

Through the Magnifying Glass:  
Exploring British Society in the Golden Age Detective Fiction of Agatha Christie and Ngaio  
Marsh

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## Abstract

This thesis uses the popular genre of detective fiction to explore the context of the heyday of the crime genre: the Golden Age. This sub-genre, best known for producing Agatha Christie, spanned the complicated history of Britain involving the Great Depression, two World Wars and huge changes to class structure. It is for these reasons that the Golden Age is such a pivotal period for changing notions of British identity. Through the very British Christie and the less well known New Zealander, Ngaio Marsh, expressions of national identity are explored as well as how the colonial fits in. Focusing heavily on the authors and their own personal experiences and views, this thesis is divided into four chapters to further break down how the Golden Age period affected its citizens and why this detective fiction held such a wide appeal. Chapter one explores gender roles and how Golden Age authors both conformed to them through their choice in detectives, yet also how they naturally resisted some through their own public image. Chapter two then examines the issue of class and how Golden Age detective fiction portrayed the changes. Contrary to popular criticism, Christie and Marsh were surprisingly progressive and forward thinking on this subject. Chapter three considers how both authors employed setting to emphasise these changes. Both Christie and Marsh used foreign settings to highlight British society and its flaws, and Marsh used her New Zealand settings to consider the relationship between Britain and her home. The final chapter will consider why Golden Age detective fiction was so popular: what was the appeal? For a period of violence and uncertainty, why were people drawn to crime fiction involving sometimes gruesome death? The appeal lay, and still does, in the puzzle: the game that diverted readers from their own problems. Golden Age fiction may have been highly formulaic and predictable, but it was also highly artificial and self-referential. This was a clever and diverting fiction that has been constantly underestimated by critics and deserves further study.

## Introduction

“For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol [...] detective stories have nothing to do with works of art.” (Auden, *The Guilty Vicarage*, 15)

“If literature, any literature, helps us decode our environment as we wish to relate to it, it is valuable.” (Winks, “Introduction” *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 4)

The value of popular fiction is extremely contentious when it comes to the whodunit. Yet, whatever their other artistic merits may be, detective novels can offer the literary historian a useful portrayal of contemporary culture, articulating prevailing views of contentious social issues and depicting the details of daily domestic life. Particularly in periods of immense social and cultural upheaval, such details can be tremendously valuable as measures of change. The protagonist detectives function in such analyses as a lens through which information about society is recorded, filtered and judged. The position of detective in society works particularly well in this role. The detective represents authority and enforces the legal, social and moral codes of the day, but also has a closer relationship with crime and human perversity than other citizens. It is a usefully ambiguous position, which allows the detective to get closer to undesirable aspects of society without becoming tainted himself, at least in the case of Golden Age detective fiction which spanned the period between 1920 and 1950 in England. This ambiguity is also self-reflective and brings into focus the changing social position, occupation, gender, appearance, and methods of the detective that surface in the period's texts.

Golden Age detective fiction did not emerge in isolation; it borrowed heavily from past fiction, most notably from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes is indisputably the archetype of modern detective fiction. It is necessary to examine him as such in order to consider how the Golden Age writers borrowed and deviated from the type. Arthur Conan Doyle's character is a self-absorbed and self-destructive detective whose engagement with society is so far beyond social boundaries that he essentially represents a challenge to the established patriarchal order. Such a protagonist evidences the value of the Watson figure, copied by the Golden Age authors, who is conservative in his or her views and is able to

point out when the detective deviates from accepted social behaviour. The relationship between the two acts as a cultural modifier with Watson reminding the reader of how they are supposed to behave. Such deviations are commonly a result of the detective's eccentricities which both endear him to the reader and create a distance, elevating his position socially and intellectually.

The Golden Age of detective fiction succeeded Holmes in Britain in the interwar years of the twentieth century, with a more general productive span from 1920 to 1950. This period is traditionally associated with four names, the "Queens of Crime": Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Dorothy Sayers, and in many respects the odd one out, New Zealander Ngaio Marsh. These four women developed the now classic "cosy" murder: a subset of the genre that uses a small group of people in a cosy or familiar setting and avoids gruesome details and violence. It is Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh who will be the focus of this thesis and although they came from different backgrounds, there are a number of interesting parallels and contrasts between their novels. They are, in my opinion, the most interesting of the four "queens"; Christie and Marsh wrote the most novels, had the longest careers and expanded and developed the genre in more innovative ways.

Agatha Christie is the most famous Golden Age author and arguably the most famous detective fiction author in history. Agatha Christie is, and has been for the past eighty or so years, a household name: it is virtually synonymous with the Golden Age "cosy" murder mystery. It is for this reason that any legitimate study of Golden Age detective fiction must, and frequently does, include her. Unfortunately, however, critics rarely do her justice; as with Conan Doyle, Christie's contribution to the conventions of detective fiction makes her *appear* conventional and the more interesting aspects of her novels are ignored by sweeping generalisations. Christie's two best known detectives were surprisingly novel when they were produced: a quirky foreigner (created during a heightened state of xenophobia in post-War Britain), Hercule Poirot, and a nosy spinster (the only female detective from the four "queens"), Miss Jane Marple. Between the two, Christie revealed a number of aspects of herself and the world in which she was living that deviated from the straight London crime of late nineteenth and early twentieth century detective fiction. During the Golden Age, Christie focused primarily on her male detective, Hercule Poirot and this study will focus on the novels starring him.

Poirot is the most famous of Christie's detectives and a transparent reinvention of the Sherlock Holmes archetype. As a foreigner his views and habits are more contentious than those of polite British society and therefore Christie created the character of Captain Arthur Hastings to be the very British but dim-witted Watson figure. Hastings appears in most of the Poirot novels between 1920 and 1933, but his limitations as a character drove Christie to write him out of all but two of Poirot's cases after 1933. Christie amended the Watson formula by instead using a series of characters, each involved in the case, to narrate and feature as the central consciousness of the novel.

The position of Poirot as a private investigator, coupled with the professional status of his Watson figures complicates his relationship with the law and society in a similar way to Holmes; Poirot often liaises with the local police and Scotland Yard but he always outwits them. He is both a figure of law and subversive in his undermining of official police authority and yet one of the most famous and loved fictional detectives. The contradictions within Poirot's character will be examined with particular emphasis on what he reveals about "Englishness" during the period.

Poirot's foreignness is particularly useful when considering issues of class. Contrary to popular belief, Christie was not concerned with enforcing traditional English values. She was interested in capturing a new breed of society that emerged after World War I: the middlebrow. In her detective fiction, Christie deals mostly with a burgeoning middle class who became increasingly mobile in both class boundaries and travel. This reflects on the changes to the old social system of Britain in the early twentieth century virtually as they occur. Now a symbol of traditional English life, at the time Christie was far more interested in considering the "new" than defending or preserving the old. Especially in her Poirot novels, Christie examined the changing shape of British society in a local and global context through a mixture of the foreign and familiar.

It is from a very different social perspective that Ngaio Marsh began writing detective stories. Her status as a New Zealand colonial complicates both her detective fiction and her critical reception as a novelist; despite being the second most prolific of the four "queens", Marsh is sometimes left out of scholarship on the genre completely. Marsh began writing later in life than Christie, when she was in her thirties and had been living in England for four

years. *A Man Lay Dead* was published in 1932 and marked the beginning of a career that was divided between directing in the theatre and writing detective fiction until her death in 1982.

Unlike Christie, Marsh created only one fictional detective for her novels, Detective Inspector (and later Superintendent) Roderick Alleyn of Scotland Yard. Alleyn is the only professional police protagonist created by the four “queens”. Despite Marsh’s colonial roots, Alleyn is British born and bred: the second son of an aristocratic family. An officer of Alleyn’s class was unusual at the time but owing to the work of Sir Robert Peel (and potentially the normalising effect of literature) it became more common as the century progressed.

In spite of his unusual position as gentleman and policeman and in direct contrast to Poirot, Alleyn is essentially a model British citizen. Alleyn embodies the laws and ethics of society and it is perhaps for this reason that his Watson companion, reporter Nigel Bathgate, is deserted so quickly. In Alleyn, Marsh internalised the Watson figure and thus Bathgate’s companionship offers little to the development of Alleyn’s character. Instead Alleyn’s subordinate both professionally and socially, Inspector Edward Fox is “promoted” to Nigel’s position. This had the unique effect of creating class negotiations between the two men that were well ahead of their time. This, claims Kathryn Slate McDorman, is the reason that Alleyn’s popularity endured for so long: he was able to develop and grow with the pace of social change in Britain. What is interesting about comparing these two detectives is where Christie subverts the authority of the police, Marsh endorses it, yet both authors were hugely popular and appealed to the same wide audience base.

Although hugely popular in Britain and America, in New Zealand, where Marsh lived and wrote for over half of her career, she was considered an embarrassment to New Zealand Literature. While her work in the theatre was greatly admired and respected, Marsh’s career as an author was rarely mentioned. Her position in New Zealand literary history today has changed very little since then. In a country invested in promoting its literary past and present, Ngaio Marsh remains an unfamiliar name to most New Zealanders. In spite of this, her detective fiction is of immense value to the study of the genre and contemporary society.

What Marsh brings to the genre is the conflicted opinions of an outsider who had been raised on the ideology of Britain’s class values in a vastly different context than where they

were intended. Marsh is a colonial New Zealand/ British hybrid; while still heavily invested in what was occurring, Marsh offers a fresh and insightful perspective to the period and to the study of the genre.

This thesis will examine Christie's novels featuring Hercule Poirot, and all of Marsh's novels, written between 1932 and 1952. The status of New Zealand as a colony and its relationship with England is fascinating especially during the war years and is reflected in Marsh's fiction. When compared to the works of Agatha Christie, this complicated relationship is revealed as well as Christie's less traditional approach to British society. In this study I propose to investigate and prove the strong colonial influence on the works of Ngaio Marsh. I will use this evidence to examine the broader shifts happening in terms of British and New Zealand cultural identity; both authors represent different aspects of British identity, while Marsh also engages with colonial New Zealand identity.

These concepts will be examined and compared between Marsh and Christie's work through the treatment of gender in terms of the masculinity of detectives Hercule Poirot and Roderick Alleyn and their relationship with their female creators, the treatment of class, setting and the artificial and self-referential nature of the genre. Both women created fiction that explored the crisis of identity of the British, and in Marsh's case New Zealanders also, in the face of war and vast social change. As Golden Age authors, their fiction was popular because when faced with instability and crisis, people turned to crime fiction. As noted by Celia Fremlin, the most popular fiction in the London 'raid' libraries during the Blitz was detective fiction (118).

I will begin this investigation by looking at gender representation in Golden Age detective fiction in terms of both the masculinity of the male detectives, their position in society and how this is affected by having female creators. Chapter one examines the history of the detective and the archetypal Sherlock Holmes model before considering how society interprets such figures for their own ideals. I will discuss the context in which Poirot and Alleyn emerged and how it affected their masculine portrayal and reception. Both detectives have effeminate traits which undermine the very concept of what it is to be masculine and express in part their feminine origin. The very idea of a female creating a male detective of superior intellect was subversive in a society that subordinated women. I will examine the close relationship Christie and Marsh had with their detectives in terms of these men being

extensions of them; a form of self-expression that could not occur with female detectives. These characters reveal a much closer and more personal interaction between the authors and their work than most scholarship suggests.

The more intimate link between author and detective fiction suggests that both public and personal opinion can be teased out of these novels. The concept and nature of class is one such aspect of this fiction that replicates the changes occurring in British society but also reflects a more personal perspective. This reveals an area where the divide between Christie and Marsh is underscored and their identities as British and colonial emerge more strongly. Christie's enthusiasm for the newly evolving middlebrow society and Marsh's conservative reverence for class structure contrast their portrayal of class changes. Furthermore, they suggest different solutions to negotiate these changes; ultimately Christie focused importance on the development of the middle class and Marsh produced a working relationship between upper and lower class men that was mutually beneficial.

The societal and cultural differences between Christie and Marsh are even more apparent when the settings of the novels are examined. In chapter three I will discuss the use of landscape and atmosphere: these settings reflect the individual styles of Christie and Marsh while revealing more of the national consciousness discussed in chapter two. Although both authors use the traditional "cosy" setting of the country house or English village murder, especially in the height of the Golden Age period under examination, Marsh and Christie also dealt with foreign settings. Inspired by her own travel experiences, Christie set a large number of her novels abroad and many others at various English holiday locations. Marsh, who wrote the majority of her Britain-based novels of this period in Christchurch, set three exclusively in New Zealand. By situating these novels outside of England, or at least the domestic English experience, British society can be examined far more critically and clearly in a more objective context. Both women used this contrast of people and place to explore concepts of civilisation and British national identity, with Marsh adding the extra complication of colonial identity. In this context concepts of national and social identity are examined in an unusually critical way, especially given the nature of the texts as popular detective fiction.

In the fourth and final chapter this "nature" of the genre will be examined in greater detail. The conscious artificial composition of this fiction will be examined as well as its

literary quality and popular appeal. In a period marked by violence and social changes, detective fiction not only reflected the contemporary climate, but offered its readers a comfort not usually associated with the murder mystery genre. The security this genre offered its readers comes, I believe, from its artificiality: while it acknowledges its place in a contemporary context, it presents itself firmly as fiction. Marsh and Christie were both prolific writers in this period and their novels are comforting in their predictable formula and recurring characters; the infallibility of their detectives to solve these cases ensures an ending of clarity, security and optimism while offering a distraction from the real world. This artificial quality of Golden Age detective fiction also offered opportunity for creative theatricality and trickery that kept the reader entertained in spite of formula and comfort. These aspects attest to the value of the genre both to its readership then and to scholars now; Golden Age detective fiction is still an inspiration source for many modern novels and television shows.

## Chapter One: Gender and the Detective

Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direst cruelty. (*Macbeth*, 1.5.39-42)

Lady Macbeth is a fascinating figure to consider where women writers of detective fiction are concerned; in order to persuade her husband to murder King Duncan, Lady Macbeth discards her “femininity” and by instigating such violence, she emasculates Macbeth in the process. Lady Macbeth, although created by a male, represents how women writers can subjugate their male creations by controlling them, and thus how the power is transferred to the women through her writing. In the context of the twentieth century, the Golden Age period marks an ebb in feminist activity between the two peaks of first wave and second wave feminism, what Hilary Hinds calls the “inter-feminist low-point” (300).<sup>1</sup> This period saw a societal shift in which many smaller independent families emerged and the emphasis on domesticity was heightened. If not progressive, it was nevertheless an interesting time for femininity because the masculine ideal, and with it normative masculinity, was changing. In the wake of World War I where the masculine hero model had been over-played by the State, Golden Age detectives like Hercule Poirot and Roderick Alleyn represent part of the anti-hero backlash that followed. The Golden Age represents a feminisation of the detective fiction genre both in terms of the hero and the fact that it was dominated by female authors.

With the changes to normative masculinity, femininity was changing too: from the Victorian era of repression to the new middlebrow sphere of more (domestic) independence and responsibility, even the men were being feminised. This is reflected in the literature and this chapter will address the following question: were Christie and Marsh actively engaged in subverting normative masculinity as well as oppressive stereotypes of femininity? Or is this merely a result of their personal struggles, which happen to represent a larger problem? These questions and the issues they raise are explored through Allen and Poirot as characters that

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<sup>1</sup> While this is far too complex an issue to put in such plain terms, the Golden Age period unquestionably falls in the gap between what are considered the two famous feminist movements.

express their author's own identity issues and experiences, but also through other characters: particularly in the clearly autobiographical figures of Ariadne Oliver and Agatha Troy. If we are to accept that this emphasis on domestic experience was what allowed female authors to become more popular, then it follows that these novels will have strong autobiographical ties to their creator both personally, culturally and nationally.

Firstly, it is necessary to define the parameters of this chapter in terms of what is meant by "gender." The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term gender as "specific to, biased towards, or belonging to the sexes," considered either culturally or biologically (OED Online). In this context it is the cultural aspect I am interested in: the link between biological sex (male and female) and the culturally imposed behavioral traits imposed by society (masculine and feminine).<sup>2</sup>

Masculinity thus signifies the cultural behaviour and practices dictated to the male sex by society. It has generally been seen as a positive and admired state which all men should aspire to.<sup>3</sup> In Western culture there is a general association of masculinity with strength, rationality, dominance and bravery, traits which usually emphasise the needs of the state over those of the individual.<sup>4</sup> Effeminacy, which will be discussed later in the chapter in terms of creating an anti-hero, is essentially feminine traits in a male: "unmanly, enervated, feeble"; "unbecomingly delicate or over-refined" (OED Online).

Femininity, with the added complication of being traditionally subordinate, is thus dependent upon the definition of masculinity so it can provide the opposite. General feminine traits that have been used in the past mirror the masculine traits: weak, irrational or emotional, and submissive. Although there is a huge span of time between Lady Macbeth's discarded "femininity" and the Golden Age femininity of focus in this thesis, there are some aspects which appear universal and timeless. Virginia Woolf raises this issue when she writes of the feminine ideal, "The Angel of the House" and Woolf's own struggles to silence 'her':

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<sup>2</sup> The society I am considering these gendered traits in the context of is the Golden Age period. I acknowledge that gender roles are far more complicated than what I can discuss in a paragraph, and that they are not fixed.

<sup>3</sup> I use the past-tense here because I believe in modern society, while many masculine ideals still exist and are encouraged, there is a lot more open criticism about the negative impacts of such culture.

<sup>4</sup> These are only a few and very generalised traits. They do not by any means describe what men are actually like, only how popular culture and society have suggested they should be. In the context of World War I, bravery, patriotism and pride would have been amongst the qualities emphasised in a good man.

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. (151)

Whatever her changing role in society or class, I would argue that the feminine female is, and has always been, seen in terms of a mother and a wife.

Lastly, feminism in the context of this thesis refers to the advocacy of women's rights. While in complete appreciation of the complexity and size of such a topic including the different goals of feminism depending on time and place, it is used here only to set up the context of the period. There are two significant periods of feminist activity and Golden Age detective fiction bridges them.

### **The Societal Significance of the Detective Figure**

The detective figure has been a very potent one in both the media and the fictional realm of literature. In terms of detective fiction, “policing”, writes Stephen Knight, is “a projection of values that are socially credible”, values he writes “that are projected beyond the capacity of everyday reality” (141). Crime was not only considered by many to be a preoccupation of nineteenth century literature, some consider the genre to have been a “covert tool” of the “‘new’ policing techniques developed by the British state to enforce norms of law and order on society” (Mukherjee, 4). This fascination with crime and detective fiction only grew stronger from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The police, as Maureen Reddy writes, “are one of the official mechanisms of authority, and perhaps the most visible representatives of social order” (70).

Marsh's successful protagonist, Detective Inspector Roderick Alleyn of Scotland Yard, embodies this concept, representing social order through the medium of popular culture

in fiction. Alleyn frequently refers to the fact that he himself is under the control of the state and that: “The police force is merely a machine” (*Death in Ecstasy*, 35). In *The Nursing Home Murder*, Alleyn explains further:

“As the police officer in charge of this case I am simply a wheel in the machine. I must complete my revolutions [...] neither you nor any other lay person, however much involved, has the power to stop the Machine of Justice or indeed influence it in any way whatever.” (617)

Marsh is therefore in a strong position to influence her readers’ perceptions of the real Scotland Yard through Alleyn. Marsh humorously points this out in *Death in Ecstasy* when Alleyn is told by an American character:

“You certainly are the goods. I guess you’ve got British Manufacture stamped some place where it won’t wear off. All this quiet deprecation – it’s direct from a sure-fire British best-seller. I can’t hardly believe it’s true.” (50)

Detective fiction acts as a kind of social regulator for its readers, but it also regulates societal expectations when it comes to police.

The effect fiction can have on the perception of reality in this case cannot be underestimated and the fact that detective fiction and the position of detective were created and developed in tandem only strengthens this point. Contextually, the figure of the official policeman emerged in 1829 with the Metropolitan Police Act which established civilian police in London, and in 1842 a detective department was formed (Kestner, *Sherlock’s Sisters*, 3). British crime fiction followed a similar trajectory. As noted by Ian Ousby, “the history of the English police force accounts for many significant developments in the portrayal of the detective” (ix). Charles Dickens created one of the first literary detectives in *Bleak House* in 1853 with Inspector Bucket. His successor, Wilkie Collins, is contended to be the father of modern detective fiction with some arguing that his 1868 novel *The Moonstone* is the first detective novel ever written.<sup>5</sup> While it is far too subjective to pinpoint the origins

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<sup>5</sup> There are actually far better *female* contenders for this title who will be discussed later in the chapter.

of detective fiction with certainty,<sup>6</sup> the most influential fictional detective for the Golden Age authors and beyond is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Doyle captured a burgeoning market of detective fiction readers and the genre has only gained in popularity since.

Unlike Roderick Alleyn of Scotland Yard, Sherlock Holmes was not a professional police detective. Furthermore, the police were not the most influential fictional characters when it came to shaping public perception, nor were they the most common; the private sleuth detective figure was a far more dominant and popular figure in most of the detective fiction of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Moreover, the professional police that featured in "sleuth" stories were usually incompetent and did little to inspire confidence in the real English police. Nevertheless, the detective did not need to officially represent the State in order to enforce a moral code upon its readers. There are thus two separate "types" of detectives: the professional policeman and the private sleuth. The policeman represents the laws of the State; the private detective, while still enforcing the same moral code usually undermines the professional police who represent them. Due to the private sleuth and his "brilliance" being dependent upon showing-up the police detective, the figure of the police detective persisted as a literary figure, however derogatory his portrayal. The history of these two types is therefore inextricably linked. Type

The profile of the policeman in literature was raised slightly during the Golden Age, most significantly with Alleyn, the only professional policeman created amongst the four "queens" of crime. While both Allingham and Sayers continued tradition with the private sleuth type, Marsh, and to a lesser extent Christie, created professionally trained detectives. Hercule Poirot, while a private investigator in Christie's novels, is a retired Belgian police officer.

This shift in trend, as well as Marsh and Christie's portrayal is indicative of the social revolution that occurred in the interwar years in Britain. Kathryn Slate McDorman writes in her biography of Ngaio Marsh that:

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<sup>6</sup> The origins of the detective narrative have been traced as far back as *Don Quixote* and even the Biblical story of Cain and Abel.

Although English people still liked to believe that their government, their empire, and their police were run by dedicated amateurs, the truth was that the twentieth century was becoming the century of the competent professional.  
(*Ngaio Marsh*, 139)

This, however, did not stop the media criticism of police corruption and ineptitude: a variant of which is alive and healthy today in most newspapers across the world. Despite this, Marsh created something virtually unprecedented at the time: a professional policeman who was well liked, thoroughly competent and hugely popular. When society is portrayed through the context of police detection, it tends to lend itself more authority. It acts as a kind of social tool, as all literature does, that shapes its readers' views.

### **History of Detective Fiction: Female Detectives**

It is important to establish the powerful position of the detective figure in society in order to explain how potent a female detective would be in this context. The female detective in literature emerged almost concurrently with the male, yet by the Golden Age female detectives had virtually disappeared. The Golden Age denotes not merely a cessation of feminist progress, it was actually retrogressive. Pre-Golden Age detective fiction, in fact, had quite a large number of female writers with female lead detectives. This no doubt reflects the change in attitude towards what women were capable of that reflected emergent feminist policies. First-wave feminism is best known for achieving voting rights for women but it arose (in part) out of the fact that women were being employed in industry: typewriting, at the telephone exchange and department stores (Kestner, *The Edwardian Detective*, 10). By the beginning of World War I “more than half a million women were at work in shops and offices” and “a quarter of a million women were employed in teaching and nursing” (Kestner, *The Edwardian Detective*, 10). The appearance of female detectives in English fiction thus has strong ties to first-wave feminism, a result Kestner explains “of a complex intersection of legal, social, moral, institutional and gendered practices” (*Sherlock's Sisters*, 1).

The three frontrunners for first female detective fiction writer are Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mary Fortune and Seeley Regester who, regardless of their gender, were pioneers of the genre. Lucy Sussex and Elizabeth Gibson write in their bibliography of Mary Fortune

that in “the mid-1860s” the genre that these women “helped define was so new it was nameless”: the term “detective fiction”, they explain, was “not coined until 1886” (2). They were also extremely progressive from a feminist perspective; Loveday Brooke, “lady detective” was a successful fictional character, Elizabeth Miller writes, “almost twenty-five years before women could actually work in the Metropolitan London Police Force” (52). Miller notes that after 1883 there were a few women employed in places such as female prisons, “but there were no women police officers until 1915” (52). The female detectives of the pre-Golden Age era were both private and official and some, like Loveday Brooke and Lady Molly (of Scotland Yard), existed “contrary to all historical actuality during this era” (Kestner, *Sherlock’s Sisters*, 1).

The potency of having such female figures is important to consider in order to properly highlight the significance of their absence from the Golden Age. Joseph Kestner suggests that to properly evaluate the achievement of the female detective narrative there are two useful theoretical concepts:

[F]irst, the idea of the gaze and female surveillance; and second, the narratological strategies adopted in these texts. [...] The specific nature of the female detective narrative is to address the practice of the woman having the power of the gaze as she executes her professional – private or official – responsibility of surveillance. (*Sherlock’s Sisters*, 17)

In other words, the female detective (and by association the women reader) is empowered to reassess her culture, to “survey” it from the point of view of the female. Kestner separates the way this is emphasised into the narrative and the more theoretical notion of perspective. This can be developed further by attributing the narrative “concept” to the female author, and the gaze or surveillance to the female detective; the power of these female detective narratives comes from the combination of both.

On a more practical level, one that is difficult to comprehend in the twenty-first century, women reading these novels were better able to realise that in reality women could be detectives too: there was no special male detecting faculty that they were born without. This is a crucial point because, as the detective is a powerful literary figure in culture, he embodies the power of the law and of society. A woman in this (fictional) role would have

been empowering for readers. As Kestner argues, “the female detective’s surveillance becomes an act of challenging patriarchy and its hierarchy of genders”, she not only “grasps the empowering gaze from the male but may, even more subversively, implode all gendered hierarchies” (*Sherlock’s Sisters*, 18-19). Although there is an inversion of power occurring, it is still a form of surveillance and thus social and legal control. Gender hierarchies may be briefly inverted but any shock factor will likely just reinforce the “natural” order of things. The female detective’s emergence, so close to the first-wave of feminism, essentially stood for female appropriation of professional power; whether it achieved it is debatable.

