'Night of the Broken Glass', and consisted of a series of coordinated attacks on Jewish property and communities in Germany and Austria, the scope of which was previously unsurpassed during the Nazi's political reign.¹³ As Tony Kushner suggests, although many German and Austrian Jews had affidavits of support that would have eventually allowed them to emigrate to America, it was swiftly realised that, in the wake of *Kristallnacht*, 'it was unwise "to sit waiting for [one's American quota] number"'.¹⁴ The answer, therefore, for many Jewish people seeking to escape the situation in their own countries was emigration to the United Kingdom via a domestic services permit. Chronicling various changes in British domestic servitude across the twentieth century, Pamela Horn argues that in the early decades of the twentieth century, white, non-British servants only 'formed a smaller specialty sector of the domestic labour force. French and Swiss lady's maids were much in demand among fashionable ladies because of their dressmaking and millinery skills and their greater vivacity, compared to their British counterparts'.¹⁵ However, this was to

¹² Anthony Read and David Fisher, *Kristallnacht: Unleashing the Holocaust* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 17.

¹³ In terms of the sheer scale of this 'orgy of destruction', Read and Fisher document that, in the first twenty-four hours alone 'at least 7,500 stores, 29 warehouses and 171 houses were destroyed; 191 synagogues were razed by fire and a further 76 physically demolished; 11 Jewish community centres, cemetery chapels and similar buildings were torched and another three gutted'. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁴ Tony Kushner, 'An Alien Occupation - Jewish Refugees and Domestic Service in Britain, 1933-1948', in Werner E. Mosse (ed.), *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-speaking Jews in the United Kingdom* (Tubingen: JCB Mohr, 1991), p. 569.

¹⁵ Pamela Horn, *Life Below Stairs in the 20th Century* (2001; Stroud: Sutton, 2003), p. 203.

have changed significantly by the close of the Second World War, owing to the fact that, from April 1938 onwards, 'a special category of refugee domestic workers' were granted entry into the country 'under permits issued by the Home Office [...] and following investigation by the Central Committee for Refugees, the Jewish Aid Committee and the International Solidarity Fund'.¹⁶ In terms of figures, exact numbers are not easy to calculate, however, Horn reveals that at least 'one estimate suggests that 14,000 women, about one thousand girls, and several hundred married couples were rescued by domestic permits issued under the auspices of the Home Offices', and that, additionally, 'around seven thousand Jewish women managed to escape Germany and Austria with Ministry of Labour permits, without recourse to the Domestic Bureau'.¹⁷ Admission to the United Kingdom under domestic servitude was, it therefore appears, the preferred method of escaping ethnic persecution for a significant number of central Europeans of Jewish descent, particularly those who were women.

This is precisely the back-story that is suggested by Christie in her characterisation of Mitzi. Referred to, derisively, as 'one of those Mittel Europas' (56), Mitzi's exact country of origin is never made clear, although her famed goulash that she cooks for the household at Little Paddocks on the day of the hold-up would seem to at least gesture towards Hungary (although this is hardly conclusive) (35). Rather than exact provenance, instead, the key point is very much her status both as domestic servant and as a refugee from Nazism. On the morning of Scherz's death, shortly following the household's first glimpse of the newspaper notice announcing that a murder will take place on their property later that evening, Mitzi bewails to her employer that

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

I do not wish to die! Already in Europe I escape. My family they all die - they are killed - my mother, my little brother, my so sweet little niece - all, all they are killed. But me I run away - I hide. I get to England. I work. I do work that I never - never would I do in my own country... (33-34)

Here, more than just a sense of upset and fear elicited by the murder announcement, Mitzi's lament, tellingly described by the narrator as a 'constant refrain' (34), reflects the historical reality that, far from actually affording these victimised persons the 'salvation' it initially seemed to, undertaking domestic servitude in a foreign country was often a further agonising experience for the already traumatised evacuees. As Lucy Delap recounts, in a 1939 article '*Housewife Magazine* brutally described the European dislocation as "Your Opportunity" to its readers [...] making "The Case for a Foreign Maid"'.¹⁸ Alison Light points out that although the number of women employed in domestic service had been in decline from around the 1890s onwards, it is really with the social changes brought about after the close of the First World War and the new employment opportunities for working class women that came about at this time, that sees the birth of the 'service problem' amongst the British upper- and middle-classes.¹⁹ Light argues that the demographic of British women who in the previous century would have seen entry into live-in service as their 'natural', and perhaps only, employment option, in the interwar years

increasingly had other options: clerical, shop or factory work, work as a waitress or a chambermaid, receptionist, florist, beautician, anything that gave them their evenings or weekends off, the freedom to meet friends, or simply stay at home. Service was more and more seen as 'Victorian', anachronistic and demeaning.²⁰

¹⁸ Lucy Delap, *Knowing their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 78.

¹⁹ Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (2007; London: Penguin, 2008), p. 179.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-79.

Unsurprisingly, given how very real a sea-change the decline in servitude represented, deeply affecting - for good or for ill - the everyday reality of the majority of British women, the 'middlebrow' literary culture of the period duly reflects this pressing social anxiety. As Nicola Humble describes, '[w]e find in the magazines, cookery books, and fiction of the years between the wars what amounts to a hysterical worry among the middle classes about the decline in the number of servants and the difficulty of getting - and keeping - good ones'.²¹ However, I would argue that, given that near total erasure of the live-in servant as a fixture of the British middle-class household as the 1940s and 1950s wore on,²² this is even more the case within 'middlebrow' fictions of the post-war era. Christie's *A Murder is Announced* is certainly a case-in-point in this regard. As reader, we are directed to the 'servant problem' remarkably early in the novel. In her morning reading of the *Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*, Mrs Swettenham comments to her adult son, Edmund, that 'Selina Lawrence is advertising for a cook again. I could tell her it's just a waste of time advertizing in these days. She hasn't put her address, only a box number - that's quite fatal' (11). The issue is pushed further into the foreground when the Swettenhams' own housekeeper, Mrs Finch, enters the dining room to clear away breakfast, and is not only prevented from doing so by late-rising Edmund not having yet finished, but 'sniff[s]' and withdraws from the room in offence on catching sight of his reading of the *Daily Worker* (12). After his mother tries to reprimand him for unashamedly reading socialist newspapers at the breakfast table, thereby upsetting the servants, Edmund nonchalantly retorts, 'I don't see what my political views have to do with Mrs Finch' (12). However, for the middle-

²¹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 115.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 124; Also see, Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, p. 313.

class Swettenhams, at this deepest point in the crisis in domestic servitude, the political is deeply and indelibly personal (to reverse the twentieth-century feminist slogan). As Mrs Swettenham very wisely informs her champagne-socialist son, 'Mrs Finch *does* matter. If she takes a dislike to us and won't come, who else could we get?' (13, emphasis mine).

Thus, when *Housewife Magazine* describes the Nazi persecution of Jewish people as a golden 'opportunity' for British householders, this is precisely because the women who have been forced to flee from their homes in Central Europe have, to attain their safety, essentially been forced into undesirable vocational roles increasingly rejected by scores of working-class British women. Therefore, the seemingly quasi-philanthropic sentiment on the part of well-to-do English men and women in aiding the rescue of Jewish women, was, as Kushner suggests, in reality 'not incompatible with exploitation'.²³ Many English householders were, at least in part, enticed into 'helping' Jewish evacuees by the prospect not only of filling the vacancies for live-in domestic staff but, specifically, of getting the most for their money: the possibility of being able to economically exploit a powerless social group without possible means of objection or access to recourse. Thus, whilst some émigrés were lucky and found genuinely benevolent employers in Britain, for others, escape from the Nazi regime meant entering into another undesirable situation of borderline slavery, and found themselves being overworked, paid below that which was contractually agreed,²⁴ and, once again, deprived of their dignity. What is imperative to note is that only a small fraction of the émigrés that arrived in Britain at this time had previously been employed as domestic servants

²³ Kushner, 'An Alien Occupation', *Second Chance*, p. 566.

²⁴ Horn reveals that some servants were accepting as low as 5s a week, when, legally, the minimum wage for foreign domestic workers was set at 15s per week during the period in question. See, Horn, *Life Below Stairs*, p. 216.

in their own countries. In fact, the vast majority of these refugee servants were women of middle-class or professional status, the majority of whom were accustomed to keeping servants themselves.²⁵ It is therefore apparent that one thing which the majority of refugee servants have in common is that, whether employed by a sympathetic or exploitative employer, their having to undertake work as a domestic servant was a form of degradation. In Christie's novel, during the chapter in which Mitzi launches a tirade against the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Phillipa Haymes, accusing her of being a Nazi, we learn that she has been privileged to have an 'expensive university education' through which she has obtained a degree in economics (89). Moreover, as earlier suggested, Mitzi also makes crystal clear that, since arriving in England she does work that 'never - never would I do in my own county' (34). Even during those few brief moments in the novel in which we find Mitzi in an uncharacteristically placid mood, a slight note of resentment at the plight she has faced, subsequently leading to her employment as a servant in England, still manages to seep through. This can be seen, for instance, when Patrick Symmons raises a toast to Mitzi to thank her for making her signature chocolate cake for Dora's birthday tea-party:

'Here's to the best cook in the world.' said Patrick.
Mitzi was gratified - but felt nevertheless that a protest was due.
'That is not so. I am not really a cook. In my country I do intellectual work.'
'Then you're wasted,' said Patrick. 'What's intellectual work compared to a *chef d'oeuvre* like Delicious Death?' (237)

Although there is clearly at least a vein of genuine care and affection in his remarks, in suggesting that her intellectual faculties pale in significance when brought up against her culinary proficiency, the effete and hedonistic Patrick has clearly

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

missed (or chosen to ignore) the point. In fact, hardly the most sensible character in the novel, we learn elsewhere that practical-joker Patrick once 'sent Mitzi a postcard saying the Gestapo was on her track' (92). Thus, for Mitzi, as for her real life counterparts, the fearsome and anxiety-inducing experience of 'displacement' was incarnated not only as a geographical phenomenon, but also as a social phenomenon. As Horn summarises, not only were these Jewish women 'traumatised by events in their own country and deeply worried about relatives left behind, but they experienced feelings of humiliation and social dislocation at being reduced to what they saw as the status of domestics'.²⁶ Even within the context of the one institution in which these foreign servants *should* have been able to obtain both empathy and a sense of solidarity, their incoherent social, linguistic, and cultural situation - their 'out-of-placeness' - was even further augmented. Light points out that in 1938

a National Union of Domestic Workers was finally established, which aimed at raising 'the status of the industry'. Though it had few enough members, it found a source of unity by hardening its ranks against the influx of foreign refugees from Europe wanting domestic work, including Jewish women from Austria and Germany fleeing persecution. It absolutely refused to accept foreign entrants for membership.²⁷

These hardened attitudes towards European refugee servants of the Second World War and immediate post-war period clearly demonstrate the fact that they were thought of as not being owed the same rights afforded to those who, in terms of social status, were their direct 'native' counterparts. Moreover, such attitudes are indeed reflected in Christie's novel, shown, for instance, through the friction between Mitzi and the novel's other servant characters - a friction arisen from

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (2007; London: Penguin, 2008), p. 251. See also, Horn, *Life Below Stairs*, p. 215.

xenophobic distrust on the part of the English characters, and deep resentment on the part of Mitzi. When Inspector Craddock visits the nearby Dayas Hall looking for Phillipa Haymes, he has an impromptu *tête-à-tête* with the estate's gardener, known as Olde Ashe. Through Ashe, Inspector Craddock learns that the opinion of Mrs Huggins, who works as the daily charwoman at Little Paddocks, is that 'Mitzi's mixed up in [the attempted hold-up], that's what she thinks. Awful temper she 'as, and the airs she gives herself! Called Mrs Huggins a working woman to her face the other morning' (98).

In the same year as the publication of *A Murder is Announced*, fellow 'middlebrow' novelist, Marghanita Laski, penned a short but pithy article for *Spectator* magazine, cunningly titled 'This Servant Problem'. In the article, Laski outlines the various reasons, as she sees them, why the very presence of a European refugee housekeeper makes 'an easy natural atmosphere around the home [...] unattainable'.²⁸ It is worth noting that Laski's language here is deeply implicated in post-Enlightenment debates regarding the concept of 'domestic bliss' from which the Gothic first emerges as a category of literary production in the eighteenth century: that, as previous discussed, the Gothic represents the dark underbelly created by conscious attempts to carve out the home as an enclave precisely defined by its 'easy natural atmosphere'. As such, it is largely unsurprising that Laski's primary concern with refugee servants in the post-war English household is not so much to do with practical matters: that, as I earlier mentioned, owing to their middle-class and professional social status in their home counties, these women were completely untrained in the household matters they were now forced to undertake on a daily basis (although she does at least touch on this). Instead, Laski's chief rationale as to why domestic happiness cannot be achieved

²⁸ Marghanita Laski, 'This Servant Problem', *Spectator* (24 March 1950), p. 371.

with a refugee from Nazism employed as a servant is because of the collective sense of guilt and shame that they educe within the household. Laski insists that 'they are frequently capable of far more intelligent work, and everyone feels a sense of guilt at harnessing a race-horse to a dray'.²⁹ Thus, in light of Laski's argument in her editorial, it is fair to suggest that people such as Mitzi - 'displaced persons' employed as servants - thus function as highly spectralised figures who have the ability to rupture a given household's collective psychological boundaries between sanctified interior space and the exterior world of political upheaval, violence, hostility, and persecution. They, I would suggest, function very much as the fragment dislodged from its appropriate locale, from its appropriate chronology, the encounter with which forces the employer to contemplate the frightening whole. Within post-war English middle-class society, the Jewish refugee employed as domestic servant thereby threatens to efface any meaningful geographical distinction between 'here' (England) and 'there' (Central Europe), or any temporal delineation between 'then' (the Nazi party's political reign) and 'now' (the post-war period). Thus, ultimately, Mitzi's disquieting presence in the village of Chipping Cleghorn serves to debunk this English community's constructed fiction of having 'moved past' the horrors of the Second World War: that they have, as Mrs Swettenham puts it strikingly early on in the novel, 'got over all that' (12).³⁰

Mitzi's situation at Little Paddocks functions, in a markedly physical way, to keep the trauma of the Second World War very much alive as, to begin with, even her bodily movement is characterised by its violent intensity. Thus, whilst, in order

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ This comment is made in reference to an advertisement for dachshund hounds, to which Mrs Swettenham comments by telling her far from interested son that 'I've never really cared for dachshunds myself - I don't mean because they're German, because we've got over all that - I just don't care for them, that's all': a comment which, against Mrs Swettenham's intention, works to expressly articulate just how fraught Anglo-German relations are following the Second World War, rather than downplay or conceal these tensions

to propagate the 'easy natural atmosphere' of the domestic sanctuary, it is considered that servitude must be present, but also as invisible as possible, Mitzi singularly refuses to disappear into the backdrop of domestic interiority, and her movements throughout Little Paddocks are as disruptive as possible. This is reflected in her *penchant* for making 'dramatic entrances', in one case 'flinging open the [lounge] door' so violently that she almost knocks Inspector Craddock to the ground sideways (333). Ultimately, Mitzi's displacement owing to Jewish persecution has rendered her as culturally 'unreadable'. In other words, the other characters in the novel, including the third-person narrator, have no easy, ready narrative through which to even begin to interpret her traumatic past experiences.

This, I would argue, is one of the reasons that the novel's descriptions of Mitzi are so contradictory and disjointed. Upon Mitzi's entrance into the story, the reader is given what is, in essence, a very vivid and intense snapshot of her physicality. Indeed, given that Mitzi is, at least structurally speaking, arguably something of a tangential character, such close, considered attention to her physical appearance, countenance, and mannerisms could be seen as certainly unusual and, to a certain degree, unnecessary. Thus, although I have already reproduced this snapshot at the outset of this chapter, given its curious vividity, it bears repeating here:

Through the door surged a tempestuous young woman with a well-developed bosom heaving under a tight jersey. She had on a dirndl skirt of a bright colour and had greasy dark plaits wound round and round her head. Her eyes were dark and flashing. (33)

The most conspicuous aspect of this description is the incoherence of Mitzi's outward appearance: the jarring, uneasy coalescence of those aspects of her appearance which are clearly attractive (the heaving, well-developed bosom, the vivid eyes) and those which are very much unattractive (the gaudy outfit, the

greasy hair). In fact, there is a seemingly undue emphasis placed on Mitzi's clothes throughout the novel, such as when it is elsewhere reported that 'the purple jumper and brilliant green skirt she wore were not becoming to her pasty completion' (87). The fact that Mitzi seems to *always* be wearing clothes which do not flatter her works to re-enforce her situation of displacement, reminding the reader of the fact that the clothes that probably would become her presumably had to be abandoned in Europe along with the great majority her possessions, and that these garments which currently adorn her are clothes that she has either had to purchase, or perhaps have been given in an act of charity, since arriving in a new country. This again, makes explicit that Mitzi's body cannot be properly 'read' by the community within which she now finds herself. To put it otherwise, that the apparatus required to interpret Mitzi's traumatised body somehow eludes the residents of Chipping Cleghorn. As a result, the villagers' encounter with Mitzi must always be a disquieting encounter which threatens any form of complacent domesticity in operation within their 'sleepy' English village in peacetime.

Christie's representation of racial prejudice in *A Murder is Announced* further illuminates the village of Chipping Cleghorn as far from having, to appropriate the psychoanalytic terminology, properly processed or 'worked through' the trauma of the preceding era of bloodshed and carnage across Europe. As David Kynaston notes, there was a noticeable revival in British anti-Semitism in the immediate post-war climate, 'even after the film cameras had entered Belsen and Auschwitz'.³¹ He goes on to observe that, the year prior to the publication of *A Murder is Announced* 'saw anti-Semitic riots in several British cities [...] triggered by lurid headlines about the hanging in Palestine of two captured British sergeants but also involv[ing] a widespread belief that it was Jews who were responsible for

³¹ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 270.

running the black market'.³² With this in mind, it is telling that, within *A Murder is Announced* an assumed linkage between Jewishness and criminality is certainly gestured towards. By mere virtue of the fact that they are 'both foreigners' (69), Mitzi is rather unrelentingly suspected, both by the police and by other characters in the novel, of being somehow involved with Rudi Scherz in the attempted shooting of her employer. However, as part of Christie's characteristic turning of the racism and prejudices of her provincial characters against themselves, there seems within the novel to be a deliberate playing about with the idea of what Benedict Anderson would famously come to term the 'imagined [...] community'.³³ In other words, the idea of England *as a nation*, with all the resonances of kinship and mutuality implicated within that term.

According to Anderson, the nation is a concept which, although it has become naturalised, is, historically speaking, relatively recent: linked to the advent of industrialisation, religious redefinition in Europe, and the rise of both the middle-classes and of literacy levels. Anderson suggests that the reason, above all others, why a nation is a community that is imagined rather than one which is actual owes to the fact that, for a person to think of themselves as belonging to a particular nation state, there is a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' implicated between this person and all the other individuals who share the same marker of national identity.³⁴ These other individuals are ones who that person does not necessarily have conscious knowledge of, and will probably never even encounter within their lifetime, yet that person is nevertheless encouraged to feel an emotive affinity with these individuals, owing to the fact that they are both English, Belgian,

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Australian, or whatever the particular nationality might be. As has been made clear throughout this chapter thus far, *A Murder is Announced* is a novel dealing very much with the aftereffects of the Second World War upon the English middle-classes. It is, I would argue, in this sense very much a twentieth-century re-fashioning of the Victorian 'condition of England' novel: keenly latching onto issues surrounding class, gender, and employment relationships in order to offer itself up - unambiguously - as both an analysis and a synthesis of its contemporary social moment. The novel's preoccupation with the legacies of the Second World War felt in the everyday lives of the British population is thus significant in terms of the novel's calibration, and subsequent problematising, of English national identity. This is in the sense that, of all events of historical significance, it is war that is most often endowed with the highest levels of significance within the imaginative construction of widely disseminated national narratives - that the story of war *is* the story of the nation, and *vice versa*. This, I would suggest, is because during periods of warfare a person's duty to their nation - the debt they must pay for accepting the promises of sanctuary, continuity, and order that has been afforded to them by the nation that 'looks after' them - is foregrounded to the point at which it cannot be ignored. In other words, there is a sense in which, during times of conflict between nations, a person ceases to be an autonomous and unique personage and instead becomes a 'citizen' of a nation under threat, whose principal purpose is to perform their service to the state to which they belong, putting aside all personal beliefs, activities, and desires. Indeed, specifically with the Second World War situated as case in point, Mark Donnelly observes that '[t]he idea that the British developed a greater sense of collective consciousness in wartime which enabled them to make sacrifices, work together and abandon narrow self-interest in pursuit of a shared goal was continually promoted by government propaganda

as a means of maintaining morale and heading off the danger of internal social conflict. The Ministry of Information and the BBC emphasised that the nation was fused together in a common cause and reassured the public that if they continued to work together, survival and eventual victory would be secured'.³⁵

In terms of the ways in which Christie utilises the character of Mitzi to challenge ideas of a collective English national identity, the opening chapter of the novel is significant. Organised as a sequence of vignettes, this importance springs from the fact that the sequence presents four individual households in close geographical proximity - The Swettenhams, The Easterbrooks, Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd, and The Harmons - reading the same advertisement in the same newspaper (the *Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*), at more or less the same time:

A marriage is announced - no, a murder. What? Well, I never! Edmund, Edmund, listen to this... (14)

'Archie,' said Mrs Easterbrook to her husband, 'listen to *this*. [...] Archie, do listen['] (16)

'In the *Gazette*,' [Miss Murgatroyd] panted. 'Just listen - what can it *mean*?['] (19)

'Oo, scrumptious!' said Mrs Harmon across the breakfast table to her husband, the Rev. Julian Harmon, 'there's going to be a murder at Miss Blacklock's.' [...]

