

# The Depiction of British Society in Selected Novels of Agatha Christie

Bachelor Thesis

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This thesis has two aims, stated in the (too brief) introduction: to explore Christie's depiction of British society, and to examine “to what extent does Christie [sic] respect the rules of the Golden Age detective fiction“ (p. 1). The author, in the theoretical part, looks at the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction (Chapter 2) and social conditions and the status of women between the wars (Chapter 3), though one of the three novels discussed, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* was in fact published in 1962. In Chapter 4 she discusses social class and the fifth and final chapter focuses on Christie's depiction of the English village. The brevity of the introduction is an indication of the extent to which the thesis feels lacking in coherent structuring and overall focus, though there are sections of interesting and thoughtful analysis of the chosen novels.

Agatha Christie is herself considered to have been one of the pioneers of 'Golden Age' detective stories, so the author's interest in the extent to which she adhered to the 'rules' of the fiction of this time seems inapposite, particularly as these are nowhere clearly stated. The 'Twenty Rules' of S. S. Van Dine (Willard Huntington Wright) and Ronald Knox's 'Ten Commandments' are mentioned only sketchily in the first chapter (it might have been appropriate to place these, at least, in an appendix) and there is no systematic attempt to apply these to her writing. One of Van Dine's 'rules', e.g. stated that there should be no 'love interest', whereas the author cites Sýkora's claim about 'Golden Age' detective fiction, that “it is not unusual that the story contains a side romantic plotline” (p. 3). This is only an example to indicate that, given the fact that Christie herself helped to establish the conventions of the 'closed circle mystery' it is idle to accuse her of breaking any rules, particularly when these have not been clearly stated. When, for example, the author writes that “Christie focused mainly on the detective genre which, encumbered with the rules of the Golden Age, preferred to be set into the middle-class environment” (p. 14) she gives no indication of what rule pertains to this. Van Dine's rule no. 20 (<http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/vandine.htm>) does state that “A servant must not be chosen” as the culprit as “The culprit must be a decidedly worthwhile person – one that wouldn't ordinarily come under suspicion”, which does indicate a strong class bias, but this is not referenced specifically.

The section on the status of women is rather perfunctory and not really linked to the analysis of the texts. It would have been interesting, for example, when the author discusses the nature of villagers in chapter 5, to hear her views on Miss Marple as a 'harmless old woman' (p. 22) and what her

almost invisible, marginal status (which is undoubtedly useful for her role as amateur detective) says about the situation of women in society in the period.

The author acknowledges, in her conclusion, that Christie “is sometimes criticised for the shallowness of her characters” (p. 24) yet she goes on to claim that this critique “involves primarily her stock characters” and that “The reason, [sic] why she remains so popular among readers is her ability to create unforgettable characters with their virtues and weaknesses” (p. 24). I would be very interested in hearing the author's justification for such a claim. Christie is undoubtedly a hugely talented and popular writer, but I would argue that character portrayal is not one of her strengths.

Overall, there is a lack of coherence in this thesis in terms of its aims and focus, though some of the analysis, particularly the section on the changing countryside, is thoughtful and makes good use of the chosen novels to illustrate the arguments. There is also a great deal of carelessness, in terms of references to the novel titles - *The Murder at the Vicarage* (not **the** Murder at the Vicarage), *Murder is Easy* (not **the** Murder is Easy), Christie's name (p. 18) and in terms of grammar and the quality of her translation of Czech sources used. But, on the whole, the work is clearly expressed, and there is sufficient research and analysis to warrant its acceptance for defence, with a recommended mark of 3/2 depending on the nature of the defence.

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