The sole example of a female detective narrative in the Golden Age comes from Agatha Christie’s elderly spinster Miss Jane Marple.<sup>7</sup> Miss Marple is an interesting character because she recalls the pre-Golden Age era of surveillance, yet she is not even a proper detective. Surveillance, coupled with her knowledge of humanity, is how she solves crimes: Marple watches people and reads them against what she knows about human nature. What is missing from her character, as a female detective figure and a detective in general, is active detection. Miss Marple gives guidance to police officers and amateurs and occasionally takes an active role but she is mostly a passive character and highly self depreciating. She does little to challenge gender boundaries and instead revels in her Victorian upbringing; Miss Marple represents contemporary conservatism under the guise of Victorian sensibilities. Although a popular character, it is, as Alison Light points out, “the Poirot years rather than the Miss Marple which help us to best to understand the relationship between the feminisation of the genre, modern recasting of ideas about the sexes and the politics of the form” (*Forever England*, 65). Miss Marple does not represent a progressive feminine position of power, nor does she encourage it for her readers.

### **The Masculine Heritage of the Detective**

Throughout its literary history, despite the impressive presence of female detectives, detective fiction has been an important part of masculine heritage. In terms of gender the detective has traditionally represented the ultimate figure of masculinity, upholder of the patriarchy, and enforcer and keeper of order. In literature the detective combines the power of

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<sup>7</sup> Obviously there may be others from writers other than the four “queens” that I am excluding here. Furthermore there is one other possible female detective. Christie wrote five novels (the first being *The Secret Adversary* of 1922) featuring a husband and wife team: Tommy and Tuppence. Tuppence is, however, more of a sidekick and thus does not qualify as a female detective in my opinion.

the law with the social authority of the masculine patriarch. Especially given the historically represented submissive status of women, the male detective can be seen as representative of society and culture. The detective is therefore the ultimate hero figure of society: a crime-fighting masculine role model, who hunts down the ‘evil’ transgressors of society and punishes them, restoring society to its natural order. During the Edwardian era, the focus on masculinity in detective fiction reflected a crucial part of its culture (Kestner, *The Edwardian Detective*, 19).

Anxiety for the future of the male population was prevalent and is highlighted by author Robert Baden-Powell in his 1908 text, *Scouting for Boys*, which became one of the most popular and widely published books of the twentieth century (Boehmer, xi). In it Baden-Powell promoted such masculine traits as chivalry, resourcefulness, bravery, discipline, patriotism, loyalty and endurance (3). Baden-Powell’s concern, writes Grace Moore, “reflects the solicitude for the moral and physical health that gained impetus from 1870 onwards. Young men had to be strong and healthy in order to serve their empire”: it was imperative that the British race not be undermined (148-149). Interestingly, it was Sherlock Holmes whom Baden-Powell chose to exemplify as the ideal British man.

Holmes is certainly the most obvious example of a famous and hugely popular British literary detective. Holmes first emerged in 1887, died in 1893, was resurrected by sheer public outrage in 1901 and appeared for the last time in 1927. Like the preceding detective figures such as Edgar Allan Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin, Holmes was an amateur and did little to promote confidence in the police force. Perhaps more so than Doyle intended, Holmes became a champion of British masculinity; at a time where there was a growing concern for the future of British manhood, particularly in the wake of World War I casualties, the figure of Holmes was evoked as a role model for young men.

Baden-Powell’s appropriation of Holmes is an ideal example of the influential power of popular literary figures and furthermore, the ability of popular culture to impose an identity on to a figure. Joseph Kestner explains that Baden-Powell believed that “the detective narrative, specifically about Sherlock Holmes, might be used as a guide during this period of transition” (*The Edwardian Detective*, 4). Kestner states:

*Scouting for Boys* codified a movement which was to influence young men and their parents throughout the world. [...] *Scouting for Boys* was one of the most significant texts in imprinting manliness on generations of young men in the early twentieth century. (*The Edwardian Detective*, 4)

Baden-Powell often resorted, Kestner writes, “to literary texts to illustrate a mode of cultural practice” by “imprinting behaviours, attitudes and concepts on its readers” (*The Edwardian Detective*, 4). Conan Doyle’s tales offered an opportunity to create a “masculine script” that conformed to the gendered masculine qualities of “science, reason, system and principle” (Kestner, *The Edwardian Detective*, 17). As Kestner comments, “the Edwardian era was ‘a society and a London made for men’” and the Sherlock Holmes fiction reflected this (*The Edwardian Detective*, 18). When seriously considered, Sherlock Holmes is hardly masculine-hero material; he is unpredictable, theatrical, emotionally unstable, obsessive and Bohemian in his lifestyle. Nevertheless he was selectively appropriated for the purposes of social education.

### **National Identity**

Arguably this connection between masculinity and the detective can be seen as fulfilling a larger purpose of keeping British society in order; it distils British values and identity issues down to core concepts that can be applied to popular fiction. Not only do male detectives of popular fiction represent masculinity, they embody national identity. Detective fiction therefore acts, as Kestner argues, as a kind of “cultural signifier” (*The Edwardian Detective*, 6). At a time of “heightened political tension, global warfare and imperial decline” during the Golden Age there was, Patrick Bixby writes, “a remarkable cultural boom” (259). Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot and Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn fronted a new wave of role-models, of representatives of the British nation which implied a preference for peace and stability that was sorely missed.

Surprisingly, given the cultural climate of Britain in the Golden Age, the fact that Christie’s Hercule Poirot was Belgian did not count against him; it seems his lack of British masculinity made him so little a threat to the English xenophobe that he could even be liked for it. As Colin Watson explains, Poirot “was not a character calculated to win the confidence

and affection of the British literary public of the 1920s” (*Snobbery with Violence*, 166); yet that is exactly what he did do. Poirot’s popularity certainly took Christie by surprise; she did not realise when she created him just how popular her novels would be and how long she would be writing about the elderly Poirot for: “[w]hat a mistake I made there. The result is that my fictional detective must really be well over a hundred by now” (*An Autobiography*, 256). Undoubtedly Poirot’s foreignness had its advantages: as Keating points out, “he could listen at keyholes and read other people’s letters, things which no decent Englishman has ever been known to do” (209).<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Poirot’s foreignness is shallow and expresses more about the British than Belgians; Poirot is essentially an Englishman in disguise. Colin Watson is correct when he asserts that Poirot “personified English ideas about foreignness and was therefore immediately familiar to readers and acceptable by them” (*Snobbery with Violence*, 167). Watson explains:

The truth is that Poirot was neither French nor Belgian. He was as English a creation as one of the new ‘Moorish’ picture palaces, or boarding-house curry, or comic yodelers. Personifying native conceptions of continentals, he was immediately familiar to readers and therefore acceptable. (“The Message of Mayhem Parva”, 99)

Poirot therefore acted as a tool through which the English and Englishness could be examined, ridiculed and critiqued from the comfort of a character frequently condescended by them. In Christie’s *Appointment with Death*, Colonel Carbury observes aloud to Poirot:

“Pretty confident, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I know my own ability,” murmured Poirot.

Rendered uncomfortable by this un-British attitude, Colonel Carbury looked away and fingered his untidy moustache. (83)

Poirot, in a sense, cannot escape his English heritage because he was created by an Englishwoman. The closest he is able to get to foreignness is an Englishman with a shrewd perspective of his own race. This is not to say that it is not possible for an author to escape

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see *Dumb Witness* pp. 123-125, where Poirot listens at the door, much to Watson’s horror.

their own experiences, but Christie did not. Poirot is indeed English and as discussed above his actions, whether acceptable or reprehensible to British society, demonstrated the new post-war British national identity without government propaganda.

When examined alongside the only outwardly foreign Poirot, Alleyn's identity as a British aristocrat is brought into question. If Marsh is judged by the same standard as Christie, then it would suggest Alleyn is in fact a colonial New Zealander. When Alleyn is taken out of England in his visits to New Zealand he fulfills the same function for New Zealanders as Poirot does for the English: he effectively holds up a mirror to their society as a fake foreigner and allows them to both laugh at and examine their shortcomings. It would be straightforward to assume then, that Alleyn is a New Zealander. In truth however, Ngaio Marsh's cultural identity was a great deal more complicated than Christie's and Alleyn reflects this. Back in Britain Alleyn does the same for the English people; in England he has the perspective of both the Englishman and the foreigner. This highlights the split nature of Ngaio Marsh's life, and in turn the duality of Alleyn's character. Alleyn, like Marsh is thus a colonial New Zealander first and foremost, but an Englishman second.

In the opening section of *Surfeit of Lampreys*, set in New Zealand, New Zealander Roberta and Englishman Henry discuss the landscape as not being quite as pleasant as "home" (England):

"If I was there I expect I'd feel the same about New Zealand."

"I expect so. But you're only one removed from England, and we're not New Zealand at all." (11)

In some ways, all New Zealanders suffered from a slight dual identity because England was still considered by many to be their true "home", even if they had never been there. For Marsh, who spent her adult life divided between both, her concept of home was even more complicated. In England, Alleyn drew attention to the structure of British society by his complicated existence as a gentleman policeman, never quite fitting either role (of gentleman or policeman) comfortably.

In New Zealand Alleyn reveals the idiosyncrasies of the colonial in a way only a colonial could; his dilemma mirrors the colonial preoccupation with never being quite right

or good enough. Diction and language seem to have been Marsh's pet issues with the colonial New Zealander, and in *Vintage Murder* Alleyn has the confusing task of deciphering a language that only appears to be the same as his:

“Then he wasn't kidding he was crook?”

“He *may* be a crook, but why should he –”

“No, no. I mean, he wasn't making out he *felt* crook.”

...

“What, oh what,” wondered Alleyn, “*is* the fine shade of meaning attached to this word ‘crook’?” (309)

The New Zealand accent is also explicitly made fun of in *Colour Scheme* through Simon Claire, who Marsh makes a point of noting, has been through the New Zealand public school system. This reveals an aspect of Marsh's colonial duality in which she demonstrates both amusement and defensiveness: her need to correct and distance herself from the New Zealand accent suggests a need to prove to her readers that she is not one of them.

One question then that naturally arises from the colonial aspect of Alleyn's nature is whether he is a post-colonial detective. Ed Christian writes in the introduction to his book *The Post-Colonial Detective* that they are “always indigenous to or settlers in the countries where they work” (2). Alleyn's existence is complicated by the fact that he is both indigenous to England and a settler from New Zealand; furthermore, while Britain has a complicated relationship with colonial culture, it is not strictly a colony. Alleyn is therefore, according to the definition above, excluded from such classification. Yet he is most definitely a post-colonial detective; Christian's definition is merely too simplistic to acknowledge just how complicated colonial identity can be. Christian explains that:

[T]heir creators' interest usually lies in an exploration of how these detectives' approaches to criminal investigation are influenced by their cultural attitudes. Thus, books featuring post-colonial detectives are interesting not only because of their plots and the quality of their writing but because of their revelations of diverse cultures. (2)

Alleyn existed not to reveal diverse cultures to his readers, but to reveal the depth in complexity of the relationship between a country and its colony. Marsh did this both overtly when she took Alleyn to New Zealand or included New Zealand characters in her books, and in more subtle ways using the duality that already existed in Alleyn. Ronald R. Thomas writes that “the criminal figure inside the gates is rather like the colonial figure outside them. Both require a distinctively English response to properly advance research in the field and to ensure the safety and integrity of the English body politic at the same time” (“The Fingerprint of the Foreigner”, 661). The “integrity” in this case has to do with the concept of national identity and the preservation of British morality. In the wake of so much violence Alleyn and Poirot reaffirmed the integrity of the nation in a more peaceful domestic setting.

### **Women Writing in a Man’s World**

The male dominated world of the Edwardian era followed Britain well into the twentieth century and complicated the status of Christie and Marsh as successful female writers; they may have been in a man’s world but they certainly did not wholly conform to it. A woman writer, a successful “career” woman no less, did not fit the new domestic atmosphere of middlebrow Britain. Since the eighteenth century, fiction writing had been one of the only respectable ways for educated women to earn an income, and with the huge popularity of the detective story it had the potential to be very lucrative (Gill, 32). Yet as Virginia Woolf argued in “Professions for Women”, “[o]utwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different” (152). Writing involved independent thinking, and a woman writer attempting to do this could not escape the “Angel in the House” (150). This “Angel” represents the societal feminine ideal discouraging women from stepping out from their considered “place” in society. “That each of these elementary reputable English ladies excelled in a genre created by men and presumed to be most attractive to masculine tastes for violence and analytical reasoning” writes McDorman, “is a puzzle that no critic has yet solved” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 133). The solution to McDorman’s proposed puzzle is not so complex: they simply adapted the genre to a more feminine and domestic type. The “Angel” that Woolf writes of is not really slain in Golden Age detective fiction: especially writing in the formulaic confines of a genre already developed by men, they did little to rebel against the feminine ideal. If, as Woolf writes, “[k]illing the Angel in the House was part of the

occupation of a woman writer” (151), then Marsh and Christie are not properly deserving of the title. Nevertheless, their existence and non-conformism, although small, represents part of the positive influence they had on female intellectualism and independence despite their best efforts to lessen their effects. Christie was, by her own admittance, motivated to write from a challenge posed by her sister, and to continue for the prospect of money, but she made sure her feminine upper-middle-class persona was maintained.

Although a childless, single woman of independent means who never married, Marsh also avoided taking any form of political stance (Harding, 58). This reveals the impact conservative New Zealand society had on Marsh’s view of herself. In England her position as a successful career woman may have been uncomfortable but her fame and success did not extend to where her home country was concerned; in New Zealand it was not even recognised. The literary scene of New Zealand was snobbish, oppressive and heavily dominated by men (Lewis, 67). As a theatre director she was well known and respected but as a writer Marsh was a kind of blight, an embarrassment on the seriously-taken literary reputation of New Zealand (Lewis, 57). Lewis highlights the parallel here between New Zealand and Australia, in what Drusilla Modjeska argues “was a hostile environment for women writers” (in Lewis, 67). Marsh was well aware, Lewis notes, of “how important it was to escape from the stultifying society of Christchurch in which she was now to become an established figure”; it was in England where Marsh felt herself thrive (68). Rather than Marsh’s position having a positive effect on the public perception of successful women writers, the negative public reaction affected her.

Marsh’s outlook on her own achievements mirrored the attitudes of the “Christchurch literary set”: in the theatre she was both confident and inspirational and yet as a fiction writer she considered herself inferior and belittled her achievements constantly (Lewis, 57). Marsh wrote of the hurt in her autobiography *Black Beech and Honeydew*, that: “intellectual New Zealand friends tactfully avoid all mention of my published work and if they like me, do so, I cannot help but feel, in spite of it” (252). Unfortunately Marsh did little to stand up to this snobbish exclusion, taking it instead like punishment and therefore reinforcing the idea that it was deserved. Both Marsh and Christie joined the ranks of women who despite their independent careers, as Hoper accuses, “did little consciously to further the cause of women” (7). Their high-profile existence may have assisted in some form to the status of women but through no effort of their own.

## Gender, Sexuality and the Criminal

Christie and Marsh may not have publicly advocated more freedom from gender roles but they certainly did their part to dispel certain gendered concepts. In terms of broader literary criticism and scholarship on detective fiction, there exists a peculiar fascination with labelling criminality as a gendered trait that Christie and Marsh did not subscribe to. Sexuality that deviates from “traditional” gender roles has been criminalised in the past; in the introduction to Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore’s book, *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, they discuss philosopher and social theorist Michael Foucault’s connection between criminality and sexuality, that “with the post-industrial valorization of the heterosexual couple came the persecution and criminalization of alternative sexualities”, these “alternative sexualities” being anything that deviated from “monogamous heterosexuality” (4). The connection between gender, sexuality and crime has been taken further, however, and the concept of criminality has become associated with a particular gender.<sup>9</sup> In his article “The Fingerprint of the Foreigner: Colonizing the Criminal Body in 1890s Detective Fiction and Criminal Anthropology” Ronald R. Thomas describes how the criminal “Other”, male or female, is feminised in the late nineteenth century: “[n]ot only is the criminal child-like (and therefore racially other) but feminine, or at least sexually ambiguous” (665).

In contrast, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller discusses in her article about female detective Loveday Brooke, how the criminal is perceived as masculine by English psychologist and author, Havelock Ellis (56). “Ellis essentially suggests” Miller writes:

[T]hat criminality, whether existing in men or women, is a masculine trait: criminal women are “masculine” but criminal men are not apt to be “feminine.” Consequently, women who violate physical norms of gender are imagined as abject, criminal subjects in a way that men are not. (56)

Masculinity in women, Miller argues, was “one of the most obvious signs of degeneracy,” and one of the ways of establishing women as “unsexed or masculinized” was through “her participation in the male sphere of work outside the home” (56). Miller quotes Ellis as saying

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<sup>9</sup> The gender itself differs and appears to depend mostly on the agenda of the author i.e. whether it is motivated by race, class or gender. See Thomas, “The Fingerprint of the Foreigner” for more on race.

that if “the criminal woman is compared with the natural woman, she is found to approach more closely to the normal man than the latter does; while the corresponding character [femininity] is not found so often in the criminal as in the normal man” (in Miller, 56). This is obviously oversimplified given the complication of class and the differences between the criminal man and woman, but it does reveal both the tendency to associate criminal qualities with gender and how ridiculous these connections are.

In the works of both Marsh and Christie, however, criminality does not follow a gendered pattern. While the concept of criminality being gendered outlived the Victorian age, “[u]nlike almost all her English mystery-writing contemporaries, male and female,” Gill writes, “Agatha Christie does not assume that murder is essentially a masculine business or that women murderers exude the naked female sexuality loved and feared by the American ‘hard-boiled’ school” (145). In Christie’s novels, Wu Chia-ying notes, “gender does not make one more evil or benign, nor does it determine one’s choice of murder weapon” (10). Likewise, Ngaio Marsh does not discriminate when it comes to murder and although the majority of her murderers are men, there is no set pattern. Nevertheless, although influential enough, Christie and Marsh did little to actively change, or attempt to influence a progression in women’s rights. That is not to say that the fictional characters Christie and Marsh used to represent themselves, as will be discussed below, were not useful and part of a slow shift towards something more radical, they were just unintentional by-products. Dorothy Sayers wrote how detective fiction was not part of the literature of expression, but of escape (Dove, 204). These women used their detective fiction to act out problems, ideas and desires but never intentionally for the benefit of women in general; yet they still managed to make some contribution, however small.

### **The Middlebrow Domestic Sphere**

In many ways, the Golden Age formula was a reaction against the over-masculinisation of culture, but not necessarily in favour of a more progressive and equal alternative. The detectives of the Golden Age emerged in a similarly influential time to Holmes: World War I had recently ended, leaving the British with a changed society. In the aftermath of war, “heroic masculinity appeared both untenable and bankrupt as an ideal within a domestic and national context” (Hinds, 310). The English people had, Bruce Harding

writes, “steadily lost their sense of purpose” (59). While Conan Doyle was still writing Sherlock Holmes stories until the late 1920s, his work had become outdated. The detectives of the Golden Age, notes Hinds, “indicate much about their time and place, and traditions in the genre”, namely, the break with tradition and a stark contrast against the traditional “‘masculine’, logical, cold and decisive Sherlock Holmes” (31). This new genre deviated from what Conan Doyle had created, illustrating the direction taken by sensationalism and crime in the media, the disbanding of class structure, and most interestingly, a reaction against the hero figure. The Golden Age “cosy” detective was thus born as an anti-hero: no longer a prime specimen of British masculinity. The detectives of the Golden Age were flawed; they were unfit, overweight, sensitive and effeminate men, given “handicaps” by their female authors. As Colin Watson comments in his article “The Message of Mayhem Parva”, the Golden Age marked “the age of novelties, and an unconventional investigator made a nice change” (99). The Golden Age era reflects the changing social and psychological landscape of Britain and is reflected in the two main resulting effects concerning the detective figure: national identity, which has already been discussed, and effeminacy, a quality in men that denotes feminine qualities.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the earlier feminist wave and appearance of fictional female detectives, and aside from Miss Marple, all four of the most popular Golden Age writers were women and all had male detectives. This is reflective of the newly domesticated “middlebrow” Britain, a reaction to the unsettled and uncertain years of World War I and a safe, stable, domestic feminine atmosphere for the men; for British woman it was a metaphorical strait-jacket. It was the domestic novel in which women had always excelled (Curtis, 51), and Golden Age detective fiction is an extension of this. Women, Curtis writes, were restricted “to writing about the detective who needed to show a shrewd application of common sense and a quick eye for informative details”, including changes “in household routine, diet, or the behaviour of children” (51). This need for a new, more grounded form of fiction combined with domestic knowledge to foreshadow, as Curtis describes, “the non-scientific, ‘intuitive’ or ‘psychological’ detectives of twentieth-century detective fiction” (51); in short, the “cosy” murder mystery detectives.

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<sup>10</sup> For the full definition of effeminacy that I am using, see the beginning of this chapter (p.13).

The term “middlebrow” refers to what Hilary Hinds calls “[f]eminized and privatized middle-class family practices, mores, and values” that “were ensconced as the norm but also presented, as the classless ideal, a benignly domestic national self” (312). The main source of its occurrence was the post-World War I expansion of the middle-classes where, Hinds argues, “the home was conceived as a proper space for the formation, reproduction, and celebration of the masculine self,” as opposed to “a place of recuperation and retreat from the cares and strife of the masculine public world” (313). While the specific changes to society that the middlebrow represents will be examined further in the next chapter in terms of class, the “cosy” mystery writers used this concept as a setting, applying it to village life, the city, abroad, or any other enclosed place with a select number of characters.

To threaten the stability of this atmosphere, by murder no less, could thus be seen as undermining masculinity itself and yet for the most part, Golden Age detective fiction merely reaffirms it. Agatha Christie may upset the quaint little village of Market Basing<sup>11</sup> or Ngaio Marsh the happy home of the Lampreys<sup>12</sup> but order is restored with the revelation of the murderer and motive: providing readers with a mild form of catharsis and little or no lingering discomfort at their position in life. In terms of murder in modern theatre productions, as Erica Hateley describes, it is not just “the aberration of murder that is exorcised” she writes, “but the aberrant (intellectual) feminine, this return to norms” she explains “is dependent on an implicitly patriarchal model of gendered subjectivity” (“Lady Macbeth in Detective Fiction”). This concept is easily transferable to the “cosy” mystery and the cathartic exorcism of any feminine discontent. After all, of the middle-class social group under discussion, it was the women, writes Hinds, who were the most avid readers: “women were, throughout the twentieth century, the buyers and borrowers of almost three-quarters of all the fiction in circulation” (301). “Middlebrow novels aimed at a popular audience”, Meyer writes, “needed relatively uncomplicated presentations of feminine authority over men to ensure the reassuring happy endings expected by their readership” (20). The implication here is that the shallow and surface “presentations” of femininity, the authority of running a household, somehow translates to feminist power.

The domestication of the detective genre denotes the social enforcement of a family-centred culture where men were back in charge (having let women have brief control in their

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<sup>11</sup> See Christie, *Dumb Witness*

<sup>12</sup> See Marsh, *Surfeit of Lampreys*

wartime absence) and in serious need of reaffirming “traditional” gender roles. The anti-hero sentiment did not work in opposition to this new domestic culture, if anything it suggested that the men could finally relax from their masculine dominance because the need to assert themselves was lessened by both peacetime and the restrictions on the role of women in society.

### **The Age of the Flawed Hero**

It is difficult to say what came first: the shift away from the masculine hero or the emergence of a culture of domesticity but they certainly worked concurrently to create an atmosphere where flawed, less overtly masculine detectives were surprisingly popular. All four of the “Queens of Crime”: Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Ngaio Marsh, created un-masculine male lead detectives. The alteration of the rigid masculine ideal was somewhat expected, but the way Golden Age detective fiction portrayed their male heroes was still surprising. The cultural climate was not tolerant of deviations from normal gender roles in society, yet these detectives were part of the biggest and most popular detective fiction genre in literary history. Colin Watson writes in his book *Snobbery with Violence* that:

Effeminacy was not only regarded as something absolutely reprehensible in itself; it was felt in some strange way to lurk within other things of which one disapproved. Eventually, advertising and the spread of habit removed the stigma from cigarettes, but minority tastes that failed to qualify for commercial promotion – from vegetarianism to classical music – continued to be linked in many minds with unmanliness. (91)

Alison Light suggests that “[s]ince war, whatever its horrors, is manly, there is something both lower-class and effeminate about peacetime” (Light, 7); Golden Age British detective fiction certainly reflected a change in approach to both class and masculinity.

Perhaps then the likes of Poirot, Alleyn, Campion and Wimsey would only ever have been tolerated in a fictional world. “Many of the sleuths of the 1920s and ’30s were self-deprecating amateurs”, Alison Light explains, “men who resort to physical violence only *in*

*extremis*, and whose personal characteristics are likely to include fastidiousness, a narcissistic delicacy, inane giggling and even laziness” (*Forever England*, 73). There were certainly excuses made for their effeminacy: Campion and Wimsey are almost stock-standard eccentric and *acceptably* effeminate aristocratic stereotypes. It is Christie’s Poirot and Marsh’s Alleyn who deserve closer consideration;<sup>13</sup> Poirot is the most effeminate of the four detectives, which is attributed to his foreignness, while Alleyn, the least effeminate has no real excuse.

Poirot was foreign; for some that would have been explanation enough but he was also the most strongly un-masculine, impractical, outrageous, flamboyant, effeminate, boastful detective and by far the most popular. Some have taken Poirot’s effeminacy as a sign that he was homosexual. H. R. F. Keating spends most of his article “Hercule Poirot – A *Companion Portrait*” trying to persuade the reader of this, while never saying it directly. Keating implies this through three aspects of Poirot’s character: his flamboyance, his love of mother-figures, and his relationship with his “Watson”, Captain Hastings. Poirot’s manner is described by Christie as womanlike: ‘[n]o martyred lady could have spoken with more feeling’ (*Peril at End House*, 14). Poirot’s interests and habits are far more aligned with the feminine than the masculine: he is unusually knowledgeable and interested in domestic duties and fashion. As Alison Light suggests, “[r]eaders need not feel their own manliness impugned by Poirot since, as a foreigner, he is forgiveably cissy” he is as she notes, “too old and too unfit to be heroic” (*Forever England*, 73).

It is difficult to deny that Poirot is definitely “camp”. Keating notes Poirot’s extravagant taste, particularly in clothing, gestures and in his manner of speech (209). It is certainly true that Poirot is at times an outrageous dresser, as described in *Death on the Nile* through the eyes of Cornelia Robinson:

The sight of Hercule Poirot, in a white suit, pink shirt, large black bow tie and a white topee, did not make her wince as the aristocratic Miss Van Schuyler would assuredly have winced. (131)

Keating uses a passage from Christie’s *Peril at End House* when Poirot, in animated fashion, describes the disadvantages to having ““a coiffure high and rigid – so – and the hat attached

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<sup>13</sup> This is obviously my opinion and definitely not the only one. Colin Watson defends Allingham as being the most earnest and accomplished of the four. See *Snobbery with Violence*, p.101.

with many hairpins – là- là - là -et là””, his knowledge extends to the point where it is implied he has first-hand experience: “[w]hen the wind blew,’ he added ‘it was the agony – it gave you the *migraine*”” (*Peril at End House*, 14). Whether this demonstrates experience of women’s fashion or merely a keen interest, it certainly goes outside the bounds or normal masculine practice.