Mrs Harmon [...] handed the *Gazette* across the table. (21)

Anderson argues that the popularisation of the newspaper in eighteenth century Europe, represents an unrivalled milestone in the development of our modern concept of nationalism, owing to the fact that the newspaper was one of the discursive forms that 'provided the technical means for "re-presenting" the *kind* of

³⁵ Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 33.

imagined community that is the nation'.³⁶ Indeed, newspapers are of particular importance in the process of marking out the parameters of the community, on both local and national levels. Not only do they bring the reader details of what other people within the same community or nation are up to, thus further supplementing the sense of 'knowing' people that is so important to the manufacturing of a national kinship, but, moreover, they inevitably get read by large numbers of people at the same temporal moment (in the case of *A Murder is Announced*, over breakfast). Thus, not only are a nation's individuals connected along a spatial plane, but, additionally, they are connected through their existing at the same notch along a chronological timeframe. Christie's series of vignettes depicting the breakfast-time reading of the *Gazette* in *A Murder is Announced*, is thus a prime example of what Anderson terms the 'confidence in [...] steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity' that can foster such powerful feelings of affinity in members of the same nation.³⁷

However, as has been previously indicated, Christie's novel does not just unthinkingly replicate the formative mechanics of nation-building (in the first instance, such unsubtle and overt flagging up of these processes could be construed as a form of resistance), but rather, precisely through her depiction of Mitzi as a 'displaced person', *A Murder is Announced* understatedly critiques the mechanisms through which national identity is acquired and venerated. Within the novel, Christie achieves this by reverse the situation, underscoring the ways in which the uprooted and nationally-incongruous Mitzi *herself* belongs to an imagined community of persons. Letitia Blacklock tells the novel's detective

³⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

characters that her housekeeper 'has a kind of persecution mania' (81). She asks Inspector Craddock not to be

too prejudiced against [Mitzi] because she's a liar. I do really believe that, like so many liars, there is a real substratum of truth behind her lies. I mean that though, to take an instance, her atrocity stories have grown and grown until every kind of unpleasant story that has ever appeared in print has happened to her or her relations personally, she did have a bad shock initially and did see one, at least, of her relations killed. I think a lot of these displaced persons feel, perhaps justly, that their claim to our notice and sympathy lies in their atrocity value and so they exaggerate and invent. (82)

The 'exaggeration' and 'invention' involved in Mitzi's remediation of her experience of the Nazi regime directly parallel the imaginative acts that have to be perpetrated in order to augment one's sense of belonging to a national community. The key point, is the emphasis placed here by Christie on the act of reading in the interpolation of national identity: that it is precisely the process of reading stories about people 'like you' (whether English or Central European Jews) that allows you to *imagine* yourself as part of a community whose constituent members must be, however abstractly, deep-down connected. Therefore, the fact that the novel's most racially 'other' character - the fictive person so unequivocally out-of-place in the novel's middle-England setting - nevertheless, through her reading of war atrocity stories, experiences such a strikingly analogous process of self-identification to that which the 'native' characters experience when they 'eagerly [...] plunge...' into their morning papers, is hugely significant (10). Thus, Christie's novel articulates a substantial awareness of the fictional basis of national identity, particularly in relation to the Second World War, and thereby works to debunk any kind of narrative of national 'superiority' on England's, and by extension, Britain's part.

Lady Audley's and Letitia Blacklock's Secrets: Re-imagining Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Gothic in *A Murder is Announced* (1950)

Although housekeeper Mitzi is overtly identifiable as *A Murder is Announced's* 'displaced person' in the traditional sense of the term, there is also the sense in which it is actually her employer, Letitia Blacklock, whose situation of uncanny displacement ensconces Christie's novel very firmly within a tradition of Gothic fiction. Indeed, I would propose, that *A Murder is Announced* can and *should* be read as her attempt to re-write Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). In the Miss Marple short story 'Greenshaw's Folly', first published, confusingly, as the concluding story in the Hercule Poirot anthology *The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding* (1960), Christie explicitly references Braddon's acme of nineteenth-century sensation fiction. As the story commences, Horace Bindler, a literary critic with a keen interest in architectural 'monstrosities',³⁸ is taken to the story's titular property by his friend, Raymond West. Trespassing onto the grounds in order to get a good glimpse at the 'awful white elephant' of mid-Victorian extravagance (338), they stumble across the house's current mistress, Katherine Greenshaw: the granddaughter of the building's original occupant, now herself approaching old age. Far from being annoyed by her two trespassers, Miss Greenshaw takes the opportunity of having two complete strangers in her immediate grasp to have Horace and Raymond witness the signing of her new will. In her grandfather's library filled with 'novels of a bygone period' (333), Katherine hides her newly-witnessed will inside a copy of *Lady Audley's Secret*: 'Best-seller in its day, [...] Not like your books, eh?', she teases the well-known (but evidently not well-read) Modernist author, Raymond (335).

³⁸ Agatha Christie, 'Greenshaw's Folly', in *The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding* (1960; London: Harper, 2002), p. 325. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

Unsurprisingly, the eccentric Miss Greenshaw is murdered soon after this incident in a scheme carried out by her nephew, Nat Fletcher, and her housekeeper, Mrs Creswell, working in tandem. Within the story, the reference to Braddon's novel functions as part of the story's overarching concern with the legacies of the nineteenth century: its playing off of different aspects of Victorian culture against each other. Living in the deteriorating remains of grandfather's hideously crass and indulgent mansion, according to Raymond and Miss Marple, Katherine's choosing of Braddon's novel as the hiding place for her will is part of her 'Victorian sense of humour' (351). As Miss Marple further elucidates: 'Miss Greenshaw told Mrs Cresswell she was going to leave her everything and so got out of paying her wages and then she left her money to somebody else [the gardener, Alfred]. No doubt she was vastly pleased with herself. No wonder she chortled when she put the will away in *Lady Audley's Secret*' (351). Although one can clearly discern at least some delight and admiration on Miss Marple's part in the sheer cleverness of Katherine's scheme, broadly speaking, both the outlandish Katherine and her ugly house fall under the umbrella of 'bad' Victorianism, representing the worst parts of mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois culture: showiness, class exploitation, philistinism. With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that the crime can only be solved by the story's 'good' Victorian, Miss Marple - a woman formidable yet self-effacing, perspicacious, and utterly unfazed by the ceaselessness of modernity.

However, although 'Greenshaw's Folly' directly references Braddon's work, I would nevertheless maintain that it is the significant number of particularly strong structural and textual convergences between *Lady Audley's Secret* and Christie's slightly earlier *A Murder is Announced* which most strongly signals Christie's careful and insightful reading of Braddon's novel, and thus most firmly suggests the influence of Braddon's Victorian Gothic upon Christie's mid-twentieth-century

detective writing. Although in 'Greenshaw's Folly' there appears to be a partial co-option of *Lady Audley's Secret* into the 'bad' Victorianism category (which, considering the publication date of Christie's story, appears apt in light of the critical history of Braddon's novel, as I will later discuss), on the other hand, Christie's desire to re-write Braddon's story in *A Murder is Announced* would seem to suggest that, for all its textual, decorative, and affective excess, there is still something in *Lady Audley's Secret* that Christie finds both useful and somehow strangely relevant to the sober world of immediate post-war England.

To begin with, the plot of *A Murder is Announced* markedly echoes that of Braddon's earlier novel in that it relates the downfall of a woman living under a fraudulent identity, who resorts to criminality in order to keep her secret under wraps. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the beautiful but humble governess, Lucy Graham, marries the wealthy widower, Sir Michael Audley, only to eventually be exposed by her detective-like step-son as a bigamist who has pushed her first husband down a well and abandoned her child. In Christie's novel, meanwhile, after the murders of Rudi Scherz, Dora Bunner, and Amy Murgatroyd it is discovered that the killer is the respected pillar of the community, Letitia Blacklock. However, the woman known to her friends and neighbours as Letitia Blacklock is, in actual fact, her sister, Charlotte Blacklock. Charlotte (as I shall now refer to her) has assumed her sister's identity since Letitia's untimely death just after the close of the Second World War. Charlotte's reason for doing so is that she might claim the vast fortune that is due to befall Letitia after the death of Belle Goedler: the rapidly ailing wife of Letitia's former financier employer.

In addition to these similarities in plot, both Braddon and Christie choose to situate the irrefutable burden of proof, in what might be interpreted as a metaphorical suggestion of a hangman's halter, quite literally around the neck of

both their female villainesses. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, this figurative noose is the 'narrow black ribbon' which Lady Audley wears around her neck, attached to which, but 'kept [...] hidden under her dress',³⁹ is the key to the jewellery drawer within which she keeps a lock of her son's hair and one of his baby shoes. Meanwhile, in *A Murder is Announced*, proof that the woman that Chipping Cleghorn has come to know as Letitia Blacklock is in fact an impostor takes the form of an incriminating scar that differentiates Charlotte from her sister. Charlotte conceals this scar on the front of her neck beneath 'a choker necklace of false pearls' (27), which is often inconsistent with her otherwise casual apparel. Indeed, towards the novel's climax, Charlotte's overblown 'anguish' and 'agony' when the string of her necklace snaps 'under the clutch of her nervous fingers' (312), resulting in a swift, tearful departure from the room, only serves to further arouse Miss Marple and Inspector Craddock's suspicion of the existence of the incriminating scar. Thus, in their suggestion of masquerade, Charlotte's pearls, which, as the narrator states, are 'so large, so even, so white that their falseness seemed palpable' (312-13), operate as a synecdoche for her character as a whole. Certainly, it is significant that when Charlotte fretfully breaks her pearl necklace, it is replaced in the subsequent chapter with a choker of outsized cameos: an accessory equally as representative of the deceptiveness of Charlotte's identity. This is in the sense that the defining characteristic of a cameo carving is that it is a relief image of a person or persons in blocked-out, simplified colour, providing a stark contrast to a background of a contrasting hue. In other words, what a cameo is categorically *not* is a depiction of a person in anything close to photographic verisimilitude, but rather it is a representation that flags itself up as precisely what it is: a representation.

³⁹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 8-9. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

It is also important to note that Charlotte's necklace is clearly defined not as a single cameo on a choker or ribbon, but rather as a 'necklace of cameos' (319), thus further accentuating the novel's prevailing concern with the multiplicity of representation. This is noticeably reminiscent of the way in which, throughout *Lady Audley's Secret*, there are four names nebulously swirling around Braddon's narrative - Helen Maldon, Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham, Lucy Audley. However, prior to the exposition that these women are one and the same, that the eponymous heroine 'has repeatedly remade her identity with each rise in the social scale',⁴⁰ it is tremendously difficult for the reader to accurately pin down these markers of identity to a corresponding flesh and blood woman in the text. Thus, Christie's suggestive use of feminine fashion accessories in her depiction of Charlotte Blacklock could be interpreted as providing further linkage with *Lady Audley's Secret* in the sense that the implications afforded by the imagery of Charlotte's neck-concealing jewellery are analogous to those afforded by Alicia Audley's description of her stepmother as resembling a 'blue-eyed wax-doll' that can be bought 'in a toy-shop' (264). Commenting on the weighty implications of what, at first, appears to be nothing more than a resentful throwaway comparison, Tara Puri suggests that, in actual fact, Alicia

is closer to the truth than she thinks, for she likens her stepmother to an artificial, synthetic commodity. But though Lucy appears to be ornamental, frivolous, and therefore benign, she in fact forms the greatest threat to bourgeois culture in the novel by too closely mimicking and thus parodying its ideal, revealing it to be an empty icon.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 90.

⁴¹ Tara Puri, 'Lady Audley's Duplicitous Hair', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 6 (July 2009), <<http://irishgothichorrorjournal.homestead.com/LadyAudleysDuplicitousHair.html>> [accessed 16 November 2012] (para. 12 of 34).

Here again, as with Charlotte Blacklock's pearls and cameos, there is a persuasive suggestion that, within Braddon's novel, references to physical objects that either adorn or mimic the human frame in some sense come to stand-in for the inauthenticity of the deceitful human characters themselves. Thus, both Lady Audley and Charlotte Blacklock ultimately come to be associated not only with synthetic commodities, but cheap commodities at that - costume jewellery and inexpensive toys. In light of this, it might be tempting to see how both novels could be read as satirising the inherent greed of their female protagonists. However, this is a reading that both the complex characterisation of the villainesses and the ambiguous moral compass of both novels (which I shall shortly discuss) render highly problematic.

In direct opposition to reading both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *A Murder is Announced* as making damning indictments of grasping and materialistic women, the third major parallel between the two novels could be argued to reside in the idea that, as Laura Vorachek writes of Braddon's work, both texts 'suggest that circumstance, and not character, is responsible' for the criminal undertakings of their female protagonists.⁴² The criticism produced soon after the original publication of Braddon's novel was characterised by a tendency to interpret Lady Audley as an indelibly evil character. Henry James' notorious editorial on Braddon's work first appeared (anonymously) in *The Nation* in November 1865, accusing Lady Audley of being 'diabolically wicked' and defaming her as 'a nonentity, without a heart, a soul, a reason'.⁴³ Interpretations of Lady Audley that follow in the Jamesean vein have possessed a stranglehold over criticism of Braddon's novel ever since. Even as recently as the 1980s Winifred Hughes sees no problem in

⁴² Laura Vorachek, 'Dangerous Women: Vera Caspary's Rewriting of *Lady Audley's Secret* in *Bedelia*', *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 28, 2 (Fall 2010), p. 73.

⁴³ Henry James (Anon.), 'Miss Braddon', *The Nation* (November 1865), p. 593.

confidently pronouncing that Lady Audley is a woman with ‘murder and bigamy in her heart’.⁴⁴ In recent years a spate of feminist-inflected criticism of the sensation genre has bucked this critical tendency. For example, in her study of nineteenth-century sensation novels and ‘new woman’ fiction, Lyn Pickett repeatedly underscores the ironic plane present within much female-authored sensation fiction, ultimately proposing that these novels ‘are not simply stories about the thrills and spills of errant femininity (or, as it would sometimes seem, stories about reforming or expelling it). Rather they use the transgressive woman as both trigger and focus for a range of narratives of uncertainty about gender, class, marriage and the family’.⁴⁵ A more considered appraisal of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, might thus see its author as commenting on both the cultural and legal hypocrisy of mid-nineteenth-century marriage practices. Indeed, Mary Lyndon Shanley argues that even as comparatively late as the nineteenth century, the English divorce law

essentially followed the canon law inherited from Rome. The ecclesiastical courts, which had jurisdiction over divorce cases, issued two kinds of decrees. A divorce *à mensâ et thoro* (divorce from bed and board) was granted only for adultery, extreme cruelty, or desertion, and it allowed neither partner to remarry. A divorce *à vinculo matrimonii* (divorce from the bonds of marriage), an absolute dissolution of the marriage bond with permission to remarry, was granted only when the marriage itself was found to have been invalid due to age, mental incompetence, sexual impotence, or fraud.⁴⁶

As Jane Jordan argues, although ‘reform of English divorce law was vigorously debated throughout the 1850s [...] [ultimately] the legislation passed in August

⁴⁴ Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 124.

⁴⁵ Pickett, *The ‘Improper’ Feminine*, p. 102.

⁴⁶ Mary Lyndon Shanley “‘One Must Ride Behind’”: Married Women’s Rights and the Divorce Act of 1857’, *Victorian Studies* 25, 3 (Spring 1982), pp. 356-57.

1857 made only minor concessions to [...] pressure groups'.⁴⁷ Thus, the acute legal difficulty, in mid-nineteenth-century England, of a woman obtaining a divorce on the grounds of spousal desertion, *with permission to remarry*, means that Lady Audley is only forced to develop and implement her deceptive scheme precisely because she has been unjustly abandoned by her flighty and impetuous husband, George, coupled with continuing exploitation by her drunken father. As Lady Audley states:

I resented it bitterly - I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support. I had to work hard for my living and in every hour of labour - and what labour is more wearisome than the dull slavery of governess? [...] His father was rich; his sister living in luxury and respectability; and I, his wife [...] was a slave allied forever to beggary and obscurity (352-53).

Indeed, Braddon's narrative strongly suggests that, were it not for George Talboys' unanticipated return to England from Australia, Lady Audley, with her kindly demeanour and generosity to those she cares for, would have happily been a loyal and dutiful wife to Sir Michael and a compassionate society hostess whose munificence would greatly benefit the village of Audley and beyond:

In the sunshine of my own happiness I felt, for the first time in my life, for the miseries of others. [...] I took pleasure in acts of kindness and benevolence. I found my father's address and sent him large sums of money, anonymously [...] I dispensed happiness on every side. I saw myself loved as well as admired; and I think I might have been a good woman for the rest of my life, if fate would have allowed me to be so. (354)

In terms of the dialogue between Christie's *A Murder is Announced* and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* the key point is that, in much the same manner as her nineteenth-century forebear, the overriding impression of Charlotte Blacklock, even after she has been exposed as a *triple* murderess is that, deep down, she was

⁴⁷ Jane Jordan, 'The Law and Sensation', in Pamela K. Gilbert (ed.), *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), p. 507.

essentially a 'good person' who was only coerced into perpetrating evil acts by the adverse cards which fate had dealt her. Even under her fraudulent persona, Charlotte's goodness of character - 'her naturally affectionate nature' (351) - shines through. Charlotte elicits *bona fide* admiration and fondness from her neighbours and household of lodgers, particularly from her old schoolfriend and confidante, Dora Bunner, whom, even without the Goedler fortune, she has chosen to rescue from dire impoverishment: 'She had swooped down upon Dora, had carried her off, had installed her at Little Paddocks with the comforting fiction that "the housework is getting too much for me. I need someone to help me run the house"' (30). Dora herself is fully aware of the genuine selflessness that underpins her friend not only offering her a roof over her head but her sustained pretence that the arrangement is one which is mutually beneficial, rather than an act of pure charity. She relays to Miss Marple that '[Letitia] came and took me away - she said she needed someone to help her. [...] How kind she was - and how sympathetic. [...] What's so nice about her is that she always pretends that I *am* useful to her. That's real kindness, isn't it?' (200-01). Thus, in the same way that Lady Audley does not selfishly hoard her ill-gotten wealth, but circulates that wealth, even to those who have previously wronged her (such as her father) Charlotte plans to use Letitia's inheritance most big-heartedly. One of her plans to this effect is to use the money to look after her lodger, Phillipa Haymes, and Phillipa's son, Harry. In fact, Charlotte has concocted these plans even *in spite* of the fact that she rightly suspects Phillipa of secretly being either Pip or Emma Stamfordis: the children of Randall Goedler's estranged sister, and thus the two people who stand to receive Charlotte's longed-for inheritance should Belle Goedler outlive Letitia Blacklock:

The odd thing is that Charlotte was very pleased to recognize Phillipa. She became very fond of Phillipa [...] She told herself that when she inherited the money, she was going to look after Phillipa and treat her as a daughter.

Phillipa and Harry should live with her. She felt quite happy and beneficent about it. (360)

Charlotte's noble temperament is, however, articulated most decidedly in her relationship with Mitzi who, as I have previously discussed, is constantly suspected by the police as being somehow involved with Rudi Scherz in the attempted hold-up of Little Paddocks. Charlotte is the only character in the novel to display anything resembling sympathy for Mitzi's plight as a casualty of the Second World War, handling Mitzi's various tantrums in a sensitive, good-humoured, but highly efficient manner. Again, unlike any of Chipping Cleghorn's other residents, Charlotte even speaks out most unequivocally against the racist treatment Mitzi experiences from the police detectives:

[I]f what you are hinting is that Mitzi has something to do with this, that's absurd too. As Miss Bunner has just told you she was frightened to death when she saw the advertisement in the *Gazette*. She actually wanted to pack up and leave the house then and there. [...] I believe you police have got an anti-foreigner complex. Mitzi may be a liar but she is not a cold-blooded murderer. Go and bully her if you must. But when she's departed in a whirl of indignation, or shut herself up howling in her room, I've a good mind to make *you* cook the dinner. (142-43)⁴⁸

Positioned as such a proficient, compassionate, and venerable woman, regardless of her true identity, it is therefore categorically not the case that her entry into homicidal criminality springs from an inherent predisposition towards immorality. Instead, as Miss Marple astutely puts it, 'the beginning [...] [of the adversity plaguing Chipping Cleghorn] was when Charlotte Blacklock, a pretty, light-hearted, affectionate girl, developed the enlargement of the thyroid gland that is called a goitre' (345). Charlotte's father, an outmoded, autocratic doctor, forbids surgical removal to take place and thus it is not until after his death during the Second

⁴⁸ Of course, the situation is complicated slightly in the sense that, a more staunchly cynical reading of the character could very well make the case that Charlotte can, of course, confidently attest to Mitzi's innocence because she *herself* is the guilty party.

World War that Charlotte's devoted sister, Letitia, whisks her away to Switzerland to have her goitre dealt with by specialists. This period of unrivalled happiness - Charlotte's finally 'feeling herself a normal woman, a woman whom no one looked at with revulsion or pity. [...] [Feeling] free at last to enjoy life' (348) - much like that which Lady Audley initially experiences after her marriage to George Talboys, is short lived, owing to Letitia's untimely death after catching pneumonia, and thus ultimately the loss of the Goedler inheritance. This, as has previously been suggested, gives birth to Charlotte's fraudulent scheme of assuming her late sister's identity and her subsequent removal from Switzerland to Chipping Cleghorn.