There is also a strong implication made by Keating that Poirot is attracted to Hastings: “[w]hy, for instance, was he quite so fond of a duffer like Captain Hastings”, who according to Keating “bumbled through their long friendship in total innocence” (216). Alison Light describes the relationship between the men as “copying that of Watson and Holmes,” but further “suggests a mocking relationship to the past” (*Forever England*, 67). The potentially homoerotic relationship between Holmes and Watson does little to dispel the idea; two men, closely bonded in friendship have the tendency to suggest ancient Greek culture revived (Livett). Nevertheless, despite the companionship of the two men there is little to suggest this is more than a friendship and useful authorial device to put distance between the reader and the inner-workings of Poirot’s superior brain.

Furthermore, although rare, there are moments when Christie does allude to the fact that Poirot was at least once attracted to the female sex. In *Evil Under the Sun*, Poirot displays distaste at the bodies of men and women sunbathing. He admits that some of them are good looking, but exclaims:

“Yes, but what appeal is there? What mystery? I, I am old, of the old school, [w]hen I was young, one saw barely the ankle. The glimpse of a foamy petticoat, how alluring! The gentle swelling of the calf – a knee – a beribboned garter –”

“Naughty, naughty!” said Major Barry hoarsely. (377)

The inclusion of this quote is not intended to prove Poirot’s heterosexuality but merely to supply evidence to counter Keating. What Keating demonstrates in this article is a startling and mildly offensive stereotyping of homosexuality.

In Keating's defense however, as a writer very capable of creating a vivid character in few words, Christie did use stereotypes quite freely;<sup>14</sup> she had to rely upon them in order to assist her readers, and sometimes to trick them<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore it is likely that she did create some homosexual characters: the possible lesbian partnership of Hinchcliffe and Murgatroyd in *A Murder is Announced*, and the strongly alluded to homosexuality of Mr. Pye in *The Moving Finger* for example. For Poirot, however, Keating's evidence is negligible. What it does prove is that Poirot's effeminacy is still so uncomfortable to mainstream masculinity that even when Keating wrote his argument, a "reason" must be found to explain it. Keating's "evidence" of homosexuality is an excuse, an explanation to (presumably) make readers more comfortable with his character.

While it seems very unlikely Christie intended Poirot to be read as gay, especially on such thin evidence as what Keating produces, there are some aspects of his character which do suggest an intended anomaly in his sexuality. Christie makes numerous associations between Poirot and cats, for example. In *Death on the Nile*, there are three separate similes used to call Poirot "catlike": two with reference to his green eyes (354, 363) and one with regards to his swift "catlike jump for the door and the deck" (329).<sup>16</sup> Historically the symbol of the feline figure in literature has been associated with femininity and domesticity<sup>17</sup> and can be employed to affect "a heightened sense of mystery, suspicion, duplicity, temptation, eroticism and evil" (Waddell, "The Female/Feline Morph", 75). Whether this was intentional or not, Poirot is the only male detective of the four to remain a bachelor, without any reference to a romance of any kind, past or present. There simply is not enough evidence to say with any certainty that Poirot is anything but effeminate. Perhaps that is why the other three women writers married their effeminate detectives off: to avoid any confusion or suspicion from their readers of a "dysfunctional" sexuality.

Ngaio Marsh, however, had suggested the stirrings of a romance between Alleyn and a woman by his fourth novel, and at the end of the fifth he had met his future wife. In

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<sup>14</sup> Christie's use of stereotypes is discussed further in chapter four.

<sup>15</sup> A good example of this can be seen in *Dumb Witness* where the murderess hides under the stereotype of timid Englishwoman under the control of another stereotype, the dominant, aggressive foreign husband.

<sup>16</sup> Also, see *Peril at End House*, p. 21 where Poirot is as jumpy as a cat; in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* he is described as feline-like, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> That is not to say it has not been associated with other meanings too, but femininity and domesticity stand out as the most dominant ones.

opposition to Poirot, Roderick Alleyn appears to be a rather virile and healthy variant of British masculinity and the least effeminate of the four Golden Age detectives. As previously mentioned, there was an acceptable level of effeminacy or softness in the upper-class gentry which Campion and Wimsey both represent. Despite being upper class himself, Alleyn does not fit this “class”. While he is born of aristocratic stock, as the second son he had no fortune to dwindle on mystery-hunting whims and his decision to join the police force acts as a balance to his birth. His masculinity in fact overrides the “dandy” stereotype through his more disciplined, rational and commanding nature. Perhaps for this reason, unlike the other three Alleyn has no excuse for what effeminacy he does display. Alleyn’s position demonstrates the flexibility in society for a stereotypical British male with an effeminate streak: he is sensitive, not overly brave and is vulnerable to self-doubt.

Although effeminate like the other three detectives, Alleyn is a very different kind of character and in terms of physical appearance at least he conforms to the masculine ideal. Alleyn has the sex appeal that Poirot lacks; he is the most handsome of the four detectives with quite a reputation for his dashing good looks, as illustrated by the clearly media-influenced opinion of Frid Lamprey:

“You can’t pit your puny wits against the master brain of Handsome Alleyn. You know, chaps, if it wasn’t for the fact that Uncle G. was murdered, it’d be rather a big moment for me having Handsome Alleyn in the flat. I’ve nursed an illicit passion for that man ever since the Gospell murder. Is he really the answer to the maiden’s prayer, Henry?” (*Surfeit of Lampreys*, 97)

Over the course of his cases, several other female characters confirm this sentiment and in two circumstances, Alleyn demonstrates reciprocity: the second being his eventual wife, Agatha Troy.

It is this relationship with Troy that demonstrates an un-manly weakness or flaw in Alleyn’s character. Despite his attractiveness, Alleyn is not a practiced suitor and the romance that blossoms between him and Troy is awkward, slow and filled with misunderstandings. Nigel Bathgate writes about this in *Artists in Crime*, reflecting that:

Where women were concerned he was, perhaps, unusually intelligent and intuitive, but the whole of this case is coloured by his extraordinary wrong-headedness over Troy's attitude towards himself. (530)

It is not until the succeeding book, *Death in a White Tie* that Alleyn manages to convey his feelings to Troy properly, and as Margaret Lewis notes, "Alleyn, although confident in his professional life", remained "slightly unsure of his position in Troy's private world" (111). It is this self-doubt, she writes, that "makes his character much more appealing" (111). Troy is the one person whom Alleyn is unable to use his considerable deductive powers to analyse. In creating Alleyn and Troy's relationship, Marsh reveals a fault in Alleyn's character that makes him more human and more likeable as an (albeit rarely) fallible human being.

Also unlike Poirot, Alleyn is extremely sensitive about the nature of his work; his delicate sensibilities are often upset when it comes to prying into the murder victim's life. Where Poirot has no qualms about searching through rooms and discovering sordid details, Alleyn dreads the task. This is highlighted in *Artists in Crime* when he is forced to invade Troy's privacy. Troy asks Alleyn if he wants to search her and her guests' rooms "for something?", and he replies:

"Not for anything specific. I feel we should just –" He stopped short. "I detest my job," he said; "for the first time I despise and detest it." (610)

By "the publication of *Vintage Murder*" as McDorman notes, Alleyn had "developed a case of disillusionment and depression" which is the reason for his first trip to New Zealand ("Roderick Alleyn and the New Professionals", 133). His subsequent experience with Troy in *Artists in Crime* only reinforces his ambivalence toward *his* role in murder cases. As noted by Jeni Curtis, "murder and the nature of the murderer upset him, he is a highly moral man, with a sense of justice, a squeamishness about ugliness in character or deed, yet he is also professional, dedicated and exacting" (54). It is this dedication that keeps Alleyn working for Scotland Yard despite the moral quandary, and this "fault" actually makes him a better policeman because he does not blindly follow the law: he chooses to. While both Alleyn and Poirot have their flaws and eccentricities, when it comes to stopping criminals and preventing murder, their integrity is never questioned.

These flaws to which I refer are aspects of Poirot and Alleyn's characters which demonstrate human imperfection and suggest more of a link between detective and reader. The most notable flaw for these detectives is their non-conformity to traditional masculinity, in other words, effeminacy. The effeminacy of these characters, I believe, comes from the fact that they were created by women; they think and behave less like men because they were not created by men. I do not believe Christie and Marsh intentionally made their detectives effeminate or flawed. In a society like Golden Age Britain, effeminacy was automatically considered a fault and ordinarily, this "fault" might have resulted in criticism and low sales. However, the flaw in their masculinity was actually appreciated by the public who were sick of the masculine male hero. As I have already discussed, domesticity and the more feminine tone of these novels, suited the cultural climate.

### **Detectives as Reflections of the Authors**

Whether intentional or not, both Christie and Marsh did pose some threats to normative masculinity; the feminisation of both detective and genre suggests a form of cultural emasculation. Part of what made the female detective figure so provocative was, as Maureen T. Reddy describes, the "doubled violation of murder and of female involvement in the public work of detection" (19). Even if only in a literary sense, the Golden Age detective fiction writers involved themselves quite publicly in the design and solution of crime. The sense of surveillance that comes from a female detective still occurs to an extent in Golden Age fiction but through a female dressed up as a male; I would argue that Christie and Marsh's detectives are altered versions of themselves. In some ways this could be seen as a double violation of masculinity: emasculation of the masculine through being impersonated.

As Peter Thoms states, there is a well-documented relationship "between detection, storytelling and power" (4). It could be argued that women like Christie and Marsh acted out some of their darker impulses through the medium of fiction, including the desire to impersonate men and criminals alike. If the point of detective fiction is escapism then surely the author adopting a male detective role and commanding the power and intelligence usually reserved for men is a form of this. While outwardly these detectives may reinforce male superiority of intellect, behind the unbeatable intelligence of world famous Hercule Poirot, or the brilliant Superintendent Roderick Alleyn of Scotland Yard, is a woman.

If “the detective’s desire for authorial mastery,” as Peter Thoms writes, “disturbingly resembles the oppressive deeds of the criminal”, and that by “[i]nternalizing detection, they bring upon themselves a mode of self-control and repression that conceals the secretive or criminal side of the self” (2), then the author’s desire to construct both the detective and the criminal is significant. This concept of the author acting out a desire for power, control or even violence suggests a kind of Jekyll and Hyde duality of self. Grace Moore writes that:

The struggle between Jekyll and Hyde is not merely a grappling between moralist and sensualist. Stevenson also employs his schizoid protagonist to demonstrate the conflict inherent in the increasingly introspective nature of Victorian middle-class life and the constraints that its rules and system of (self) policing placed on sexual identity and individuality. (157)

Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella, *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, is, Moore writes, “one of the most frequently sexually allegorized texts of the *fin de siècle*” (148). This concept of a doppelganger, a darker opposite can be applied to authors and their relationship to their protagonists.

Stevan Eldred-Grigg, in a satirical attempt to describe this phenomenon of duality, classes Ngaio as a cross-dressing lesbian:

Young women, disturbed young women. Not really women at all. A sort of desexed species. Women who want to be men. Women who associate with one another in dim rooms. (196)

Here, as with *Lady Macbeth* the concept of the de-sexed female is inextricably linked with the societal or self-imposed masculinisation of women. Eldred-Grigg exemplifies here the oppressive male perspective of a woman in a more masculine position, as well as the New Zealand attitude to modern women writers: if a woman like Marsh is not married, she must be a lesbian. And having a male protagonist, Eldred-Grigg suggests, is essentially cross-

dressing. This obviously takes the sentiment to the extreme. Yet Eldred-Grigg is not the only person to make, or at least demonstrate<sup>18</sup> this assumption.

Ngaio Marsh's latest biographer, Joanne Drayton revisits this stereotyping in a deliberately sensationalised manner; the book's synopsis ends with:

The popular appetite for classic 'whodunits' was insatiable and Marsh was one of the best, but her greatest love was the stage – or was it?

The alternative 'greatest love' to which it refers is her friend and companion Sylvia Fox. Drayton, in fact, implies that Marsh had several romantic relationships with women such as Doris McIntosh as a "confidante" offering "emotional support, and possibly more, although a physical dimension to this relationship was never suggested" (221-222). The "physical dimension" of Marsh's relationship with women that Drayton discusses, never suggested in the case of Doris, is also never proven with Fox: "She was part of Ngaio's everyday life, but also of a private world never mentioned in *Black Beech*" (238). It was never mentioned anywhere in her correspondence, it seems, so it must have been erased. Without having seen this "evidence", the only available information upon which to base an assumption about Marsh's sexuality is her un-feminine physical appearance, the fact that she never married, and that she had a number of close female friends. Drayton's biography, while a detailed and engaging one, betrays Marsh and women writers in general by subscribing to sensationalist claims to account for Marsh's lack of conformity to a normative gender role.

A far more interesting, valuable and valid way of assessing Marsh and Christie as women writers is to analyse how their writing acts as an extension of themselves. Both Poirot and Alleyn are extremely telling about their authors and will be examined below. If writing is a form of self-expression, in looking at their detectives we are able to extract what parts of themselves these authors wished to express and why. It is not, however, only the detectives that Christie and Marsh used to express themselves. Several other characters and events in their novels highlight the strong personal connection these Golden Age authors had to their fiction.

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<sup>18</sup> Eldred-Grigg's novel suffers from a great deal of awkwardness and it is difficult to decide on how much credit to give him. I reluctantly have called his work a satire and therefore must assume that his stereotyping of Marsh was deliberate and critical.

## Agatha Christie

When he emerged in the early twentieth century, Hercule Poirot was the exact opposite of his creator, Agatha Christie. As Gilian notes: “[a] A tall, attractive, reticent, married, rather untidy young Englishwoman created a short, plain, talkative, old Belgian bachelor of meticulous neatness” (52). In adopting the persona of Poirot for her novels, the very private Christie hid every obvious aspect of her character from her readers. Furthermore, “[i]n striking contrast to her contemporaries, both male and female,” Christie created a detective who had absolutely no hero potential whatsoever (Gilian, 52). Gilian describes the relationship between Christie and Poirot as “unusual in that it is not autobiographical, not idealized, and not romantic” (53). However, just because Christie and Poirot were dissimilar does not mean he did not represent a part of her; the fact that he is an exact negative of her is telling in its pure opposition. While Poirot was still in his formative stages, Christie recalls deciding:

He would be meticulous, very tidy, I thought to myself, as I cleared away a good many odds and ends in my own bedroom. [...] I could see him as a tidy little man, always arranging things, liking things in pairs, liking things square instead of round. (*An Autobiography*, 256)

Poirot was unencumbered by a husband and child and he never looked untidy. Furthermore he did not suffer from an overactive imagination or a fear of public speaking. Gillian writes that “[o]ne of Christie’s major themes in her posthumously published autobiography is how shy she was, how slow, how chronically incapable of expressing her feelings” (2). Rather than suggesting then that Christie did not express her feelings through her literature, her personal struggles with self-expression suggests a deep-rooted need to do so. Why not through her characters? If Christie had such a disconnected relationship with her detective, why would she have protested so vehemently about his depiction? As Elizabeth Walter notes:

She would never consent to any representation of Poirot, not even as played by Albert Finney in *Murder on the Orient Express*; and though she once allowed his patent-leather shod feet to appear on the jacket of *Poirot’s Early Cases*, she was never happy with even this partial representation. Her preference was always for a motif. (20-21)

Poirot was never a person to Christie: he was a part of her and that is the real reason she did not want him depicted; he represented too many of her secret faults and desires to be given a face, and no face but hers would be accurate. Christie did eventually tire of Poirot in her later years, referring to him as “Hercule Poirot, my Belgian invention,” who was “[hung] round my neck, firmly attached there like the old man of the sea” (*An Autobiography*, 277). She even wrote him out of the play form of *The Hollow*: “how much better, I kept thinking, would the book have been without him” (*An Autobiography*, 473). Far from being a random character, Poirot symbolised an extension of Christie; he represents the bridge between Christie’s personal life and her literature.

This relationship between Christie and Poirot goes directly against the popular assertion that Christie was intensely private about her life and affairs and thus kept her private and fictional worlds separate. Gill Gillian writes that “[a]s a creative yet opaque literary medium, detective fiction was perhaps uniquely fitted to the character of Agatha Christie, a woman obsessively concerned to avoid self-revelation” (1). Christie, in fact, wrote and published some of her most private personal problems. During her career and in between writing detective fiction, Christie wrote six serious novels under the pseudonym “Mary Westmacott” that read like a dramatised version of what happened in her personal life: “Mary’s” first novel, *Giant’s Bread* of 1930, details the breakdown of her marriage to Archie Christie. I am not arguing here that Christie was not a private person. The fact that she was deeply upset at being discovered and that she used a pseudonym does suggest that she did not want to make her affairs public knowledge. The issue here is that in spite of being private, the need to express her problems through writing was so strong that regardless of the risk of discovery, she published these novels anyway. Clearly the impulse to write about herself was alive and well, Christie merely wished to do it anonymously.

While Poirot is certainly the most famous of Christie’s alter-egos, her most obviously autobiographical character is Mrs. Ariadne Oliver who appears in the Poirot novels as an alternative to Captain Hastings. Oliver is Christie’s light-hearted parody of herself, first appearing in *Cards on the Table* in 1935: “Mrs. Ariadne Oliver was extremely well known as one of the foremost writers of detective and other sensational stories” (15). When Rhoda visits Oliver at her home, she witnesses the chaos of a detective fiction writer; Oliver explains:

“I *am* working, as you see. But that dreadful Finn of mine has got himself terribly tangled up. He did some awfully clever deduction with a dish of French beans, and now he’s just detected a deadly poison in the sage-and-onion stuffing of the Michaelmas goose, and I’ve just remembered that French beans are over by Michaelmas.” (98-99)

While definitely the most obvious character to parallel her own life, readers are only ever able to know Oliver and identify her with Christie on a superficial level. Christie and Oliver developed together as she got older and more overweight and they share a love of apples, eating and sports cars.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that after the public revelation that she was Mary Westmacott, Christie shied away from writing about more personal and emotional aspects of herself. As a result, her works became increasingly artificial in the self-referential, consciously fictional way that will be discussed in the final chapter.

#### Ngaio Marsh

Where Poirot is an extension of Christie, Alleyn is the male embodiment of Marsh. Alleyn was Marsh’s lens, her point of perspective that allowed her to make comments on the changing and developing society of Britain that she loved so much, and later in her own country of birth, New Zealand. Alleyn is a male version of Marsh, a fantasy of sorts where her qualities are mixed with her colonial desire for belonging. This is reflected by the fact that not only was Alleyn her sole central consciousness throughout her novels, he bore several outward physical similarities to Marsh: both were tall, slender and well-spoken. Marsh was, by all accounts, an unusual looking woman. According to Lauris Edmond she was “too tall, too mannish,” and “had too deep a voice” (2). Yet these features became normal, even handsome when transferred to a slightly effeminate British policeman; Alleyn is the male, upper-class, British born, Oxford educated, version of herself, who is admired for the very qualities Marsh was faulted for. Marsh’s description of Alleyn in his debut novel, *A Man Lay Dead* could easily be of her:

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<sup>19</sup> In one memorable moment in *Hallowe’en Party*, Oliver is observed exiting her beloved sports car with great difficulty due to her large size and the car being filled with apples. It is in this novel that she is put off apples for life, due to the nature of the murder she helps solve.

He was very tall, and lean, his hair was dark, and his eyes were grey, with corners that turned down. They looked as if they would smile easily, but his mouth didn't. "His hands and his voice are grand," thought Angela. (50-51)

Marsh herself wrote of this strong sense of familiarity between her and Alleyn that she discovered early in his development as a character:

From the beginning I discovered that I knew quite a lot about him. Indeed if I had not fallen so casually into the practice of crime writing and had taken to a more serious form, he would still have arrived and found himself in an altogether different setting. ("Roderick Alleyn", 5)

Alleyn was a part of Marsh that she needed to express and had she not written detective fiction, he would have appeared in some other manner. This suggests that Alleyn's character development had far less to do with the Golden Age genre than the personal expressions of his author.

There is, however, an alternative argument about what Alleyn meant to Marsh that must be addressed. Some have argued that Alleyn represents Marsh's ideal match, the partner she never had. Margaret Lewis suggests this in her biography: "[w]as Ngaio describing here the sort of man she had been hoping to meet for many years? Did she fall in love with her creation, as Dorothy Sayers did with Lord Peter Wimsey?" (56). Marsh did raise this in her "Introduction: Roderick Alleyn": "I can't say I have ever succumbed in this way to my own investigator but I have grown to like him as an old friend" (6). Although she could have been lying, it seems more convincing and less romanticised to believe Alleyn fulfilled something in her, some form of inadequacy, and gave it a voice. Furthermore, despite the contentions made by various critics that Marsh's characters, Alleyn included, are shallow imitations of other author's creations (Panek, 188), Alleyn grew and developed with Marsh. He lost his grating facetious humour after the first couple of books, as well as his affected need to quote poetry, and developed deep-rooted anxiety about aspects of his profession; essentially Alleyn grew up, which is surely the very definition of development. In a genre expected to be so formulaic, Alleyn's development speaks to both Marsh's talent as a writer and the connection between them. The changes to both Alleyn and Poirot's characters stem directly from their authors' experiences; thus subtle changes to their views, manner and lifestyles reflect this.

In describing Agatha Christie's literary venture as Mary Westmacott, Lewis asserts that this was the very thing Ngaio Marsh "strove to avoid": "[t]he detective novel provided exactly the right framework for a stylized view of life that would shed no light on the writer's much-valued privacy" (63). This assumption mirrors the view about Christie quoted above. Marsh may not have had an alias (or if she did, she hid it much more successfully than Christie), but she did share her own personal issues with her readers. While her detective Roderick Alleyn, shows us a great deal about Marsh, she also used other characters to "act out" aspects of her life. "I have always tried" Marsh writes, "to keep the settings of my books as far as possible within the confines of my own experience" (*Portrait of Troy*, x); the settings are not the only aspects of her novels she drew on personal experience for.

Roberta Grey, the central consciousness in *Surfeit of Lampreys* is modelled off Marsh and her relationship with the Rhodes family, who are the eccentric Lampreys in the novel. Marsh was exceptionally close to the "Lampreys" and Roberta's arrival for the first time in England mirrors Marsh's own when she was invited to stay with them. Despite being much closer in age to the parents than the children in real life, Marsh romanticises the story version so that Roberta is a similar age to Henry Lamprey, the eldest son, and by the end of the novel they are set to wed. This reveals Marsh's strong desire to "belong" to such a family of eccentric aristocrats and her adoration for the Lampreys specifically.

The second, much more critically treated character revealing a side of Marsh that obviously gave her some concern was Florence 'Flossie' Rubrick of *Died in the Wool*. In this case it is not so much her character that parallels Marsh but her actions: Flossie's patronage of the local station manager's son, Cliff Johns. "The kind of kidnap that Flossie achieves," Lewis explains, in "pulling him out of school and sending him to 'the nearest equivalent in her country to an English Public School' against the wishes of his father, a strong trade unionist, is not without a parallel in Ngaio's own life" (101). Marsh was convinced, Lewis writes, that her nephew, John Mannings, to whom she was much attached, "would have a better future with an English-style upbringing: private school, British Army, financial career" (103). Marsh arranged for John, fourteen at the time, to board at Christ's College "the exclusive private boys' school in Christchurch" in order to mould him into "the kind of cultivated, polished Englishman that she had always admired" (Lewis, 102). It is difficult to tell whether Marsh wrote of the problems of Flossie's imposed patronage because she had

made a similar error with John, who “was just as out of place at Christ’s College as he was at home” (Lewis, 102), or whether she was uneasy about her plans and wanted to explore the potential for failure through Flossie. According to Lewis, at the time Marsh was writing *Died in the Wool*, she was making “plans that were remarkably similar” with John.

Just as with Agatha Christie there was the very obvious self-reflective character of Ariadne Oliver, the most clearly Marsh-like fictional character is Alleyn’s wife Agatha Troy. Although not a detective fiction writer, Troy does what Marsh always loved, trained in, but was never quite good enough to make a career out of: painting. Marsh introduced Troy in the opening pages of *Artists in Crime*, borrowing an experience that happened to her on a sea voyage to New Zealand from England, where she saw but did not paint the scene Troy does:

[I]t was this feeling of unfulfilment that led me to put another painter on another boat deck making a sketch of the wharf at Suva and that she made a much better job of it than I ever would have done. (*Portrait of Troy*, ix-x)

While Troy is able to capture what Marsh could not, Alleyn, who is on the ship as well and is just as impressed with the scene as Marsh, is even more incapable of capturing it except in memory. Marsh fulfills both her and Alleyn’s desire of capturing the scene through Troy’s painting:

Alleyn drew in his breath sharply. It was as if his deliberately cultivated memory of the wharf at Suva had been simplified and made articulate. The sketch was an almost painfully explicit statement of the feeling of the scene. (*Artists in Crime*, 457)

Alleyn’s discovery of Troy’s painting is a kind of moment of triumph for Marsh: not only has she managed to recreate through words, the scene at Suva, she has created someone who is able to paint it properly and furthermore, someone to appreciate it with her.

Physically, Troy resembles a more delicate feminine version of Marsh (and, by extension, Alleyn). Marsh describes Troy with “shortish dark hair, thin face and hands. She’s absent-minded, shy and funny, and she can paint like nobody’s business” (*Portrait of Troy*, xi). It is this description, writes Lewis, that “seems very close to the Ngaio Marsh who

absorbed that scene on the way back to New Zealand in 1932” (78). In spite of her fragile feminine frame, Troy is described in masculine, often boyish terms: her short hair, her gruffness and her manner, as Alleyn notes, “[t]here was a kind of spare gallantry about her” (460). “Even the use of her last name, Troy,” McDorman writes, “reinforces the androgyny” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 82). These androgynous “characterizations do not suggest sexual peculiarities” of Alleyn’s part, she writes, but rather “promote the ideal of male/female equality and kinship” (McDorman, *Ngaio Marsh*, 82). This may be what the likeness promotes, but it is far more likely an unintentional result of the biographical characteristics Troy and Alleyn share with Marsh than any social statement on gender stereotyping.

Of the four “queens” of the Golden Age, “Ngaio Marsh reigns supreme for excellence of style and characterisation”, Lewis writes, and for “expand[ing] the genre in a fresh and creative way, adding psychological depth and a welcome strand of humour to the basic murder investigation” (x). While Lewis’s statement is well supported, there are critics who have accused Marsh of creating one-dimensional characters. LeRoy Panek claims that Agatha Troy is a poor imitation of Dorothy Sayers’s Harriet Vane: both women are the love-interests and eventual wives of their author’s detective (188). Panek argues in his book, *Watteau’s Shepherds: The Detective Novel in Britain 1914-1940*, that “Agatha Troy is Harriet Vane in a painter’s smock” (188);

Nevertheless, as much as she depends on Sayers, Marsh copies the externals only; in Marsh readers do not find the sustained insights into characters or the attention to non-detective themes which they find in Sayers. Thus Agatha Troy is a version of Harriet Vane from whom only the stereotyped romantic elements remain. (188)

While Troy is certainly an undeveloped character by the standards of literature in general, (she is the wife of a detective in a popular fiction series, after all) she is certainly not merely a poor carbon-copy of another detective’s wife. Accepting the obvious truth that writers do borrow from other works, if Marsh had enough imagination to write detective stories independent of Sayers, surely she had the intellect to create her own characters. Harriet Vane

may have emerged before Troy, but neither character is particularly original.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, even if she was as unimaginative as Panek accuses her, it is far more likely Troy was an imitation of herself, a female version of Alleyn or someone Marsh wished she was, or any combination, than copied from Sayers.

Troy and Alleyn represent separate and similar aspects of Marsh's character: sensitive, vulnerable, self-deprecating, passionate, artistic, talented and unsure; a "divided self" as Lauris Edmond writes, "a creator of masks and fantasies [...] a contradictory personality, magnetic in its charm and authority, partial in its sympathies" (1). The only aspect of her character they do not obviously represent is Marsh's colonial heritage and its hold on her. Interestingly, Dorothy Sayers's marriage of Wimsey and Vane signified the end of the Wimsey novels. Alleyn's marriage to Troy, however, develops and matures him as a character, and it is perhaps this sense of change, development, and growth that fortifies Alleyn's popularity over the long course of Marsh's writing career (Curtis, 54).

Christie and Marsh drew on their own personal experiences and character traits (both their strengths and failings) in their novels so much so that "versions" of themselves appear. As Peter Thoms suggests:

[S]torytelling [...] is an egotistic demonstration of power, an act of self-performance in which the attempt to affirm a desired public identity depends upon the oppressive plotting of the stories (and thus lives) of others. What might initially seem to be merely a defense of self constitutes an offense to another, who responds by defending and then offending in turn, and so on until a society of competitive storytellers is rapidly formed. (4-5)

While perhaps not an "egotistic demonstration of power", writing was for both women "an act of self-performance", even if only in a private sense. They could not help but play an active role in their plots, characters and murders. Lady Macbeth exemplifies the issues concerning these women as controlling a narrative and of having a kind of criminal responsibility for the result. Just as Lady Macbeth tends to be masculinised or over-

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<sup>20</sup> Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters had already developed the intellectual female character and Vane and Troy are both watered-down versions. Furthermore, it is popularly believed that Vane was modelled on Sayers herself; a young, educated female mystery novel writer in the 1930s.

sexualised to demonstrate her murderous power and lack of femininity, so have these writers suffered categorisation and Marsh especially. Nevertheless, in holding a similar position to Lady Macbeth the authors are able to emasculate male characters and empower female readers without even intending to: their very position in society is cause enough. Marsh and Christie have also been defined and categorised by notions of class and class consciousness, and it is this notion of “position” in society that will be the focus of the next chapter. Furthermore, class, as opposed to feminist ideas, was an area they were far more conscious of depicting and developing in a progressive way.

## Chapter Two: Class in the Detective Story

Detective fiction is the civilized exploration of the most uncivilized act, murder. (Olekisw, 161)

Criticised for a wide range of features, “cosy” Golden Age detective fiction can never be reproached for being uncivilised; its civilised nature and emphasis on “class” is part of what makes it such an interesting genre to study. It would be a gross understatement to say that the “cosy” murder mystery is preoccupied with class issues; not only does it document the changes in class to society, it has been accused of both reinforcing old class values and snobbishness, as well as moulding an optimistic, even modernist view of the decline of “class” as a concept. That is not to say, however, that all four of the famous “queens” were united in their opinion and portrayal of a changing society; Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh differ in what they are condemned and praised for. Christie, although hugely critiqued for her depiction of the serving classes, has been hailed a modernist by Alison Light; Christie’s optimism for the new generation is certainly made clear in her novel *An Appointment with Death*. Ngaio Marsh, while not championed as a modernist, reveals similar themes in her novel *Death and the Dancing Footman*. Furthermore Marsh was condemned for her class-conscious snobbery, made worse by her colonial heritage, and although these are fair accusations, they also produce her defence. This is further dispelled by her depiction of the relationship between Alleyn and his second-in-command, Fox, who contrasts Alleyn’s upper-class “status” and yet is treated with genuine respect by both Alleyn and Marsh.

### Class Changes

According to Alison Light, “the reconstruction of the nation in the aftermath of a profoundly destabilising world war involved a reconfiguration of middle-class domestic values as the proper and defining location of the English character” (311). The reconfiguration of these values emanated from the change in size and status of the serving and middle classes, and the trend toward a more domestic culture: the middlebrow. Regardless of actual social status, the perspective from which most Golden Age fiction is written ranges from upper middle-class to middle-class views. Both Christie and Marsh, although in vastly different settings, experienced similar class snobbery where their families

held pretensions to a higher level of class than they could afford. Agatha Christie's family were upper-class but poor.<sup>21</sup> Ngaio Marsh, from a far more humble family, was given the most exclusive education possible in Christchurch at great expense to her parents and certainly above their station.<sup>22</sup> Christie and Marsh were, in consequence, educated on the importance and priority given to social standing.

While the class structure in Britain was mostly archaic and outmoded by this period, war was the catalyst for bringing about actual change through the emergence of domestic culture. Contrary to popular belief, as discussed by Martin Pugh, "the 750,000 British male wartime deaths" did not mean that "the interwar generation of women were deprived of husbands" ("Wish You Were Here?"). Marriage rates, although reduced temporarily, steadily rose throughout the 1930s, and the preoccupation in the media with weddings supports this (Pugh, "Wish You Were Here?"). Furthermore, home-ownership and the attraction of the domestic ideal became a popular and encouraged trend, "a great moral good, a means of promoting family life and an expression of Britishness and stability" (Pugh, "Wish You Were Here?").

These middle-class domestic aspirations, however, were met with the "servant problem" which, Hinds explains, was "the increasing difficulty from the early 1900s through to the 1950s of the middle-classes to secure for themselves the domestic servants that they sought" (308). It can be inferred therefore, that the outward expansion of the middle-class affected the serving classes too; "servants" were turning to other forms of employment with opportunities of their own to achieve middle-class domesticity. Yet without servants, middle-class domesticity lost any elitist sense it otherwise might have had; the serving and middle-classes were dependent on each other for their existence and the changes of the post war era essentially brought them closer. Writing on the detective genre, Kathryn S. McDorman comments that: "[b]ecause it is a democratic fiction that appealed to readers in all strata of British society [...] it reflects many of their concerns. Detective fiction has become the twentieth-century version of the novel of manners" ("Roderick Alleyn and the New Professionals", 121). While her assertion that Golden Age detective fiction is democratic is certainly contentious, the genre does resemble a novel of manners in the sense that it

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<sup>21</sup> Christie had her 'coming-out' in Cairo because it was cheaper and her mother was determined that she would not miss out. See *An Autobiography* (pp.167-169).

<sup>22</sup> Although New Zealand was a small colony at the time, its class structure aspired to and was modeled off that of Britain.

demonstrates to readers the diction, language, acceptable and correct behavior, social gaffes, and distinguishing features of society and different classes during this period.

“A novelist of manners” McDorman explains, “may exaggerate, of course, although not to the same extent as a satirist; but she must present a fundamentally honest appraisal if she is to maintain her credibility as an accurate observer” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 44). The Golden Age authors instructed their readers on this new emerging society, normalised and, to an extent, popularised it. The “cosy” murder, working as a novel of manners, provided a sense of stability, instruction, and a form of control over these uncertainties. The detective fiction of the inter-war years, as Hinds argues, “inhabits, epitomizes, and anatomizes middle-class social mores” (294). In some regards, as Snell suggests, “the ‘detection’ is almost a detection of ‘community’” in the sense that it reveals “through gossip and a jumble of intercrossing angles of vision” a series of “invisible networks” that represent the community or society as a whole (47). The process of detection is the investigation into the community “that is often as yet unclear to the seeming protagonists or ‘actors’” (Snell, 47).

The detective performs the function of a regulator, someone who processes the community through his knowledge and status as an officer of the law, or protector of private interests. This perspective gives readers a moral compass to defer to throughout the novel; in combination with the characters who represent a microcosm of society, readers investigate, reveal, and are instructed on what went wrong and what should have happened, before society is correctly adjusted. In Joseph Kestner’s book *The Edwardian Detective, 1901-1915*, he writes that “[t]he detective narrative, with its functions of policing, surveillance, and maintaining order, can be viewed during the Edwardian age as not only exploring the causes of decline but also reaffirming stability in light of such apprehensions” (9). Kestner invokes Foucault to suggest that the detective’s surveillance of society is “part of the state apparatus for controlling behaviours: ‘the codified power to punish turns into a disciplinary power to observe’” (in *The Edwardian Detective*, 14). The writers of the interwar years continued to use the detective as an instrument of cultural instruction. Though this does provide a sense of stability for the reader, it also instills a sense of class snobbery over the serving class that needs to be addressed.

## Decline of the Aristocracy

Christie and Marsh, while thematically concerned with class changes in Britain, differed greatly in their focus and treatment of it. One aspect that they did converge on was depicting the decline of the aristocracy. K. D. M. Snell writes that Marsh and Christie essentially contributed to chronicling the first half of the twentieth-century by “responding to momentous social and economic changes with a fussy last-ditch insistence upon the rightness of precise internal arrangements” (Snell, 23). If “internal” can be substituted for “class”, these precise “arrangements” become clearer; the rightness of class structure is the real focus. McDorman, somewhat inconsistently from her previously discussed assertion of “democratic” detective fiction, writes that the inter-war “years were intensely unsettling for the ruling classes of Britain, a theme that is sounded most forcefully by other fiction writers but that amounts to nothing more than a nervous giggle in mystery writers’ works” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 134). The treatment of the deterioration of upper-class society may have been mostly unsympathetic, but it was unquestionably a thematic concern of the Golden Age writers: even if only explored humorously and lightly. This can be seen clearly in both Agatha Christie’s *Appointment with Death*, where an upper-class family is dissected and condemned, and in Ngaio Marsh’s most class-critical novel published, *Hand in Glove*. The general (popular) opinion of the aristocracy can be summarised by Henry Lamprey (a member himself) from Marsh’s *Surfeit of Lampreys*:

“We are feeble. We’re museum pieces. Carryovers from another age. Two generations ago we didn’t bother about what we would do when we grew up. We went into regiments, or politics, and lived on large estates. The younger sons had younger sons’ compartments and either fitted them nicely, or else went raffishly to the dogs and were hauled back by the head of the family. Everything was all ready for us from the moment we were born.” (13)

This perspective is mirrored by the internal dynamics of the Boynton family in *Appointment with Death*, where the Boynton’s physical and mental degeneracy can be seen as a metaphor for the death, or needed death, of the aristocracy. Perhaps because of the harshly condemning tone, the Boynton’s are not actually British but American, and thus are able to be more openly criticised. The matriarch of the family, Mrs. Boynton, is described when

amongst her family by Christie as: “[o]ld, swollen, bloated, sitting there immovable in the midst of them—a distorted old Buddha—a gross spider in the centre of a web!” (10). The control over her family’s physical movement, Christie writes, “conveyed the idea that old Mrs. Boynton had pulled an invisible string” and alludes to the mental control that is also occurring (13). Christie’s description of the eldest Boynton son: “a tall rather loose-boned man—age about thirty. The face was pleasant but weak and his manner seemed oddly apathetic” sounds far closer to an English stereotype than an American one (10). Sarah King, whose curiosity is piqued by the second son, Raymond Boynton, feels “slightly scornful of him”: “[t]o be under the thumb of one’s family like that—it was really rather ridiculous—especially for a *man!*” (14). Yet there is an overwhelming number of occurrences, in Christie and Marsh’s fiction alone, that depict an old upper-class British family at the mercy of a patriarch: desperate to keep him happy in the hopes that he will leave them money when he dies. The Boynton’s may be American, but they represent the British aristocratic family structure: dependent on and manipulated by the person who controls the finances.

Ngaio Marsh’s *Final Curtain* provides another example. In this novel Alleyn’s wife, Agatha Troy, is summoned to Ancreton Manor to paint a portrait of the family patriarch, Sir Henry Ancred. While at Ancreton, Troy is witness to the hostility of a family at the financial mercy of a selfish “Old Person” (253). Sir Henry insists on an annual family gathering on his birthday so that he can announce his latest will and reveal who is in (and out) of favour. The Ancreds’ lives revolve around these announcements and their chief concern at the beginning of the novel is that Sir Henry will marry his peroxide blonde mistress and cut the family out of their inheritance. The portrait Sir Henry commissions, a larger than life canvas of him as Macbeth, represents all that is Ancred: artificial, self-imposed grandeur, self-important and fragile, a pure caricature of the aristocracy. Like Christie, Marsh uses Ancred as a metaphor for the decline of the upper class supremacy. Furthermore, the manor itself represents the physical decay of the upper class. Once a magnificent house, “whose very architecture speaks of bombast and self-invention rather than tradition and heritage” (Rowland, 69); it has become infested with rats, the roof leaks and one of the turrets has been chopped down for firewood. Like the aristocracy, it is no longer sustainable.

Outside of the traditionally accepted period of the Golden Age, Ngaio Marsh’s novel *Hand in Glove*, published in 1962, serves a further example of upper-class degeneracy and pretense. The aristocrat Mr. Percival Pyke Period, the last in his line (and hugely proud of his

status) is discovered to be an imposter of low birth and new money, while *Lady Bantling* is a deranged murderer. What *Hand in Glove* does differently, however, is offer a third representative of the aristocracy, one with a place in contemporary society. Nicola Maitland-Mayne, who is employed by Mr. Period because of her family connections, suggests an alternative future for the descendants of such families. Her conversation with Mr. Period on the subject demonstrates this when he asks her if she is indeed a “Maitland”:

“Yes, but I don’t make much of a to-do about the ‘Maitland,’” said Nicola.  
 “Now, that’s naughty of you. A splendid old family. These things matter.”  
 (26)

Nicola demonstrates how outmoded and inconsequential this snobbery has become. She is an ordinary young woman working as a secretary, who just happens to have an old name: her name is the only thing that distinguishes her from any other young woman. This could be due in part to the predominantly middle class readership: by making Nicola no better than the readers, Marsh avoids any snobbish overtones that such a subject could reveal and instead makes Nicola an admirable character for all. Nevertheless, the irony here is that “these things” no longer matter when an aristocrat looks like an ordinary middle-class woman and the only steadfast aristocrat in the novel actually forged his identity.

Nicola’s position mirrors that of Marsh’s detective Roderick Alleyn, whose aristocratic family consists of a Baronet brother and Lady Alleyn for a mother. These are capitalised on by Marsh to a much greater extent than with Nicola; however, when compared with Dorothy L Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey, it is clear Alleyn is different from the typical upper-class sleuth.<sup>23</sup> Snell writes of Wimsey that he “stands as an intelligent and appropriate metaphor for the state of many among the rural upper classes in the inter-war period” (33). Snell describes Wimsey as a “class symbol of inter-war village England” who lacks a clear role: “[i]ndeed, with his confidence problems he might be seen as a metaphor for Britain and gradual decline” (33-34). In contrast, Alleyn is defined by his role as a distinguished policeman, not as a member of the upper-class. Essentially what Christie and especially Marsh suggest, is that to be born into an old established family, while adding to your prestige and suggesting good breeding, is obsolete in any other respect. The reputation of the

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<sup>23</sup> Likewise, despite being clearly both educated and distinguished, Christie’s Poirot is saved from the class question by his foreignness.

remaining aristocratic families clinging to their upper-class status is in ruin, while the “new” generation of highly born but middle-class educated people with respectable jobs, like Nicola and Alleyn, are praised. Not working becomes associated with degeneracy regardless of what family you were born into. The transformation of both classes is, therefore, held in relation to each other. Even Marsh’s beloved Lamprey family must adapt.

### Uncertainty of the Middle Classes

The Golden Age authors may have chronicled the changing landscape of class-based society; however, it was presented from a particular perspective. Golden Age writers have been heavily criticised for their depiction of the lower “serving” classes. McDorman writes that detective fiction “culture reflected resistance to change rather than acceptance of it” (134). As mentioned above, the middle classes relied on the existence of the lower classes to define them. The changes to society, particularly the expanding workforce gave the lower-classes more choices and more opportunities to earn money, while the servant population was severely diminished. Without the *lower* serving the *middle* classes, and without the estates, names, and old money of the upper classes, all three class levels were becoming harder to identify. Golden Age detective fiction, however, took particular care to distinguish, discussing the “servant problem” and lamenting at the dismal service available. Hastings displays surprise at meeting someone who is “clearly, the old-fashioned type of servant seldom seen nowadays” (*Dumb Witness*, 56). It became a case of “us” which included the readers in its snobbery, and “them”; and yet interestingly, the readership of these novels was large and wide-ranging. Despite this perspective, the serving classes would have represented a significant portion of readers.

Despite this apparent snobbery, Marsh and Christie also offered a way forward: a solution to the predicament through assimilation. Both writers focus on different aspects of adaptation to these changes, which are primarily reflected in their detectives: Poirot’s international identity reflects Christie’s optimistic stance for the future of Britain on a more global level, while Marsh inserts notions of hybridity and adaptation to the existing class structures. These concepts will be explored individually below.

## Agatha Christie

### Servants

Firstly it is necessary to address this criticism of Golden Age writers and their demeaning portrayal of servants. K. D. M. Snell asserts, in his article “A Drop of Water from a Stagnant Pool? Inter-war Detective Fiction and the Rural Community”, that “[t]he theme of incompetence and employees’ obstinacy” runs throughout Christie’s novels (28). As he rightly points out, despite including them in her novels as supporting characters, “[o]ne rarely finds much social breadth in this fiction”: the serving classes that are depicted in these stories are “often incompetent or stupid” and are rarely made “murderers, probably” Snell argues, “because they are not thought to be worth developing as full characters” (28-30). In *Dumb Witness*, in an exchange between Emily Arundell and another old lady in the greengrocer’s a reference is made to “service people” which (it becomes evident) is a derogatory and racist comment about all Greek people (10). By association, this term also insults people in the serving classes. Yet these comments, as offensive as they may be, are often made by people like Emily Arundell: old, Victorian in their thinking, and usually lacking authority. It would be very different if it was, for example Poirot or one of the “assistants” such as Hastings, or Mrs. Oliver.

What is unmistakable in the literature of this period is the powerful sense of “class-envy” that Hinds describes as a combination of “envy and superiority”: “whereby middle-class women attribute to their servants a greater degree of agency, power, mobility, economic independence, and even privilege and freedom than they accord themselves” (309). It was the servants who could “decide when to leave and when to stay; they could pick and choose their employers” (Hinds, 309). This is raised in Christie’s autobiography when she discusses food rationing in the war:

[T]here were infinitely more advantages for the working class, because nearly everyone had a cousin or a friend, or a daughter’s husband, or someone useful who was either in a dairy, a grocery, or something of that kind [...] Nobody that I came across at that time ever seemed to keep to the rations.” (*An Autobiography*, 262)

Christie describes this as a “family perk” that was abused “without any feeling of behaving dishonestly”, yet she remains fairly neutral in terms of whether she believed it was immoral or not (*An Autobiography*, 262). Alison Light praises Christie’s style for standing out not because of “its snobbishness but its comparative freedom from much of the rancour and discontent about an expanding middle class which motivates her fellow writers” (*Forever England*, 76). Jealous or not, aside from paying little attention to the lower classes except for the odd criticism, it is hard to accuse her of snobbery. For the most part it seems that Christie was simply writing about what she knew, about what her concerns and interests were. There is no malice or sense of satire in her portrayal of the serving classes; they just do not concern her as much as the middlebrow era of the expanding middle class.

### New Money

One way that Christie explores the changes to Britain’s class system is through the invasion of “new money.” Primarily American, it can be seen as a direct threat to the established, respected and titled aristocracy, most of whom could not afford to keep the vast estates of their family name. In making wealth, not class the focus in her novels, Christie explored the levelling effects of money on class. Money was the aristocracy’s greatest threat because it could part families with their estates and thus undermine what little of the old world there was remaining. The desperation with which the aristocracy cling to their titles and estates is explored in *Peril at End House*, where Christie portrays the murderous desperation to keep an old family property. End House, “a tumble-down old place. Going to rack and ruin” is owned by Nick Buckley, the last living member of the Buckley family who have had the house for “two or three hundred years” (13). Nick murders her cousin so that she can pretend to be the beneficiary of a vast will in order to keep the heavily mortgaged End House.

Wode Hall, the recent acquisition of Linnet Ridgeway in *Death on the Nile* is an example of what happens when the aristocracy lose hold of their property and new money prevails. At only twenty years old Linnet is the very definition of new money, yet she owns (to the village of Malton-under-Wode at least) a vital part of British history: Wode Hall. Interestingly in this case, it is the lower class villagers who protest most vehemently against

Linnet's presence despite the necessity of the old resident to sell. As one villager mentions, "[s]he'll bring money into the town", despite the "envious and grudging" tone:

"Bit of a difference from Sir George," said the other.

"Ah, it was the 'orses did for him," said Mr Burnaby indulgently. "Never 'ad no luck." (10)

Furthermore, Sir George's stereotypical descent from gambling and subsequent bankruptcy appears to be accepted and fondly discussed. Despite Linnet's sensitivity and respect towards Sir George, he remains, according to Tim "quite venomous about her – mutters things under his breath whenever he sees her. Can't forgive her for having given him an absolutely top price for the worm-eaten family estate" (39). Both Sir George and the village resent her intrusion, despite the benefits. This highlights both the reluctance towards change, even if it is positive, but also its inevitability.

## Modernism

What is more of a preoccupation in the novels of Christie, however, and certainly of greater concern, is the decline in status of the *middle*-class. Far from sharing the Victorian beliefs of Miss Emily Arundell, in her influential chapter "Agatha Christie and Conservative Modernity" in her book *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*, Alison Light, asserts that Christie had a "modernist spirit" who, "in her own way is an iconoclast whose monitoring of the plots of family life aims to upset the Victorian image of home, sweet home" (61). With "modernist irony", "a strict formalism of technique" and "a language of reticence", Light argues that Christie "was able to articulate a conservative Englishness but in a modern form" (62). By killing Mrs. Boynton in *Appointment with Death*, for example, Christie sets free the Boynton children, and by saving a marriage and a rocky romance, she instils optimism in her readers for the future of these characters and their offspring. In fact, Christie uses the romance aspect of detective fiction to promote future generations. Light writes:

If nothing else, what marks Christie's work, for all time, as of the post-war generation is its brightness of tone and the premium placed on youth, that

elixir with healing powers which had been so wantonly wasted. Christie's fiction seems to set its face firmly to the future, to address all those who identified with a younger generation stifled first by their elders and then silenced by the tragedies of the war. (*Forever England*, 69)

While Light clearly defines Christie as a modernist, she is never clear on what she believes a 'modernist' is.

In her defence, modernism is a term that eludes definition, largely due to how complex the material is that it covers. In *Modernism: An Anthology*, the editor Lawrence Rainey devotes most of his introduction defining the parameters of modernism, and how they differ depending on the specific medium it is applied to. "Whatever literary modernism was," he writes, "it was impatient with or overly hostile to received conventions of fiction" and showed an open "contempt for popular culture" (Rainey, xxv). If we consider modernist literature, from T.S. Eliot for example, we see the importance of originality, of new structure, new rules that defy anything that was already in existence: *The Wasteland*, for example. The defining characteristic of modernism is its rebellion against popular culture, observing conventions and anything that suggested tradition. When this definition is considered against Light's argument, the claim that Christie is a modernist is very weak. Her strongest case lies in arguing that Poirot is a modernist detective, rather than Christie a modernist author. In reality, both would be more accurately called simply "modern."

Poirot's modernist characteristics discerned by Light are slightly more sustainable. Poirot is an international detective: a man of the world, free from class definitions and his taste in aesthetics certainly appears modernist, "[h]e evinces a penchant for pure form, and for the minimalist rejection of the florid and ornate" (Light, 73), as is his effeminate break with traditional masculinity. In one of her most famous novels, *Murder on the Orient Express*, Christie highlights this idea of global detection, not limited by British law; Poirot is returning to London from Syria, where he assisted the French government, when a murder occurs on board. Poirot must solve the murder while the train is caught in a snowstorm in Yugoslavia and before it reaches the Italian border. Furthermore, the international cast of suspects includes representatives of America, Russia, Germany, Hungaria, Sweden, England and, obviously Belgium, all of whom are linked by a murder that took place in America years

before. *Murder on the Orient Express* exemplifies Poirot's combination of "Belgian" quirks and international ways.

This idea is used by Thomas to argue the relationship between the decline of British authority and power and the rise of America: "the criminal conspiracy in *The Orient Express* represents the emergence of America after the war as a dangerous and more primitive kind of world power" (*Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 270). Thomas argues that the novel "reaffirm[s] the identification of Poirot with European collective nationalism" and further that:

Christie's detective has become one of those indistinguishable citizens of the world himself. Indeed, it is crucial to his identity as a defender of European collectivism that Poirot was born in one European country, lives in a second, and speaks the languages of several others (270).

As a Belgian refugee, Light writes, Poirot was "the best of both worlds": "a dispossessed modern, belonging nowhere in particular, and a comic upholder of the values of the past" (74), not to mention a direct mockery of others. Yet an upholder of the values of the past, comic or otherwise goes against the commonly defiant modernist spirit.

Poirot is a collection of a whole range of characteristics: male, female, British, French, Sherlock Holmes, even Agatha Christie herself: he is a pastiche and because of this he symbolises the international detective; not as a new figure, but a collection and merging of many existing ideas. It is true that Poirot is a break from the "traditional" detective figure as a character who defies class definition and represents the coming age of mass communication, but he embodies this in terms of representing tradition, change, and stereotypes, not from making a clean break from them. Without a clear and justified definition of what she deems "modernist", Light appears as though she has confused being a modernist with simply being modern.

## **Ngaio Marsh**

### Colonial Obsession with Class Culture

Ngaio Marsh, in contrast to Christie, had a characteristic colonial fascination with the traditional rather than the modern, specifically the British Class system. If Christie's decision to make Poirot an "international" detective is telling, then Marsh's bestowment of upper-class English birth right and education upon Alleyn demonstrates her class fixation. Elric Hoper, in his contribution to the Ngaio Marsh Symposium of 1993, writes:

One of the most frequently recurring subjects in satire of provincial and colonial society is that the further from the metropolis, the higher the position claimed in the pecking order by those with pretensions to social status. (9)

It is unlikely that any place in New Zealand, in Marsh's time and even at present, could rival Christchurch and its pretensions. "The establishment of Christchurch, under the control of the Canterbury association" writes Lewis, "is a fascinating example of nineteenth-century social engineering. The settlers were all members of the Church of England, and were chosen to represent a cross-section of British life" (1). As Lauris Edmond notes, "[i]t was clear that a healthy variant of the English class system was alive and well in this city built around the Avon River and planted with English trees" (1). Alleyn is undoubtedly a product of Marsh's colonial class-consciousness, yet his success as a character, and Marsh's success as an author, comes from this colonial perspective too; her experience of the class-system in Christchurch, based on that of England but intrinsically different in practice, provided Marsh with the ability to make Alleyn an entirely new kind of detective. Marsh's treatment of class, particularly in the relationship between Alleyn and Fox, reveals her colonial heritage and the advantages of such a perspective on the changing class system in Britain.