Christie's novel therefore shares with Braddon's an identical narrative structure with regard to the place of the Gothic villain, or in these cases, villainesses. This is in the sense that all of Lady Audley's and Charlotte Blacklock's attempts to master the disastrous, increasingly pandemoniac events of their respective novels are ultimately undone. Indeed, although, as novels, both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *A Murder is Announced* have become synonymously associated with the crime of murder, it is important to remember that, in both cases, the initial crime that takes place is an instance of fraud that one can argue as being relatively victimless. However, as their fraudulent schemes being to unravel, Lady Audley and Charlotte Blacklock, like Gothic villains such as Manfred of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or Ambrosio of Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) before them, are forced to enter a self-perpetuating cycle of having to take more and more extreme measures: Lady Audley attempts to kill her first husband by pushing him down a well, contemplates poisoning her second husband, and sets fire to an inn hoping to kill Robert Audley (who escapes unharmed) and her blackmailer, Luke Marks (who is harmed, but only dies some time later as his condition worsens),

whilst Charlotte Blacklock fires a gun at Rudi Scherz, poisons Dora Bunner, strangles Amy Murgatroyd with her own washing and is arrested whilst trying to drown Mitzi in the kitchen sink. Specifically with regard to Christie's novel, the shift that occurs from weaponry specifically designed to kill to whatever implement may be nearby and convenient absolutely exemplifies the escalating spiral of Charlotte's utter desperation and the psychological decline that accompanies such an agitated condition. Both Lady Audley and Charlotte Blacklock are thus evidently women pushed to extremities by their paranoia and, furthermore, both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *A Murder is Announced* might be read as narratives of addiction, in which the quest to maintain a false, yet more desirable state of being (in this case, to be somebody that you are not) supersedes the 'real' state of consciousness. This reading of both texts is certainly supported by comments made in the concluding chapters of Christie's novel in which, anticipating Bunch Harmon's comment that Charlotte must have been insane to think she could get away with trying to kill Mitzi with police detectives only in the next room, Miss Marple asserts that

[s]he was quite a kindly woman. What she said at the last in the kitchen was quite true. "I didn't want to kill anybody." What she wanted was a great deal of money that didn't belong to her! And before that desire - (and it had become *a kind of obsession* - the money was to pay her back for all the suffering life had inflicted on her) - everything else went to the wall. (366, second emphasis mine)

Lastly, it is worth noting that both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *A Murder is Announced*, as I earlier indicated, can be argued as highly complicated and ambiguous in terms of their supposed moral compass. As writers such as Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and their imitators cultivated, developed, and pushed the sensation novel towards phenomenal popularity in the 1860s, the genre was met with increasing public alarm and hostility. Even Braddon herself acknowledged that the 'sensational' subject matter of her novels inevitably resulted in their possessing of

a certain degree of 'coarseness'.⁴⁹ However, more than simply a perceived artlessness of prose style, there was widespread belief that the sensation novel was a fundamentally corrupt and *corrupting* form of literature that would seduce young women into behaving in the same outrageous and criminal manner as characters such as Lady Audley. To take a singular example from a hefty backlog of critical disparagement, W. Fraser Rae, in a 1865 piece on Braddon, made the wonderfully redolent pronouncement of *Lady Audley's Secret* 'as one of the most noxious books of modern times'.⁵⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Braddon was 'deeply stung' by these 'unjustifiable' charges of authorial wickedness.⁵¹ In response to yet another scathing attack - this one penned by the novelist Margaret Oliphant and published anonymously in the September 1867 edition of *Blackwood's Magazine* - Braddon wrote to her mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, that

I defy any critic - however nice or however nasty - to point to one page or one paragraph in that book [*Aurora Floyd* (1863)] - or in any other book of mine -which contains the lurking poison of sensuality. [...] Let him consider my books as rubbish & twaddle with any severity he pleases - but let him consider what I have written - & say whether I have dwelt on the physical - or raved about "thrilling kisses-" and "warm breath" and column like throats-"⁵²

Elsewhere in her letters to Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon candidly admits that the success of her novels owes, at least in part, to her perceptive tapping into a public prurience for sex and scandal: her providing of 'strong meat' for the gluttonous reader who 'is not very particular as to the quality thereof'.⁵³ However, from her

⁴⁹ Robert Lee Wolff, 'Devoted Disciple: The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1862-1873', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 22, 1 (1974), p. 19.

⁵⁰ W. Fraser Rae, 'Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon', *North British Review* 43 (September 1865), p. 187.

⁵¹ Wolff, 'Devoted Disciple', p. 143.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

evident hurt at the hands of Oliphant's accusations, it would at least appear that Braddon also saw her novels as having a certain degree of didacticism. To put it otherwise, there is a sense in which Braddon's fiction may operate 'to serve rather than *subvert* the dominant ideology', to adopt Rosemary Jackson's phrasing.⁵⁴ Whilst on the one hand it is certainly true that Braddon's transgressive heroines are always 'punished' for their crimes (Lady Audley, for example, dying in a Belgian sanatorium shortly after her admittance), on the other, the internal complexity of the novel itself does not quite survive this evaluation of Braddon as a socially uncritical or 'moral' novelist. This becomes particularly noticeable at the rather forced conclusion of *Lady Audley's Secret*, the brittleness of which is epitomised, I would suggest, by the sudden rebuff of Robert Audley's noticeable homosexuality and his preposterous marrying off to George Talboy's sister.⁵⁵ As such, I would certainly argue that Braddon's attempt to clamp a lid on those dissident elements within her novel is not entirely successful, or to put it otherwise, that the subversive elements of *Lady Audley's Secret* ultimately undermine Braddon's efforts at narrative containment. In the novel's concluding paragraph, the narrator addresses the reader, asking that 'I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace' (446-47). However, not only do Braddon's motley crew of self-interested, unpitiful characters seem anything but 'good people' by this juncture of the novel, but if this is 'happiness', then it is a very strange and perverted kind: Sir Michael again widowed and subject to social humiliation (despite the family's attempts to cover up the real reason behind Lady Audley's removal to the continent), Alicia Audley

⁵⁴ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 175.

⁵⁵ For further discussion of Robert Audley's homosexuality, see, Richard Nemesvari, 'Robert Audley's Secret: Male Homosocial Desire in *Lady Audley's Secret*', *Studies in the Novel* 27, 4 (Winter 1995), pp. 515-28, and Esther Saxey, 'Introduction', in Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862; London: Wordsworth, 2007), pp. v-xxviii (esp. xxiii-xxvii).

engaged to be married to a man other than the cousin she loves, Robert Audley married to *any* woman, and Audley Court a grim, crumbling, abandoned ruin rather than the comfortable family home that it was (at least in part) during Lady Audley's residence there. What's more, the question of whether the novel's ludicrous ending is intended as a satirical point, or whether it was simply the easiest and most convenient means of Braddon winding-down her narrative, is one which is genuinely irresolvable.

The same could also be said of Christie's *A Murder is Announced* owing to the fact that the exposition of Letitia Blacklock's true identity and subsequent arrest on three charges of murder is shown as actually benefiting nobody. The key point, I would propose, is the novel's clear overdetermination of the fact that, had Charlotte Blacklock inherited the Goedler fortune as she planned, a substantial proportion of the wealth would have gone straight back to the fortune's true heir, Phillipa Haymes. This would seem to destabilise any kind of assumed legalistic narrative thread running through the novel, undermining the supposition that the reason why Charlotte Blacklock's scheme cannot be 'allowed' to reach successful completion is because she is depriving the correct legal recipient of the Goedler legacy from their rightful inheritance. Is it therefore the case that Charlotte *must* be punished for the insurmountable fact that she has murdered three persons, and that this is what both the internal coherence of the detective novel and the real-life British legal system demands? It would certainly be tempting to think yes, but, as with Braddon's novel, subtle textual details towards the close of *A Murder is Announced* make this an uncomfortable conclusion to come to. In one of the chapters of his memoir that reflects upon his wife's fiction, Max Mallowan, even goes as far as to suggest that Christie's 'books are the modern version of the medieval morality plays, concerned with the exposure of evil and calling the

wicked to account for [their] criminal actions by paying the appropriate penalty'.⁵⁶ Mallowan furthers this suggestion by going on to state that, within Christie's fictional world, 'there is no room for any relaxation of moral standards. Evil must be pursued to the end'.⁵⁷ It is unclear whether this is genuinely Mallowan's (rather naive) understanding of his wife's fictional practice or whether, considering that the memoir was first published only a year after Christie's death, it is Mallowan's attempt to perpetuate the conscious and cunning self-fashioning that Christie began in her own lifetime: in other words, his contribution to Christie mythology. Certainly, there are, in fact, many instances within Christie's work where 'evil', as Mallowan calls it, is not pursued to the very last. In *Five Little Pigs* (1943), for example, after finally managing to elicit a rather half-hearted confession, Hercule Poirot concludes that there is nevertheless probably not enough evidence to successfully prosecute the scheming murderess, Elsa Dittisham. Moreover, both Poirot and Miss Marple have cases in which the sympathy that they develop for the guilty party sees them allowing the killer the chance of a 'kinder' way out, rather than incarceration, trial, prosecution, followed almost certainly by capital punishment. For example, in *Peril at End House* (1923), Poirot knowingly lets Nick Buckley take a fatal overdose of cocaine at the time of her arrest. Meanwhile, in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962) - the novel with possibly the *most* sympathetic of all of Christie's fictional killers, a film actress who murders the woman responsible for infecting her with German measles in the early stages of her pregnancy, resulting in her son being born with severe intellectual disabilities - the suggestion is that Miss Marple knows very well that Marina Gregg's husband, Jason Rudd, has administered a fatal dose of sleeping pills shortly before the police

⁵⁶ Max Mallowan, *Mallowan's Memoirs: Agatha and the Archaeologist* (1977; HarperCollins, 2001), p. 223.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

turn up to arrest his wife, and is more than content to keep such knowledge to herself. The novel ends with Miss Marple and Jason standing over Marina's body laid out on her bed:

Miss Marple said gently, 'It's very fortunate for her that she - took an overdose. Death was really the only way of escape left to her. Yes - very fortunate she took that overdose - or - *was given it?*'

His eyes met hers, but he did not speak.

He said brokenly, 'She was - so lovely - and she had suffered so much.'

Miss Marple looked back at the still figure [on the bed].

She quoted softly the last lines of the poem:

*'He said: "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."'*⁵⁸

Such clear, tender compassion towards, not one, but *two* people who have broken the seventh commandment is hardly stuff that morality plays are made of, whether Medieval or modern. Furthermore, even though the killer in *A Murder is Announced* is subject to the more conventional fate awaiting a fictional murderer, I would still contend that the novel's conclusion still does not support Mallowan's assertion of Christie's work possessing a stern and unwavering implied morality. The final chapter of the novel,⁵⁹ sees Miss Marple explaining Charlotte's criminal scheme to an assemblage of Chipping Cleghorn residents in the home of Reverend and Bunch Harmon. The vicar's complaint that he is so distracted by talk of the 'real life' detective story that he cannot write his forthcoming sermon prompts Patrick Symmons to suggest that he ought to 'preach on Thou Shall Do No Murder' (376). Reverend Harmon, however, immediately rejects this suggestion and is seconded by his wife, who advocates 'a much nicer text, a happy text' (376), proceeding to

⁵⁸ Agatha Christie, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962; London: Harper, 2002), p. 351.

⁵⁹ Here I am distinguishing between the final *chapter* of the novel - Chapter 23, 'Evening at the Vicarage' - and the rather ludicrous, completely superfluous four-page *epilogue*, in which Edmund Swettenham and Phillipa Haymes return to Chipping Cleghorn following their honeymoon.

quote from Song of Solomon 2:12: 'For lo the Spring is here and the Voice of the turtle[dove] is heard in the land' (376). This exchange serves to highlight the conflict between competing discourses of retribution and forgiveness (or arguably *forgetfulness*, or a commitment to moving forward in a positive fashion), which, I would argue, belies the fact that Christie's attempt to convey an image of contentment among the residents of the village following Charlotte's enforced removal from their midst is either unintentionally and deliberately ineffective. Firstly, it should be noticed that, her partner Amy having been Charlotte's final murder victim (and the one who was killed in the most humiliating fashion), the now grieving 'widower', Miss Hinchcliffe, is noticeably absent from this harmonious, almost tea-party gathering. Secondly, although the village of Chipping Cleghorn might now be 'content', this does not automatically equate to the same thing as 'happiness'. In other words, as Christie's narrative unfolds, there is still a noticeable downward movement with regard to the cumulative happiness of the village. Thus, as with *Lady Audley's Secret*, the novel ends with a vision of a community that the reader can clearly see as being in a state of psychological detriment, even if the village's residents cannot, or will not, acknowledge this detriment themselves.

Thus, having above outlined the points of convergence between the two novels, it remains to be fully explicated what light is shed upon *A Murder is Announced* by reading it as a re-imagining of *Lady Audley's Secret*. The crux of the matter, I would suggest, is that in re-writing Braddon's novel and coaxing mid-Victorian anxieties regarding women's agency into a post-World War II context, Christie is cunningly picking up on, and subsequently re-appropriating, something in Braddon's original source novel which has received very little attention in the critical discussion that the novel has garnered: namely, the way in which the novel

constructs a certain kind of relationship between the novel's central female protagonist and the communal village space. Indeed, it seems reasonable that, after having discarded her identity as Mrs Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham's surest bet for beginning a new life and illegally re-marrying might have been to relocate to the anonymity of London or any of the other major nineteenth-century cities. However, she instead opts to conduct her personal renaissance in the 'dull, out-of-the-way village' of Audley, somewhere in the county of Essex (5). This, I would argue, is because the insular, self-contained, panoptic dynamics of the village force Lady Audley to forge connections with other people, and it is precisely these connections that are her salvation, but also eventually her undoing. Upon her arrival in the village of Audley, Lucy Graham does not remain a suspicious newcomer out on the periphery but becomes absolutely ingrained in the social fabric of the village, particularly through her altruistic acts to the village's most overlooked and disaffected groups in need of attention, such as the elderly and the pre-adolescent:

She would sit for a quarter of an hour talking to some old woman, and apparently as pleased with the admiration of a toothless crone as if she had been listening to the compliments of a marquis; and when she tipped away [...] the old woman would burst out into senile raptures with her grace, her beauty, and her kindness, such as she never bestowed upon the vicar's wife, who half fed and clothed her. (5-6)

Every one loved, admired, and praised her. The boy who opened the five-barred gate that stood in her pathway ran home to his mother to tell of her pretty looks, and the sweet voice in which she thanked him for the little service. (6)

These connections that Lucy Graham fashions with all sectors of village society are imperative to her continued existence. Firstly, not only do they create a sense of a 'known person' were any doubts pertaining to her provenance to be raised at any point, but, moreover, the highly democratic distribution of her interest and affection works to pre-empt any suspicions that she may be a gold-digger solely out

to get her hands on Sir Michael's wealth. Indeed, it is important to consider the fact that Braddon could have chosen any name for her rural setting of the novel. However, she chooses to have the village acquire the name from the nearby ancestral estate, which in turn acquires its name from the Audley family itself. This, I would certainly contend, is far more than Braddon's mere mimesis of historically viable cultural practice, but rather, it is of fundamental importance in understanding the psychogeographics of the text. This is in the sense that this conflation of personal name and place name makes explicit that Lady Audley is so much more than simply a particular resident in a particular village, but that, both semantically and in terms of her social role as Lady of the Manor, Audley is absolutely *her* village - her possession via her marriage to Sir Michael (not in the legal sense, of course, but certainly in the spiritual or psychological sense). Thus, for the astute reader of *Lady Audley's Secret* who is able to identify the bizarre, affected conclusion of the novel for the twisted, Gothic perversion of the 'happy ending' that it purports to be, this is the point at which Braddon most furtively 'sticks the knife in' in terms of the novel's proto-feminist social critique, and taps directly into that most ubiquitous staples of sensation fiction: the shattering psychic reverberations of depriving women of their 'rightful' property. As the curtain draws closed on Braddon's narrative, the reader is left with the overwhelming sense that, try as the family might to suppress the truth, the triumvirate that is the village, the Court, and the family of Audley will forever be scarred by their collective act of marshalling to her death a woman who only wanted to locate for herself some domestic tranquillity and a certain level of financial security.

Similarly, in *A Murder is Announced*, although Charlotte (as Letitia) could have chosen a life of relative anonymity, she instead chose to become utterly

assimilated into the small community of Chipping Cleghorn. Although it may seem a trivial example, Charlotte's complete integration into the village is exemplified by the following passage. Noting the similarity between the way in which one of their doors automatically swings closed at their cottage, Boulders, and the way in which the lounge door swings closed at Little Paddocks (and thus, the impossibility of Rudi Scherz holding a pistol, wielding a torch and holding the door open simultaneously without an accomplice), Miss Hinchcliffe recalls to Amy that

That's why Letty Blacklock bought that absolutely delectable heavy glass doorstop from Elliot's in the high street. I don't mind saying I've never forgiven her for getting in there ahead of me there. I was beating the old brute down most successfully [...] [but] then Blacklock comes along and buys the dammed thing. I'd never seen as attractive a doorstop, you don't often get those glass bubbles in that big size. (188-89)

The squabble over the ornamental doorstop, I would insist, works to belie the close, interpersonal relationship between Miss Hinchcliffe, the woman she knows as Letitia Blacklock and Mr Elliot of the home-ware or antiques shop: the fact that Mr Elliot is able to inform Miss Hinchcliffe who has superseded her to the purchase of her desired item and that she will be on familiar terms with that person. Moreover, although Miss Hinchcliffe claims that she has never forgiven Letitia for walking away with the coveted doorstop, her 'complaint' is couched in such a way that it paradoxically speaks of a great appreciation and admiration for her neighbour, particularly evident in the upgrading from 'Letty' to 'Blacklock' when discussing her consumer *savoir-faire*. This kind of petty squabble is therefore actually part of the bonding process of village life: that, ultimately, what the narrative earlier satirically refers to as '[t]he passionate hates and feuds of rural life' (10), are, in fact, an integral and often secretly enjoyable part of the ways in which friendships are forged between the village's inhabitants. However, as previously suggested, for both Lady Audley and Charlotte Blacklock, it is also

precisely these same kinds of connections with other people, but made in communities other than their current villages - Lady Audley's previous married life in the small seaport town of Wildernsea and Charlotte Blacklock's time spent living in Switzerland during the Second World War - that bring about the exposition of their former identities. Ultimately, what the return of the repressed narrative structure of the Gothic allows both Braddon and Christie to suggest, is that the prior relationships made by these women are so deep-rooted that, in spite of the extraordinary lengths our villainesses might be willing to go to erase them, they simply cannot be made to disappear just because they have become no longer desirable.

Uneasy Neighbours: Warfare and the Exposition of the 'Society of Strangers'

Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* is often bandied about in attempts, by various critics, to define or capitulate the Urban Gothic as a discrete yet cohesive substratum of Gothic literature. For example, in *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*, there exists a frankly rather bizarre section in which Mighall makes the case for *Lady Audley's Secret* as a work of 'Suburban Gothic'.⁶⁰ Assuming that Mighall employs the term 'suburban' in its most common sense - that is, to describe the newer, more sporadically built-up environment that exists on the periphery of an older, centralised, and more resolutely urban space - then this classification of Braddon's novel is simply incorrect.⁶¹ *Lady Audley's Secret*, as has already been

⁶⁰ Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*, p. 118.

⁶¹ In a similar move to Mighall, Laurence Talairach argues that 'the nineteenth century Sensation Novel illustrates the evolution of the Gothic genre, leaving medieval castles in the Apennines to settle in industrial cities.' However, just two sentences later, one of the examples she lists to support this very claim is Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. This, again, is factually inaccurate. Laurence Talairach, 'Behind the Scenes of Women's Beauty Parlours: From Gothicism to Sensationalism', in Karen Sayer and Rosemary Mitchell (eds), *Victorian Gothic* (Leeds: Leeds Centre For Victorian Studies, 2003) p. 124.

discussed at length throughout this chapter, is very unambiguously set in and around a country home and the Essex village within which that home is situated. Braddon's novel, like Christie's *A Murder is Announced* and those other novels by Christie discussed in chapter two of this thesis, is a work of Village Gothic. However, whilst a discussion of the Urban Gothic bears little relevance to Braddon's novel, I would argue that it does indeed have a particular purchase in terms of Christie's *A Murder is Announced*. To return to the quotation from Sara Wasson with which this chapter began, Wasson both persuasively and redolently illustrates why, after arguably having had its heyday in the *fin-de-siècle*, the nightmarish, Gothic cityscape appears to become of renewed interest in the literature of the Second World War and immediate post-war years: the falling of bombs transforming the home into a space of (metaphorical, in many cases, literal) entombment, unearthly sounds and ghastly wails heralding the arrival of a heavily personified Death, and day-to-day experience punctuated by the surreal transmogrification of the perfectly quotidian into the stomach-turningly sinister. In terms of the popular, 'middlebrow' women's fiction of the period, the disquieting, grisly experience of living in London during the Second World War is perhaps most famously explored in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949). The narrative of Bowen's Urban Gothic novel employs a strange, disruptive syntactic peculiarity which functions as a reflection of the dislocating experience traversing the London streets during the Blitz: a 'notoriously strange prose style that produces in almost every sentence [...] some disorientation of sense, some unexpected deviation from standard meaning'.⁶² To give only a few examples, in Bowen's novel we read 'How do you mean, met?' instead of 'What do you mean, "met"?', 'more like myself, am I looking?' instead of 'I am looking more like myself?', and 'you could not know which might be

⁶² Susan Osborn, 'Reconsidering Elizabeth Bowen', *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, 1 (Spring 2006), p. 192.

the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting' replaces 'you could not know which would be the staircase that somebody would, for the first time, not mount'.⁶³ Thus, it may be suggested that Bowen's linguistic topography becomes as incomprehensible, as difficult to navigate, as the disjointed, fragmented, polarised topography of the blitzed city, thus rendering the reader's experience of the text as akin to being in the streets themselves. This peculiar narrative style has been described as a display of 'willful [*sic*] opacity',⁶⁴ and in this sense, it is arguable that the words on the page function as a physical manifestation of the 'cataracts of rubble' that blight the streets of wartime London itself.⁶⁵ Not only was Christie most assuredly familiar with the work of her contemporary, but the pair were reciprocal admirers, with their regard for one another's artistry well noted.⁶⁶ With this in mind, I would like to suggest that there is a significant amount of crossover between the production of a war-torn, Gothicised cityscape in Bowen's novel and Christie's depiction of the immediate post-war village in *A Murder is Announced*. In addition to Charlotte Blacklock's forging of connections to the other residents of Chipping Cleghorn, part of the reason why the mystery at hand is such a lengthy one to untangle (at 382 pages in the current Harper edition of the novel, *A Murder is Announced* is certainly the longest of Miss Marple's capers), is that Charlotte is by

⁶³ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (1949; London: Vintage, 1998). pp. 12, 13, 92.

⁶⁴ Anna Teekell, 'Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War', *New Hibernia Review* 15, 3 (Autumn 2011), p. 61.

⁶⁵ Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 91.