Marsh came from a modest socio-economic background and while her parents gave her an excellent education, it took virtually everything they had. In terms of her relationship with the "Lamprey" family, Lewis writes, "Ngaio was totally out of her class, but as an actress she was able to play a convincing part until the role became more natural" (45). Lewis argues that Ngaio's status "as a New Zealander, a painter and a writer with theatrical experience" meant "she fell outside the normal class boundaries of English society" (45).

This seems to be a bit of an oversimplification. While artists did tend to enjoy a freedom from rigid class rules, they were not exempt from snobbery or inferiority.

Nevertheless, as comfortable with the British gentry as Marsh may have been, her status as colonial complicated matters. As Hoper writes, “[t]he last thing an educated colonial wishes to be thought is colonial”:

As a result, one of the dead-giveaways of the colonial was that their aristocratic behaviour had a rather overblown theatrical element. The undecorated behaviour of authentic blue bloods was much harder to imitate.  
(9)

Yet Marsh did imitate the blue blooded identity with Alleyn very successfully and her popularity in England surely exhibits this. Marsh had been raised in a city and country where, as Lauris Edmond writes, “the wish to belong in England – for preference in the upper echelons of its class system, with titles never far away” was, he argues, a “characteristic fantasy” (2). Marsh’s class-conscious upbringing aligned her with those of her readers who had higher class aspirations, and in a class-based society like England, that would have accounted for a significant percentage of the population. Lewis comments that, “Marsh did know the social niceties of house parties and country house weekends; she had shared in this ambience since she arrived in England, and was already familiar with its transplanted variety in New Zealand” (57). Yet the “element of snobbish prudery” that this aroused and noted by a reviewer in the *Observer*, suggests that, Marsh was perhaps “trying too hard to shake off her roots and adopt an aristocratic demeanor” (Lewis, 80). Nevertheless, Marsh captured a common fascination with class and that certainly is part of her popularity.

Part of Marsh’s enduring critical success, however, comes from her perspective and treatment of the class developments that were occurring in Britain. Kathryn Slate McDorman writes that:

Marsh lived in an England undergoing these subtle, but radical changes in thinking. With her discerning eye as a New Zealander, she had a more disinterested and therefore clearer view of this phenomenon than her great contemporaries. (“Roderick Alleyn and the New Professionals”, 123)

Marsh undoubtedly had a clearer view of the changing social situation in Britain than most: New Zealand had already been through it. The settlers to New Zealand and to Christchurch especially, could not be transplanted and reformed as a properly balanced “re-creation of the provincial and agricultural ideal” as was planned by the Anglican gentry (in Lewis, 1). The servant shortages presented themselves quickly, but unlike when it occurred decades later in Britain, the availability of cheap land meant that servants could charge high wages and buy land quickly and easily “and achieve a degree of independence that would have been impossible in Britain” (Lewis, 2). Marsh’s fiction and her preoccupation with class suggests, however, not disinterestedness as McDorman claims in the above passage, but the fascination that comes from a colonial watching the revered British class structure dissipate and become more like her own in New Zealand. This equates to what Lewis argues is “[a]n ironic tone” that is “often apparent in her novels, mixed with a naïve admiration for certain aristocratic qualities” (68). Marsh does revere class to an extent, but it is mixed with a kind of wonder at its continued existence, and her attitude does become more critical in later years.<sup>24</sup> In effect Marsh’s colonial identity provided her with both conservatism and a vision for the solution to the British social problem, even if only on a fictional level. Marsh managed to depict what a native English writer could not; a gentleman policeman and his working-class assistant, whose identity and relationship represented the future, not the past. The class division, while still distinct, is far more progressive.

### Alleyn

Alleyn’s identity as a gentleman policeman holds its own significance in terms of a progressive class viewpoint. In “Roderick Alleyn”, first published posthumously in *Death on the Air and Other Stories* in 1995, Marsh discusses the day Alleyn was conceived in her imagination and how she believed his best chance of success “lay in comparative normality”, “in the invention of a man with a background resembling that of the friends I had made in England” (“Roderick Alleyn”, 4). Furthermore, Marsh did not want to “tie mannerisms, like labels, round his neck” as Christie and Sayers had done in the footsteps of Sherlock Holmes (4). In hindsight, she writes, “I can see now that with my earlier books I did not altogether

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<sup>24</sup> For example, compare the depiction of the upper-classes in *A Man Lay Dead* (1934), with *Hand in Glove* (1962).

succeed in this respect” (“Roderick Alleyn”, 5). Marsh is here referring to Alleyn’s facetious humour that disappears after the first few novels; it is something often used by critics to evince class conscious snobbery in her writing. LeRoy Panek, for example, accuses Marsh of both appropriating “a remarkably Wimseyean diction”, and using “badly facetious rejoinders” (187). As previously discussed Alleyn’s status as a gentleman detective was definitely not original, nor did Marsh claim it as such: both Sayers and Allingham’s detectives were of noble blood too.

Yet Marsh did manage to make Alleyn a unique detective. He may be a member of the aristocracy, but as Marilyn Rye argues:

[H]e has rejected full membership by his choice of profession and the tempering of his class loyalty. Instead of sustaining the upper class’s vision of itself, he scrutinizes and tests the behavior of its members as he does the suspects of all classes. (92)

As an officer of Scotland Yard, “the first career policeman” (Curtis, 54), Alleyn changes the dynamic of his class status to something quite radical, bypassing the gentleman sleuth category of Wimsey and Campion. “Marsh used” McDorman argues, “the contradiction of background and profession to comment in subtle ways about the English class system”: she “never analyzed or instructed, but she created completely credible and fascinating characters who, by playing their roles so skillfully, do ‘hold the mirror up to nature’” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 77: 112). Contrary to common opinion, Marsh does take a critical approach to most upper class society.

In *Death and the Dancing Footman* the old aristocracy, once so prominent is reduced, as Susan Oleksiw writes, “to a middle-aged man playing parlor games with his friends’ lives” (177). In this novel Jonathan Royal, the middle-aged man in question, devises a scheme to invite a group of selected individuals, all with dubious and antagonistic links to each other, to stay with him for the weekend. He proposes to incite animosity and drama for the benefit of playwright Aubery Mandrake who is to write a play based on the event. These characters include representatives of three separate aristocratic lines who, as Oleksiw explains, “represent the old Country society, the social class that governed England and, by extension, the British Empire” (164). Whatever they once represented, however, “they have” she claims,

“worn themselves out” (Oleksiw, 164). Murder, revenge, jealousy and oedipal undertones are all associated with the aristocracy and this sick “game” Jonathan devises for his own malicious enjoyment is not unlike Mr. Shaitana’s in Christie’s *Cards on the Table*.<sup>25</sup> Especially without the initial presence of Fox, Alleyn’s contrast to these vestiges of the past is made striking. It is not his class that makes Alleyn superior, but his intelligence, skill as a detective, his sense of humour and his unpretentiousness. Alleyn acts as a model modern gentleman, assimilating into a new emerging society, not clinging to outmoded ideas.

### Alleyn and Fox

The aspect of Marsh’s literature that offers the most in terms of constructive and innovative class interactions, however, lies in her pivotal decision to switch from using the traditional “Watson” figure of reporter Nigel Bathgate, to focusing on the partnership between Alleyn and his working-class subordinate, Sergeant Fox. As McDorman writes:

Had Marsh confined Alleyn to these circles and friends, he would have remained a rather rarefied “new breed” at the Yard, with his esoteric quotations and nervous sensibilities. His class background and his eccentricities might have overwhelmed him and seriously limited his appeal. Marsh refused to allow this; as she distracted Bathgate with the demands of matrimony, she began to expand the role of Alleyn’s police subordinate, Edward Fox. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 88)

Marsh has been criticised and once again accused of copying Sayers in this decision. Panek likens Fox to Bunter, Wimsey’s valet (193). The class dynamic may be similar but the difference is that Alleyn does not employ Fox: they are colleagues not lord and master. Although Alleyn always ranks higher, by Marsh’s 1936 novel *Death in Ecstasy*, where Alleyn is Chief Inspector, Fox has been promoted to Detective-Inspector, the rank Alleyn had when he was introduced. In Marsh’s work, as noted by McDorman, “one senses the rigidity of class distinction and perceives in the character of her protagonist, Roderick Alleyn, a symbol of fundamental transformation in attitudes towards both class and professionalism in modern Britain” (“Roderick Alleyn and the New Professionals”, 121). Individually, both do

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<sup>25</sup> In *Cards on the Table*, Mr. Shaitana, a collector of murder memorabilia, invites Poirot to a dinner party with his ‘collection’ of murderers on display as guests. This novel will be discussed further in chapter four.

outwardly appear to be typecast: gentleman sleuth and working-class “copper”, it is the relationship and interaction between these two men that reveals both to be so much more than what their class suggests.

Marsh is not, however, completely exempt from displaying old notions of class and caste; Fox’s working-class origins allow him to get closer to and more information from servants suspicious of Alleyn’s status, and likewise Alleyn’s class is used when there are snobbish aristocrats to interview. Marsh demonstrates the social issues raised in an official police investigation by involving different classes of people; in an official investigation there is a type of class leveling in which all members of society must go through the same process. When he is without Fox in *Death and the Dancing Footman*, Alleyn muses on the servants’ vital knowledge of what occurs in a household and how much he misses Fox:

To tap this source of information is one of the arts of police investigation, and Alleyn, who did not care overmuch for the job, sighed for Inspector Fox, who had a great way with female domestics. Fox settled down comfortably and talked their own language, a difficult task and one which it was useless for Alleyn to attempt. Caper had placed him in Jonathan’s class and would distrust and despise any effort Alleyn made to get out of it. (525)

This is an acknowledgement of their different backgrounds and social positions, yet it is not a patronising view: Alleyn clearly admires the way Fox handles these people and he views it as a skill not a natural social occurrence. Furthermore, when it comes to investigating murder, Fox is in a better position than Alleyn because while the servants distrust Alleyn, the aristocrats tend to dismiss Fox (and working-class policeman in general), underestimating their intelligence and capabilities, often to their detriment. In *Surfeit of Lampreys*, the Lampreys converse in French while under police officer Martin’s observation for the sake of privacy. After exiting the room to see Alleyn and Fox, Fox complains that the Lampreys are probably using Martin’s absence as an opportunity to agree “on the tale they’d tell”:

“They’ve already done that, sir.”

“What!”

“Yes, sir. They spoke in French, sir. I’ve got it down in shorthand. They speak quite good French, with the exception of Lady Patricia. I thought, before proceeding, you’d like to see what they said.” (150)

Martin can speak French: something the Lampreys never anticipated. Fox himself is in the process of learning French with the aid of grammarphones, which, as Panek notes becomes a running joke in Marsh’s novels (193).

Fox is not, however, a typical comical stereotype of a working-class police officer, content in his position, as he might say; by *Death in Ecstasy*, Fox has already progressed to advanced French.<sup>26</sup> Marsh may treat Fox’s French comically in itself, but the idea of him becoming fluent in French is a fairly important breakthrough in class depictions: French is irrefutably something usually used to define the “educated” and privileged classes of Britain from the lower classes, as with the Lamprey family. However, this is not necessarily, as Jeni Curtis points out, “evidence of Ngaio Marsh’s own snobbery, so much as her highlighting of the way in which certain classes of English people perceived themselves and their relationship to law and justice” (54). Due to the nature of their work, law enforcement officers were considered of low social standing. Alleyn defies such a categorisation as a gentleman detective, while Fox, although outwardly befitting the working-class stereotype, demonstrates development, complexity and education.

From Marsh’s first novel *A Man Lay Dead*, it is evident that she did not intend to make Fox a main character; when he appears, McDorman notes “he and Alleyn seem to have a somewhat uneasy relationship. Alleyn is still at his sardonic, affected best, and Fox appears stolid by comparison” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 88). Fox is not, in fact, formally singled out and described until *The Nursing Home Murder*. McDorman notes that by her third novel, “Marsh ha[d] consigned Nigel Bathgate to the periphery and ha[d] elevated the unassuming Inspector Fox to Watson status” (“Roderick Alleyn and the New Professionals”, 137). In *Death in Ecstasy* Fox still has an element of the comical figure, as evidenced by his response to Bathgate’s rather inane outburst:

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<sup>26</sup> See *Death in Ecstasy* p.30

“Chief Detective-Inspector,” he said, “I am your Watson, and your worm. You may both sit and trample on me. I shall continue to offer you the fruits of my inexperience.”

“Very nicely put, Mr Bathgate,” said Fox.

Alleyn and Nigel stared at him, but he was perfectly serious. (99)

While this is most likely an attempt to reveal Fox’s dedication to Alleyn, arguably it can also be read as Fox insulting Bathgate by agreeing with his statement that he acts like a worm to be trampled on. Fox is hardly outspoken, yet he has a quiet intelligence that suggests he is quite capable of such an innocent-seeming and very underhanded insult. Alleyn himself alludes to Fox being as cunning as his namesake by suggesting that when Fox is at his most cunning he appears as the opposite: “[w]hat are we to make of this, Fox?” he asked. ‘What do *you* make of it? You’re looking very blank and innocent, and that means you’ve got hold of an idea’” (*Death in Ecstasy*, 149). By the time Alleyn goes to New Zealand for a holiday in Marsh’s fifth novel, he writes to Fox like a close friend and obviously misses his companionship; in an “extract” from one of his letters to Fox, Alleyn outlines the entire case for him, including a table for alibi purposes as well as descriptions of his impressions of the Maori race and New Zealand police (*Vintage Murder*, 367-372). At the end of the letter Alleyn writes: “I am feeling much better, so you need not put on your scolding air over my police activities” (372); their friendship is clearly thus a close one where they are openly and naturally concerned for each other’s welfare.

As commented on by McDorman, the bond that Marsh created between Alleyn and Fox that “would only deepen with the passage of time, and Alleyn’s marriage” she writes, “enhances the alliance because Troy is so obviously fond of Fox” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 91). Alleyn and Fox complement each other; McDorman writes of their relationship:

Fox’s sanity, his professionalism, and his very chameleonlike blandness provide the perfect anchor for Alleyn’s more mercurial personality and fastidious temperament. Fox represents what most of the upper and upper-middle classes of the early twentieth century would have regarded as the best working-class virtues. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 92)

Fox's presence adds a sense of realism to Marsh's novels. This signifies change, revealing that Marsh is not stuck in an archaic "prewar world of house parties and debutante seasons" (McDorman, *Ngaio Marsh*, 138), but actively engaged in depicting the future of British society and class. Fox keeps Marsh in check just as much as he does Alleyn and their relationship represents the way forward for the English in both the police force and society at large.

### **Colonialism and Class**

Colonials in this literature, like foreigners, are treated as if in a class of their own: an inferior one. Ed Christian writes that the term post-colonial, "[i]n its widest sense", "embraces the members of any group – be it national, tribal, ethnic, or otherwise – which has been marginalized or oppressed and is struggling to assert itself" (1). I use colonial here in the settler or creole sense; as a creole Marsh's identity is complicated by anxiety at not fitting into either culture properly.<sup>27</sup> Marsh, although a colonial, did little to give New Zealanders a voice beyond that of the good natured people with their appalling dialect, defensiveness and embarrassing pretensions to Englishness. Her perspective through which her fiction was written was from a British-born gentleman detective, after all. Nevertheless, Alleyn's relationship with Fox and their class, education, and personality differences that must be worked through are mirrored in Marsh's New Zealand novels. Marsh, McDorman writes, "explored Inspector Alleyn's difficulties in relating to these New Zealanders who are simultaneously complacent and uncertain. He succeeds in winning their respect and trust by adopting an attitude of bemused attachment that never becomes patronizing" (*Ngaio Marsh*, 38); this is a recreation of his relationship with Fox. Marsh's view of the country as a whole, however, remains critical in terms of New Zealanders clinging to outdated British culture. The old country houses that Christie and Marsh employed to depict the decaying upper classes are given a new task in Marsh's New Zealand literature, where they ridicule pretensions to English standards.

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<sup>27</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary online defines "creole" as usually now "a descendant of European settlers, born and naturalised in those colonies or regions, and more or less modified in type by the climate and surroundings."

In Marsh's novel *Colour Scheme*, the Wai-ata-tapu Hostel, "a one-storeyed wooden building shaped like an E with the middle stroke missing", can be seen as a metaphor for the relationship between colonial New Zealanders and their relationship with England:

An observant visitor might have traced in it the history of the Claires' venture. The framed London Board-of-Trade posters, the chairs and tables painted, not very capably, in primary colours, the notices in careful script, the archly reproachful rhyme sheets in bathrooms and lavatories, all spoke of high beginnings. Broken *passé-partout*, chipped paint and fly-blown papers hanging by single drawing pins traced unmistakably a gradual but unmistakable decline. (*Colour Scheme*, 590)

The house and its owners speak of well-intentioned enthusiasm but most of all failure. Regardless of such surroundings, they see themselves as retaining their "class" and practice snobbery against colonials, despite being the very definition themselves. McDorman argues that the characters represent an interesting analogy for colonialism and that "*Colour Scheme* emphasizes the adolescent stage" of colonial development: "the search for a unique identity" through separation "from the parents" (*Ngaio Marsh*, 25). This, she writes, stems from Marsh's insistence "that simple political independence from Britain failed to create nationalism or a national identity" (McDorman, *Ngaio Marsh*, 25). McDorman writes:

Some in *Colour Scheme*, like the Claires, clung to the illusion of their English selves; others, like Maurice Questing and Dikon Bell, had their English, New Zealand and American influences confused and reflected no dominant culture. Those of the younger generation defined themselves by rejecting all that they were not—English, American, or Maori—in the vain hope that the residue might be undiluted New Zealander. Marsh examined all three types in probing but sympathetic portraits; every character in the novel reflects a phase of the developmental conflict. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 25)

This depiction of colonial growth and lack of development can be seen as classifying Marsh in one of two ways: firstly, as a hybrid writer at home in both Britain and New Zealand describing with authority and clear-sightedness the differences between colonial New

Zealanders and the British. McDorman certainly appears to be of this sentiment. The alternative and more credible option is that her hybrid nature made her an outsider of both, not at home in either setting.

Her perspective was not clear-sighted, it was filled with the bias of someone reared in the class-conscious snobbery and inferiority of Christchurch, only to escape and be accepted into the London aristocracy. Surely Marsh was far too embroiled in class-consciousness to be properly objective, even if her views are insightful and valid. Marsh lived in both Christchurch and London, but she was not “at home in both settings” as Alzinia Stone Dale argues (111). Each city held uncomfortable identity issues for her; Lewis writes:

More than an expatriate, she cultivated a dual identity, signing hotel registers in New Zealand with a flourish as ‘Ngaio Marsh, London’, and in England, as ‘Ngaio Marsh, New Zealand’. To those who knew her only in Christchurch, curled up on the floor of her house wearing comfortable trousers, chain-smoking companionably with her students, or pottering around in the garden in old shoes, the glamorous studio photographs taken in England seemed to be of a different person. (130-131)

Marsh’s identity was more split than unified, and as Lauris Edmond describes, “she conspicuously acted out in her life and behaviour many of the conflicts that lay deeply buried in the New Zealand psyche” (1). Marsh evidently acted these conflicts out in her writing: Flossie Rubrick, Agatha Troy and Alleyn are all examples previously discussed.<sup>28</sup>

A further example of this colonial sense of division is seen in the landscape of the Mount Moon homestead in *Died in the Wool*, where an English house, complete with garden and tennis courts sits conspicuously upon the vast mountain range of the South Island of New Zealand. Marsh describes it through Alleyn’s eyes, with its:

Victorian gables and the inevitable conservatory, together with lesser family portraits and surplus pieces of furniture traced unmistakably the family’s English origin. The garden had been laid out in a nostalgic mood, at considerable expense, and with a bland disregard for the climate of the plateau

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<sup>28</sup> See Chapter One, “Ngaio Marsh”

[...] The tennis lawn, carved out of the tussocky hillside, turned yellow and dusty during summer [...] The dining-room windows looked down upon a queer transformation of what had been originally an essentially English conception of a well-planned garden. But beyond this unconvincing piece of pastiche—what uncompromising vastness! (34)

Where the aristocratic manor houses represent an unhealthy rigidity and resistance to change, Mount Moon Station house represents a poor and “unconvincing” imitation of one. The house is discordant with the landscape and is subtly condemned for it through the death of its creator; Flossie Rubric must die because despite her progressive views and patronage, her resistance to forging a new identity for New Zealanders, one that does fit the landscape perpetuates this embarrassing colonial imitation. The “civilised exploration” provided by detective fiction in this genre as described by Olekisz in the opening quote to this chapter not only applies to the uncivilised act of murder, but of civilisation more broadly: what it means to be civilised. In his article “Kiss the Baby Goodbye: ‘Kowhaiwhai’ and Aesthetics in Aotearoa New Zealand” Nicholas Thomas writes that:

It has been pointed out in a critical literature on settler-colonial culture that if creoles are not to perceive themselves merely as impoverished or dislocated Europeans, some effort of indigenisation or localisation is required, that typically entails the cultivation of sentimental attachments to the landscape and the adoption of various badges of indigenous identity. (111)

The settings of these novels thus wield huge influence over the tone and themes of the novel; the concept of class is merely one aspect of the concern with national identity and depicting it through literature.

### Chapter Three: The Detecting Landscape

I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night  
 Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.  
 (*Othello*, II.I.397-398)

For Shakespeare's Iago, hell and night are here expressions of a more physical move from the civilised court of Venice, where the play begins, to the unstable and dangerous island of Cyprus. This shift in setting brings to light the evil lurking beneath the surface of civilised behaviour and manners. The overarching idea is that the act of transplanting a group of civilised members of society into a particular setting can cause chaos where uncivilised primal urges surface. This emphasis on setting is something that the Golden Age detective fiction writers use extensively both in the localised "country house" murders, and in the more Shakespearean use of "foreign" settings. Furthermore, the landscape of these novels is used as a way of reflecting on the changing identity of the British: especially when transplanted to a foreign setting, their own cultural identity stands out more plainly. Simon Joyce writes that "instead of being relegated to the background of literary analysis, as the mere 'setting' for narrative, representations of physical space are seen as actively involved in shaping textual meaning" (1). These settings often reflect a national concern for Britain in which Thomas suggests, "formerly stable national distinctions seem to have become almost entirely unintelligible" (*Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 258). While this is extreme and arguably untrue, it does demonstrate the monumental nature of the changes occurring during the period.

A world of warfare, instability and global travel faced Christie and Marsh and their readers. This is reflected, Thomas writes, in the way "in which everyone is a suspect and no one can be conclusively identified or fully trusted" (*Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 259). As Light asserts, "[w]hether in Mesopotamia or St Mary Mead, society is a society of strangers" (Light, 93). This is reflected in the stuffy confines that usually accompany the text: settings of houses, theatres, trains and even an airplane, where the physical boundaries add to the psychological pressure and tension of the mystery. Furthermore, as McDorman describes:

Those writers, like Marsh, who utilized themes of Commonwealth development offered some interesting perspectives on this issue and ultimately suggested how the British people viewed themselves and their great colonizing effort in a world where power was being transferred increasingly from older nations in Europe to newer ones in Asia and Africa. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 22)

It is difficult to imagine now in present day society, the centrality of the local landscape to personal identity and the powerful effect its shifting boundaries would have had on Golden Age readers. The psychological landscape of the mystery is reflected in the setting of these novels. The setting thus becomes an anthropological snapshot of life, culture and class in post-War England from microcosm to macrocosm: day-to-day life and the chief anxieties of middlebrow culture to the nation's identity as a collective.

### A “Cosy” Setting

Virtually all novels of Golden Age detective fiction, specifically those of Christie and Marsh, reproduce the same setting over and over again: the “cosy” circle. This contains the core of the story; a small group of people who are isolated when a murder is committed, and who must remain together until it is solved.<sup>29</sup> Within this group is the murderer and usually at least one of the victims (some murders are committed before the novel begins, or extraneously while the investigation is underway). In employing this core setting there can be no possibility of a murderer being an outsider or a stranger and thus the detective (and by association the reader) has only a handful of possible suspects. As K. D. M Snell writes, the Golden Age authors:

[P]referred known face-to-face communities, within which they could create and resolve a crime in the context of everyday life and an inward-looking set of characters, where they could expound principled ideas, disrupt privacy and reassert moral authority in a relatively closed community. (24)

This group can be transplanted into a myriad of different physical locations depending on the type of murder and characters used. The “fragility of such appearances of social order” can

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<sup>29</sup> Obviously this is over-simplified. There is often more than one murder and the group can remain close-by without having to be in the same residence, the emphasis is on restricted confines.

thus be shown through this group of people in locations that range, “from a country house or a village to a theatrical troupe” (Curtis, 50). The choice in landscape setting of these murders can be generalised too, as Colin Watson writes:

Their choice of setting is believed by many to have been calculated on the principle that the eruption of violence in the midst of the familiar, the respectable, the ordinary, is more shocking – hence more satisfactory as a device of fiction – than the presentation of evil in a locality itself unusual or sinister. (“The Message of Mayhem Parva”, 107)

Furthermore, there is a strong sense of nostalgia that pervades the atmosphere of these novels. As Watson argues, “England as represented by Mayhem Parva” (his term for Golden Age detective fiction), “was as much a mythical kingdom as any realm of musical comedy, but the fantasy derived from nostalgia, not invention” (“The Message of Mayhem Parva”, 107). Arguably, however, nostalgia is precisely that: an invention. Nostalgia is heavily imbedded in both the past and the present because it is more about what is happening in contemporary society to warrant the nostalgia than the subject of it.

Taken together, these novelists can be seen to work from a pattern: a small group of people in isolation from the general population. The physical setting will be one of familiarity, created even in the foreign location novels by the sense of Englishness and British dominion or nostalgia. As Auden suggests, “[n]ature should reflect its human inhabitants, [...] for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of murder. The country is preferable to the town” (19). Auden continues, suggesting that “[t]he corpse must shock not only because it is a corpse but also because, even for a corpse, it is shockingly out of place, as when a dog makes a mess on a drawing room carpet” (19). These novels “offered not outward escape” as Watson argues, “as did books of travel, adventure, international intrigue, but inward – into a sort of museum of nostalgia. The word ‘cosy’ often has been applied, and in no pejorative sense, to the Mayhem Parva writers” (*Snobbery with Violence*, 171). The country was so popular as a setting for these “cosy” murders because it represents a state of innocence that the city lacks. This draws upon the old rural “pastoral” romance genre used to express a “nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity” of rural life in an “idealised natural setting” (Abrams, 120).

As prescribed as many aspects of the “cosy” novel were, like the “rules” of detective fiction<sup>30</sup> the pattern was altered and broken: the only one that stayed consistent throughout the novels of Christie and Marsh was the inner “cosy” circle. Lewis acknowledges this when she states that “[n]one of these writers stayed rooted in the archetypal English village jokingly called Mayhem Parva; all explored fresh territory and new situations” (59). “Of the eight novels that Marsh published in the 1930s,” she writes, “only one, *Overture to Death* (1939), falls directly into the category of the “English cosy”, a novel set entirely in an English country village, where the highlight of the social season is a play performed by local talent in the village hall” (Lewis, 59). While Christie avoided repetition by varying her settings and style quite considerably, she did tend to stick to the nostalgic landscape more closely. It seems Christie preferred the more “innocent” normality that is made so much more unsettling when murder is committed. Marsh, however, stuck to a much narrower formula in which the theatre was one of the main ways she adapted and personalized her settings.

### Country House Murders

The most typical form associated with the “cosy” group in Golden Age detective fiction is the Country House Murder which, George Grella describes, “presents a group of people assembled at an isolated place—usually an English country house—who discover that one of their number has been murdered” (“The Formal Detective Novel”, 84-85). It suggests a party of some sort: usually upper class friends and relatives where there are a myriad of ill feelings and secrets to be exposed as the story unravels. The Country House Murder is useful for revealing two important aspects of changing British life: domestic arrangements and the decline of the aristocracy, who are usually represented by at least the host, if not the guests as well. Ngaio Marsh’s first book, *A Man Lay Dead*, was written in the form of this sub-genre and reveals the extent of the popularity of its kind. Not only does Marsh set her murder in a country house, but the murder takes place during a game frequently played at the time in such a setting, the murder game. A group of people are invited away to the country house of Sir Hubert Handesley for one of his famous ““unique and delightfully original house-parties”” and the novel begins “in grandeur” as two of the guests travel by train first-class to Frantok (*A Man Lay Dead*, 14:13). Marsh writes in an ironic tone that “Charles Rankin, himself a

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<sup>30</sup>See S. S. Van Dine “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Fiction” which was written in response to Ronald Knox’s “Knox’s (Ten) Commandments”. Both works are extremely difficult to track down.

connoisseur of house-parties, had refused many extremely enviable invitations in favour of these unpretentious weekends” (14). Perhaps “unpretentious” is a relative term to house parties but between Frantock, the first-class travel and the concept of a weekend house party, this novel makes very clear its interest in upper-class life, yet at the same time, suggests a parody of an established form.

### Christie and the Rural Ideal

*A Man Lay Dead* is a novel that fit with an already established “type” yet it suggested the beginnings of a parody that pervade the “cosy” murders: it did not take itself seriously. Alison Light writes of Christie, that “[i]n the same spirit the country house is cheerfully updated over the years: into an hotel in *Evil under the Sun*” for example, as well as many more (Light, 81). By “updating” the country house and expanding its scope, these writers allowed for more variation that both appealed to more readers and included a much larger range of character types. In the classic “whodunit” mystery, Scott McCracken argues that:

[T]he English countryside is part of a modern and progressive nation-state. Far from being cut off and isolated, the rural setting is linked to the city by railway, telegraph or telephone, while the characters who occupy that world are often cosmopolitan or accustomed to foreign travel.<sup>31</sup> (64)

The County House Murder thus adapted into rural settings in general: also isolated, still invoking the pastoral innocence, but much broader in scope. Alison Light comments that:

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. It is not just the metropolis which can signify displaced and anonymous humanity; by the 1930s it is possible to imagine the ‘Home’ Countries, that place which conservative ideology was constructing as the heart of England, as the reverse of homely. (*Forever England*, 92)

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<sup>31</sup> This is also often the case with Holmes.

*Evil under the Sun*, as mentioned above by Light is an example of the updated country house murder setting: the “great cult of the Seaside for Holidays” as Christie writes (*Evil under the Sun*, 373). An old Georgian property, “added to and embellished”, “The ‘Jolly Roger Hotel, Smugglers’ Island, Leathercombe Bay”, Christie writes, “came triumphantly into being” (373). The guests become paid ones and strangers (at least supposedly) but in essence it is the same.

Contrary to common perception, however, less than half of Christie’s novels are set in “cosy” villages; the rural landscape is usually reserved for the Miss Marple mysteries, which often take place in villages or country mansions. The more urban Poirot, who lives in an apartment in London, tends to be more involved with more glamorous settings: foreign and local holiday locations as well as metropolitan cases. It is important to make clear, however, how varied Christie was with both setting and the way in which it was used. Marsh’s interest of the theatre, by contrast, narrowed her scope in a way, but also gave her more opportunity for depth.

### The Theatre and Ngaio Marsh

It is often said, by New Zealand critics especially, that Marsh’s first love was not writing (or painting) but the theatre. Whether this is true or just argued for the sake of New Zealand’s literary reputation, Marsh certainly did love the theatre, and the number of times it appears in her literature supports this. All four “queens” of crime had a sense of theatricality about their works, which will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, but none so explicitly as Marsh. Of her sixteen novels during the Golden Age period, from her first in 1934, to *Opening Night* in 1951, three were explicitly related to the theatre,<sup>32</sup> and a further six had strongly theatrical overtones.<sup>33</sup> Marilyn Rye writes that “this setting with its company of actors reappears frequently in Marsh’s fiction” as Marsh “recreates the country house

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<sup>32</sup> *Enter a Murderer*, *Vintage Murder*, and *Opening Night*.

<sup>33</sup> *Death in Ecstasy* (in which a woman is killed in a theatrical religious ceremony), *Artists in Crime* (where the body of an artist’s model is committed with props), *Overture to Death* (a pianist is killed mid-concert), *Surfeit of Lampreys* (a theatrical performance takes place right before the murder), *Colour Scheme* (a theatrical performance again is the key event to which the murder is related) and *Final Curtain* (a famous Shakespearean actor is killed after having his portrait painted as Macbeth).

murder formula in a variety of milieu” (89). Furthermore, her talent and love of the theatre coloured all of her murders and many of her character “roles”. As McDorman notes, “Ngaio Marsh knew and respected the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action in drama”: “[i]t was her skill as a novelist, trained in the theater, that enabled her to work within their confines. The theater provides some of the same advantages to plot as does the classic country house or the small village” (McDorman, *Ngaio Marsh*, 130). The theatre could be transplanted and used in many different forms; what is interesting is that it creates a much more unsettling atmosphere than the “cosy” pastoral ideal. In a world of theatre and actors, there is significantly less nostalgia and comfort because it is all the more apparent that no one can be trusted and that appearances are deceptive.

McDorman writes that Marsh created such “uniquely detailed environments” that “place and character are always of secondary importance” in her novels (*Ngaio Marsh*, 46). This represented, she claims, “Marsh’s continuing departure from the classic precept for writing a detective story” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 46). The theatre is only one such detailed environment but it can be used in conjunction with the rural landscape as it is in *Vintage Murder*, and with the city in *Enter a Murderer*. The best example of Marsh merging the country house murder with the theatre is demonstrated in *Final Curtain*, where theatricality is part of the legacy of the Ancred family and the patriarch, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a retired Shakespearean actor. Ancreton House is displayed as a stage for these family members to perform their monologues on: a backdrop to their “act” metaphorically as it is literally in Sir Henry’s Macbeth portrait. Sir Henry’s youngest granddaughter is referred to as “the bloody child” of Macbeth and his daughters the three weird sisters (despite there being four). Furthermore, the novel is littered with quotations from Shakespeare and other plays; Cedric complains of his aunt Pauline: “[s]ince the Tragedy she is almost indistinguishable from Lady Macduff. Or perhaps that frightful Shakespearean dowager who curses her way up hill and down dale through one of the historical dramas” (403). While interviewing one of Sir Henry’s daughters (called Desdemona), Alleyn shrewdly notes that:

On the wall opposite her hung a looking-glass in a Georgian frame. He saw that Desdemona was keeping an eye on herself. Even as she moved her palms from before her eyes, her fingers touched her hair and she slightly turned her head while her abstracted yet watchful gaze noted, he thought, the effect. [...] He felt as if he interviewed a mannequin. (387)

Troy also notes the difficulty of identifying how genuine the Ancreds' grief is and how much of it is a chance to "perform" by "expressing so eloquently that sorrow whose authenticity [she] was not quite willing to discredit" (344). In virtually all whodunit detective fiction where there is a select group of characters and one is the murderer, no one is completely genuine. Marsh simply brings the reader's attention to the staged theatrical side of these murders where the murderer is acting the part of an innocent character. These elements, like Christie's, are easily transferrable between rural and city scenes.

### **A 'Foreign' Setting – London and Abroad**

The most popular city setting for Golden Age detective fiction is London. In the inter-war years a great deal of detective fiction was set there, as Colin Watson explains, "London and its society fascinated a public which was" both "static" and "conscious of its provincialism" (Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 193). None of the four "queens" were perhaps quite as conscious of their provincial roots as Ngaio Marsh: her fascination with London is unmistakable in her novels. Particularly in this Golden Age period, however, Christie seemed to be more interested in foreign locations. Stephen Knight writes that "the setting will be the screen on which are projected the interests and anxieties dear to the audience, who usually live anywhere but the imagined place and so fantasise both the pleasures and the dangers of such a relocation" (143). The "cosy" murder poses a problem for this theory: for if the readers did not live in London, rural England or go on holiday, where were they all? Part of the effectiveness of Golden Age fiction is that the settings are familiar: many readers would have at least visited London or a rural English village, or taken a seaside holiday. The point of these settings was to re-create what the reader had already experienced: to draw on those experiences and contrast them with the sinister events in the novel. Nevertheless, part of Marsh's fascination with London did come from the fact that for most of her life she lived in New Zealand. While Christie yearned for more travel, Marsh longed for London.

## Marsh and London

For Marsh, London was a foreign setting and it features in many of her novels. McDorman writes that “[e]xamining Marsh’s use of London as a setting reveals that in thirteen or more of her thirty-two novels she featured the city in at least a portion of the story” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 57). The first time Marsh visited London she was asked to write a series of articles as “A New Canterbury Pilgrim” which “appeared regularly throughout 1928 and 1929” (Lewis, 40). These were travel pieces: descriptions of the sights and sounds of London for an avid New Zealand audience. The articles contained descriptions “on a variety of subjects, from mannequin parades to air shows” which, Lewis writes, would surely “have fuelled nostalgia in the minds of recent immigrants, and encouraged even more impatient young people to find the passage money for a trip ‘home’” (40). Sadly, after thoroughly enjoying London for a few years and finishing her first novel, Marsh was called back to New Zealand because her mother was ill. Lewis comments that “[t]he New Zealand she returned to in 1932 could hardly have provided more of a contrast to the England she had left” with “the depression “at its height, and in 1932 riots had occurred in all four major cities” (66). Furthermore, after living with the Lampreys and later in a London flat by herself, she was back in Christchurch in her parents’ home looking after them. Stuck where she was, it is not surprising that she returned to London as often as possible in her novels. Apart from one overseas trip in 1937 when she did return to London in person, between 1932 and 1949 she remained in Christchurch (McDorman, *Ngaio Marsh*, 12); virtually the entire Golden Age era.

Writing about London thus became a form of escapism for Marsh as much as reading about it was for her readers. Nevertheless, depicting London and England more generally while in New Zealand proved problematic and has attracted criticism. Kathryn Slate McDorman is generous in her praise of Marsh and her critical perspective of both England and London as a “hybrid personality” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 3). Margaret Lewis, however, criticises Marsh’s London of the forties as being “clearly based on her pre-war memories of London, where she danced at jazz clubs like the ‘Metronome’ with the Rhodes” (Lewis, 118); Lewis writes that “[t]he tie with England was unbreakable, and Ngaio created a mythic picture of England that she was later to perpetuate in her fiction” (38). This is particularly clear in her

1949 novel *Swing Brother Swing* where, Lewis notes, “Ngaio [had] not visited England for eleven years, and this is quite apparent from her approach”:

As a fairly lightweight society crime story set in the 1930s it would have been acceptable, but set in the grey and dreary London of the years following the human and physical destruction of the Second World War, the plot seems ridiculous and the atmosphere of privilege and snobbery insensitive. A trip to England was clearly long overdue if she was to continue to set plots there with any kind of conviction. (117-118)

With its swing bands and socially focused media reports of gossip that surrounds the scandals and romances of the upper-classes, *Swing, Brother, Swing* does come across as light and frivolous (510-512).

This accusation is fiercely defended by Alzinia Stone Dale in her article, “Ngaio Marsh’s London.” “Lewis’s judgment” Dale contends, “is both inaccurate and anachronistic because Marsh’s fictional London is a surprisingly good fit for the real place” (109):

I actually walked Marsh’s London streets and found that Marsh’s London was far freer of fancy than that of her British contemporaries like Agatha Christie and Margery Allingham, who specialized in atmosphere, but very seldom used real places. (112)

It is unsurprising that Marsh used real landmarks in her novels. Perhaps as an effect of being a tourist in awe, Marsh felt the real London was much more exciting than a fictional one. As comforting to readers as it may have been that Marsh’s London was based quite accurately on 1949, Dale spectacularly misses the point. Firstly, what Lewis means is that Marsh’s story was inaccurate in terms of the *mood*; the tone of *Swing, Brother, Swing* was inappropriately gay for the atmosphere of post-war London and no amount of factual accuracy about which buildings were still intact would have made a difference. Secondly, a fairytale element *is* actually present in Marsh’s London settings. Even in Marsh’s earlier novels, such as *Surfeit of Lampreys* which was published in 1941, Marsh’s London is a fairy-tale like place, based on experiences and fact but interpreted and described through the gothic, Dickens and the theatrical.

*Surfeit of Lampreys*

In *Surfeit of Lampreys*, Marsh's own trip "home" to stay with the Rhodes family is recreated, when the New Zealand character Roberta visits the Lamprey family; the whole tale adopts a distinctly fantastical element. Through Roberta, Marsh is able to recreate her experience of seeing London for the first time: "she could scarcely so much as gape at the London she had greatly longed to see" (*Surfeit of Lampreys*, 24). She describes the daze of the overwhelmed tourist being broken by the sight of the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus:

It is here at the place which he learns with a rare touch of insolence, to call the hub of the universe, that the colonial wakes from the trance of arrival, finds his feet in London paving stones, and is suddenly happy. (27)

Marsh's London has a distinctly fantastic air to it which is captured by her appropriation of Dickensian characteristics, including the London gothic style that Charles Dickens developed when he took the setting of eighteenth century gothics and transplanted it on to the streets of London. This homage to Dickens is furthered by the Lamprey family themselves who appear to have come straight from Dickens: they are a large dramatic family with money problems and expensive taste, evocative of the Micawber's in *David Copperfield*. The head of the family, Charles Lamprey, openly hides from his debt collectors (called 'bums' in the novel) and when Charles is caught out by one of them, his eldest son is quick to pass on the news:

"I thought you might like a good laugh," said Henry. "The bum has come up the back stairs and caught poor old Daddy. He's sitting in the kitchen with Baskett and the maids."

"Oh, *no!* said his mother.

"His name is Mr Grumble," said Henry. (*Surfeit of Lampreys*, 39)

Mr Grumble, who turns out to actually be Mr Grimball, exemplifies the light-hearted Dickensian tone. This connection to *David Copperfield* is made more explicit by a direct comparison when Henry attempts to guess Roberta's thoughts, she replies: "[n]o, Henry, don't. But you can make another kind of guess. What family in fiction would you most

resemble if you belonged to a different class?” (280); the answer is, of course, “[t]he Micawbers” (281).

The gothic atmosphere, first overtly invoked during Alleyn’s midnight walk home and conversation with the local patrolling policeman about *Macbeth*, is used as a clue to the murder. This atmosphere is further employed when Roberta and Henry volunteer to stay in an old Victorian apartment for the night: windy, raining and dark, Marsh writes “[i]t was in a sort of trance that Roberta offered to spend the rest of an endless night in an unknown house with the apparently insane widow of a murdered peer” (214);

The great door swung inwards. With the feeling that an ominous fairy-tale was unfolding, Roberta saw a very old woman dressed in black satin and carrying a lighted candle in a silver candlestick. She stood against a dim background of stuffed bears, marble groups, gigantic pictures and a wide staircase that assembled into blackness. (220)

From initial fairytale to comical Dickens, to gothic horror, the London Marsh invokes, regardless of whether there is actually an old Victorian house at the address given by Marsh, is a fictionalized one. *Surfeit of Lampreys* was published two years into World War II and despite small references to the Lamprey men joining the Armed Forces, it effectively turns its back on reality.

### *Death in Ecstasy*

While Marsh obviously was out of touch with war-affected London, her city novels have always contained this mythic air. In her fourth novel *Death in Ecstasy*, published in 1936 and set in London, the city is just as fantastic and heavily atmospheric. The novel opens on “a pouring wet Sunday night in December” and retains an atmosphere of darkness and intrigue throughout. The mystery surrounding the House of the Sacred Flame in Knocklatchers Row is emphasized by the authoritative narrative voice of Bathgate who suggests to the reader they are being told a mysterious but true story that occurred in the past, from someone who had experienced it. The opening tone is that of a fairytale, like “Arabian Nights” in London: “[t]here are many strange places of worship in London, and many

remarkable sects [...] All sorts of queer little religions squeak, like mice in the wainscoting, behind its tedious façade” (*Death in Ecstasy*, 7). At the beginning of the novel, the readers are addressed like children listening to a tale:

Why, for instance, should old Miss Wade beat her way down the King’s Road against a vicious lash of rain and in the teeth of a gale that set the shop signs creaking and threatened to drive her umbrella back into her face? She would have been better off in her bed-sitting-room with a gas fire and a library book.  
(7)

This combination of tone and content sets the uncanny theatrical mood for the story. The church and cult are fictional as Marsh makes clear in her “Foreword”, yet it would not matter if it did. The facts are not nearly as important as the atmosphere, about how the setting can draw parallels with the murder, in the case of Marsh, and a striking contrast most often in the work of Christie.

### Christie Abroad

Christie’s novels abroad come from a long line of works that employ setting to highlight ideas about human nature. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Shakespeare took his Venetian characters in *Othello* and threw them into violent Cyprus; the dramatic change of environment, so different from Venice, brought out the inner savagery of men. E. M. Forster used setting in a similar way in his novel *Passage to India*. While there is no question that Shakespeare and Forster are beyond the Golden Age writers’ league in literary merit, it is the same tool. Christie’s travel settings are informative, emotive and evocative; she quite often uses the contrast of a peaceful sleepy village with a murder scene, however, particularly during the Golden Age time frame under consideration, a large percentage of her novels were set abroad. As Light notes, “[i]n the 1930s there is hardly a novel which does not bear some mark of ‘abroad’” (*Forever England*, 89). Both Christie and Marsh wrote novels abroad, but if the theatre is Marsh’s forte, then foreign travel is Christie’s: one of them at least. Christie’s “sense of place”, writes Charles Osborne, “always emerges particularly strongly in those of her novels with un-English settings” (98). Light

continues this theme when she writes that “Christie uses abroad as a more effective means of concentrating her plots and isolating her characters so that their local anxieties and indigenous behaviours are thrown into relief” (*Forever England*, 91). Christie’s characters, Light continues, “take their domestic outlook with them, like so much bottled water, and murder simply works to reinforce the sense of privacy which has been invaded” (*Forever England*, 91); just like the mess on the carpet discussed above.<sup>34</sup>

### *Death on the Nile*

Travel between the wars had, in fact, become more possible for most of the population: “[i]ronically”, Light writes, “the war left a surplus of transportation which saw the former destroyers turned into luxury liners and cruisers, and made possible the growth of air travel” (*Forever England*, 89). Christie thus captures, “a middlebrow world of burgeoning tourism which at its most expensive could include Nile cruises and journeys on the Orient Express” (Light, *Forever England*, 89). Christie’s 1937 novel, *Death on the Nile* is a perfect example of this new opportunity to travel; although acknowledged to be very expensive, the characters on the Nile cruise range in class, wealth and nationality: another sign of the democratization of class that was occurring in Britain. This novel is closest to the *Othello* model in the sense that it begins in London then shifts to Egypt, which is where the evil emerges. Christie begins by introducing each of the main characters in their own natural habitat, some in America as well as England, and then jumps in time to when they are all about to embark on the Nile cruise together. Christie describes a hot sandy market atmosphere which Poirot and Rosalie Otterbourne walk through, where “[f]ive watchful bead-sellers, two vendors of postcards, three sellers of plaster scarabs, a couple of donkey boys and some detached but hopeful infantile riff-raff closed in upon them” (54);

“You want beads, sir? Very good, sir. Very cheap...”

“Lady, you want scarab? Look – great queen – very lucky...”

“You look, sir – real lapis. Very good, Very cheap...”

“You want ride donkey, sir? This very good donkey. This donkey Whiskey and Soda, sir...” (54)

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<sup>34</sup> It is Christie’s travel writing that also highlights her middle-class stature; she is well-travelled and draws on these experiences for these foreign novels.

From the heavily tourist-dependent atmosphere of the market scene, the Nile cruise, as Simon Doyle comments, “feels, somehow, so much less touristy – as though we were really getting into the heart of Egypt” (119). The effect of this foreign landscape is expressed by Rosalie while talking to Poirot:

“There’s something about this country that makes me feel – wicked. It brings to the surface all the things that are boiling inside one [...]” she stopped. “I shouldn’t have said that, I suppose.”

Poirot made a gesture with his hands.

“Why not say it – to me? [...] If, as you say, you boil inside – like the jam – *eh bien*, let the scum come to the surface, and then one can take it off with a spoon, so.”

He made a gesture of dropping something into the Nile.

“Then, it has gone.” (117-118)

Poirot’s jam-making analogy is fitting for the whole of the “cosy” murder genre, the Egyptian setting coupled with the close confines of the boat merely hasten the process. Such an historical backdrop adds a richness and sense of mystery to the novel which would have undoubtedly appealed to readers. As the party embark on their sail down the Nile the sights seem to reflect the atmosphere on board the boat: when the scenery becomes “less stern” with “palms, cultivation”, obvious signs of civilization, the mood onboard shifts: “[i]t was as though the change in scenery had relieved some secret oppression that had brooded over the passengers” (133). The implication is that the atmosphere influences the people, and also adds suspense for the reader’s enjoyment with a little superstition.

The attraction of the exotic is twofold here. Firstly, from the perspective of Golden Age readers, reading about somewhere new and exciting and now more possible to visit would have had massive appeal. There exists also, however, the cultural fascination of the exotic ‘other’ as most famously discussed by Edward Said who, in his book *Orientalism*, Matthew Scott writes, is “determined to suggest that” the “East” “has a qualitatively different imaginative currency to other half-imagined foreign places because it has been an arena of continual imperial ambition” (66). Scott writes that the “literary attention to the East, growing out of the period of empire, were sustained into a twentieth century fascination with the

‘other’ that was” “at best patronising” (66). While certainly not politically correct, Christie capitalised on this fascination with otherness and her own experiences to dramatize the settings and add to the appeal of her novels.

### *Appointment with Death*

Atmosphere and the foreign landscape are utilized in a similar way in *Appointment with Death*, where a small group of people visiting Jerusalem take a tour and camp by the “rocky stronghold of Petra” (57). As with *Death on the Nile*, the novel opens on “civilisation”, the Solomon Hotel in Jerusalem and the murder does not occur until the party is camping at Petra. Just as with the village atmosphere where it changes from safe and cosy to sinister, Petra shifts from exciting and beautiful to oppressive and unsettling. In this novel there is a particularly powerful link between the sinister character of Mrs. Boynton and the setting of the caves, as if she is a manifestation of them, or they of her: there is an unmistakable and inextricable link. However, in this novel the atmosphere is more dependent on Mrs. Boynton than Petra; Sarah’s journey to the campsite is described in terms of her recognition of Mrs. Boynton:

Gone was the feeling of peace—of escape—that the desert had given her. She had been led from freedom back into captivity. She had ridden down into this dark winding valley and here, like an arch priestess of some forgotten cult, like a monstrous swollen Buddha, sat Mrs. Boynton... (56)

The power Mrs. Boynton holds over her family is similar to the atmosphere over the passengers in *Death on the Nile*, as Raymond Boynton describes:

“You see I can’t answer for myself even now. I might do—anything! I might pass you by or cut you, but I do want you to know that it isn’t me—the real me—who is responsible for that. It’s my nerves. I can’t depend on them.... When she tells me to do things—I do them! My nerves make me!” (57-58)

Murder, especially abroad, seems to put the English (and others) under the microscope of studiers of human nature and makes them vulnerable to ridicule. Light writes that “Christie’s travel settings produce a Chinese box effect” in which “readers are given back a mirror image of their own concerns and the peripatetic settings enhance, rather than diminish, the social and psychological inwardness of the plots” (*Forever England*, 91). The further benefit of the foreign setting is, as it was with Gothic literature, that the evil occurs somewhere other from where the reader is, who are most likely safely in England.

## **New Zealand**

As mentioned above, as well as having similar concerns to Christie, Marsh had the additional complication of being a born and raised colonial New Zealander. The number of times she either set her novels in New Zealand, or had characters with ties to the country proves her interest. Marsh analysed, McDorman argues, “what New Zealanders thought of themselves and their place in the world, and what illusions shaped their perceptions” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 23). “In her New Zealand novels”, McDorman writes, “the country is a major character in the plot”: “[i]ndeed, in all the New Zealand novels the different parts of the country contribute significant commentary on the characters, the plot, and the mystery” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 46). Marsh still painted, and her paintings reveal her obsession with capturing the New Zealand landscape even if her novels were focused mainly on England (Lewis, 70). In terms of her writing, in addition to travel pieces and her detective fiction, Marsh did initially intend to write a New Zealand novel as well. She started the novel around 1927 but never felt as if she had properly captured the country:

It had lost my first intention and was steaming off busily down the well-worn rails of the colonial novel. I had merely changed the landscape and might as well have sent my characters to Canada or Jericho. Gone was the idea which was to have been the whole matter of my book. I turned, more successfully, to crime fiction. (In Lewis, 53)

“Speaking in public about Katherine Mansfield many years later”, Marsh praised Mansfield for her treatment of New Zealand as a setting without overpowering the novel’s themes or characters, while still sufficiently evocative of place (53); Marsh explained, “because she

isn't writing her boots off to create local colour she remains one of the most successful of our writers to do precisely that thing" (in Lewis, 53). Marsh understood, as Lewis acknowledges, "the unique problems of writing prose fiction that as to be rooted in a new and as yet artistically undefined society" and yet she herself was not equipped to do it (53). The sentiments of ex patriot, Dikon Bell in *Colour Scheme* sound therefore as if they are Marsh's own: "Dikon, who longed to be in London, recognized in himself an affinity with this indifferent and profound country and resented its attraction" (614); Dikon appears to share the same frustrated attraction to New Zealand, despite his attempts to leave it behind.