⁶⁶ In her autobiography, Christie comments that 'If I could write like Elizabeth Bowen [...] I should jump to heaven with delight'. See, Agatha Christie, *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* (1977; London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 422. Bowen is furthermore listed as one of Agatha Christie's favourite authors in Francis Wyndham, 'The Algebra of Agatha Christie (Interview)', *The Sunday Times* (27 February 1966), p. 26. Bowen often wrote highly favourable reviews of Christie's novels for *Tatler* and *Bystander* during her tenure as the magazine's weekly book reviewer from October 1941 until April 1948. For example, she writes of Christie's *The Hollow* (1946): 'I am struck, here as always, by Mrs. Christie's excellence as a novelist (apart, I mean, from her first-rate handling of mystery). She does not lose sight of the fact that unnatural death is, after all, a sombre affair; leaving behind it a train of shock and sorrow - she is accordingly never callous, and never plays for a smile in the wrong place'. Elizabeth Bowen, 'Review of *The Hollow*', *Tatler and Bystander* (18 December 1946), p. 401.

no means the only member of the community who is living under an assumed identity. Charlotte's lodger, Phillipa Haymes, and her distant cousin, Julia Symmons, turn out to be the disinherited twins Pip and Emma - the two people who stand to inherit the Goedler fortune in the unlikely case that Belle Goedler should outlive Letitia Blacklock. Having been separated as toddlers, both women have, under slightly different auspices, and without knowing of the other's intention, descended upon Chipping Cleghorn with the eventual hope that, in Emma's words, the woman they know as Letitia 'might pity a poor orphan girl, all alone in the world, and make her, perhaps, a small allowance' when she comes into her inheritance (306). Additionally, both women subsequently realise the impossibility of making a clean breast to Letitia owing to the way in which their deception will be perceived in light of the shooting on the night of the bungled hold-up of Little Paddocks, and thus both decide to maintain the deception until absolutely necessary. As Miss Marple and Inspector Craddock discuss the case, the elderly spinster knowingly compares the pre- and post-war village hoping to provoke Inspector Craddock into realising what bothers him so greatly about the mysterious Chipping Cleghorn murders. Filtered through the external narrator, Inspector Craddock comes to realise that, within the confines of the village

[t]here were just faces and personalities and they were backed up by ration books and identity cards - nice neat identity cards with numbers on them, without photographs or fingerprints. Anybody who took the trouble could have a suitable identity card - and partly because of that, the subtler links that had held together English social rural life had fallen apart. In a town nobody expected to know his neighbour. In the country now nobody knew his neighbour either, though possibly he still thought he did. (165)

Inspector Craddock is quite right in his thinking that, in a sense, the 'flaw' with the compulsory identity cards introduced in Britain under the 1939 National

Registration Bill,⁶⁷ is that although these cards listed the name, age, address, sex, and occupation of each card-holder, they did not, however, include any kind of image, or something as uniquely individual as a fingerprint, and thus could very easily be forged. As such, there is a certain dark irony in that this particular government intervention into the everyday, domestic life of the population which was intended to make the country more 'knowable', and thus safe, in reality has functioned to make it even further frighteningly anonymised: an 'uncanny' inversion of the fantasy of what a nation ought to be. What therefore quite rightly makes Inspector Craddock uneasy is that the post-war rural village, almost before his very eyes, appears to drop its façade of itself as a community, revealing itself instead as the 'society of strangers' that Alison Light sees in Christie's work,⁶⁸ and what we might additionally conceive of as a society of 'displaced persons'. As I have previously suggested, both in this chapter and in previous chapters, it is not the case that, prior to the upheaval of the Second World War, the identity of one's rural neighbour was a reliable and secure bet - Christie's intertextual use of *Lady Audley's Secret*, as well as earlier works such as *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) are certainly testament to that. However, what I am suggesting is that what the context of the Second World War appears to do is allow Christie to augment and unambiguously foreground the possibility of one's neighbour harbouring villainous intentions to a degree that is hereto unexplored in her fiction. As Barbara Watson writes of Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, but which is a sentiment so faultlessly fitting

⁶⁷ Entering into a state of emergency at the outbreak of war, there were three chief rationales underlining the government's proposal for passing the law in September 1939. Firstly, as an appeal to administrative efficiency in the face of the inevitable scattering of the population owing to mobilisation and mass evacuation. Secondly, to help facilitate food rationing, which was, at this point, thought a likely probability. Thirdly, the need for up-to-date data on the UK population on which to base planning decisions, with the last UK census having been held in 1931. Walter F. Pratt, *Privacy in Britain* (London: Associated University Press, 1979), pp. 91-92.

⁶⁸ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 61-62.

of *A Murder is Announced*, 'a convention is established [...] by the end of the novel that the unreliability of knowledge and of people has been revealed rather than created by war'.⁶⁹ Thus, even if within the interwar and Second World War periods one was still somewhat able to romanticise the *beau ideal* of a quiet life lived in the English country village - despite Christie's constant chipping away at the plinth in novels such as *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *Murder is Easy* (1939) - by the increasingly Gothic reality of post-war England of the 1950s, this is a fantasy which has well and truly been toppled to the ground. Furthermore, as the proceeding chapter will demonstrate, as we move further into the 1950s and into the 1960s, Christie's use of the Gothic (and specifically, her reprocessing of works of nineteenth-century Gothic) becomes increasingly concerned with questions concerning the contemporary state of the nation, particularly within the context of the crisis in English national identity brought about by the collapse of the empire with which that identity relied both so long and so heavily upon for internal differentiation.

⁶⁹ Barbara Watson, 'Variations on an Enigma: Elizabeth Bowen's War Novel', *Southern Humanities Review* 15, 2 (1981), pp. 132.

Chapter Five - A 'house that had been put to the wrong use':¹ Elements of Brontë Gothic in Agatha Christie's Later Fiction

I think Deborah might like to have this [...] and the Florentine set. She's frightfully keen on Victorian things. A lot of people are nowadays. (57)

- Tuppence Beresford, in Agatha Christie's *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968)

She was wearing a big coolie-style hat of vivid magenta straw. Beneath it her face showed its pinky reflection on the dead-white surface of the skin. She was heavily made up in an exotic un-English style. Dead-white matt skin; vivid cyclamen lips, mascara applied lavishly to the eyes. Her hair showed beneath the hat, black and smooth, fitting like a velvet cap. There was a languorous un-English beauty about the face. She was a creature of the tropics, caught, as it were, by chance in an English drawing-room.

- Hercule Poirot's first encounter with Hattie Stubbs, in Agatha Christie's *Dead Man's Folly* (1956)²

Becoming Gothic: The Reception of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* in Gothic Criticism

Taking Agatha Christie's 1956 'Poirot' novel *Dead Man's Folly* and her 1968 'Tommy and Tuppence' narrative *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* as case studies, this final chapter is concerned with the turn in the latter part of the author's career towards the genre that I, taking my cue from Susan Rowland, have called 'Brontë Gothic':³ a term that I am using to encompass, specifically, Charlotte Brontë's novels *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853), and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Indeed, it is certainly no overstatement to suggest

¹ Agatha Christie, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968; London: Harper, 2001), p. 350. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

² Agatha Christie, *Dead Man's Folly* (1956; London: Harper, 2002), p. 37. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

³ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 120.

that Charlotte and Emily Brontë are two of the most important Gothic writers of the nineteenth century. It is not just the case that these two authors are adept in putting the established conventions of the genre into effect - which, of course, they are - but, more importantly, they are of great significance in the further development of the genre. Following the Gothic novel's rise towards the end of the eighteenth century, the genre fell rapidly out of fashion by the early years of the Victorian period. Emily Rena-Dozier suggests that '[i]f nineteenth-century historians of the novel agreed on anything, it was that the [G]othic novel was a disreputable and embarrassing moment in the story of the British novel's rise'.⁴ She then proceeds to recapitulate the sentiments of one such critic, Wilbur L. Cross, who, she argues, 'describes the eighteenth-century novel as an hysteric in need of a slap across the face and a splash of cold water':⁵ a remedy which, according to Cross, can be provided by the sophisticated, intelligent novels of Jane Austen.⁶ However, not knowing (or otherwise not caring) about the prevailing literary trends, the Brontë sisters 'devoured' a significant amount of Gothic fiction in their youth.⁷ The result of this formative reading is that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* skilfully refashion the Gothic genre, transmogrifying it from camp melodrama complete with outdated sets, insincere plots, and vapid characterisation (particularly of female protagonists) into a powerful and alluring narrative mode which writers ever since have found a useful vehicle

⁴ Emily Rena-Dozier, 'Gothic Criticisms: *Wuthering Heights* and Nineteenth-Century Literary History', *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 77, 3 (Fall 2010), p. 759.

⁵ *Ibid.* For Cross' original phrasing see, Wilbur L. Cross, *The Development of the English Novel* (1899; London: Macmillan, 1906), pp. 114-15.

⁶ According to Cross, Jane Austen 'gave anew to the novel an art and a style, which it once had had, particularly in [Henry] Fielding, but which it had since lost'. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁷ Patricia Ingham, *The Brontës: Authors in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 152.

through which to explore social, sexual, and domestic dissidence. With Gothic studies being a comparatively young sub-discipline within literary studies as a whole, it is to be expected that the novels of the Brontë sisters have not always been read as 'Gothic'. However, by the same token, it is also illuminating that, since the emergence of the first modern scholarly monographs devoted, in part or in full, to the study of Gothic fiction from the early 1980s onwards, these studies have tended to claim the Brontës, most insistently, as indispensable figures within the Gothic tradition. In light of such research, most serious scholars of the Gothic would now take issue with William Patrick Day's 1985 description of the relationship between the Brontës' novels and the Gothic as 'cousinly',⁸ and his forthright assertion that, when it comes to the Gothic genre, the Brontë sisters 'use the tradition, but are not [part] of it'.⁹

Prior to the birth of Gothic studies as an acknowledged field of literary criticism, there were, however, at least a handful of individual articles, which recognised the work of the Brontë sisters as in some sense Gothic. In his 1958 essay, Robert B. Heilman suggests that a re-appropriation of Gothic narrative devices is 'the distinguishing, and distinguished' element that unites *all* of Charlotte Brontë's fictional output, including the somewhat unusual candidates of *Shirley* (1849) and *The Professor* (1857).¹⁰ Heilman implicitly links Charlotte Brontë's development of the Gothic to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of psychology that was gaining cultural momentum within the nineteenth century, stating that her fiction 'demands [...] of the reader a more

⁸ William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Robert B. Heilman, 'Charlotte Brontë's "New" Gothic', in Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann Jr. (eds), *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad: Essays Collected in Memory of James T. Hillhouse* (Minneapolis, Mn: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 132.

mature and complicated response than the relatively simple thrill or momentary intensity of feeling sought by primitive Gothic'.¹¹ As Heilman suggests, the Gothicism of Charlotte Brontë's work is manifest in her aptitude for looking 'beyond familiar surfaces' in order to penetrate and confront 'the psychic darkness'.¹² Moreover, in her amusing 1973 satiric piece, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic', Joanna Russ locates *Jane Eyre* within a tradition of Gothic fiction, albeit in a complicated, ambivalent way, ultimately invoking the term 'Gothic' to suggest that Brontë's novel does not truly belong to this genre. Russ argues that mass-market, 'lowbrow', drugstore Gothics penned by writers such as Victoria Holt, which were popular with the reading public from the end of the Second World War through to the 1980s, are 'a cross breed of *Jane Eyre* and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*'.¹³ The complication, however, is that, contrary to the argument that one might expect, what Russ implies is a retrospective, reverse trajectory, arguing that Brontë's novel might be called 'Gothic' because it resembles the fictional works that were the product of this particular post-war publishing phenomenon, that (wrongly in Russ' opinion) have the label of 'Gothic' attached to them, and *not* because *Jane Eyre* advances or is reminiscent of the Gothic novels that come before it. Ultimately, Russ' point is a sardonic one, which argues that neither *Jane Eyre*, nor du Maurier's *Rebecca*, nor the mass-market novels she goes on to analyse are genuinely Gothic, but rather, as she explicitly states, that the 'real descendants' of the works of Horace Walpole, Matthew

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19.

¹³ Joanna Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic', *Journal of Popular Culture* 6, 4 (Spring 1973), p. 666.

Lewis, and Ann Radcliffe are 'known today as Horror Stories'.¹⁴ I would disagree with this statement, and instead propose that there is some logic governing the appropriation of the term 'Gothic' for the kind of twentieth-century books that Russ' article is interested in. For example, I would certainly suggest that her discussion of the relationship between travel and middle-class femininity in her mass-market 'Modern Gothics' very much emphasises the continuity between these books and the novels of Ann Radcliffe.¹⁵ Thus, although it is not the conclusion that Russ makes, there is nevertheless a more direct line of descent which might be gleaned from her three literary groupings - eighteenth-century Gothic, *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, and the postwar, drugstore Gothics. In fact, my argument would be that there exists a marked Gothicism to all three of these groupings in the sense that the novels therein *all* exhibit a commitment to the exposition of the darker, more sinister facets of a middle-class, female experience of the domestic interior, or as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik put it in their work on du Maurier, their representation of the home as 'a nightmare space [...] full of dark secrets and threatening scenarios'.¹⁶

However, as previously suggested, it is with the publication of larger volumes of criticism devoted to the genre that the process of entrenching the works of the Brontës within a canon of Gothic literature begins to gather significant momentum. For instance, in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick postulates the Gothic credentials of *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette* in terms of a dialectical interplay between, on the one hand, stubborn forces of passionate, unbridled energy that demand immediate

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 671-672.

¹⁶ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 102.

recognition and threaten to obliterate accepted boundaries (both social and narrative), and, on the other hand, forms of reticence, suppression, burial, and a refusal of representation.¹⁷ Moreover, George E. Haggerty's 1989 analysis of Emily Brontë's novel adopts a similar viewpoint, identifying its Gothicism in terms of language (principally the sublime indecipherability of Catherine and Heathcliff's semantics) and narrative structure, ultimately arguing that *Wuthering Heights* marks 'not the death of the Gothic, but really its second birth. Brontë teaches us how Gothic conventions can be transformed into novelistic ones and how the novel can be liberated to include Gothic effects without collapsing'.¹⁸ Employing a noticeably different stratagem, however, in *Literary Women* (1976), Ellen Moers argues for the singularity and uniqueness of *Wuthering Heights* amongst Victorian literature, distinguishing Emily Brontë's novel as Gothic far more in terms of its content, rather than its form, structure, or stylistic idiosyncrasies. Moers firmly highlights the challenge posed by the novel towards the fantasy of the idealised family space, flagging up the criss-crossing motifs of infanticide and incest that pervade the novel. Moers additionally argues that these interlocking motifs are bound up with the novel's shocking 'acceptance of the cruel as a normal, almost invigorating component of human life',¹⁹ which, I would further suggest, is by its very definition also explicitly *family* life. However, in terms of criticism of this period, it is Kate Ferguson Ellis in *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (1989) who most unequivocally identifies Emily Brontë's novel as Gothic in terms of its representation of family

¹⁷ See, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Arno, 1980), pp. 104-53.

¹⁸ See, George E. Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction / Gothic Form* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989) p. 79.

¹⁹ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1976; London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 99.

structures and spaces, highlighting the novel's superb exploitation of fears relating to the permeability of the boundaries of both home and family. Ellis perceptively picks up on the metaphorical load placed by Brontë on the garden wall surrounding the novel's titular property and the anxiety of what this border can and cannot successfully (that is, without physical or psychic violence) assimilate. Ellis argues that, like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) before it, *Wuthering Heights* articulates the fear of the 'unnatural', reconstituted family, suggesting that 'Heathcliff [...] is not simply Hindley's victim. He is an active collaborator in the usurpation of Hindley's birthright, his father's love. He does this not because he is innately evil, but because [...] having (we assume) been abandoned by his own parents, he must steal someone else's'.²⁰

To return to *Jane Eyre*, whilst it is surprising that author of the oft cited aphorism that 'we live in Gothic times',²¹ for once uncharacteristically skirts around making use of the term 'Gothic', Angela Carter, nevertheless suggests Brontë's novel as firmly belonging to this genre. Carter argues that owing to Brontë's deft coalescing of 'psychological realism [...] [and] a surprisingly firm sociological grasp' with 'utterly non-realistic apparatus of psycho-sexual fantasy - irresistible passion, madness, violent death, dream, telepathic communication',²² *Jane Eyre* ought to be aligned 'not with *Emma* or *Middlemarch*, but with certain enormously influential, sub-literary texts in which nineteenth-century England discussed in images those aspects of unprecedented experience for which words could not, yet, be found: Mary

²⁰ Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 215.

²¹ Angela Carter, 'Afterward', in *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (London: Quartet, 1974), p. 122.

²² Angela Carter, 'Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*' (1990), in *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (1992; London: Vintage, 1993), p. 162.

Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*'.²³ Furthermore, in *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (1990), Eugenia C. DeLamotte argues that Charlotte Brontë's novel is structured around a series of 'reworkings of Gothic set pieces: the pause at the threshold, the meeting with the housekeeper, the tour of the deserted wing, the panoramic view from confinement, the encounters with the man of mystery and the Evil Other woman, the intrusion in the heroine's room by night, the narrow escape from the villain's domain, the expulsion from Eden'.²⁴ However, DeLamotte argues that what marks the novel out as original in relation to those earlier incarnations of the Gothic genre that it actively seeks to rework is the staging of 'the double status' of Thornfield Hall as simultaneous 'exotic Gothic mansion and ordinary, boring domestic space'.²⁵ Upon Jane first being shown to her quarters by Mrs Fairfax, the reader is informed that

[t]he steps and banisters were of oak; the staircase window was high and latticed: both it and the long gallery into which the bed-room doors opened, looked as if they belonged to a church rather than a house. A very chill and vault-like air pervaded the stairs and gallery, suggesting cheerless ideas of space and solitude; and I was glad when finally ushered into my chamber, to find it of small dimensions and furnished in ordinary modern style.²⁶

Thus, even within this short two-line description, in which the expectations created by Jane's 'reading' of the house's architecture are set-up and then promptly deflated, Brontë conveys the double status of Thornfield Hall unrelentingly. I would even suggest that what this excerpt illustrates is that,

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 198-99.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

²⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; London: Vintage, 2007), p. 118. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

within the one textual space, there actually exists two separate (but overlapping) properties: the physical Thornfield Hall, which as DeLamotte says, is actually a thoroughly boring, run-of-the-mill domestic space; and the Thornfield Hall of Jane's agitated imagination, full of mystery, a menacing atmosphere, and with the potential for jeopardy around every corner.

With regard to Christie's own fictional output in the following century, this idea that Charlotte Brontë articulates so fiercely in *Jane Eyre* - of flagging up the double status of the home in relation to a safety/peril, quotidian/pandemoniac dichotomy - is of great significance. I would even suggest that the assumption that Christie's novels - with their consuming family tensions escalating to murder within the supposedly haven-like space of the middle-class home - would seem to owe the greatest debt to Emily Brontë's depiction of domestic life as exceptionally brutal and violent in *Wuthering Heights*, is actually incorrect. Instead, I would argue that whilst there is certainly an element of *Wuthering Heights*-esque family viciousness in many of Christie's novels, for example in Superintendent Sugden's vengeful slitting of his father's throat in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938), or Neville Strange using part of a fireplace fender to viciously attack and kill the woman 'who had been like a mother' to him in *Towards Zero* (1944),²⁷ as a whole, her *oeuvre* owes much more to *Jane Eyre*. As I have signalled in chapter one when discussing Alison Light's reading of Christie, contemporaneity could be argued to be very much one of the defining features of Christie's fiction. Her novels, as I have previously suggested, hasten to the forefront the brutality and exploitation that lingers beneath the façade of respectable bourgeois domesticity, but they do so with a seeming commitment to their own present moment, with the events depicted

²⁷ Agatha Christie, *Towards Zero* (1944; London: Harper, 2002), p. 284.

never set more than a year or two before the novel's publication. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* similarly refuses to expel the Gothic world to the remote past - to the temporal margins - but rather, locates the domestic interior as a site affected by fear and aggression in the here, the now, the 'this lifetime'. Thought to be written in 1846, in the latter half of Brontë's novel *St John Rivers* presents the heroine with the gift of 'a new publication': Walter Scott's *Marmion* (1808) (446). Given that *Jane Eyre* is a retrospectively told life-story, with Jane-as-character being 26 years old on receipt of this present, it is thus conceivable, and indeed likely, that the temporal positioning of Jane-as-narrator is intended to be the present-year, making her 64 years old upon recounting her tale to the reader. Charlotte Brontë's novel is therefore self-consciously in dialogue with its own modernity, whilst *Wuthering Heights* is more in-line with previous Gothic works in that the very opposite situation is true - that there is a deliberate attempt to obfuscate the modernity of the novel. Emily's novel unambiguously displaces the events presented within its pages, with the action of the outer narrative frame taking place in 1801 (the very first word of the novel),²⁸ and the 'real' action of the story commencing two decades previously, from 1771 onwards. Whilst this is a deferral much diminished from those to be found in the works of Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis, or Ann Radcliffe, it is still a deferral of chronology nonetheless,²⁹ meaning that *Wuthering Heights* presents itself, at least on surface level, as being concerned with a family struggle within a historical period noticeably removed from that in which the

²⁸ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847; London: Vintage, 2008), p. 1.

²⁹ Tamar Heller picks up on the importance of dates and of images of history in the novel, arguing that despite the fact that 'Wuthering Heights is not the medieval castle in which the heroine is imprisoned in Radcliffean [G]othic, it is an antique structure with "crumbling griffins" [...] over the lintel that bears the Earnshaw family name, emphasisi[s]ing [...] the [G]othic preoccupation with "family lineage". Tamar Heller, 'Haunted Bodies: The Female Gothic of *Wuthering Heights*', in Sue Lonoff and Terri A. Hasseler (eds), *Approaches to Teaching Emily Brontë's 'Wuthering Heights'* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2006), p. 68.

novel was actually produced. This, with the single exception of *Death Comes as the End* (1944) (as pointed out in chapter one), is a trope which is simply not used by Christie in her manipulation of the Gothic genre. Thus, because Charlotte Brontë's novel much more fully commits to dropping the veil of metaphorical estrangement in terms of setting (both spatial and chronological) that previously was such an integral part of the Gothic genre's prescribed narrative requirements, I would argue that Christie's fiction inherits from *Jane Eyre* the startling and powerful effect of, to adopt the words of Patricia Ingham (via the narrator of *Shirley*), enabling a world that is as "unromantic as Monday morning" [...] [to be] transformed into a Gothic horror'.³⁰

'[A]ll this adulation and excessive Brontë cult':³¹ The Brontës in 'Middlebrow' and Popular Culture, 1920s - 1950s

The Brontës and their works hold a singular position within the 'middlebrow' literary culture that comes after the First World War. Particularly for women writers of these years, the discernible influence of the Brontës - as opposed to other authors and their works - is very much unrivalled. The fiction of the Brontë sisters serves as formative paradigms (to greater and lesser degrees) within an arresting number of 'middlebrow' novels of the inter- and post-war periods: including Elizabeth von Arnim's *Vera* (1921); Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932); Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936); Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), a 'shameless reduplicat[ion]' of *Jane Eyre*, as Angela

³⁰ Ingham, *The Brontës*, p. 172.

³¹ Rachel Ferguson, *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Ernest Benn, 1933), p. 21. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

Carter describes it;³² Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945); Dodie Smith's, *I Capture the Castle* (1949); and the Agatha Christie novels under discussion in this chapter, *Dead Man's Folly* and *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*. The recapitulation of Brontëan themes, motifs, and characters specifically within women's 'middlebrow' fiction of the period in question is symptomatic of a larger cultural phenomenon of 'Brontëphilia',³³ as Nicola Humble describes it, that begins soon after the First World War. One of the foremost signs of this explosion of renewed cultural, literary, and biographical fascination with the Brontës was the refashioning of the Haworth Parsonage - the Brontë family's former residence - into 'The Brontë Parsonage Museum', which was officially opened on 4 August 1928.³⁴ Whilst the village of Haworth in West Yorkshire had boasted a 'museum' devoted to their acclaimed literary family since 1895, this was a rather modest affair: a small collection of the Brontëan relics housed within two small rooms on the first floor of the former Yorkshire Penny Bank located on Haworth's main street.³⁵ However, the purchasing of the Parsonage by local businessman and philanthropist, Sir James Roberts, early in 1928, and his subsequent gifting of his purchase to the Brontë Society, enabled a much larger museum to be established at the family's former residence. The Brontë Parsonage Museum thus opened its doors to the public, commencing with a celebratory affair that saw the official handing over of the property deeds from

³² Carter, 'Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*', *Expletives Deleted*, p. 163.

³³ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 177.

³⁴ Anon. 'Haworth Parsonage: Opening Ceremony, August 4th, 1928', *Brontë Society Transactions* 7, 38 (1928), p. 138.

³⁵ Esther Alice Chadwick, 'Haworth Parsonage: The Home of the Brontës', *The Nineteenth Century and After* 103, 611 (January 1928), p. 135; Charles Lemon, *A Centenary History of the Brontë Society, 1893-1993* (Kendal: Titus Wilson & Son, 1993), p. 6.

Roberts to the then president of the Brontë Society, Sir Edward Brotherton.³⁶ Attendees reputedly ran into thousands,³⁷ and Humble describes photographs from the opening day, such as that reproduced as figure 2, as ‘showing a massive crowd more reminiscent of a political rally than a cultural event’.³⁸ However, I would even suggest that this description does not go far enough. The photograph depicts what resembles a human river: people all dressed up in their Sunday finery, filling any and *all* available space in the narrow lane between the Sunday School building and the wall of the graveyard. However, it is not just the number, but the demographic of people in attendance that is seriously impressive. As one commentator noted, [l]ocal characters from the Pennine moors rubbed shoulders with [...] special guests, and a galaxy of literary people whose names would have occupied a dozen pages, of *Who’s Who*.³⁹ Other notable attendees included descendants of Elizabeth Gaskell, members of the Branwell family, politicians, the vice chancellor of Leeds University, and even several foreign dignitaries made themselves present for the occasion.⁴⁰ Given that, ultimately, the day in question marked the opening of a small domestic museum in an out-of-the-way Yorkshire village, the scale and magnitude of the proceedings is evocative with regard to the position occupied by the Brontës within the literary and cultural imagination of the time. Indeed, although it is her 1931 novel, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, which features the ghosts of the Brontë sisters as actual characters within the

³⁶ Anon. ‘Haworth Parsonage’, p. 138.

³⁷ Lemon, *A Centenary History of the Brontë Society*, p. 27.

³⁸ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, p. 176.

³⁹ Albert H. Preston, ‘Sixty Years Ago: Personal Recollections of the Opening Ceremony of the Brontë Parsonage Museum’, *Brontë Society Transactions* 19, 5 (1988), p. 227. The literati to which Preston refers, although well-known at the time, include the now-forgotten figures of writers such as Halliwell Sutcliffe and James A. Mackereth.

⁴⁰ Anon. ‘Haworth Parsonage’, p. 137.

story itself, that is usually championed as the ‘middlebrow’ text most unrelentingly affianced with cultural Brontëphilia, the opening of the Brontë Parsonage Museum is directly responded to in Rachel Ferguson’s 1933 play *Charlotte Brontë: A Play in Three Acts*. Ferguson’s may well have been one of three biographical plays about the Brontës that, according to Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, ran concurrently in London theatres that year.⁴¹ The play’s prologue is set in the small, front-facing, first floor box-room known as the ‘Children’s Study’, not, however, during the Brontës’ lifetimes, but explicitly within the present day of the early-1930s, when the building is very clearly operating as a museum. The play begins by introducing the audience to Elliot and Edna Emerson: husband and wife American tourists visiting England’s ‘centres of culture’ (14), who cannot help but spurt forth their views on the lives, loves, and works of the Brontës before their captive audience of more demure, sensible, English visitors - a middle-aged woman accompanied by her daughter, and an elderly clergyman. This uncomfortable encounter is one which the English girl, Sylvia, without the Americans realising she is making fun of them, implicitly compares to the seventh phase of hell, *à la* Dante’s *Inferno*. One of the many pieces of ‘information’ that Elliott holds is that there is a missing portrait of Emily painted by Branwell which has been hidden somewhere within the village. This leads to his wife commenting that

THE A.W.: It would make a very instructive paper for the Minerva Circle. We’re gettin’ low on topics. We’ve done *The Decay of Rome*, *The Lake Poets*, *Modern English Literature*, *The Elizabethan Drammer*, an’ we did *Five Hundred Years of Old Furniture* at our last meetin’.

THE ENG. GIRL: There’s always the Seven Cycles of Hell, Mrs. Emerson.

⁴¹ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (1940; Melbourne: Hutchinson & Co, 1985), p. 296. Unfortunately, none of these three plays are identified by name or playwright.

THE A.W.: Oh, we done The Inferno last fall. Dante was a very deep an' remarkable thinker, for the time.

THE ENG. GIRL (*strangling with suppressed laughter*): I—I—think we —

THE A.W.: We did a passage turn about in the original. Mr. Emerson an' I did Rome in September, an' I said to the members "Remember," I said, "Italian's an easy language if you recollect that 'c-h-e' is spoken hard. Sound o' 'kay.' An' 'c-i' sound of 'chee.'"

THE ENG. GIRL: I—I—I—see. (*She turns abruptly, and affects to examine a case, her shoulders heaving.*) (15)

As crystallised by the above excerpt, the Emersons are undoubtedly figures-of-fun, and the play's audience is very much invited to laugh at their amateur literary pretensions. However, considering the fact that the people laughing at the Emersons and their catalogue of opinions about literature and culture, ancient to present, are people who have chosen to spend their leisure time attending a biographical play about Charlotte Brontë, these are pretensions that are more than likely held by the audience members themselves. Thus, although the Emersons are undeniably the butt of the prologue's joke, I would insist that, at the same time, they are a kind of parable of the 'middlebrow' reader. For example, Edna's pestering of her husband to enquire whether they can purchase Emily Brontë's writing desk reflects a tendency which 'middlebrow' culture is often accused of bearing: the valuing of culture as a commodity (which, once purchased, endows the possessor with an enhanced cultural capital), rather than for its intrinsic 'artistic' or 'intellectual' worth.⁴² As Melissa Schaub puts it, there is a sense in which 'middlebrow culture was often sold and bought as a commodity that people could acquire by owning the

⁴² To give just one example, in his caustically-toned account of his time spent as a second-hand bookshop-come-lending library clerk, George Orwell writes that '[i]n a lending library you see people's real tastes, not their pretended tastes. It is simply useless to put Dickens, Thackeray, Jane Austen, Trollope, etc into the ordinary lending library [...] Yet it is always easy to *sell* Dickens, just as it is always easy to sell Shakespeare'. George Orwell, 'Bookshop Memories' (1936), in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell - Volume 1: An Age Like This, 1920-1940* (1968; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 275-76.

right books and projecting the right image'.⁴³ Moreover, the particular nature of the Emersons' interest in the Brontës is illustrative of Humble's assertion that '[t]he Brontës were in many ways the perfect middlebrow subject: available for both serious analysis and gossipy speculation; their works clearly of a high literary status, but also intimately familiar'.⁴⁴ If 'gossipy speculation' is imperative to a 'middlebrow' handling of the Brontës and their works, then the Emersons can certainly provide: 'He was a sap, that Reverend Nicholls. I mean, it riles one. What a sensible girl like Charlotte saw in him beats me. Tisn't as though he were her only bid, either. That girl could've married anyone' (17). Elliot's over-invested dissection of the relationship between Charlotte Brontë and Arthur Bell Nicholls bears such intimacy, yet casualness, that it makes it seem as though Brontë and Nicholls are the couple whom he knows from further down the road, rather than figures from the remote historical past. Moreover, his insistence as to the 'fact' that Charlotte could have found a far superior husband for herself, seems to be in direct contrast to the more widely acknowledged notion that the pool of potential suitors for Charlotte (and, indeed, all the Brontë sisters) was brutally limited, thus endowing his remark with the appearance of privileged information of which, gossip, by definition, is the disclosure of to a tertiary party.

The interwar years also witness something of an upsurge in critical studies of the Brontës and their novels. For example, E.M. Delafield who, as the author of the hugely successful 'Diary of a Provincial Lady' series (1930-40), is a preeminent figure within 'middlebrow' literary culture, edits and introduces *The Brontës: Their Lives Recorded by their Contemporaries* (1935): an anthology

⁴³ Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 21.

⁴⁴ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, p. 177.

of letters, reviews, and selected excerpts from Elizabeth Gaskell's influential *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). Delafield's introduction to the collection, even as a work of non-fiction, can be seen as revealing the exact same preoccupations that fictional treatments of the Brontës receive within the 'middlebrow' literature of the period. She is, for example, in the first instance intensely concerned with the Brontës, not as a family of writers, but simply as a family. Noticeably marked by the increasingly widely disseminated rhetoric of popular psychology, Delafield utterly dismantles the image of the family as held together by mutual bonds of love and affection, instead 'reading' the Brontës as a quasi-psychoanalytic case study, speculating as to the more uncomfortable forces that may be implicated within each sibling-sibling bond:

The emotional tie between children of the same parents may be a very strong one, or it may not. The instinctive tie can never be anything but strong, and its roots lie below the level of conscious thought. The Brontës, living together in isolation on their moors, reacted on one another powerfully, both consciously and unconsciously.⁴⁵

Delafield is also shown to have strong opinions on the Branwell-as-co-author-of-*Wuthering-Heights* debate that had been in circulation since the 1860s,⁴⁶ but which gained renewed clout in the 1920s and 1930s, primarily owing to Alice Law's 1923 biography of Branwell Brontë.⁴⁷ Thus, I would argue that the 'burying' of Branwell that Stella Gibbons sets out to achieve in her parodic *Cold Comfort Farm* - via her distinctly satirical treatment of the Branwell enthusiast 'Mr Mybug' - is what Delafield also noticeably strives for within her introduction to the anthology.

⁴⁵ E.M. Delafield 'Preface' (1935), in E.M. Delafield (ed.), *The Brontës: Their Lives Recorded by the Contemporaries* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1935), p. 15.

⁴⁶ For more on this topic, see Patsy Stoneman, 'The Brontë Myth' in Heather Glen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 230.

⁴⁷ Incidentally, this argument was again espoused in a slightly later Branwell Brontë biography, this time from *within* 'middlebrow' literary culture, in Daphne du Maurier's, *The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë* (1960).

Within the introduction, Delafield's vehement words give rise to a damning indictment of Branwell Brontë's character. She argues that all claims as to Branwell's full or partial authoring of *Wuthering Heights* can be discredited when one considers the fact that Branwell 'was a liar and a boaster. The sustained effort necessary for the writing of even one chapter of a novel was not at all typical of Branwell - but the pitiful determination to show himself off as an artist of some kind, a creator, *was* typical in the extreme'.⁴⁸ Thus, whether by Gibbons' more comic means, or by Delafield's tone of exasperated scorn, there is a patent sense that what is being objected to is the underestimation of female creative intelligence by those male critics who express incredulity 'that a book so marvellous in its strength, and in its dissection of the most morbid passions of diseased minds, could have been written by a young girl like Emily'.⁴⁹ In doing so, Delafield's preface is implicated in what Humble, in relation to *Cold Comfort Farm*, sees as an act of fencing off 'the Brontës as the province of women', lest they should be 'grotesquely misread by male intellectuals who attempt to usurp them'.⁵⁰ Despite all of Delafield's evident intense fondness for the works of the Brontës, there is, however, a concurrent sense that the Brontës need to be consigned to the remote past in order to bolster her own twentieth-century modernity, creating a narrative of historical 'progress'. For instance, Delafield projects noticeably twentieth-century principles of child education onto her nineteenth-century subjects, claiming that all of Branwell Brontë's personal deficiencies and setbacks arise from the fact that he 'was kept at home when he should have been at school'.⁵¹ This view is, of course, informed by over a century's worth of significant legislative reforms in relation to

⁴⁸ Delafield, 'Preface', *The Brontës*, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Francis H. Grundy, 'Branwell and *Wuthering Heights*' (undated), in Delafield, *The Brontës*, p. 79.

⁵⁰ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, p. 180.

⁵¹ Delafield, 'Preface', *The Brontës*, p. 15.

childhood education, in the form of a succession of Education Acts, that take place from the time of Branwell's boyhood to Delafield's penning of her preface in the 1930s. This sense of historical superiority, despite all sentimental attachment to the Brontës, is not at all dissimilar to Rachel Ferguson's use of Brontë spectres in *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*: a novel that is, as Patsy Stoneman observes, marked with a pronounced 'fear [of the Brontës] as spinsters ruled by erotic compulsions',⁵² and which, I would add, firmly establishes the Brontës as a totem against which the reader is invited to measure the 'success' of the 'smart', 'modern', marriage that is signalled by the engagement between Katrine Carne and Freddie Pipson that takes place at the story's close.

It cannot go unstated that the extended period of cultural 'Brontëphilia' that emerged after the First World War doubtless owed a great deal to the translation of their literary works into the more popular mediums of film, television, and radio. In terms of *Jane Eyre* alone, Stoneman litanises that along with more than ten different stage versions performed between 1910 and 1945, 'the novel was performed on British radio four times between 1930 and 1946, and on British television [...] in 1937 and America in 1939'.⁵³ However, as she also observes, the absolute apex of the mass-cultural dissemination of Charlotte Brontë's tale - the form in which *Jane Eyre* was granted the highest level of visibility within the period - took the form of Robert Stevenson's Hollywood film, starring Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine, which had its premiere in December 1943 in Great Britain, and February 1944 in the United States.⁵⁴ The film is estimated to have been viewed in

⁵² Patsy Stoneman, 'Jane Eyre in Later Lives: Intertextual Strategies in Women's Self-Definition' in Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker (eds), *Fatal Attractions: Rescripting the Romance in Contemporary Literature and Film* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 43.

⁵³ Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights'* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), p. 87.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

colossal numbers,⁵⁵ and, in terms of reworking Charlotte Brontë's original, the film, whether in spite or *because* of the contestation of more established gender roles facilitated by the outbreak of the Second World War, refashions Jane Eyre's story into a more straightforward romance narrative - girl meets boy; girl loses boy; girl and boy make up, get married and live happily ever after. The film tames Brontë's rebellious Jane to such a degree that Fontaine's appreciably 'vanilla-flavoured' version of the character spends a great deal of her time and energy on-screen staring languidly and pleadingly - her head tilted with docility to one side - at Welles' Edward.⁵⁶ In terms of making Brontë's narrative fit a more conservatively-fashioned romance paradigm it is also important to note that the Jane-as-potential-missionary episode after her departure from Thornfield Hall is entirely expurgated, as is the inheritance which she receives in the original novel, which works to elevate Jane to a more equal socioeconomic footing with Edward. However, it may also be argued that the film also served to highlight the Gothicism of Brontë's source text. As previously suggested by my discussion of the multiplicity of 'Thornfield Halls' presented in the novel, it can be said that, within *Jane Eyre*, there are really two narratives competing for textual fruition, and, as a result, the reader is constantly asked to negotiate between explanations of events that favour the judicious, the rational, and the quotidian, and those that seem to favour the outlandish, the unearthly, and the supernatural. I would even suggest that what renders *Jane Eyre* so powerful and so 'successful' a novel, is that the reader is able to maintain *both* readings simultaneously, to some degree, and still progress through the novel: that, a decision as to what is 'really going on' never needs to be reached in order to make the story 'make sense'. However, this effect is not one

⁵⁵ The estimate is 18,000,000 by 1948. See, Ingham, *The Brontës*, p. 228.

⁵⁶ Leslie Halliwell, cited in Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, p. 101.

which is easy to accomplish within a staunchly visual medium such as film. In reference to early twentieth-century adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*, Ingham argues that, given the choice between explaining the increasingly rampageous events at the farm via the mental disturbances of the various characters, or the presence of genuine spectres (or attempting to maintain the ambiguity between the two), 'it was usual to opt for real ghosts'.⁵⁷ The exact same sentiment applies to film adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, and thus what Stevenson's film does is to replace what I see as the novel's 'genuinely' Gothic effect of never being able to fully confirm or repudiate the supernatural, with a cheaper, more 'Hollywoodised' version of Gothic that fully commits to (and exaggerates), the outlandish, unearthly, supernatural vein of Charlotte Brontë's text. Within the film, any given outdoor scene features an unnecessary amount of studio produced fog. Furthermore, the interior shots of Thornfield Hall - a property which, in the original novel is explicitly described as being 'of proportions not vast, though considerable: a gentleman's manor-house, not a nobleman's seat' (120) - suggest a gargantuanly sized castle, one that is crypt-like, brimming with exposed stone, and more exaggeratedly mediaeval than is strictly required. However, most significantly, Edward's desperate 'call' that eventually brings Jane back to him is portrayed, unambiguously, as a supernatural instance of genuine telepathic communication (occurring in the middle of a fierce storm for good Gothic measure). Therefore, although viewerly fretfulness and fear is elicited by different means - with the novel's truly 'uncanny' representation of the domestic interior substituted for cheaper thrills in a *papier-mâché* fortress - the 1943 film nevertheless served to draw attention to the fact that its source text is anything but committed to the faithful representation of life as it is really lived, which is, broadly speaking, the

⁵⁷ Ingham, *The Brontës*, p. 227.

definition of a work of literary Realism: that instead, it is an important, innovative, and remarkable work of Gothic fiction.

Devotion Beyond Idolatry: Revising the *Jane Eyre* plot in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968)

I would therefore suggest that both the lives and fictional works of the Brontë sisters, and *Jane Eyre* in particular, were deeply embedded within the collective imagination of the 'middlebrow' literary cultures of the mid-twentieth century, prompting many authors within this rung of the cultural ladder to draw on Charlotte Brontë's novel for inspiration. With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that Christie's 1968 'Tommy and Tuppence' novel, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, noticeably incorporates certain elements of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.⁵⁸ Significantly, Christie was most certainly in the process of drafting *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* when the significant literary and cultural splash was made by the publication of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966. As Hunter Davies observes, Rhys' novel - an intended quasi-prequel to *Jane Eyre* - was met with 'rave reviews everywhere',⁵⁹ including particularly favourable accounts in *New Statesman*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *New York Times Book Review*, *London Magazine* and Davies'

⁵⁸ One place, prior to this thesis, that the use of a *Jane Eyre* intertext in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* has been picked up on is ITV Television's 2006 adaptation of the novel - which sees Tommy and Tuppence teaming up with the more well-known Miss Marple - as part of their *Agatha Christie's Marple* series (2004-2013). In the television episode, the village's precocious starlet, Nora Johnson (a character invented for the adaptation) stars as Helen Burns in a new film adaptation of Brontë's novel. As soon as Tuppence and Miss Marple are driven into the village (which has been renamed 'Farrell St Edmund'), there is a close-up of a poster for the film, which one character is nailing to a post, this same poster appearing again in the next scene in the interior of the pub in which Tuppence and Miss Marple will take lodgings. There is also a screening of the film itself at the Festival of Farrell St Edmunds later in the episode.

⁵⁹ Hunter Davies, 'Rip Van Rhys', *The Sunday Times*, (6 November 1966), p. 13.

own encouraging piece for the *Sunday Times*.⁶⁰ Moreover, the novel also won the WH Smith Literary Award in 1967, both further increasing its (already substantial) public visibility and providing legitimisation for the novel as a 'good' or 'worthwhile' cultural artefact. Furthermore, the novel famously 'resurrected' an author, who was largely assumed to have died some time after her publication of her previous novel in 1939. Thus, taking the evident 'success' of Rhys' novel into account, it can be argued that the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* greatly served to emphasise the potential, or, to put it in more extreme terms, the 'need' for a creative re-visioning of Charlotte Brontë's original novel, which, I would argue, is precisely what Christie provides in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*.

Indeed, the first epigraph to this chapter is taken from a scene that occurs towards the beginning of Christie's novel, in which the amateur detectives go through the possessions of their recently deceased aunt. On finding a ring that seems particularly 'old fashioned and sentimental' (57), Tuppence comments to her husband, Tommy, that they ought to keep it because their daughter, Deborah, is 'frightfully keen on Victorian things. A lot of people are nowadays' (57). Although this incident at least appears to have little bearing upon the rest of the story, I would suggest that Tuppence's rather shrewd observation provides a useful means with which to think through Christie's engagement with particular aspects of Brontë's Victorian novel. Thus, although I would certainly contend that the episode of cultural Brontëphilia that transpires right in the middle of the so-called 'modern' decades of the twentieth century would suggest the genesis of this cultural phenomenon as having deeper roots than first supposed, Miles Taylor corroborates Tuppence's/Christie's observation in his noting that, more broadly speaking, the

⁶⁰ Extracts from several of these reviews are reproduced in Carl Plasa (ed.), *Jean Rhys' 'Wide Sargasso Sea': A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) pp. 15-23.

years following the close of the Second World War marked the beginning of a renewal of cultural interest in the British Victorian period in both Great Britain and America.⁶¹ This revived attention towards the years of Queen Victoria's reign manifested itself across a number of disciplines implicated in both literary and material culture, including, to name a few, collecting practices, architectural conservation, literary criticism, and literature itself.⁶² Similarly, Cora Kaplan argues that 'the fascination with things Victorian has been a British postwar vogue which shows no signs of exhaustion. At the beginning of the fad in the 1960s, "Victoriana" might have narrowly meant the collectible remnant of material culture in the corner antique shop, but by the 1970s its reference had widened to embrace a complementary miscellany of evocations and recyclings of the nineteenth century, a constellation of images which became markers for particular moments of contemporary style and culture'.⁶³ In terms of the literary manifestation of post-war 'Victoriana', as Kaplan terms it, although Christie's late-career novel has hardly been discussed in any context, let alone this particular one, it is illuminating to note that *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* sits squarely between two works which have subsequently been seen as crystallising the moment that the genre of neo-Victorian fiction came into existence: the first being Rhys' aforementioned *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and the second being John Fowles' bestselling *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

⁶¹ Miles Taylor, 'Introduction', in Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (eds), *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 5-6. Also see, Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 1.