### Portraying the New Zealand Landscape

As previously discussed, Marsh was called back to New Zealand to her dying mother before her first novel had even been printed.<sup>35</sup> Between taking care of her father, and the War, Marsh was trapped in New Zealand for virtually all of the Golden Age period. Given her success in writing detective stories and her living situation, it is not surprising that the New Zealand landscape worked its way in. Marsh eventually brought her detective, Roderick Alleyn to New Zealand on holiday and later on assignment and was able to capture some of the landscape in this way. Although she never managed to write her serious novel, *Vintage Murder*, *Colour Scheme* and *Died in the Wool* do all capture some part of New Zealand and its landscape. As she jokingly writes in a letter from Fabian Loss to Alleyn in *Died in the Wool*, New Zealand was an ideal "setting for a modern crime story" (20).

Marsh's first New Zealand novel, *Vintage Murder* was written before the outbreak of World War II, where Alleyn is on holiday. While "[i]dyllic representations of New Zealand high-country life proliferate in a variety of genres," as Michele Dominy writes (317), Marsh's representation of the landscape, with nature in particular, borders on the gothic. Marsh makes use of Maori superstition and the New Zealand wilderness to add a sense of suspense and atmosphere to the mystery. Set in a village with a touring theatre company, most of the novel occurs in the theatre or around it, but in a key scene when Alleyn must find out what Carolyn is hiding from him, he takes her and the reader away from the semi-familiar setting and into the New Zealand wilderness:

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<sup>35</sup> She had to be sent a copy from England after it was published.

The road wound upwards through round green hills whose firm margins cut across each other like the curves of a simple design [...] from behind this sequence of rounded greens rose the mountain, cold and intractable against a brilliant sky. (385)

...

And from the trees came the voice of a solitary bird, a slow cadence, deeper than any they had ever heard, ringing, remote and cool, above the sound of water. Carolyn stopped to listen. Suddenly Alleyn realized that she was deeply moved and that her eyes had filled with tears. (386)

Alleyn remarks at the change this inspires in Carolyn: “[i]t was as though the top layers of whimsicality and charm and gaiety had become transparent” (387). He remarks at the fact that ““because she is unhappy and I have jerked her away from her usual background”” and taken her into nature, the landscape appears to strip away her artificiality and reveal her true self (387). The setting here acts like a torture-device for eliciting confessions as Alleyn discovers when Carolyn follows him deep into the forest where “there was something primal and earthy about this endless interlacing of greens” (392):

He remembered hearing tales of bushmen who were brought far into the forest to mark trees for sawmills, and who returned in three days, unable to endure the quiet of the forest.

...

“I saw you come in here. I couldn’t bear to be alone. It’s quite true – everything you said. I’ll tell you everything, [...]. I’ll tell you everything.” (393)

The landscape also affects Alleyn in terms of his superstition of Maori folklore. Alleyn purchases a tiki for Carolyn’s birthday that features in the murder investigation. While in the forest, he contemplates the greenstone carving, taking out “the squat little monster”:

“This is the right setting for you, only you should hang on a flaxen cord against a thick brown skin like Te Pokiha’s [...] You little monstrosity! Sweaty dark breasts for you, dark fingers, dark savages in a heavy green

forest. You've seen a thing or two in your day, Last night was not your first taste of blood, I'll be bound. [...] I wish to hell I knew how much you do mean." (393)

Here both the gothic and the exotic are invoked in terms of Maori culture as mysterious and "Other".

The gothic is again invoked in *Colour Scheme* with more of the mystery of Maori culture and its ties to landscape. *Colour Scheme* is set amongst miraculous healing thermal pools and the mountain range where the sacred burial plot of Rangi's Peak lies. The murder mirrors an old Maori story that forms the superstition associated with the Peak:

"Many years ago, when I was a youth, a maiden of our *hapu* lost her way in the mists on Rangi's Peak. In ignorance, intending no sacrilege, she came upon the place where my grandfather rests with his weapons, and, being hungry, ate a small piece of cooked food that she carried with her. In that place it was an act of horrible sacrilege. When the mists cleared, she discovered her crime and returned in terror to her people. She told her story, and was sent out to this hill while her case was discussed. At night she thought she would creep back, but she missed her way. She fell into Taupo-tapu, the boiling mud pool. Everybody in the village heard her scream." (613)

The murder victim, Maurice Questing, who it turns out had been stealing sacred relics from Rangi's Peak, including the weapons buried with Rua's grandfather, is pushed into the same pool and it is made to look like a repeat accident. While the murder itself has to do with espionage, not the disturbance of sacred ground, the story certainly had an influence over the murderer. These exotic settings create interest, suspense and additional depth to what are admittedly rather repetitive novels. Through the landscape of the story both Christie and Marsh were able to personalise their fiction and keep it individual enough for their devoted readers; "[t]he pressure of the Second World War" Lewis writes, "led to a conscious recognition of her roots" (87). Moreover, Lewis writes:

Only gradually, as the Japanese invasion forces spread through South-East Asia, did New Zealanders begin to realise that their own nation could also be

at risk. The fall of Singapore, the bombing of Darwin in Australia, and the presence of Japanese mini-submarines in Sydney Harbour made New Zealanders feel they were coming close to the front line. For defense they had always depended on Britain, and Britain was now fighting for survival in Europe. (84)

Perhaps then more than ever before did she feel cut-off from England, more like a colonial than she ever had. As McDorman notes, Marsh wrote *Colour Scheme* “while the outcome of the war was still unpredictable” and thus “reflects some of the uneasiness and insecurity of the Allied side” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 35). To say that war changes landscapes, while a gross understatement, does show how broadly it can affect a nation and the way they perceive territory, boundaries and how these reflect part of a collective identity. McDorman writes that:

Despite the distance, however, the English and New Zealanders shared several bonds: the heritage of English-speaking peoples, a Commonwealth commitment to the Allied cause in World War II, and the experience of being beleaguered island nations. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 20)

War itself did not appear in much of Marsh or Christie’s novels yet the effects of it did. The settings of these novels gave the atmosphere of realism and of change but ultimately left out the details. Golden Age detective fiction was popular because it offered diversion and escape and this idea of purpose will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four: The Genre

For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol [...] detective stories have nothing to do with works of art. (Auden, *The Guilty Vicarage*, 15)

Returning to Auden's passage quoted in the introduction, this chapter will examine the appeal of the detective story: why Golden Age detective fiction was so popular during the Great Depression of 1929 and World War II (1939-1945) and why it has endured so well despite its "low-culture" status as popular fiction. What is often overlooked in this fiction is how intentionally and obviously artificial it is and in this way more than any other it incurs its value. Golden Age detective fiction, specifically the works of Christie and Marsh are refreshingly honest about what they are and reassuring in their clearly fictional status. Furthermore, these novels gave their readers a challenge, a game to occupy them at a time when it was most appreciated: "in the London shelters during the Blitz," Celia Fremlin writes, "'raid' libraries were set up which, in response to popular demand, lent out detective stories and almost nothing else" (118). Having considered the works of Christie and Marsh through gender issues, relationships and identities, in terms of the changing notion of class and through the use of setting, this chapter will examine these novels as literature. Golden Age detective fiction will be critically examined in terms of quality, of the division between high and low culture, its merit and its failings. The notion of appeal will be reflected on in terms of the readership and the context of the Golden Age with a specific consideration of the connection between war and the murder mystery.

With the arrival of World War II the prophecy of detective fiction was one of doom, with, Fremlin writes "total eclipse being widely predicted not only for Agatha Christie, but for the whole genre":

Who, demanded columnists far and wide, was going to be bothered with fictional death and horror when the real thing was going on around them? Millions, apparently. To the astonishment of sociologists, critics – and even of writers and publishers – the reading of detective stories not only shows no decline but even, during the winter of the Blitz, showed an unmistakable increase. (118)

Detective fiction during World War II essentially became a coping mechanism. For a popular fiction genre to be used this way shows just how powerful any form of literature can be. “The pot-boiling imperative,” writes Willis, “with the additional desire to entertain and keep up both civilian and service morale, ensured that writers of detective fiction kept the books coming year on year, even when they had other wartime fish to fry” (20). The actual war-related content in these novels is strictly limited and very few attempts of direct patriotism are made. As Willis acknowledges, these authors were “aware that people immersed in potentially traumatic situations, and subject to official propaganda on a daily basis, were unlikely to stand for too much of this sort of thing in their rare and valued lighter moments” (20). The increasing artificial nature of Christie and Marsh’s novels reveals this need in the reader; however unintentional, the tone of this fiction suggests a modernist attitude, which alone makes it worth considering.

### **Quality**

The question of quality comes up frequently in the criticism of detective fiction, as it does with any popular fiction: it is usually this notion that separates high and low culture. The term quality is used in this context to separate “literature” from other forms of fiction, like romance for example. If a novel penned in the romance tradition is considered to be well written, challenging in terms of content and original, like Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, then it transcends the genre and becomes “literature.” Detective fiction, especially from the Golden Age, no matter how well written, will never be able to transcend the crime genre because of its nature: formulaic, repetitive and predictable. And yet as has been proven in the last three chapters, it has a real literary worth. Christie and Marsh leveled class groups to an extent in their readership, as was discussed in chapter two, but they also leveled intellectual divisions. This is because Golden Age detective fiction may not have aspired to much but it was clever; part of the appeal lies in the fact that these were smart, quality novels that, far from lofty literary aspirations, were written for the simple pleasure of entertainment.

## High Culture Snobbery

The subject of snobbery must be raised when discussing this type of literature because despite the results of Joke Hermes' research, there is still a gulf between high and low art; and so there should be. It is important to have some kind of distinction between clever, well written literature that pushes boundaries and popular light fiction. Popularity should not determine literary worth.<sup>36</sup> Robin Winks acknowledges in her editor's introduction to *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays* that "detective fiction stands central to the variety of debates arising from the concept of "popular culture." Should the noblest minds study popular culture at all?" (1). The implication of Winks' statement, whether it is her personal opinion or not, is that the "noblest minds" should not be subjected to studying what they did not create.

While the distinctions of high and low culture may be mostly unavoidable, these terms should not be so heavily weighed down by the degree of intellectual snobbery that exists today; an author of popular fiction may be just as intelligent as one of "literature" and their fiction is likely to reflect this. What separates these two "classes" of art is sometimes simply purpose. High art is about originality of thought, of exploring "noble" subjects such as existentialism, of challenging people and, in part, of proving how clever the authors (and readers) are. This definition obviously has its problems, most notably the fact that when too strictly applied, certain Masters such as Shakespeare can become excluded given the number of low-culture traits; as with any classification of literature, it does need to be seen as an artificial construct and therefore fallible. Furthermore, as Janice Radway has argued, these generalisations mean that certain genres are simply condemned for their low culture style without any acknowledgement that there may be some value to them too. Nevertheless, categorising and classifying literature is something that will never cease.

Writing in the late 1980s, Tzvetan Todorov claims that "[w]e are today in the presence of a discrepancy between two essential manifestations; no longer is there one single esthetic norm in our society, but two; the same measurements do not apply to 'high' art and 'popular' art", "[y]et there is a happy realm where this dialectical contradiction between the work and its genre does not exist: that of popular literature" (159);

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<sup>36</sup> Although arguably there is still the issue of who gets to decide what is "high" and "low" art, or where the line is. Regrettably the issue is far too contentious to do justice to here.

As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre. Detective fiction has its norms; to 'develop' them is also to disappoint them: to 'improve upon' detective fiction is to write 'literature,' not detective fiction. The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of its genre, but the one which conforms to them. (159)

As with many generalised statements about literature, Todorov's suffers from oversimplification. The novel itself emerged and from such genres and I would argue remnants of 'genre' are present in all literary masterpieces.

### Quality of Style

These novels were written to appeal to a mass audience and a great source of their popularity and criticism comes from their formulaic style. One thing must be made clear first: the "rules" of detective fiction, most famously penned by S. S. Van Dine in 1928, were written before the heyday of Golden Age fiction of the thirties and forties. The "queens" of crime did not invent these rules, nor did they adhere to them. This was part of the entertainment: the readers knew the rules, but also knew that they could be broken in any conceivable way. Agatha Christie must be held at least partly responsible for this; after her 1926 novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, possibly the reason S. S. Van Dine published his list, the rules could never be taken seriously again because the alternative was so much more engaging.

One of the most blatantly and frequently broken rules is the inclusion of romance, and by the time W. H. Auden wrote about the conventions of detective fiction in 1948, it had gone from no romance allowed for the detective to: "[i]n his sexual life, the detective must be either celibate or happily married" (21). Michael Cohen writes that "each great author in the classical genre has resisted the formulaic nature of the mystery, initiated changes in its conventions, and drawn attention to their artifice" (29). While the Golden Age detective fiction writers certainly drew attention to their artifice, part of their appeal lies in their

adherence to formula. As Todorov argues, the best works of detective fiction are the ones that conform rather than resist it. The highly constructed “formula” of these novels is alluded to by Christie herself through Mrs. Oliver in *Cards on the Table*:

“I should have kept him to the end,” said Mrs. Oliver. “In a book, I mean,” she added apologetically.

“Real life’s a bit different,” said Battle.

“I know,” said Mrs. Oliver. “Badly constructed.” (28-29)

Interestingly, Wu Chia-ying suggests that this repetition of structure, of the formulaic “cosy” mystery can be seen “to work like a ritual”: “[t]he content of the ritual does not matter much, because it is precisely the formality of the ritual that comforts people” (14); Chai-ying explains:

That accounts for the fact that at a time when traumatic international events were taking place, in golden age British detective fiction the frame of meaningful events was narrowed down to the scale of the domestic. (15)

These stories, prolifically produced, with their predictable formula and recurring characters thus became part of their reader’s life, a ritualised activity that they returned to and relied on for comfort and diversion, not for textual analysis. In terms of prosaic style and literary flare, these novels are simple, descriptive to a point and contain a large amount of dialogue: they are in no way masterpieces.

Edmund Wilson, in his 1950 article “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd”<sup>37</sup> writes that “[d]etective-story readers feel guilty, they are habitually on the defensive, and all their talk about ‘well-written’ mysteries is simply an excuse for their vice, like the reasons that the alcoholic can always produce for a drink” (39). Strangely enough given his title, it appears that Christie did not even make it onto the list of recommendations worthy of consideration, yet Marsh, Allingham and Sayers all did. Wilson likens Marsh’s prose to “unappetizing sawdust” full of “mostly padding” and undeserving of even the classification “prose” (37). His criticism is overdramatised and cheap in its scathing tone, but it does raise the issue many

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<sup>37</sup> An obvious wordplay on Christie’s famous title *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

other critics have with Marsh's writing with how much time she devotes to police interviews, where each character in turn gives their narrative on the event. It is for this reason that *Colour Scheme*, in which the murder takes place while Alleyn is both present and pretending to be a guest, is strongly preferred to *Died in the Wool*, where Alleyn must interview each of the suspects at length (Lewis, 100). Although Christie is better at integrating the interview process into her narrative, she nevertheless suffers a similar form of "padding" with Poirot's lengthy explanations of the murder and how he was (cleverly) able to solve it. Nonetheless, even the most positive critics who try to push Marsh and Christie further towards "literature" lament at how the formula of detective fiction held each author back from reaching their potential.<sup>38</sup>

Aside from criticism of Marsh and Christie's technical writing, the tone of these novels has been heavily praised. Alison Light, writing of Christie and Ivy Compton-Burnett, could easily be discussing Christie and Marsh when she writes that "[b]oth share a modernist irony, a strict formalism of technique, and employ a language of reticence which was able to articulate a conservative Englishness but in a modern form" (*Forever England*, 62). Christie does, however, outmatch Marsh when it comes to progressiveness, as discussed in chapter two. "Few authors" Light writes, "are capable of writing 'down' rather than 'up' without patronizing or ingratiating themselves with their readership"; Christie was one such author who showed an "unfrightened sense of respect for her audience" with "a complete absence of undergraduate humour and mannerism, Christie never risked condescending to or intimidating the reader" (*Forever England*, 77: 78). This can be seen when Poirot's verbal quirks are compared with Alleyn's. Alleyn uses wordplay, high-culture references and dry, subtle irony: in *Death in Ecstasy*, he interviews Father Garnette, who in response to being asked how long the murder victim had been attending his church, he answers:

"Let me think. I can well remember the first evening I was aware of her. I felt the presence of something vital, a kind of intensitah, a – how can I put it? – an increased receptivitah. We have our own words for expressing these experiences."

"I hardly think I should understand them." (*Death in Ecstasy*, 39)

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<sup>38</sup> See Symons, p. 151; this is of course only one of many references to such a view.

Here Alleyn is clearly making fun of this religious and intellectual snobbery, and while most, if not all, readers would get the joke, it is still a joke of intellectual superiority over another person and some readers would have missed the irony. Poirot, in a war focused xenophobic atmosphere captured a humour that transgressed over any intelligence or class barriers: making fun, even if only light hearted fun, of foreigners. Poirot is, for example, forever misquoting English sayings: “[i]t is a weak spot on which you put your finger” (*Dumb Witness*, 123); and “[p]ermit me to say – you are the sport, Madame” (*Cards on the Table*, 47). Despite the variances in accessible humour, both Christie and Marsh wrote in what Colin Watson terms a “sound, simple, undemanding style” that was “free of literary affection of the kind that had bedevilled the work of so many of the early mystery writers” (“Mayhem Parva”, 101). Accepting these novels as genre dependent popular fiction written for the purpose of an income, they are very well written.

## Content

Another feature of Marsh and Christie’s writing often criticised is their treatment of content: poor characterization is one such form. However, given the length of the novels, the number of characters that need to be introduced, as well as the prerequisite focus on the ‘puzzle’ plot, both authors did an exceptional job of creating a real sense of character with minimal description; they were effectively the literary version of highly skilled caricaturists. Stereotypes were frequently employed, such as the “modern” woman, the elderly Victorian character, the wealthy American, and the gentleman “dandy”. This is not to say that Christie and Marsh’s characters are all the same, both authors merely use stereotypes to allow the reader to quickly categorise them, before developing the character further and adding depth. In Christie’s *Dumb Witness*, which incidentally contains all but the rich American stereotyped character, Theresa Arundell easily fits the “modern” woman label: she is a free thinker, exquisitely dressed, and part of an exciting and high-society life, yet her choice in husband, a young, quiet, and very focused doctor, problematizes the stereotype. As her aunt observes: “[h]e was very polite, very formal and, to her mind, intensely boring” (25). Furthermore, the doctor does not dote on her, as one would imagine he must in order to keep her attention: “[e]verything about him fascinated her. His calmness and detachment, so different from her own hectic, grasping life” (21). This pattern of predictable stereotype to

developed character appears consistently throughout the Golden Age novels. Even Christie's famous spinster sleuth Miss Marple fits the elderly Victorian stereotype and Marsh's *Death in Ecstasy* includes all four.

As these novels progress, the initial stereotypes give way to reality and have the potential to challenge certain stereotypical views. In Marsh's *Vintage Murder*, she uses the racial stereotyping of the noble savage to categorize her Maori character, Dr. Te Pokiha, who is described in such terms, almost to the point of absurdity:

“Te Pokiha's high caste. His mother was a princess and his father a fine old chief. The doctor's had an English college education – he's ninety per cent civilized. All the same, sir, there's the odd ten percent. It's there, no matter how civilized they are.” (289)

Furthermore, his description, while mostly positive, is inescapably patronising. Once this stereotype is solidified, Te Pokiha becomes a murder suspect; the “ten per cent” having assumedly incited enough rage over the victim's disrespect for Maori culture for him to commit murder. Te Pokiha does, in fact, reveal his “ten per cent” savagery, but it is from the rage of an oppressed people forced into stereotypes: he is innocent of murder. While this is somewhat racist, by getting the readers to believe him guilty and then revealing his innocence, the reader does feel chastised for his or her assumption. Stereotypes, however useful, can never be trusted in Golden Age detective fiction.

As unoriginal as they are, these stereotypes draw attention to the artificiality of the detective narrative as mass produced and formulaic fiction that is self-conscious of both what it is and what it should be. Mid-way through Marsh's *Vintage Murder*, Nigel Bathgate discussed the case with Alleyn:

“Look here,” said Nigel suddenly, “Let's pretend it's a detective novel. Where would we be by this time? About half-way through, I should think. Well, who's your pick?”

...

“It depends on the author. If it's Agatha Christie, Miss Wade's occulted guilt drips from every page. Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter would plump for Pringle,

I fancy. Inspector French would go for Ogden. Of course Ogden, on the face of it, is the first suspect.” (121-122)

Nigel’s comment draws attention to the novel’s genre and cheekily suggests that the murderer depends on the style of the author. Writing on nineteenth-century crime fiction, Peter Thoms notes that “the detective functions as an authorial figure, attempting to uncover the story of the crime, and the ‘case’” therefore “becomes a story about making a story. Thus the resulting solution confronts us as an artifice, as an intelligible chain of narrative constructed from discovered information” (14). The chief difference between nineteenth-century detective fiction and the “cosy” genre is that Golden Age fiction does not attempt in any way to evoke a sense of verisimilitude. Detective fiction is discussed in many of Marsh and Christie’s novels in terms of whether the characters read it or not, of how it shaped their perceptions of what a detective would be like, or of what they think detectives do.

It is this self-referentialism that partly endears Golden Age detective fiction to the modernists. Kathy Mezei writes that “[a]lthough conventionally linear and chronological in structure, inter-war domestic and detective novels nonetheless appropriated the self-conscious narrative techniques and the ironic, understated, and unsentimental style of modernism” (105). This self-consciousness constantly remind the reader that they are in a fictional world and therefore act as a comfort: they are safe from the murderer.

Between drawing attention to the artificiality of the story and investigating “the social and political significance of the home front”, detective fiction shared many thematic similarities with the high-brow fiction of the era (Bixby, 261). Alison Light, who argues that Christie has great worth as a modernist writer claims that:

The instabilities which these popular murders set in motion bear a direct relationship to the existential crises which torment the writers of high culture: the obsession with unstable identities, the ultimate unknowability of others, the sense of guilt which accompanies civilization, and the concomitant effects which such destabilisation has upon the certainties of realist narrative – all find their modified parallel in Christie. (*Ngaiio* Marsh, 88)

The difference between Christie and the modernists, Light argues, is that “what could become painful existential questions are in Christie’s fiction playful ones” she claims that Christie, “comically transmutes such anxieties into a new kind of community”, a “new kind of reassuringly collective experience” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 89). “Murder”, she writes, “becomes a means of social integration, and by the end of the novel enables the setting up of a new society” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 89).

There is, however, criticism surrounding the content of these novels when it comes to depicting social hardship, as Julian Symons writes:

These things were ignored in almost all the detective stories of the Golden Age. In the British stories the General Strike of 1926 never took place, trade unions did not exist, and when sympathy was expressed for the poor it was not for the unemployed but for those struggling along in a fixed inherited income. (*Bloody Murder*, 104)

It is impossible to deny Symons’s accusation: both Christie and Marsh mostly contained their stories to a small group of isolated people and with the focus on character and plot. Context, particularly in unpleasant forms, rarely make an appearance. The almost complete removal of depicting day-to-day hardships, however, reveals more about what people wanted (or did not want) to read. Pugh writes, “to some extent, after the privations of wartime, many people were keen to recapture a real or imagined life of pleasure and indulgence” (“Wish You Were Here?”). There is usually enough information to hint at the war, rationing, or even damage from bombing, but it is mostly ignored in favour of more entertaining subjects; detective fiction is escapist after all.

### **The Reader and Appeal**

It is amusing to read the many critics of detective fiction who marvel at the calibre of its readers, that *educated* people read it. This suggests in all its glorified snobbery that educated people *only* read high-brow fiction and that uneducated people read the popular fiction or “trash”. What this fails to take into account is that regardless of education or intelligence, doctors and chimney sweeps alike were affected by the uncertainty of war.

George Grella writes that “[m]ore curious still, this unoriginal and predictable kind of entertainment appealed to a wide and varied audience, attracting not only the usual public for popular fiction but also a number of educated readers” (“Formal detective novel”, 85). W. H. Auden similarly points out that “[t]he most curious fact about the detective story is that it makes its greatest appeal precisely to those classes of people who are most immune to other forms of daydream literature” (23). This “daydream literature” was, and still is, a form of escape. Given the depressing context Julian Symons describes, it is unsurprising that crime fiction was so popular: Marsh and Christie catered to a readership by giving them an entertaining diversion.

The combination of artificiality that constantly reminds the reader they are reading fiction and the hero-like nature of the detective provide a sense that the detective is indestructible. He is immune from violence and death because he is the author’s recurring protagonist but also because there is little violence in Golden Age detective fiction. “Nothing can happen to them,” writes Todorov, “a rule of the genre postulates the detective’s immunity. We cannot imagine Hercule Poirot or Philo Vance threatened by some danger attacked, wounded, even killed” (160). Todorov is not entirely correct, however. While the reader is safe in the knowledge that no real harm will come to the detective, there is always an element of unease about their safety being threatened. Hercule Poirot is drugged in *Death on the Nile* and although it is only to make sure he hears nothing during the night, it still highlights how vulnerable he could be to attack: sleeping draught could have easily been replaced with poison. In *Died in the Wool*, Fabian Losse is struck down by a blow to the back of the head because he is mistaken for Alleyn. Neither Poirot nor Alleyn are particularly physically impressive, quite the opposite, and when events like these occur, the reader is reminded how fragile they are, even as obviously fictional characters. As Symons observes “[t]he fairy tale land of the Golden Age was one in which murder was committed over and over again without anybody getting hurt” (*Bloody Murder*, 104). Readers are thus made uneasy, but they are constantly reassured that nothing bad can actually happen to the detective or the reader because ultimately the author is in control of the events and thus will protect both.

In offering safety to the reader, as acknowledged by Michael Cohen, “[t]he identification and elimination of the murderer is a kind of return to innocence” (51). Cohen here refers to W. H. Auden, who writes: “I suspect that the typical reader of detective stories

is, like myself, a person who suffers from a sense of sin” (Auden, 23). Likewise Scott McCracken claims:

Detective fiction has been compared with the myth of original sin, the first loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden, and the myth Oedipus, whose discovery of his origins is also a discovery of his crimes. Thus, the detective narrative can be seen as a new form of an old story: the narrative that attempts to explain what has gone before, to find a beginning or origin. (51)

Auden himself acknowledges that “it is sometimes said that detective stories are read by respectable law-abiding citizens in order to gratify in fantasy the violent or murderous wishes they dare not, or are ashamed to, translate into action” (23). Yet Auden dismisses this option, suggesting that while it “may be true for the reader of thrillers” it is not so “for the reader of detective stories” (23). What makes these stories appealing is, as Auden suggests, the fact that they are “escapist literature”: they provide “the illusion of being dissociated from the murderer” (24). David Lehman writes that “[r]eaders of detective novels participate in perfect murders—perfect because they offer us a vicarious and therefore socially acceptable form of releasing out homicidal instincts, [...] letting us off the hook each time, without ever having to face the consequences” (1600). While “homicidal instincts” is taking this a bit far, the comfort of safety and repetition is something that comes up over and over again in literature on detective fiction.