⁶² Taylor, 'Introduction', in Taylor and Wolff (eds), *The Victorians Since 1901*, pp. 6-8.

⁶³ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 2-3.

(1969).⁶⁴ By underscoring the proximity of Christie's novel to these other works, I am not suggesting that *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* ought to be considered as a work of neo-Victorian fiction, as the novel's action and narrative being located within the present day of the late 1960s, rather than within the years of Victoria's reign, would clearly preclude it from such categorisation (as I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis). However, what I am suggesting is that Christie's novel is very much a product of this particular historical moment and its renewed fascination with previous century, and thus Christie's novel has elements of something resembling a neo-Victorian attitude or outlook, without the adoption of a neo-Victorian *form*. My argument is that Christie's novel shares the same primary thematic concerns with works like *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in the sense that it is 'in some respect [...] *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*',⁶⁵ and that by re-appropriating nineteenth-century fiction to suggest that an understanding of the Victorian past is imperative to an understanding of its own contemporary moment, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* is very much part of what Kaplan identifies as 'the astonishing range of representations and reproductions for which the Victorian - whether as the origin of late twentieth century modernity, its antithesis, or both at once - is the common referent'.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ For example, Sally Shuttleworth refers to Rhys' and Fowles' as the 'progenitive model[s]' for what she then calls 'retro-Victorian' fiction, the term now generally been replaced with that of 'neo-Victorian' fiction. Sally Shuttleworth 'Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel', in Elinor D. Shaffer (ed.), *The Third Culture: Literature and Science* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), p. 26. Similarly, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn argue that although 'chronologically speaking everything after that key date [of 1901] is in an essential manner post-Victorian (though not neo-Victorian), [...] it was only really with the work of authors like Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Women* (1969) that a conscious articulation of the desire to re-write, re-vision and challenge the nineteenth-century's assumptions and dominance came about'. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 3.

To proceed onto the Christie's novel itself, having last been seen in the wartime thriller *N or M?* (1941), *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* presents to us husband and wife sleuthing team Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, now in late-middle age. Prompted by a pang of conscience, the couple decide that it is time to pay a visit to Tommy's difficult and cantankerous elderly aunt, Ada Fanshawe, who is currently installed at Sunny Ridge nursing home. Because Ada fails, or otherwise takes perverse delight in *pretending* not, to recognise Tuppence as her nephew's spouse - 'No good pretending she's your wife. I know better. Shouldn't bring that type of woman in here' (31) - Tuppence is forced to wait in the home's communal sitting room whilst Tommy attends to his aunt. It is here that she meets 'a very nice fluffy old lady' (41), Mrs Lancaster. However, despite her external amiability, Mrs Lancaster is, by Tuppence's own admission, 'a little peculiar' (43), seemingly having got it into her head that there is a dead child buried behind the sitting room's fireplace:

'I see you're looking at the fireplace.'

'Oh. Was I?' said Tuppence, slightly startled.

'Yes. I wondered-' she leant forward and lowered her voice. '- Excuse me, was it your poor child?'

Tuppence slightly taken aback, hesitated.

'I wondered. I thought perhaps you'd come for that reason. Someone ought to come some time. Perhaps they will. And looking at the fireplace, the way you did. That's where it is, you know. Behind the fireplace.' (40)

Three weeks later, Ada passes away, and Tommy and Tuppence return to Sunny Ridge to collect her effects, which are now theirs. However, their late Aunt's possessions now contain something which they had never encountered before: 'a small oil painting representing a pale pink house standing adjacent to a canal spanned by a small humped-backed bridge. [...] It was a very pleasant little scene but nevertheless Tommy wondered why Tuppence was staring at it with such earnestness' (54). The painting, it turns out, was gifted to Ada by Mrs Lancaster,

who has now, the Beresford's are told, been taken away from Sunny Ridge by her family. However, Tuppence's failed attempts to return the painting to Mrs Lancaster via her forwarding address, compounded by her unshakable and unnerving feeling of 'déjà vu' whenever she looks at the painting (83), leads to her suspecting untoward happenings at Sunny Ridge, and takes advantage of her husband's attending the International Union of Associated Security conference, to undertake some solo sleuthing, hoping to unravel the mystery of Mrs Lancaster's 'disappearance'.

Tuppence eventually realises that the sense of 'uncanny' repetition that the painting inspires in her owes to her once seeing the house it depicts from the window of a train when on the return journey from visiting her god-daughter's daughter. Arming herself with a map and her car, she sets about trying to find the house again and somehow does indeed stumble across its location, just outside the village of Sutton Chancellor. The secluded, fleshy-hued Georgian property is second only perhaps to Hillside in *Sleeping Murder: Miss Marple's Last Case* (1976) (discussed at length in chapter one), as one of Christie's most emphatically 'uncanny' houses. Like Hillside, the house near Sutton Chancellor is one which, for the novel's sleuthing heroine, very much literalises the idea of the unnerving, unintentional return to a particular place via a different pathway to that which was previously traversed: 'Tuppence had thought to herself - That house was rather like a dream! Perhaps it was a dream[,] [...] And so she had forgotten all about it - until a picture hanging on a wall had reawakened a veiled memory' (93). Moreover, in chapter one I explored Christie's exploitation of the trope of spatial doubling in relation to her domestic spaces, and suggested that, in the re-christening of houses over the passage of time, a house can come to function as the *doppelgänger* of the house of former times (the example in *Sleeping Murder* being St Catherine's and

Hillside). However, in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, this trope is escalated to the nth degree: presenting a house whose identity is decidedly unstable; a house that seems to proliferate, all but inexhaustibly, almost of its own accord. Indeed, Tuppence learns from her investigative *tête-à-têtes* with the locals of Sutton Chancellor and the nearby town of Market Basing, that the house that interests her has been given at least ten different names since its original construction in the eighteenth century: Waterside (130), Watermead (130), Bridge House (167, 242), Riverbank (171), Canal House (241), Canal Side (241), Meadowside (242), Riverside (242), and Ladymead (320). Canal House, as I shall - following Tuppence herself - now call it, is furthermore a house that is quite literally divided and doubled, having in recent times been converted into two dwellings. However, as opposed to the more usual practice of splitting a double-fronted property into left and right, Canal House has been split into front and back: 'rather an odd way of dividing a house', Tuppence quite rightly thinks to herself (107). Moreover, in terms of the aesthetics of ruination so imperative to the Gothic genre, whilst the rear-end of the property is currently being rented to Alice and Amos Perry, the front part of the house - the part that can be seen in the painting - has lain empty for a significant number of years. With nobody living in it, the house is therefore not fulfilling its purpose, and thus, in a sense, its ruination is prefigured (we learn there have already been problems with unattended plumbing and with animals getting into the chimney). Finally, Canal House, in spite of its external façade as 'one of the most attractive houses [...] ever seen - a quiet, peaceful house, irradiated by the golden light of the late afternoon sun' (92), is a property which has garnered something of a rather dreadful reputation. As, Mrs Copleigh, the loquacious landlady of the boarding house in Sutton Chancellor that Tuppence takes residence in, tells her guest that people 'say there's something queer about it' (145),

proceeding to reel off a litany of violent and morbid stories in which it stars. One such story, which, significantly, is hugely reminiscent of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, is that a runaway nun was live-entombed there, her lover having 'bricked up all the fireplace [...] and nailed a big sheet of iron over it' (146). Another equally gruesome suggestion is that a young woman was installed there by her mother in order to give birth to her illegitimate child. The young mother, however, murdered her newborn baby shortly before killing herself. Thus, although it is exceedingly difficult at this juncture of the narrative to separate gossip and hearsay from occurrences which have actually taken place within the property (and deliberately so) - everything merging in the weary Tuppence's mind into 'a kaleidoscope of moving figures and of all sorts of horrific imaginings' (160) - the suggestion is nevertheless very much that Canal House is a property which enfetters, and subsequently desolates, the lives of its occupants, seemingly by virtue of itself.

Having already mentioned the later *Villette*, the influence of Brontë's earlier *Jane Eyre* upon *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* is manifested most conspicuously in the novel's triumvirate of Nellie Bligh, Philip Starke, and Mrs Lancaster: a cluster of relationships, which, I would insist, are modelled on a Jane Eyre - Edward Rochester - Bertha Mason paradigm. Indeed, during the last section of the novel, the solution to the menacing Canal House mystery, which Tuppence and Tommy know to be *somehow* intertwined with Mrs Lancaster's abrupt disappearance from Sunny Ridge, comes increasingly into focus, it is made clear that the solution to the mystery is tied up with these three characters. As such, it is at this point that the comparison between Christie's creations and Brontë's earlier characters become most obvious. From his very entrance into the story, Sir Philip Starke is presented as a character securely in the cast of Brontë's agitated and brooding hero. As owner of The Priors - a Victorian 'gentleman's house' with 'Gothic overlays, a touch of

Balmoral [Castle]', part of which, significantly, 'burnt down many years ago' (320) - not only does Philip's social and financial positioning echo Edward's role as Master of Thornfield Hall, but, moreover, the echoes are evident in Christie's physical description of her character:

How old was he, [Tuppence] wondered. Seventy at least, perhaps older. A worn ascetic face. Yes, definitely ascetic. A very tortured face. Those large dark eyes. El Greco eyes. The emaciated body. [...] His eyes met hers and seemed to leave some message.

'You are thinking about me,' those eyes said. 'Yes, it's true what you are thinking. I am a haunted man.'

Yes, that described him exactly - He was a haunted man. (304-05)

In a similar vein, Nellie Bligh, the church-volunteering, ultra-competent, and '[s]o sensible' tweed-clad spinster (330), is positioned unequivocally as a modern-day Jane Eyre. As reader, we eventually learn that Nellie, who, the novel intimates, evidently throws herself fervently into 'useful' activities around Sutton Chancellor to distract herself from her lack of romantic or family life, as a young woman worked as Sir Philip's secretary. The significance of this, I would argue, is that the secretary is very much the typical twentieth-century surrogate for the figure of the Victorian governess in terms of the available employment opportunities available for the genteel, middle-class woman fallen on hard times. Indeed, the key point is that, in both the mid-nineteenth century and the interwar years of the twentieth century,⁶⁷ employment as a secretary, like employment as a governess before it, allowed an unmarried middle-class woman to earn a wage whilst maintaining her 'respectability'. As Gerry Holloway suggests of the governess, these roles were not without their stigma, as the loss of option of remaining 'leisured' signified the 'double failure' of both a woman's ability to secure a husband and, should she have

⁶⁷ Phillip tells Tuppence that his wife, Julia, died 'before the war. In 1938' (313). Nellie was in his employment at this time.

a family, their own inability to support her as an unmarried woman.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, becoming a family's governess or secretary still does not represent the complete degradation of being forced to enter into domestic service. However, owing to the increasing removal of child-education to outside the domestic sphere from the later decades of the nineteenth century onwards, which in turn heralds the increased professionalisation of teaching as a career for women,⁶⁹ the role of governess is not one which would have been particularly in demand in the mid-twentieth century. The role of private secretary, I would therefore argue, is its closest equivalent, allowing a middle-class woman to work closely with a well-off man and his household, but to be categorically one rank above that of his domestic staff. Moreover, in the novel's present day, although she is no longer his employee, she is still desperately in love with the woeful Philip and, as one character puts it, 'completely devoted [to him] beyond idolatry' (309). Completing the picture, the seemingly amicable old lady whom Tuppence, and then reluctantly Tommy, has made it her mission to track down and ensure the safety of, turns out not to be *in* danger, as the sleuths first supposed her to be, but rather to *be* the danger. This is because Mrs Lancaster is actually Julia Starke, Philip's mentally disturbed wife whom the village of Sutton Chancellor believe to be dead. Indeed, it is suggested that whilst Julia had always been 'slightly imbalanced' owing to generations of familial in-breeding in the aristocratic Warrender family (347), this, however subsequently developed into criminal insanity after she was forced to have an abortion as a teenager. In the final chapter of the novel, after managing to imprison Tuppence within Canal House, leading her through a series of secret doors leading

⁶⁸ Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 37.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-23.

from the Perry's half of the property to the abandoned half, Julia candidly confesses to her captive that

I began to have dreams that the child was always there, asking me why it never had life. The child told me it wanted companions. [...] But there was a way to atone. To atone for what I'd done. What I'd done was murder, and you can only atone for murder with other murders, because the other murders wouldn't really be murders, they would be *sacrifices*. They would be offered up. [...] The children went to keep my child company. (338-39)

Thus, when he discovers that it is his wife who is responsible for the wave a child-murders affecting the village of Sutton Chancellor and the surrounding areas, Philip 'gallantly' decides not to turn her over to the authorities, claiming that 'I loved her - I always loved her - no matter what she was - what she did - I wanted her safe' (347). Instead, Philip takes matters into his own hands, covering-up Julia's murders by installing her in a private institution and circulating the false knowledge that Julia died whilst on holiday abroad. With the invaluable assistance of his 'dear faithful Nellie' (348), Philip has for several decades been moving Julia around the country and changing her identity periodically to keep her safe. As such, a striking parallel exists between Philip's scheme and Edward Rochester's act of 'protecting', but simultaneously effacing public knowledge of his 'mad' first wife by confining her, with an attendant, to the attic of Thornfield Hall. However, because those dark deeds which have been repressed, so the internal logic of the Gothic novel decrees, must return to face the cold light of day, the schemes of both husbands ultimately unravel, leaving Philip Starke to have to make the painful admission, before the detective characters, that '[s]he was my wife' (346): a seemingly deliberate chiasmus of Edward Rochester's famous wedding-day declaration, in the attic of Thornfield, that '[t]hat is *my wife*' (354).

In her reading of *Rebecca* as a re-writing of *Jane Eyre*, Stoneman suggests that because the plot of du Maurier's novel 'so clearly echoes that of *Jane Eyre*, the

later novel seems to be looking back and asking what has changed'.⁷⁰ However, the same question could be directly applied to Christie's *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*. In so plainly re-appropriating the Jane-Edward-Bertha paradigm within a detective novel written and set over one hundred years after Brontë's original novel, what, if anything, has altered within this particular character setup? Clearly, not the actions of the morally ambiguous husband or the 'mad' wife, but certainly the actions of the dutiful, devoted, female companion figure. What Christie's novel, despite evident regard and admiration for both Charlotte Brontë's specific novel and Victorian fiction more broadly, seems to underscore through the character of Nellie Bligh is that there is a danger in an excessive or false nostalgia for images of Victorian femininity and of models of male-female relationships. Indeed, a less complicated reading of *Jane Eyre* tends to interpret Brontë's novel as suggesting the quiet dignity to be had for a woman in providing a man with unwavering emotional support, even in the face of poor judgement calls or aberrant behaviour: a reading that has been doubtless bolstered by Stevenson's 1944 gross misadaptation, which seems to have haunted cultural engagement with the novel ever since. In *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, this faithful and unwavering solidarity is certainly what Nellie Bligh chooses to provide for Sir Philip. This unflappable constancy, however, comes at a great cost. On the one hand it is made explicit that Nellie's constant pining for Philip is an embarrassing dissipation of much personal potential, leading Tuppence, employing imagery suggestive of a loss of human agency, to comment at the novel's close: 'Poor Nellie Bligh. [...] Doing all these things for him all those years - such a lot of wasted doglike devotion' (351). However, much more than a wasteful annexing of her own identity with his, I would advocate that it is the very nature of these 'things' she does for Philip - the

⁷⁰ Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, p. 99.

fact that *she* is the one who organised Julia Starke's initial removal and cover-up, and continues to organise subsequent relocations - that suggest that if Nellie is a kind of Jane Eyre figure, then she is very much a degenerated version of Brontë's heroine. As Maria Lamonaca comments, it is precisely Jane Eyre's 'insistence upon her spiritual and moral integrity [that] enables a stinging critique of society's expectations for women. Jane's religious convictions are presented as the primary force behind her resistance to conventional female subject-positions, whether as Rochester's mistress or as St. John's spiritual helpmate'.⁷¹ Nellie Bligh, despite her associations with helping to maintain the spiritual well-being of Sutton Chancellor - the fact that she is, in Julia's words 'very churchy, you know. Religious' (336) - ultimately lacks the unwaveringly Christian moral compass of her nineteenth-century counterpart, precisely because of her romantic devotion towards Philip. In fact, Nellie learns to become utterly complicit with immoral and illegal transactions, even entering into would-be homicidal criminality when she herself attempts to kill Tuppence with a metal grave vase when she believes the sleuth to be too near to discovering the truth. Thus, in underscoring the moral depravity implicated in trying to maintain this Victorian image of the long-suffering but ardently faithful female companion, Christie's novel seems to be suggesting that what was once possible with the *Jane Eyre* plotline has now deteriorated substantially: that the social and sexual roles needed for virtuous-to-the-last Jane Eyre to achieve her happy ending are no longer in place, and that this is, by and large, a positive move forwards. What is imperative to note is the intimation at the novel's close that, after all she has done, Nellie *still* does not attain the man she desires. By the late-1960s, for a woman, acting like 'Jane Eyre' has become a pathology, rather than something to be admired. Thus, in a period in which

⁷¹ Maria Lamonaca, 'Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*', *Studies in the Novel* 34, 3 (Fall 2002), p. 246.

nineteenth-century literature and culture was enjoying something of a rediscovery and re-appreciation, Christie's incorporation of a *Jane Eyre* story-arc in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* functions as something of an admonition: that these fanciful and escapist images of Victorian gender need to be approached with caution; that they can be enjoyed and appreciated without losing sight of how far things have 'progressed' in the interim.

Writing Her a Death: The Plight of the Creole Heiress in *Dead Man's Folly* (1956)

As the preceding discussion illustrates, *Jane Eyre* was still a fervent preoccupation for Christie even in the late years of her career. However, as important as *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* is both in terms of tracing the influence of the Brontës upon Christie's work, and in thinking through Christie's problematic relationship with nineteenth-century literary culture more generally, I would nevertheless suggest it is her 1956 novel *Dead Man's Folly* which most benefits from being read in tandem with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as it is within this novel that Christie incorporates elements of Brontë Gothic to produce the most startling effects. However, although the novel uses Brontë's earlier text greatly, I would not call Christie's novel a 're-writing' of *Jane Eyre*, at least not in the same sense that, as I explored in the previous chapter, *A Murder is Announced* (1950) suggests a 're-writing' of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), as it undoubtedly does not bear enough *structural* parallels for this to be considered the case. Instead, what I would propose is that Christie's novel is self-consciously in dialogue with Brontë's earlier text. The significance of 1956 as the year this novel's publication cannot be overlooked. This is, of course, the year of the Suez Crisis,

which occurred in the wake of the decision of Egypt's President Nasser to nationalise the Suez Canal Company in July 1956. The nationalisation of the Canal Company was a means of raising the funds to build a hydroelectric and irrigation dam at Aswan: a project which America had recently refused to provide financial aid for.⁷² With the Suez Canal providing a vital route to both India and Australia, and with the certainty of a hefty increase in passage rates under Egyptian administration, British opinion, as T.O. Lloyd recounts 'regarded Nasser's action as a blow that had to be parried'.⁷³ A conference of twenty-two nations with interests in the Suez took place in August, eighteen of whom agreed that the canal in fact ought to be *internationalised*. Egypt, unsurprisingly, declined such international intervention, and, as Lloyd suggests, contrary to popular consensus, 'proved quite capable of running the Canal' alone.⁷⁴ Since these attempts to thwart the nationalisation of the Suez proved unsuccessful, other, more underhand methods had to be employed. From August onwards, France began supplying Israel with military equipment, 'with at least the suggestion of co-operating against Nasser'.⁷⁵ For Britain, an outbreak of violence between Israel and Egypt would provide the perfect cover for entering into Egypt under the guise of separating the warring armies, when in fact, the actual plan - 'Operation Musketeer' - was to reclaim control of the Suez for themselves. In October, Israel did indeed attack Egypt and, as planned, the British and French militaries arrived to occupy the Canal. The operation, however, was not a success, and Britain's actions in particular were vehemently condemned by America's President Eisenhower. Ultimately, the United

⁷² T.O. Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: English History, 1906-1992* (1970; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 337.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Nations saw that a stop was put to 'Operation Musketeer' before it had barely begun, leaving Britain very red-faced indeed. As Lloyd summarises:

The French government admitted straight-forwardly that it had co-operated with Israel, but the British government stuck to its story that it had not even known that Israel was going to attack Egypt. This shows what was really to be condemned about the British government's attitude to the Suez: it knew that what it was in fact doing [...] could not be defended in public but it nevertheless went ahead. As nobody outside the country believed its story anyway, it gained the discredit of being dishonest[.]⁷⁶

For Britain, the reverberations of the Suez Crisis were as bad as they could possibly be: the country's reputation within the international community - especially with America and with now-former allies in the Middle East - was severely tarnished, and, in essence they were not allowed to leave the debacle with a shred of dignity intact: because of the bungled attempt to seize control of the canal, Nasser in fact had increased support in refusing 'to have anything to do with the compromise terms worked out in mid October for the canal, and kept control of it in Egyptian hands'.⁷⁷ Ultimately, what the Suez Crisis came to embody was the death of the British Empire: the recognition of Britain's now complete *lack* of imperial power, gravitas, or persuasion; its being made to look foolish and weak, militarily inept, and untrustworthy on an international stage. Thus, to return to *Dead Man's Folly*, the reason I have brought up this particular historical context - the key point, as it were - is precisely the question of what it might mean for Christie to write a novel self-consciously in dialogue with an earlier novel that has a hefty colonial streak running through it - such as Brontë's *Jane Eyre* - right at the very twilight of the empire that produced that particular facet of the former novel.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Dead Man's Folly is set in and around Nasse House, in the county of Devon: a riverside Georgian mansion complete with both an ornamental folly modelled on a Greek or Roman temple and a sinister boathouse. Nasse currently finds itself in the hands of self-styled squire, Sir George Stubbs, who purchased the house and informally took up the title 'Sir' despite the fact that he is categorically 'not [...] one of the landed gentry' (82), and his wife, Hattie, who is of a genuinely far wealthier background. The couple have invited the detective novelist Ariadne Oliver, Christie's 'delightful piece of amicable self-parody',⁷⁸ to design and oversee a murder-mystery contest as part of the village fête which they have been persuaded to host on their premises. Mrs Oliver in turn invites her friend Hercule Poirot to the event on the pretext of having the esteemed private detective award the prizes to the contest winners. However, her true motive for inviting Poirot down to Devon is her increasing sense of unease and the unshakable feeling that she is being manipulated into letting her fictional mystery game enable something untoward to transpire. Of course, her instincts turn out to be accurate when, firstly, Marlene Tucker, the 'nondescript, rather moronic' teenager hired to play the mystery's strangulated murder victim (135), is discovered to have actually been strangled in the gloomy boathouse, and, not long afterwards, it is discovered that Hattie Stubbs has disappeared without explanation.

Within Christie's novel, certain elements of Brontë's earlier text are replicated across multiple levels of the narrative: in both the 'real', primary story of Marlene Tucker's murder, its build up, and its aftermath, and the 'fictitious', secondary story that forms the basis of Ariadne's murder mystery game. In the secondary story, this replication of *Jane Eyre* occurs by way of references to a

⁷⁸ Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*, p. 195.

secreted wife who suddenly re-emerges. When discussing her idea for the competition with Poirot, Mrs Oliver explains that

[t]here's Peter Gaye who's a young Atom Scientist and he's suspected of being in the pay of the Communists, and he's married to this girl, Joan Blunt, and his first wife's dead, but she isn't, and she turns up again because she's a secret agent, or perhaps not, I mean she may really be a hiker. (55)

Of course, not only does 'Joan' sound exceedingly like 'Jane', but in deliberately choosing a monosyllabic surname for the wife of this nuclear physicist, 'Joan Blunt' and 'Jane Eyre' follow an identical syllabic patterning. However, it is very much through its primary story that *Dead Man's Folly* most strikingly achieves a dialogic relationship with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: a relationship that occurs principally through the character of Hattie Stubbs, who is, I would argue, unmistakably and very knowingly modelled on Brontë's character of Bertha Mason.

Christie, however, is far from the first writer to self-consciously model one of their own characters on Charlotte Brontë's Creole lunatic. Indeed, I would argue that Brontë's more or less staunchly disparaging treatment of Edward Rochester's secreted wife has elicited reprimand, via creative medium, from as early as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 Gothic story 'The Yellow Wallpaper', which, as I suggested in chapter one, is a text that would have been available for Christie, in her late career, owing to its first British publication in Philip van Doren Stern's 1948 anthology *The Midnight Reader*. Towards the climax of Gilman's story, the narrator, crawling around the perimeter of her attic-bedroom room before her spooked husband, makes the rather curious remark that 'I've got out at last [...] in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'⁷⁹ This seemingly incongruous mention of a woman called 'Jane' - who is

⁷⁹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), in *The Yellow Wallpaper and Selected Writings* (London: Virago, 2009), p. 23. All subsequent page references, given hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

referred to at no other point in the story - has sparked significant debate as to the reason for its existence, often figuring in these debates as the 'key' to how we should interpret Gilman's baffling tale. In the first instance, the appearance of the name Jane in this line has been understood simply as a typo, which somehow made it into publication, of the narrator's sister-in-law, Jennie. As Julie Bates Dock documents, in all but two of the seventeen anthologisations of Gilman's story between the 1930s and the mid-1970s, the dialogue was editorially 'corrected' for the line to read '... in spite of you and Jennie'.⁸⁰ However, taking into account that, although not so common nowadays, historically 'Jennie' has been diminutive of 'Jane' as readily as it has been a diminutive of 'Jennifer', it is quite possible that the subtle change was deliberate, the increased formality on the narrator's part connoting the heightened hostility held towards the woman who has been helping to take care of her. On the other hand, if we read Gilman's story as Gothic-horror, and thus dealing with genuine supernatural phenomena, then it is certainly possible that there has been a woman (or indeed, multiple women) trapped inside the attic wallpaper of this colonial mansion, and that it is one of *these* newly-freed women that makes the gloating exhortation to John, and not his wife, Jane. By contrast, William Veeder's psychoanalytic - mostly Kleinian - reading of the tale advocates precisely the opposite. He comes to the conclusion that it is the narrator we have known for the majority of the story who is, in fact, the 'Jane' in question (then proceeding to refer to the narrator as 'Jane' for the remainder of his essay). Veeder's argument is that, suffering from schizophrenia, which he identifies as the logical progression of the nervous hysteria with which she suffered as the story commenced, the narrator begins to refer to herself in the third-person: 'Gilman's

⁸⁰ Julie Bates Dock, *The Yellow Wall-paper' and the History of its Publication and Reception: A Critical Edition and Documentary Casebook* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 122-25. Of the two that leave the name as 'Jane', one provides a footnote to warn that Gilman may have intended the line to read 'in spite of you and Jennie'.

heroine enacts the schizophrenic abyss that threatens with maternity. [...] [T]he heroine can speak the name “Jane” only after she has ceased to be Jane.’⁸¹ However, in opposition to all those readings of Gilman’s story just recounted, my explanation for the otherwise incoherent reference to a woman called Jane would be to suggest that Gilman’s story ought to be viewed as conscious re-writing of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*: that Gilman’s unnamed narrator is in fact supposed to be Bertha Mason, who, in the dialogue in question, launches a verbal attack both on Edward Rochester’s act of incarcerating her, and on what, from her perspective, seems to be Jane Eyre’s complicity in this feat.⁸² In the first instance, it is important to note the significance of the fleeting, almost throwaway remark that the narrator makes when they tell us that, in order to rid themselves of the persistent, unbearable odour given off by the yellow paper, they ‘thought seriously of burning the house - to reach the smell’ (18). Of course, not only does this contemplation pointedly foreshadow Bertha’s actual act of setting fire to Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre*, but, moreover, it very much works to supply that which is missing in Brontë’s original novel: a *reason* for Bertha’s otherwise random acts of arson. Furthermore, although this certainly is not Veeder’s reading at all, ironically, his humorous foregrounding

⁸¹ William Veeder, ‘Who is Jane?: The Intricate Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’, *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory* 44, 3 (Autumn 1988), p. 65. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar advance a similar argument, suggesting that ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ comments on ‘the anxiety-inducing connections between what women writers tend to see as the parallel confinements in texts, houses, and maternal female bodies’, and that ‘[e]ventually it becomes obvious to both reader and narrator that the figure creeping through and behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and the narrator’s double. By the end of the story, moreover, the narrator has enabled this double to escape from her textual/architectural confinement’. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 89-91.

⁸² In a 1991 short article, Margaret Delashmit and Charles Long suggest ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ as a re-writing of *Jane Eyre*, teasing out parallels between the two works. However, their argument is that Gilman’s story re-appropriates the ‘Red Room’ scene of Brontë’s novel, which is categorically not the same as what I am suggesting. In their reading of the story, the narrator’s exhortation about having escaped despite the efforts of John and Jane is read as an ‘epiphan[ic]’ moment, in which, similar to Veeder’s reading of the text, referring to herself in the third-person. See, for example, Margaret Delashmit and Charles Long, ‘Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”’, *Explicator* 50, 1 (Fall 1991), pp. 32-33.

disjunction between what the narrator is telling us is going on, and what we might infer as actually transpiring, very much helps to situate Gilman's John as a latter-day Edward Rochester and the enigmatic 'Jane' as Jane Eyre. He asks his reader to

[c]onsider the basic situation: John and family come as summer vacationers to a town small enough to be called a "village" [...], John presumably taking over the practice of a colleague who is himself on holiday. How many cases so "serious" that John would have to attend overnight can befall a village in the summer? [...] Since there is a sufficient increase of "serious cases" that John must sleep away "very often" by mid summer, are we to infer that the community is withering way under his prophylactic touch?⁸³

Alas, I think not. Instead, what we as the reader glean from John's habitual absences is what the narrator deep down knows but cannot, at least at this particular juncture of the story, articulate: that John has grown weary of looking after his 'mad' wife and has instead found solace elsewhere - that is, in the company of a sensible and unassuming young governess.

However, whilst Gilman's story may be a candidate for one of the earliest examples of Bertha Mason's fictional re-appropriation, the most famous instance is of course to be found in Rhys' aforementioned *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which re-christens 'Betha Mason' as 'Antoinette Cosway' and depicts her tragic life from her unhappy and tormented childhood in Jamaica, to her ultimately fatal act of setting fire to Thornfield Hall. Between these two, however, lies Christie's *Dead Man's Folly*, and it is my contention that Christie's novel should be included in this tradition of works that have re-assimilated the character of Bertha Mason within a new fictional narrative. As such, my argument is that a whole decade prior to the publication of Rhys' novel, Christie had already taken up the challenge of (to use Rhys' much cited words) rescuing Brontë's 'poor ghost', and subsequently trying to

⁸³ Veeder, 'Who is Jane?', p. 59.

'write her a life'.⁸⁴ In doing just that, Christie deftly exploits the potential of *Jane Eyre* as a detective narrative. Brontë's novel, after all, is one which is punctuated by a series of (mostly nocturnal) mysteries in demand of explanation: who is wandering the corridors of Thornfield at night laughing manically? How do Edward's bed curtains catch fire? Why does Grace Poole receive a higher salary than the house's other servants for what seems like less work? Or in Jane's own words, 'how had [Richard Mason] become involved in this web of horror? and why had the Fury flown at him? What made him seek this quarter of the house at an untimely season, when he should have been asleep in his bed? [...] what brought him here? And why, now, was he so tame under the violence and treachery done to him? Why did he so quietly submit to the concealment Mr Rochester enforced? Why did Mr Rochester enforce this concealment?' (253).

The fact that Lady Stubbs' provenance directly mirrors that of Bertha's when it is revealed, that, although now the mistress of an English country house, she - as one character tells Hercule Poirot - 'comes from the West Indies. One of those islands with sugar and rum and all that. One of the old families there - a creole' (43). The reader's first encounter with Hattie occurs just before this conversation, and takes the form of the immensely and, by Christie's standards, unusually evocative portrait of the character given at the head of this chapter. To recap, our first meeting with Lady Stubbs is filtered through Hercule Poirot's perspective and occurs in the drawing room at Nasse House, where it is reported that

[s]he was wearing a big coolie-style hat of vivid magenta straw. Beneath it her face showed its pinky reflection on the dead-white surface of the skin. She was heavily made up in an exotic un-English style. Dead-white matt skin; vivid cyclamen lips, mascara applied lavishly to the eyes. Her hair

⁸⁴ Jean Rhys, 'The Art of Fiction LXIV (Interview with Elizabeth Vreeland)', *Paris Review* 76 (1979) p. 235.

showed beneath the hat, black and smooth, fitting like a velvet cap. There was a languorous un-English beauty about the face. She was a creature of the tropics, caught, as it were, by chance in an English drawing-room. (37)

The most striking feature of this description is the seemingly unrelenting overdetermination of Hattie Stubbs as 'un-English'. Indeed, I would argue that it is highly significant that her jarring incongruity with her English country house environment is given form not only in her overstated, gaudy items of clothing and garish, exaggerated makeup, but in a strange interplay of whiteness and non-whiteness. The racial ambiguity, strange as it may seem, is arguably connoted most directly through Christie's uneasy repetition of Hattie as being 'dead-white', as such an obvious and needlessly proximate repetition of the exact same wording has the paradoxical effect of somehow drawing attention to a perceived *absence* of whiteness. As a result, there evidently appears to be something 'wrong' with Hattie Stubbs' complexion, meaning for those who try to 'read' her physiognomy, 'white' (as a colour) somehow refuses to translate to 'Caucasian' (as a racial category), the way that one might expect it to. Indeed, at other points within the novel, the villagers of Nascombe are shown as often speculating on the subject of Hattie's exact racial category. For example, Robert Hoskins, the village's local police constable, reports to Inspector Bland, the official detective leading the investigation into Marlene Tucker's murder, that George Stubbs' wife is a '[f]oreigner of some sort. Coloured, some say, but I don't think so myself' (108). This, I would argue, strongly parallels the racial uncertainty that plagues Brontë's depiction of Bertha Mason: the fact that, when Jane first encounters Bertha, in the scene in which Jane's wedding veil is destroyed by a mysterious intruder, she is described using terms that seems to strongly suggest Bertha as being black. Jane describes her nocturnal intruder to Edward, commenting on the subject of the intruder's face that she 'never saw a face like it! It was a *discoloured* face - it was a

savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful *blackened inflation* of the lineaments!' (342, emphasis mine). Further underscoring both her physical darkness and African heritage implicated in the shape and size of Bertha's lips, Jane's reply to Edward's chide that spectral entities tend to be pale, is that her ghoulish visitor 'was purple: the lips were swelled and dark' (342). However, at a later juncture of the novel, after the exposition of Edward's attempted bigamy, Brontë appears to change track and, as a consequence, Bertha seems to get whiter and whiter to the point in which she becomes overtly elided with Blanche Ingram, whose complexion is described as being that of a Spaniard (207). Thus, although Blanche is described in terms that mark her out as being un-English in her physical countenance, these are still terms that suggest her as being distinctly European in looks. Consequently, Brontë's deliberate coalescing of these two characters, which occurs when Edward recounts to Jane first meeting Bertha in Jamaica, appears to efface Bertha's prior blackness creating an immense sense of racial ambiguity: an ambiguity that is often ascribed to a lack of conviction on Brontë's part to stick with her original vision for the character, but which could equally be an attempt at narrative realism in the sense that the reader's encounter with Bertha comes through an unstable and arguably neurotic narrator. Indeed, it is imperative to remember, of course, that Jane's first face-to-face with Bertha, when the latter seems at her *most* noticeably black, occurs in the middle of the night, almost in a liminal state between dream and wakefulness.

The inability to unproblematically place Hattie Stubbs within a traditional taxonomy of race not only suggests a dialogue between Christie's novel and Brontë's original text, but it also marks Christie's novel out as noticeably different to Gilman's incorporation of Bertha Mason in 'The Yellow Wallpaper', where the question of race is not particularly pushed to the forefront. However, the evident

dialogue between Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Christie's *Dead Man's Folly* is moreover manifest in the unremitting preoccupation with the issue of Hattie Stubbs' apparent 'madness'. Poirot finds his first meeting with Lady Stubbs to be a startling experience, and it is made explicit that her eyes frighten Poirot, with their 'childlike, almost vacant, stare' (37). Throughout their exchange, Hattie is shown to be affectionately playing around with her large emerald ring, the climax of which sees her leaning in close to Poirot and telling him, 'in a confidential whisper', that '[i]t's winking at me' (38). The need to express such sentiment in a hush-hush manner, coupled with her uncontrolled burst of laughter following her disclosure, works to undercut the possibility of Hattie talking in metaphor, thereby suggesting that she actually believes the ring to be an animate object, capable of winking at her. Such bizarre behaviour would seem to signal an apparent mental disturbance and, indeed, Hattie Stubbs has a vast plethora of terms (most of them characteristic of a mid-twentieth century English lexicon) that refer to someone with some sort of mental impairment thrown at her: 'feeble minded' (49), 'wanting up here' (69), 'mentally deficient' (78), 'half-witted' (78), 'a little simple' (132), '[s]ubnormal' (132), and 'barmy' (145). With these descriptors in mind, and coupled with her inability to defend herself following her unexplained disappearance from Nasse House on the day of the fête, it is perhaps unsurprising that she, for most of the latter half of the novel, is earnestly considered to be the most likely candidate for Marlene Tucker's murderer. Exhibiting disdain for popular forms of mid-century psychological discourse, Inspector Bland rebuffs Robert Hoskins after his speculation as to Lady Stubbs' I.Q. level, telling him not to 'bring out these new-fangled terms like a parrot. I don't care whether she has got a high I.Q. or a low I.Q. All I care about is, is she the sort of woman who'd think it

funny, or desirable, or necessary, to put a cord round a girl's neck and strangle her?' (145).

The difficult question that has perplexed readers and critics of *Jane Eyre*, and perhaps even more so of Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (where the issue is foregrounded to an even greater degree), is whether women such as Bertha Mason and Gilman's narrator were mentally imbalanced before their husbands forcibly relegated them to the marginal enclaves of the domestic interior, or is it the experience of incarceration itself which has driven these women to a state of insanity. With this in mind, I would argue that, in *Dead Man's Folly*, Christie is not just unproblematically 'trying out' Bertha Mason's 'madness' upon the mannequin of her own female protagonist, but rather that Christie utilises Hattie Stubbs to build upon the discussions springboarded by Brontë's novel regarding the appropriation of 'madness' as a tool against female agency and power. Indeed, one way in which it is possible to think about the complexities surrounding Christie's depictions of Hattie's 'madness' is to consider whether Bertha Mason is truly the foremost literary model on which Christie fashions her character (as those resemblances discussed thus far would appear to suggest), or whether the issue is more complicated. Thus, whilst Christie's novel certainly exhibits a direct dialogical engagement with *Jane Eyre*, on the other hand, I would also make the case that this dialogue is noticeably bifurcated. As such, I would propose that the second, more indirect strand of inheritance is one that takes a detour from the time of leaving Brontë's original novel to arrival at Christie's text, via Gibbons' comic *Cold Comfort Farm*. Gibbons' novel depicts the transformation of a pathologically insular and highly dysfunctional farming family who are, despite their resistance, brought into a fashionable and glittering twentieth-century style of modernity by their meddling cousin from London: Flora Poste. In terms of Christie's possible

engagement with *Cold Comfort Farm*, I would point out that, throughout *Dead Man's Folly*, Poirot is subjected to having the same cryptic message repeatedly communicated to him. The first instance of this occurs when the detective meets the ferryman Old Merdel (significantly, Marlene Tucker's grandfather), who lets the detective know that there will '[a]lways be Folliats at Nasse' (70), which later transmutes to become '[t]here have always been Folliats at Nasse House' (193), and 'there would always be Folliats at Nasse House' (282). It is difficult not to see this as a deliberate take on the famous and similarly enigmatic refrain that punctuates Gibbons' novel: in which it is repeatedly stated that '[t]here have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort' (and similar variations throughout).⁸⁵ However, in Gibbons' novel, because any logical reason as to why both Flora Poste and the reader must constantly be reminded that the Starkadder family, in one form or another, have inhabited their Sussex farmhouse for many generations never comes to any kind of fruition, the use of this refrain within Gibbons' narrative should, I would argue, be read as a comic send-up of what Dani Cavallaro refers to as the 'intimate interrelation of dynastic and architectural themes' indicative of much Gothic fiction.⁸⁶ In Christie's novel, by contrast, considering that the current owners of Nasse House are named Sir and Lady Stubbs, the intimation that the property will always be inhabited by the Folliat family is one of the foremost clues in solving the murder that takes place on the property on the day of the fête. Thus, in her use of the cryptic utterance in *Dead Man's Folly*, I would suggest that what Christie is doing is injecting a great deal of seriousness back into the Gothic prospect of subject and space becoming inextricably bound-up together in a psychologically detrimental way.

⁸⁵ Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932; London: Penguin, 2006), p. 171.

⁸⁶ Dani Cavallaro, *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 148.

However, whilst this most certainly illuminates Christie's familiarity with Gibbons' rural parody, it does not quite explain why this familiarity with *Cold Comfort Farm* is important specifically with regard to the treatment of Hattie Stubbs in *Dead Man's Folly*. The key point, I would suggest, is that, around the time of its original publication, *Cold Comfort Farm* was usually perceived as being a parody of the 'loam and lovechild' genre of twentieth-century rural novel that were the trademarks of Gibbons' and Christie's contemporaries, Sheila Kaye-Smith, John Cowper Powys and, in particular, Mary Webb.⁸⁷ Subsequently, however, critics have begun to recognise that the novel is heavily indebted to a more recognisably nineteenth-century tradition of writing about the countryside. For this reason, Raymond Williams argues that *Cold Comfort Farm* 'really ought to be read side-by-side with, say, *Wuthering Heights*, *Adam Bede*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*'.⁸⁸ However, the anomalous absence from Williams' litany is *Jane Eyre*, the influence of which is highly visible within Gibbons' novel. As Nicola Humble puts it, 'Cold Comfort Farm, as Flora first encounters it is a Brontë-world, a giddy amalgam of Brontë pastiches'.⁸⁹ The *Jane Eyre* intertext in *Cold Comfort Farm* thus appears most perceptible in that chief among these pastiches is the Starkadders' firmly attic-bound, 'mad' matriarch, Aunt Ada Doom, whom I would posit as another twentieth-

⁸⁷ Indeed, in 1916, the *Evening Standard* published Mary Webb's debut novel, *The Golden Arrow*, in serial form from early June to mid-August. One of the assignments handed to Gibbons, who worked as a journalist for the newspaper, was to write the précis of the novel for those readers only just joining the serialisation. Gibbons is reported to have held the novel in low regard, finding it utterly 'ridiculous'. Thus, as Reggie Oliver writes in his biography of Gibbons, she 'began to wonder how the grim, outlandish characters of Webb's suffocating rural milieu might fare if confronted by a brisk, smart, sensible young lady from London. This was the germ of *Cold Comfort Farm*'. Reggie Oliver, *Out of the Woodshed: The Life of Stella Gibbons* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 66.

⁸⁸ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), p. 253.