### The Appeal of Crime

For many scholars, the appeal of crime fiction appears to be due to violence, where reading is about a cathartic exorcism of anti-social impulses and excess emotion. “More often than not,” writes McCracken, “we read for the uncertainties provoked by the mystery rather than the security given by the solution” (50). The grotesque, as Terrie Waddell writes “not only captivated the public’s imagination” but was “viewed as dark and disturbing realm of fantasy”: “[i]t stood in marked opposition to the structure of civilised Europe, as something both alluring and sinister – the antithesis of reason and culture” (77). Michael Cohen suggests that “the violence in fiction mirrors one real aspect of our world that we would like to see

removed” and furthermore “that fictional imitation of violence somehow helps effect a kind of larger catharsis of, where the fears are not about our own psyche but about society” (15). The concept of evil fascinates readers, Waddell argues, “because it has no fixed meaning – it remains a floating signifier, difficult to pin down to a definitive signified. As that which is forbidden, it is often wrapped in a sense of the exotic, the surreal, and the extraordinary” (ix). Cohen, however, suggests that it is death, not evil that fascinates the readers: “[o]ur fear of death is the main terror engaged by violent crime stories, and the fear of death probably explains why most mysteries are murder mysteries” (14-15). He argues:

Everyone has had the impulse to shed the restraints of civilization and polite behavior occasionally; everyone knows what it is like to want to mangle, mutilate, or murder someone. [...] In other words, the reader identifies with the villain, even if that villain is performing acts that are literally inhuman. (Cohen, 14)

Whether Cohen is correct about this when it comes to mainstream crime fiction is debatable but the reader of Golden Age detective fiction is far more aligned with the detective than the criminal. Although not written directly from the detective’s point of view, it is usually from the perspective of someone close to them.

In the case of the “cosy” murder, the appeal of violence that might draw many readers to crime fiction is absent. “For what is most noticeable about the appearance of the whodunit, and most paradoxical,” Light writes, “is the removal of the threat of violence” to the point where Golden Age detective fiction becomes “distinctly pacific in its retreat from old-fashioned notions of the heroic” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 69-70):

The revulsion against violence went together with a loss of appetite for melodrama which made detective fiction one of the primary sites for the exploration of newly secular mores. The non-heroic and the de-consecrated tend to go hand in hand. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 71)

Golden Age detective fiction emerged out of the aftermath of World War I, only to be caught up in World War II. The absence of violence can thus be attributed to circumstance. While readers were happy to read “cosy” murder mysteries to divert their attention from the horror

and anxieties of war, it was a form of escape: a retreat into the safely repetitive world of genre fiction, not to be reminded of it. As noted by Wu Chia-ying, in these stories “[m]utilation of the body becomes almost a taboo” where “a presentation of the corpse is contradictory in a war period,” given the gruesome war-wounds soldiers were returning with (5). Golden Age fiction, however, undeniably involves corpses, but Chia-ying is correct that gruesomeness is kept to a minimum: neat bullet wounds, stabbings and poison tend to be the usual methods for Christie. Unlike the majority of crime fiction, “[t]hese are not cathartic novels, stimulating and releasing deep feeling” as Light asserts, “[r]ather their effect is preoccupying, the mental equivalent of pottering, which works more to relieve generalised anxiety than to generate a strong emotion” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 71). She argues that:

The nerves of those who had undergone the privations of war at home – rationing, black-out, cold, the influenza epidemic, bereavement, and the long, long hours of waiting to hear the worst – were equally jarred. Pitting their wits in a struggle that was cerebral without involving strain, this was the generation who made the crossword the national pastime of the middle classes. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 71)

While this is true of Christie, Marsh in fact, has several murder victims who meet more horrific deaths. In *Colour Scheme* the victim is pushed into a boiling mud pit, in *Vintage Murder*, Alfred Meyer’s skull is crushed by a jeroboam of champagne, while Lord Wutherwood in *Surfeit of Lampreys* is impaled in an elevator through his eye, where “‘There was much haemorrhage’ Alleyn chanted drearily, ‘and escape of brain matter’” (164). The escapist fiction of the “cosy” mystery thus needed to be light, entertaining and, while exciting enough to be absorbing, frivolous enough to not cause any real emotional strain but it could include violence in a sufficiently theatrical manner of the grotesque.

One aspect of Golden Age detective fiction that epitomizes this attitude is the inclusion of romance in the plot that ends happily, usually with an announced engagement. Romance represents both a secondary form of diversion and a positive and hopeful by-product of murder; it allows the reader to emotionally invest in the outcomes of the characters and be supplied with a happy ending. The murder is identified, captured and thus stopped and hope in humanity is restored twofold. The successful match of two people not only entertains the reader, but allows them to vicariously experience the happiness of the characters. In

thirteen of her thirty-two novels, McDorman writes, “Marsh threaded young love through her story” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 101). McDorman explains that:

The romances provide, as they adhere to the ancient ritual of courtship, the reminder that life does go on even in the presence of brutal death. Alleyn often remarks to himself that, though these young lovers may have been shocked and saddened by the murder, their real concern quickly returns to each other. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 101)

Agatha Christie, it seems, did not agree. In her autobiography she wrote: “I myself always found the love interest a terrible bore in detective stories. Love, I felt, belonged to romantic stories” (259). Christie complains: “[t]o force a love motif into what should be a scientific process went much against the grain”, she included it anyway, however, because when she began writing “at that period detective stories always had to have a love interest – so there it was” (*An Autobiography*, 259). This may account for the presence of the love interest in her first few novels, but she continued the practice for virtually the rest of her career. Christie therefore either enjoyed the romance element more than she cared to admit, or she believed that it was integral to her success as a writer, why else would it endure?

### The Appeal of the Game

While comfort and diversion were certainly part of what made detective fiction sell, the most important, not to mention contentious, aspect of Golden Age detective fiction is the puzzle; Golden Age detective fiction was popular because it worked like a game, hence the term ‘whodunit’. The contention comes from scholars such as Wu Chia-ying, who find it “hard to believe that its reader really tries much to beat the detective in figuring out the whodunit, bearing in mind that golden age British detective fiction is meant to be an entertainment, not for serious literary studies” (4). While it is certainly true that detective fiction was not intended for serious literary studies, Chia-ying underestimates the importance of the game: beating the detective is the purpose of the game and this, for many readers, was (and still is) considered fun. Furthermore, despite the novel’s “simplistic commentary upon human nature”, as Watson notes, the authors “somehow [leave] the reader with the flattering impression that he had been given credit for philosophical astuteness” (“Mayhem Parva”,

101). One rule of Van Dine's that was upheld religiously and captures the spirit of what this fiction was about, is that the "reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery", for Golden Age fiction is, as he writes, "a kind of intellectual game" (in Curtis, 51). As discussed by Nigel Bathgate in *Death in Ecstasy*, the reader should have enough facts by the middle of the novel to make their guess, any later and it is not a proper guess because the clues will be too obvious.

After Marsh had become an established writer, Lewis notes, she "became more perceptive about her readers, dividing them into two camps, the acquiescent and the combatant" (60). The acquiescent readers were the ones who read for the sake of pleasure and escapism, while the combatant reader, more actively played the game, trying to solve the case before the detective. There may be two *ways* of reading the detective novel, passively and actively, but the combatant readers Marsh identified tend to be escaping and enjoying the novel as well as actively trying to participate. This does not mean that there are not readers who have no interest in playing the game: they are simply not proper readers of detective fiction because they are not participating fully in the novel. The "cosy" detective fiction of Christie and Marsh is a game, and while readers can enjoy the novel without "playing", the novels are written for the participants, not the spectators.

The concept of detective fiction being a game of "guess the murderer" is playfully acknowledged by both Christie and Marsh in their novels. Marsh's *A Man Lay Dead* is about a murder that occurs while playing the then very popular 'murder' game. Christie's 1936 novel, *Cards on the Table* opens with a foreword by Christie to her readers on this very subject:

There is an idea prevalent that a detective story is rather like a big race—a number of starters—likely horses and jockeys. [...] The favourite is by common consent to be the opposite of a favourite on the racecourse. In other words he is likely to be a complete outsider! Spot the least likely person to have committed the crime and in nine times out of ten your task is finished.  
(10)

Christie raises this issue because this specific novel: "*is not that kind of book*. There are only *four* starters and any one of them, *given the right circumstances*, might have committed the

crime” (10, emphasis in original). In acknowledging her readers’ usual habits, she therefore presents them with a different kind of challenge, a new game in which “[t]he deduction must” be “entirely *psychological*” (10, emphasis in original). In this novel Christie sets up a Russian-doll effect: the novel is a game for the reader, the victim, Mr. Shaitana is killed while playing out a “game” (showing off his acquired murderers and taunting them) for Poirot, he is killed while the four suspects are playing a game of bridge and in their score cards lies the clue to “whodunit”.

A similar situation, although less intricate is demonstrated in Marsh’s *Death and the Dancing Footman*, where Jonathan Royal plays a cruel game with his guests in which he slowly reveals personal information and hidden connections between them as discussed in chapter two. Francis Hart, for example is revealed to be the doctor who disfigured (fellow guest) Sandra Compline’s face in a botched plastic surgery. During the weekend several attempts are made on Nicholas Compline’s life and the reader, in order to play the game, must work out who the murderer is while the guests try as well. This becomes a recurring device in both Marsh and Christie’s fiction where the reader, as well as the group of suspects, attempt to work out what happened, where everyone was, and who had the opportunity. In several novels maps are included such as the train compartment layout in *Murder on the Orient Express*, and the church in *Death in Ecstasy*.

Other ways the game is constructed include red herrings, word-play (such as the Lottie/Lettie hint in *A Murder is Announced*), clues, common sense and psychology. As Ruth Morse writes, “Christie’s detective fiction resorts to the literary equivalent of the optics of illusion” (108). Furthermore, Peter Thoms suggests that “[t]he detective often acts as if he were merely playing a game, a common image for his procedures, and one which suggests their potentially dangerous reductiveness” (2). The detective, Thoms argues, “simplifies the ambiguous and complex” and reduces characters to game pieces to be manipulated on a playing board; he proceeds on the premise that mystery represents a puzzle to be solved and a victory to be won (2). While this is more likely a reflection of what the reader is doing, both Poirot and Alleyn do manipulate their suspects at times as if they were chess pieces. Yet this is to be expected: if they treated their cases with too much seriousness and reverence, it would change the tone of the novels and their frivolous ‘game’ sentiment. As William D. Rubinstein notes, “[r]eading detective stories was one of the characteristic aspects of the British middle classes in the interwar years. Their emphasis on rationality” and “the

inevitable triumph of justice” he writes, reveals “much about interwar Britain” (“A Very British Crime Wave”). Specifically, it reveals a need in the population, across class and culture, for diversion and entertainment, and nothing invokes these qualities better and more artificially than the theatre.

### **Sense of the Theatrical**

The self-consciousness of the author and the interaction between the reader and the novel suggests a break-down of the fourth wall: a term used in theatre when it is made explicit that the audience is watching ‘theatre’ and usually involves some form of communication or acknowledgement between the audience and the actors on stage. It is not surprising therefore, that both Marsh and Christie had connections with the theatre: Marsh was a famous stage director in New Zealand, while a number of Christie’s novels were dramatized with her active involvement. These Golden Age novels invoke a number of theatrical devices to serve their author’s purpose. The murders, for example, are almost always “off-stage” as they are traditionally with Greek plays. Furthermore, given the “cosy” circle of suspects where no one is actually who they appear to be, there is a sense of social masks, of roles played by actors, that the detective (and reader) must see through in order to discover the true identity of each member. As Light asserts:

Social life is always a kind of impersonation in Christie’s novels; it is openly seen to be theatrical, a matter of convincing your audience by a clear repertoire of gestures and speech mannerisms. The idea of the social mask is, of course, much older than class societies, but in the whodunit it is robbed of emotional and moral force, retaining only a sense that theatre, however artificial, is a surviving form of collectivity. (*Ngaio Marsh*, 96)

The detective is actively aware of this, to an extent, as Marilyn Rye writes, “Marsh’s detective is always aware of the construction of crime as an aesthetic act. He is always looking at the suspects and determining which are playing “roles,” as he tries to catch them in that one moment when they step out of character” (83). Rye further suggests that “Marsh reinforces the identification of murdering and acting through [...] Alleyn, who functions as

both an audience to criminal performances and a performer/director in his own right” (76-77):

Looked at in this light, the covering up of crime becomes a performance with the criminal’s objective mimicking that of the theatrical performer: sustaining illusions that audiences are persuaded to accept as real. (*Rye*, 77)

The suspects, or members of the “cosy” circle, much like the audience, often treat the murder, as Wu Chia-ying suggests, as “a welcomed excitement” (8). It is these novels that resemble the theatre that capture what the whodunit is all about; the parallel between theatre and Golden Age detective fiction reveals the conventions and artificiality of construction most clearly.

While the theatre is certainly more of a forte for Marsh, Christie’s *Three Act Tragedy* is, as the title suggests, a striking example of this. The novel is divided into the three acts: “suspicion”, “certainty” and “discovery”. Also included is a “credits” page like what you would find on a play programme, including the director, the assistant directors, the company who did the clothes as well as:

**Illumination by**  
Hercule Poirot

The novel opens with Sir Charles Cartwright being admired by Mr Satterwaite as he climbs “up the path from the sea” (5). The road and path are described, as well as the landscape, and the reader assumes the characters are outdoors until “swish fell the heavy curtains” and “up sprang the lights” revealing the scene to be a staged one (5). Sir Charles Cartwright blurs the lines between reality and theatre “[h]e’s always been the same – a better actor in private life than on the stage! Charles is always acting. He can’t help it” (6).

Similarly, Marsh uses aspects of the theatre in her structure and presentation. She frequently employs chapter headings that play on the theatre for example, in *Vintage Murder* when Te Pohika reveals his “savagery” as previously discussed, the chapter is titled “*Dr Te Pohika Plays to Type. Warn Curtain*” (438). The theatre has been used numerous times by Marsh as a setting for her murders, the most obvious being *Enter a Murderer*. Again, the title

suggests something of the content: during one of the acts of a production, one which Alleyn is in attendance, an actor is shot dead by a supposed prop gun. Alleyn must therefore quite literally work his way through a group of actors and their various ‘fronts’ in order to ascertain who loaded real bullets into the gun.

It is these novels in particular that highlight the fragility of identity and the fine line between fact and fiction that it entails. “No one but a veteran of the theater” McDorman writes of Marsh, “could have conveyed as successfully as she did in her books the same sense of heightened emotions on both sides of the curtain: audience and actors become witnesses, murderers and victims” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 8). Virtually every character that Alleyn comes into contact with is acting some part, some falsehood that must be exposed. Jeni Curtis writes that “Ngaio Marsh’s theatrical career is important to her novels thematically” because “[b]oth the theatre and the murder mystery ask the audience/reader to redefine perceptions of illusion and reality” (53). There is however, an underlying contradiction between theatre and fiction as Curtis notes:

[T]heatre and the novel work in opposing ways: in a play every energy is bent toward maintaining illusions that resemble reality – we suspend disbelief and accept the story being acted out, forget that these are actors; they become the characters in front of us. Whereas in a murder investigation, false illusions of innocence have to be dispelled in the interest of justice. (53)

What Curtis does not acknowledge here is the dramatic irony implicit in Golden Age detective fiction, when the fourth wall is removed and the audience is both aware of the artifice and in possession of more information than the “actors”, there is no attempt at suspended disbelief. The Golden Age detective fiction genre is highly artificial because it functions as a game for readers to amuse and divert them from other aspects of their life. While it did not begin in wartime, it grew from a genre that did, the war merely reinforced its use and importance. Both Marsh and Christie began writing detective fiction as a form of diversion themselves: a challenge to keep them occupied and that tone has extended over the genre. This literature, while revealing aspects of great social change, remained true to its honest roots of popular fiction.

## Conclusion

“I’m sorry, but I do hate this differentiation between the sexes. ‘*The modern girl has a thoroughly businesslike attitude to life.*’ That sort of thing. It’s not a bit true! Some girls are businesslike and some aren’t. Some men are sentimental and muddle-headed, others are clear-headed and logical. There are just different types of brains. Sex only matters where sex is directly concerned.” (Christie, *Appointment with Death*, 15)

“I believe that in a year’s time we shall look back on these frozen weeks as on a strangely unreal period. Does it seem odd to you, Fox, that we should be here so solemnly tracking down one squalid little murderer, so laboriously using out methods to peer into two deaths, while over our heads are stretched the legions of guns? It’s as if we stood on the edge of a crackling landslide, swatting flies.”

“It’s our job.”

“And will continue to be so. But to hang someone – now! My God, Fox, it’s almost funny.” (Marsh, *Death and the Dancing Footman*, 560-561)

These two passages demonstrate the capacity of Golden Age detective fiction in Christie and Marsh’s novels. At their best, these novels offer enormous insight into the period in terms of gender roles, class changes, concepts of national identity, and the needs of the people who read them. The fact that the scope of readership was so broad emphasises the idea that Golden Age detective fiction fulfilled something crucial for its readers. Not only do the above passages demonstrate significantly more substance than is usually accorded to the genre, they also reveal what the authors felt as members of society experiencing the same things. Golden Age detective fiction was a fantastic leveller of class, education, and circumstance; war and the changing parameters of society affected everyone.

Christie’s real worth lies in her modern approach to changing British society. She may not have been actively involved in feminist politics, but her very position in society as an influential woman writer afforded her a great influence over the population. Her opinion, therefore, on matters of gender in particular, becomes weighty. Christie had the power to subtly influence the views of her readers where they may have otherwise been resistant.

The quoted passage above comes from the heroine of *Appointment with Death*, Sarah King. Sarah is a fantastic model of a modern Christie female character: educated, likeable and opinionated. Her commentary here on gender roles is both radical and astute; even in present day society we are still labelled by gender, and could benefit from such a reminder. In 1938 this statement is even more impressive. Sarah's insight exemplifies Christie's literary career in the sense that Golden Age detective fiction is full of "types" and "classifications" that are misleading, unhelpful and occasionally dangerous. Through using and deconstructing stereotypes as well as drawing constant attention to the artificiality of the genre, Christie appears modern and advanced in her thinking; a stark contrast to the way she is perceived today.

In the present day, the Golden Age of detective fiction has become synonymous with Agatha Christie; it is if they have merged. Her dominance in the genre has only increased over time. Virtually all of Agatha Christie's novels are still in print and new editions are constantly being produced. Furthermore, popular television shows such as *Midsomer Murders*, which has been running since 1997, are modern versions of the "cosy" murder mystery that are heavily reminiscent of Christie.

While progressive in her domestic focus, Agatha Christie has come to symbolize the old, quaint and traditional British society. As Light notes: "[h]er settings are assumed to be inherently backward-looking, her social attitudes simply snobbish, and her imaginary milieu an idealised picture of 'the long summers' of the English upper middle class in a tightly class-bound society" (*Forever England*, 62). Christie is now inextricably linked to British nostalgia; just as the Golden Age detectives were identified as using the pastoral for such a purpose, Golden Age detective fiction (and specifically Agatha Christie) has become the twenty-first Century version of the nostalgic pastoral.

Ngaio Marsh does not suffer the same anachronistic labelling to the extent Christie does. Yet both suffered from the assumption that as popular genre fiction, their novels lacked substance; furthermore, as nostalgic stories, they could offer nothing of value to contemporary society to make them worthy of study. The results of this thesis were not intended to prove this concept wrong: substance is incontrovertibly the chief aspect that separates high and low brow literature. What the passages above are intended to exhibit is the ability of detective fiction to connect with what was happening in the world in a meaningful

way. In this brief but clever second passage, Marsh uses Alleyn and Fox to muse on how trivial life can become in the face of war, and simultaneously how “funny” it is that detective fiction is so popular and important at such a time. It is this recognition and level of assurance that the reader required: that life will continue, the law will be upheld and Golden Age detective fiction writers will continue to produce. What Marsh recognises here is that the context of society has changed even detective fiction to the point where it will never return to its original frivolous form; just like anything else, it must adapt to survive, and in the writings of Marsh and Christie it did.

While in some ways it can be seen as outrageous and culturally biased<sup>39</sup> to place Ngaio Marsh and Agatha Christie in the same critical framework, some have argued that Marsh was, in fact, a better writer than Christie. “Of the four, Agatha Christie certainly claims the greatest fame and most prodigious publishing record. She remains the standard by which other writers of detective fiction are judged” McDorman writes, yet “many critics insist that Marsh was superior to Christie in every area: plot, characterization, and prose style” (*Ngaio Marsh*, 135).<sup>40</sup> “Although other detective writers touched upon the theme of empire and Britain’s shifting role there,” she argues, “only Ngaio Marsh made it a central focus in so many books” (McDorman, *Ngaio Marsh*, 44). Margaret Lewis goes as far as to claim that during the height of the Golden Age period, “Ngaio’s reputation in the United States was very high; in these years she was much preferred to Agatha Christie” (Lewis, 111).

As a New Zealander and fan of detective fiction, seeing a claim like Lewis’s is a huge surprise and it is worth considering *why* that is. Fellow New Zealander Bruce Harding quotes the Australian novelist Kylie Tennant as exclaiming: “[h]ow does it come about that a female New Zealander should glitter in the foremost ranks of popularity among the best sellers of detective fiction?” (60). I am not as interested in answering her question as I am in drawing attention to the fact that it is asked. While Marsh does not come close to Christie’s *enduring* popularity, it is interesting that in New Zealand, where an international best-selling author is a rare and precious breed, most New Zealanders barely know who she is. Despite her success, Marsh is still largely ignored by New Zealand history as a writer because what she wrote was popular fiction; eighty years on from the publication of her first novel and the attitude

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<sup>39</sup> As a potentially defensive New Zealander myself.

<sup>40</sup> Obviously there is also the likelihood that as a biographer of Marsh, McDorman may be subject to similar accusations of bias.

towards her, and other popular fiction writers in New Zealand, does not appear to have changed.

While interesting that a New Zealander was part of a hugely popular British literary phenomenon, a question far more valuable to ask in relation to Marsh is not how she managed to write popular literature, but why it was so popular. Bruce Harding asserts in his article, “‘The Great and True Amphibian:’ The New Zealand – England Polarity in the Fiction of Ngaio Marsh” that:

Marsh’s own *loquendi* was consonant with an idea of Edward Said: that we must pay greater attention to the place of narrative fiction in ‘the history and world of empire,’ for stories ‘become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history.’ Marsh’s peculiar genius, in my account, was to mix the *tour d’horizon* (local vision) with the *tour du monde* which today we may readily associate with an internationalist vision.” (59)

Marsh’s significance lay in the fact that, aside from being a clever and proficient writer, she was on the periphery of British Golden Age society. More broadly speaking, the genius of Marsh and Christie lay in their narrating of the history of the Golden Age from the perspective of intelligent and talented women experiencing these changes. The changing identity of class, gender and nationalism are recorded in these novels, not from the lofty pretense of proper literature, but from popular fiction: the kind that struck a chord with millions of readers during the recorded period.

The Golden Age genre is not, however, without its limitations. Scott McCracken argues that:

[T]he detective’s self is contradictory and cannot be said to consist of a single, defined identity. Instead, the detective operates by transgressing the boundaries that make up identities. He or she is able to cross the boundaries that make up identities. He or she is able to cross the boundaries of class, ‘race’ and gender that normally define the self in a way that other people cannot. This brings the detective dangerously close to the criminal, but allows him or her to guide the client and, crucially, the reader through uncharted

areas of modern society. In this sense, the detective facilitates a transgressive act, but it is matter of debate whether the narrative of detection confirms or disrupts the social boundaries transgressed. (63)

It can be argued that for every progressive notion put forward by Marsh and Christie, there existed an equal or larger amount of social conformity and regulation. Ed Christian frames this issue in culturally exclusive terms:

What are we to make of the fact that most of these novels, though set in post-colonial countries, are written by white males, have male detectives, and have detectives who are members of a police force (even when they are not police procedurals in the usual sense)? Why is the English tradition of the ‘cozy’ mystery virtually non-existent among post-colonial novelists (excluding expatriate colonials such as Ngaio Marsh),<sup>41</sup> and the amateur or private detective rare? To what extent does the market for detective fiction (whether local or world-wide) influence the development of characters and the choice of generic conventions? (4)

The sentiment of McCracken and Christian is the same: Golden Age fiction, whatever progressive advances it did make was a dominantly white, western and sexist narrative because it upheld the values of such a society. This alludes to and supports the previously discussed issue with the authors of Golden Age fiction: they did not produce *female* detectives.

This limitation of the Golden Age is able to be overcome, as has been demonstrated more recent detective fiction. While still used dominantly to support similar notions, it has, perhaps for this reason, become a way for minority groups to make their mark on popular culture. In the past few decades, detective fiction has been used as a medium to readdress issues such as racism and homophobia.<sup>42</sup> In essence, the notion of the post-colonial detective

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<sup>41</sup> While not crucial to the quote itself, it is important to note here for the sake of accuracy that Christian’s labelling of Marsh as an expatriate is misleading. She did live in England for a few years but she resided for most of her life in New Zealand. I do acknowledge, however, that a case could be made for Marsh (and all colonial New Zealanders at the time) to be considered expatriates of England. Nevertheless, one is not made here.

<sup>42</sup> This can be seen in the works of Walter Mosley, for example, where his African American detective Easy Rawlins is placed in the context of mid-century racist America. Susan Rowland discusses lesbian relationships

expanded to include other “Others” in society. When the detective, the social regulator and moral compass of civilised society, becomes the “Other”, rather than enforce conservative morality they challenge it. Just as the female detective would have been potent in Golden Age detective fiction, there are still minority peoples who are able to use the gaze and surveillance of the detective narrative to inverse the power.

Despite the scope and possibilities that the detective narrative provides, there is still the seemingly impenetrable wall of criticism and snobbery for popular genre fiction. Even, as I have discussed, the critics who deem it worthy enough to comprehensively study end up reinforcing these outmoded ideas by using sweeping generalities and reductive arguments. This thesis does not call for detective fiction to be reassessed and elevated to the realm of ‘high’ culture literature, but until critics let go of such stringent ideas about what is and is not valuable where literature is concerned, there can be little progress. Most popular detective fiction is terrible, but that does not mean that there is not the capacity in the genre for a masterpiece.

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