⁸⁹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, p. 180.

century adaptation of Brontë's Bertha Mason.⁹⁰ However, in direct contrast to Brontë's original novel, in which Edward's mentally unbalanced first wife is an unambiguously disempowered figure of subjugation and patriarchal imprisonment, the autocratic Aunt Ada is shown as putting on a continual *performance* of 'madness' as a means of controlling her family's mobility and behaviour, and is thus in a position of supreme power in that, with additional overtones of Dickens' Miss Havisham, she 'holds the whole family in her tyrannical emotional grip'.⁹¹ Indeed, when Aunt Ada is brooding alone in her attic bedroom, the reader, via Gibbons' use of second-person narration, learns that:

You told them you were mad. You had been mad since you saw something nasty in the woodshed, years and years ago. If any of them went away, to any other part of the country, you would go much madder. Any attempt made by any of them to get away from the farm made one of your attacks of madness come on. It was unfortunate in some ways but useful in others... The woodshed incident had twisted something in your child-brain, seventy years ago.⁹²

Thus, what I am ultimately suggesting is that Christie's Hattie Stubbs is, in a sense, a cross-breed between Brontë's original Bertha Mason and Gibbons' Aunt Ada Doom. As such, it is not surprising that, in spite of all the derogatory descriptions which lead us to believe otherwise, the notion that Hattie Stubbs may be as sane as any other character in the novel - cunning and manipulative, even - is kept as a viable narrative possibility for much of *Dead Man's Folly*. Christie, in fact, appears to play something of the literary critic when Poirot thinks to himself that, much like Bertha Mason before her, I would add, '[p]eople seemed to hold diametrically

⁹⁰ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik implicitly suggest as much when they argue that Flora's relatives 'exhibit all the characteristics of obsession and dark dealing that you would expect from a Gothic tale. There is a "madwoman in the attic", old Mrs Starkadder, known as Aunt Ada Doom'. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 102.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*, p. 115.

opposite ideas concerning [Hattie Stubbs]' (78). Certainly, a reading of Hattie's character as a perfectly sane woman who, reminiscent of Aunt Ada Doom, shrewdly constructs her own 'madness' to suit her own purposes is the view espoused by George Stubbs' fiercely loyal live-in secretary, Amanda Brewis, who retorts to Poirot that '[i]t suits Lady Stubbs now and then to play the helpless nitwit if she doesn't want to do anything. It takes her husband in [...] but it doesn't take *me* in!' (148). Such a negative and cynical view of her employer's wife is perhaps unsurprising when considered that the 'spare efficient-looking' secretary (36), is, I would argue, a modern day counterpart to the 'poor, obscure, plain' governess, Jane Eyre (305). This correspondence is rendered exceptionally unambiguous when it is revealed, with all the conventional trappings and language pertaining to the 'romance plot' (such as the reversal of communicative credence between spoken word and elliptical silence), that Amanda, much like Nellie Bligh in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, is in love with her employer:

'Sly,' continued Miss Brewis. 'Deceitful! Always playing the simpleton - especially when people were here. [...] That woman never understood him. She just regards him as a kind of machine for tipping out fur coats and jewels and expensive clothes. If he were married to someone who really appreciated his abilities...'

Poirot looked at her with real compassion. Miss Brewis was in love with her employer. She gave him a faithful, loyal and passionate devotion of which he was probably unaware and in which he would certainly not be interested. To Sir George, Amanda Brewis was an efficient machine who took the drudgery of daily life off his shoulders. (184-86)

Amanda's own personal reasons belying her incredulity towards Hattie Stubbs' ostensive 'madness' aside, this idea - pervading the novel at large - of mental disturbance as a performance rather than as the result of an instance of genuine trauma is particularly significant. As previously mentioned, the crippling psychosis of Gibbons' matriarch, before Flora's actions at the end of the novel reveal it to be both lacking in integrity and utterly self-styled, is suggested to be the result of

Ada's traumatic girlhood encounter with 'something nasty in the woodshed'. Similarly, and in a move that significantly pre-dates Jean Rhys' own (arguably, rather more thorough) exploration of the same idea in *Wide Sargasso Sea* - in which the traumatic reverberations in the British West Indies of the 1833 Emancipation Act are articulated most directly when Antoinette's family home is burnt down, and members of her family are consequently killed, by protesting former slaves - the 'madness' of Hattie Stubbs is also intimated to be the result of an undisclosed instance of childhood trauma. For example, on the morning of the fête, Hattie becomes distressed on receipt of a letter from her second cousin, Etienne de Sousa, outlining his plan to call on Nasse House in the near future. After prompts from those gathered around the breakfast table for a disclosure as to why the prospect of a visit from her cousin distresses her, Hattie's evasive response is that '[i]t does not matter. It was a long time ago. I was a little girl' (77). Moreover, the idea that not only is Hattie traumatised, but that, specifically, she suffers from a markedly colonial form of trauma, is brought even closer to the surface when it is suggested by her husband that the core of Hattie's mental imbalance is her inability to successfully work through a 'queer childhood memory' of 'trouble with the natives - or something like that' (151). Thus, regardless of the characteristic economy of this patently ephemeral reference,⁹³ Christie's decision to endow Hattie with an unhappy childhood manifestly marked by colonial disturbance and a traumatic experience of the process of abolition, nevertheless actively prevents Christie's Creole heiress from becoming, to adopt Rhys' term for what she saw as Charlotte

⁹³ For more on what I have here termed Christie's stylistic 'economy', see, Nicholas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns, 'Agatha Christie: Modern and Modernist', in Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (eds), *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1990), pp. 120-34 (esp. pp. 123-24).

Brontë's uninformed characterisation of Bertha Mason, just another "'paper tiger" lunatic' without reason and without history.⁹⁴

However, having outlined the importance of colonial trauma in relation to female madness within the novel, it must also be stated that the ultimate resolution of the *Jane Eyre* theme in *Dead Man's Folly* works to cement, but also to complicate these ideas, and comes about in rather a strange way. Indeed, the reason why Old Merdel is so insistent that the Folliat family will always be in residence at Nasse House (the dangerous knowledge that leads to his own murder during the latter stages of the novel) is because 'Sir George Stubbs' is not just fictitious in terms of social rank indicated by the title 'Sir', but it is actually a fictitious persona altogether. Thus, the person masquerading as the current lord of the manor is one James Folliat, who, bearing in mind the post-war context of the novel, has committed the *most* detestable crime (arguably, even more despicable than the murders he commits) in that he is a war deserter. This act of treachery has been covered up by his mother, Amy Folliat, who became Hattie's guardian after she was orphaned, and whom Poirot confronts in the final chapter of the novel:

Do not imagine I have no sympathy for you, Madame. Life has been hard for you, I know. You can have had no real illusions about your younger son, but he was your son, and you loved him. You did all you could to give him a new life. You had charge of a young girl, a subnormal but very rich girl. [...] On her marriage, she assumed control of her own fortune. She was, as you have told me, docile, affectionate, suggestible. Everything her husband asked her to sign, she signed. Securities were probably changed and re-sold many times, but in the end the desired financial result was reached. Sir George Stubbs, the new personality assumed by your son, became a rich man and his wife became a pauper. (280-81)

Thus, not only is Hattie Stubbs clearly marked out as a modern-day Bertha Mason, but there is a concomitant positioning of James Folliat as an updated edition of

⁹⁴ Jean Rhys, 'Letter to Francis Wyndham, 14 April 1964', in Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (eds), *Jean Rhys Letters, 1931-1966* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1984), p. 262.

Edward Rochester in that his exploitation of his Creole wife arises solely from a position of personal economic detriment. In Brontë's novel, I would argue that the reader is subtly directed to sympathise with Edward, who is ultimately also a victim of the means in which familial property and finance is propagated within a staunchly patriarchal set-up: the fact that, as the second son, he stands not to inherit his family estate and fortune and thus, in this sense, has very little choice but to marry (and exploit) the Creole heiress as his father and elder brother wish. Additionally, Edward claims that the Masons deliberately concealed Bertha's mental instability from the Rochesters, and thus the argument could be made that he married Bertha under entirely false pretences. In contrast, however, in *Dead Man's Folly*, not only are the dire straits in which James Folliat finds himself prior to his marriage to Hattie self-inflicted by his cowardice and national disloyalty, but, moreover, as the bizarre truth belying Marlene Tucker's murder illuminates, he is a wicked man of voracious greed, and the reader is not given a space in which to find any sort of reconciliation with his actions. Reversing the *Jane Eyre* paradigm so that act of bigamy occurs *before*, rather than *after* the male protagonist's wedding to the Creole heiress, the truth that James Folliat concealed from his mother when she organised his marriage to the young Hattie, was that he was already married to an Italian woman with a criminal background:

[James] accepted his marriage to Hattie as a means to wealth, but in his own mind he knew from the beginning what he intended to do [...] *murder*. Hattie had no relations, few friends. The servants hardly saw her that first evening, *and the woman they saw the next morning was not Hattie*, but his Italian wife made up as Hattie and behaving roughly as much as Hattie behaved. The false Hattie would have lived out her life as the real Hattie though doubtless her mental powers would have improved owing to what would vaguely be called "the new treatment". (282-83)

However, the only threats to the longevity of James' scheme are, firstly, Marlene Tucker, who was widely known to be the only person to take seriously the ravings

of her grandfather - 'of course he's batty, my granddad is, so no one listens to what he says' (86) - and secondly the looming arrival of Etienne de Sousa who would, of course, recognise an impostor masquerading as his cousin. Thus, by strangling Marlene and having the woman known as 'Hattie Stubbs' disappear, it will be widely accepted that 'mad' Hattie, for some unknown reason, decided to kill the teenager and ran away to avoid the consequences of her actions, leaving the deserted 'Sir George' eventually free to re-marry anyone of his choosing, including a certain Italian lady who would doubtless find her way to Nasse House at some point in the near future. For this reason, Susan Rowland sees Christie's novel as utilising 'Gothic forms' in order 'to re-imagine the boundaries between the mad Creole wife and gentle Jane by portraying [Hattie] as either victim or killer'.⁹⁵ Thus, ultimately, I would suggest that the patriarchal and colonial victimisation of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is increased substantially in Christie's novel in light of the fact that the enforced incarceration we find in Brontë's novel is escalated, for the sake of obtaining her fortune, to a wedding-night murder and subsequent undignified burial in the woods. Thus, the racial and mental ambiguities that we find in Brontë's original novel here intensify to become acts of artifice: the exotic and enigmatic woman with the unreadable skin complexion turns out to be neither black-Caribbean nor white-Caribbean, but a mainland European, and, in the same vein, she is neither stark-raving mad, nor slightly mentally deficient, but a conniving and experienced criminal.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is now firmly ensconced in academic discourse as a proto-feminist novel: that Jane's anger provoked by social injustice (particularly, though not exclusively, in her childhood years), her violence of feeling, and the structural logic which dictates that she cannot marry Edward until,

⁹⁵ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, p. 120.

first, they stand on a more equal socioeconomic footing and, secondly, he has been suitably 'punished' for his treatment of Bertha, has meant that the novel is seen as posing some quite substantial resistance towards normative models of docile Victorian womanhood. Writing in the mid-1980s, this is precisely the kind of reading of the novel that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously, and very angrily, takes such issue with, because celebrating the achievements of the novel's titular heroine 'spells complicity with the novel's imperialist agenda' (though of course, this is certainly contestable).⁹⁶ By logical extension, in 'rescuing' Brontë's marginalised 'madwoman' and correctively affording her the opportunity to give her account of the story,⁹⁷ *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been thus seen as a 'properly' feminist novel, in its implicit criticising, not only the mechanisms of patriarchy and empire that have played their part in driving a young Creole heiress entirely out of her mind, but in also reprimanding a 'less enlightened' female author of the previous century, whose work (we are encouraged to believe) is, at worst, utterly complicit with the racial and gender biases of their period, or, at best, does not do quite *enough* to challenge disparaging constructions of femininity that is racially 'other'. Indeed, commenting on the final section of Rhys' novel (the section ostensibly set in England), Spivak states that

[i]n this fictive England, [Antoinette] must play out her role, act out the transformation of her "self" into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. At least

⁹⁶ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 29. Spivak takes particular issue with readings of the novel such as Gilbert and Gubar's famous reading of the novel, which tend to interpret the character of Bertha as the manifestation of Jane's own suppressed violence and anger - Jane's 'own secret self' - rather than as a fully functioning and historically viable character within her own right. See, Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 348, 361-62.

⁹⁷ This is, of course, metaphorically speaking. In the literal sense, Antoinette shares narration of the novel with her husband.

Rhys sees to it that woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister's consolidation.⁹⁸

There is a certain politics - an unambiguously and avowedly postcolonial politics - which, through readings such as Spivak's, have become attached to Rhys' novel. In terms of ensuring the author's formidable and lasting reputation in the literary academy, it is somewhat fortunate that Rhys' late novel is published - and piques scholarly interest - precisely at a moment where the underlying Eurocentrism, or 'unconscious imperialism',⁹⁹ of mainstream twentieth-century feminism (and, significantly, feminist literary criticism) is being called to account. In short, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* fits very neatly into a Spivakian understanding of postcolonial-feminism, and this Spivakian model - based on an ignorance/knowledge dialectic, the 'epistemic violence of imperialism', as she calls it in the quotation above - was, for a significant while, very much the dominant model. The story, as twentieth-century feminism once told it, is that there was *Jane Eyre*, and then there was *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which subsequently altered our understanding of Charlotte Brontë's novel both considerably, making us - as critics and as readers - see things in Brontë's story which cannot then be unseen. However, what I hope to have done in this chapter is to provide an alternative account: to produce a different understanding of the compelling fascination held by Edward Rochester's mad first-wife for British and American women writers from the 1840s through to the 1950s and 1960s - an account which is one of periodicity, rather than one of who has accurate knowledge and who does not. What I hope to have demonstrated is that, not only does Christie's novel significantly predate Rhys' dialogue with *Jane Eyre* in

⁹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (1985), in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ed.), *'Race,' Writing and Difference* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 270.

⁹⁹ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 29.

Wide Sargasso Sea - that Christie has also seen in *Jane Eyre* those things that irritated Rhys, and chosen to creatively do something about it - but that her intertextual incorporation of elements of Brontë Gothic in her 'middlebrow' *Dead Man's Folly* might be argued as more radical, more feminist, and more *avant garde* than the use of intertextuality in Rhys' purportedly 'modernist' text.

In making this argument, I am not downplaying the wonderful poetics of Rhys' novel: *Wide Sargasso Sea* might indeed be considered incomparable in terms of the mesmeric quality of its prose. However, Rhys' novel simply is not without comparison in terms of its (postcolonial) relationship with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: it has a distinct forebear in Christie's *Dead Man's Folly*, which, in turn, is part of a larger history of attempts at re-visioning the Bertha Mason character that takes us through writers including Stella Gibbons and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Thus, contrary to the cultural imaging of Christie as avowedly conservative in outlook, both in terms to attitudes towards race and gender identity, in *Dead Man's Folly*, in a way perhaps less poetic than Rhys, but certainly all the more shocking, the author *unrelentingly* draws attention to the plight of the Creole heiress, condemning the discrimination, exploitation, and extreme cruelty that Hattie Stubbs is forced to endure throughout her brief life in England. In writing her a death other than one caused by her own arson attack on Thornfield Hall, Christie paradoxically achieves something of Rhys' ambition to 'write a life' for the mistreated Creole of Brontë's original novel. It is here too that Christie's depiction of the architectural folly - from which the title *Dead Man's Folly* is derived - comes into significance. The folly functions as a metonym for both the acts of colonial exploitation performed by the Folliat family (on the level of narrative), and, given the time of its publication, the current state of British imperialism (on a much grander level). From the outset of the novel, Sir George's indulgent outdoor structure is positioned as a markedly

Gothic location in terms of the sense of the 'uncanny' provoked by its incongruous placement deep within the woods on the estate, and the sensations of claustrophobia aroused by the disempowering lack of vistas when one stands within the folly. Indeed, when Poirot scopes out this location for clues, he experiences the dislocating Gothic experience that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests is apt to occur when 'the eye is baffled in its attempt to rationalize [...] near and middle distance and move through it to the relatively bright [...] [space] glimpsed in the far distance':¹⁰⁰

Through the trees he could catch faint glimmers of the river and of the wooded banks on the opposite side. [...] Gaps could be cut in the trees, of course, but even then there would be no proper view. Whereas [...] on the grassy bank near the house a folly could have been erected with a delightful vista down the river to Helmmouth (195-96).

However, more than just a general sense of menace created by its bizarre placement and state of decay, the true Gothicism of the lopsided folly resides in the psychogeographic loss of distinction between subject and environment: the idea that, as the mirroring of names makes explicit, whatever is 'wrong' with the *folly*, is also what is 'wrong' with the *folliats*; that, as the architect Michael Weyman puts it early in the novel, giving Sir George's half-ruined indulgence a disdainful kick, 'If the foundations are rotten - everything's rotten' (30). Indeed, it is in this sense that Christie most adroitly puts into effect the 'presentism' implicated in Charlotte Brontë's version of Gothic, staunchly situating the (in this case upper-) middle-class home of the present day as the principal site of brutality, exploitation, and fear. Thus, the tableaux we are presented with at the close of the novel - of Hattie Stubbs' exploited and decayed body buried beneath Nasse House's ornamental Greco-Roman folly - is absolutely a symbolic one. This is particularly so in light of

¹⁰⁰ Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, p. 28.

the resonances expressed by the building's neo-classical architecture: not only of a sense of advancement and civilisation that is specifically European, but also, more cynically, of slave-owning cultures. Metaphorically co-opting Britain's now-dying imperial project into the empires of the ancient world, what is made plain by the evocative staging of Hattie's body is that middle-class domestic and cultural life functions very much on the back of acts of colonial exploitation and bloodshed. However, with the intervention of Hercule Poirot and the arrest of Hattie's killer and his female accomplice (anticipated by, rather than depicted within the narrative), it is also suggested that this is a parasitic procedure that cannot possibly continue, thus concretising ideas about Britain's now tarnished dignity, and the loss of the country's imperial grasp over much of the globe.

It might therefore be suggested that *Dead Man's Folly*, provides one of the most premier example of why Alison Light's characterisation of Christie as a 'modernist [...] iconoclast' is in need of reconsideration.¹⁰¹ The problem is that Light's understanding of 'modernism' is a traditional and very specific understanding, in which the terms' meaning is implicit and unproblematically elided with 'anti-Victorianism'.¹⁰² However, it is my intention that both this specific chapter - with its focus of Christie's re-processings of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* - and, to some degree, this thesis in its entirety, has made Christie's perceived 'anti-Victorianism' difficult to now confidently accept. It is undeniable that Christie's fiction absolutely and somewhat relentlessly shatters the fantasy of safe, blissful bourgeois domesticity - 'the Victorian image of home, sweet home' that Light identifies.¹⁰³ In fact, within Christie's fiction, home (whether we interpret this to

¹⁰¹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 61.

¹⁰² This traditional understanding of 'modernism' is discussed in Taylor, 'Introduction', *The Victorians Since 1901*, p. 4.

¹⁰³ Light, *Forever England*, p. 61.

mean an individual household or a close-knit village community) is very often the deadliest place a person can be, and one's own family more treacherous than the strangest of strangers. However, this iconoclasm towards middle-class domesticity is articulated not through a rejection of the nineteenth-century past, but by actively engaging with, and to some degree continuing the work of those Victorian Gothicists whose fictions have already the status of home and family as threateningly ambivalent. Christie's relationship with nineteenth-century literary culture that comes through her reworking of the Gothic is thus far more nuanced and problematic than the outright rejection of the Victorian that Light's reading of her work suggests. In fact, this relationship consists much more of the twin-poles of simultaneous attraction and repulsion - concomitant desire and distance - that characterises the work of many 'middlebrow' women novelists of the years leading up to, and following on from, the Second World War.

Appendix

Agatha Christie

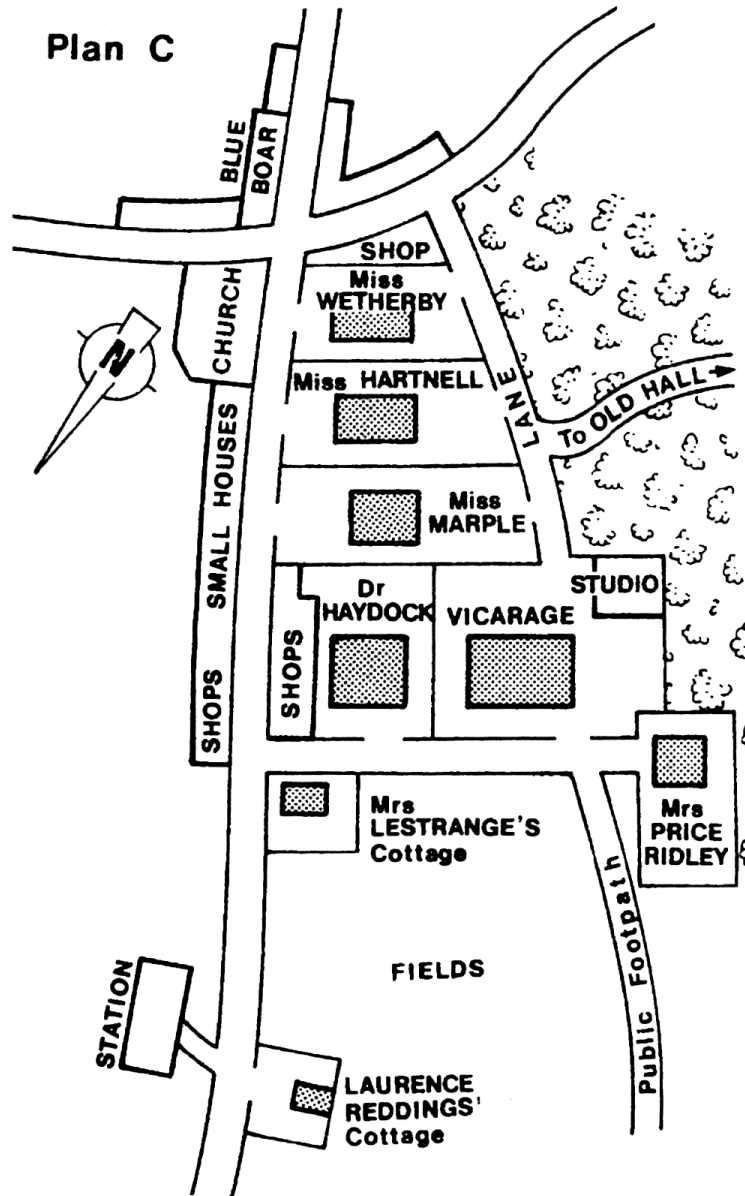


Figure 1: Plan of St Mary Mead, Downshire. Image reproduced from Agatha Christie, *The Murder in the Vicarage* (1930; London: Harper 2002), p. 102.



Figure 2: The Opening of the Brontë Parsonage Museum, Haworth, 4 August 1928.
Image Courtesy of the Brontë Society.

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