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**THE DEPICTION OF BRITISH SOCIETY IN SELECTED NOVELS
OF AGATHA CHRISTIE**

Bachelor Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the sources listed in the works cited page.

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Bernadette Higgins, M.A., for her kind help, valuable
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TITLE:

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ABSTRACT:

The Thesis explores how the British society is depicted in Agatha Christie's detective stories. The theoretical part introduces briefly the Golden Age of detective fiction and Christie's position within the genre. It also gives an outline of the social conditions between the Wars. The analysis is based on three country-house mysteries, the attention being paid to the classes, village and the social changes that took place in the inter-war and post-war period.

ABSTRAKT:

Práce se zabývá zobrazením britské společnosti v detektivkách Agathy Christie. V teoretické části je stručně představen Zlatý věk detektivního žánru a pozice autorky v něm. Také jsou představeny sociální podmínky společnosti v období mezi dvěma válkami. Analýza vychází z tří detektivních románů, jejichž děje se odehrávají na venkově (country-house mysteries), a zabývá se především společenskými třídami, vesnicí a sociálními změnami, které se odehrávaly v meziválečném a poválečném období.

KEY WORDS:

Agatha Christie, Golden Age, social classes, village, Wars

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1 Introduction

The thesis explores the depiction of British society in Agatha Christie's detective stories, namely the *Murder at the Vicarage*, *Murder is Easy*, and *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*. These all are the country-house mysteries, that is they are set in a village and there is a closed circle of suspects narrowed to the inhabitants of a certain village only. Two of them take place in St. Mary Mead, the home of Miss Marple, and one in the mysterious village Wychwood-under-Ashe.

The theoretical part represents briefly the major characteristics of the Golden Age of detective fiction and explores Christie's position within the genre. It also outlines the social conditions between the Wars to provide the basis to which the practical part refers.

The main body tries to find out to what extent does the depiction of social classes reflect the reality (outlined in the theoretical part) and to what extent does Christie respect the rules of the Golden Age detective fiction. It refers to the concrete characters in the stories supported with several extracts proving the specific arguments.

Besides the social classes, the thesis deals also with the life in the village. It includes the detailed descriptions of the villages described above and the depiction of villagers, their nature, customs, etc. There is a gap of more than thirty years between the *Murder at the Vicarage* and *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* and the main aim is thus to capture the changing atmosphere and social conditions between, and after the two Wars.

2 Golden Age of Detective Genre

2.1 Agatha Christie and the Golden Age

The literary work of Agatha Christie belongs to the Golden Age of detective stories which in terms of time denotes the period between the two World Wars. Besides Christie's work, the works of "G. K. Chesterton, Anthony Berkeley, Ronald Knox, Freeman Wills Crofts" and other's (Androski) also belong to this period. In America, a new hard-boiled style was formed with its main representative Raymond Chandler. The interwar period was extremely important for the development of detective genre because the interest in detective stories among the reading public was rising and, moreover, the rules of the genre were established. The writers' aim was to involve the readers into the plot, to make them rival the detective in finding the murderer. As a result, "the plots became so complicated that they almost lost the contact with reality. To this fact reacted the American Hard-boiled school and Noir Crime Fiction" (Luklová 64, as translated by Čechová). Some writers and theorists tried to delimit the detective genre with their own rules. "The *Twenty Rules For Writing Detective Stories* written by the American literary critic and author Willard Huntington Wright in 1928 gave base to the *Ten Commandments* of detective fiction by the Catholic priest Ronald Knox. It summarises the norms on how to approach a detective story and expresses a negative attitude towards the genre's cliché" (Luklová 64, as translated by Čechová). It was meant to instruct the writers of detective fiction to play fair-play with readers. That meant primarily to clearly present all the important elements of the plot at an early stage in the proceedings and not to conceal any important facts from the reader. McCaw describes the *Ten Commandments* as "highly eccentric checklists of detective fiction which reinforce a pervasive critical sense among some that the genre is too often formulaic and lacking in social relevance" (11). From today's perspective, this definition seems quite correct. Some of the Knox's rules (like no. 5: No Chinaman must figure in the story) are at very least bizarre. Agatha Christie abided these rules in her own way though. Luklová mentions following examples: "in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* she breaks the rule forbidding the detective or his helper to be a murderer. Nevertheless she states all the necessary facts and thus doesn't break the rule of fair play with a reader. Her innovative approach can be found also in her *Murder in the Orient Express* where all the suspected participated in the murder" (65).

Agatha Christie is probably the most influential writer of the Golden Age, mainly for her original way of creating her stories with a puzzle whose denouements are not unbelievable but still they can confuse and surprise a reader.

2.2 The Nature of the Golden Age Detective Fiction and Its Subgenres

As mentioned above, the Golden Age detective stories (or more general, mystery fiction) represent the canon of the methods and rules which “proceeds from the E. A. Poe and A. Conan Doyle’s narrative techniques. These are based on the causality of logical steps leading to a final solution of a problem.” (Sýkora 17, as translated by Čechová). The fiction is oriented towards the reader, who must have a chance to solve the mystery too. “The absolute subordination to the rules of the conventional form had a harmful effect on the genre though. The detective novel had been reduced to an abstract game, like a puzzle. The characters of such novels became only shallow figures, the attention being paid to a difficult construction of a mystery” (Sýkora, 17).

Sýkora also mentions “the centralization” as a major feature of the Golden Age mystery fiction (18). The characters find themselves in the fictional isolated world existing outside the reality that doesn’t succumb to change and in which only rarely do “the social disorders or economic crises take place” (Sýkora, 18). In such an environment (with a traditional class distinction too) there must be a detective with a high social status or be generally acceptable by the middle-class society. The most famous detectives are thus usually amateurs (Christie’s Miss Marple and Mr. Satterthwaite, Sayer’s Lord Peter Wimsey and others); the police have a little chance to solve a crime. “It is not unusual that the story contains a side romantic plotline” (Sýkora, 18). Besides chasing the perpetrator, the detective often functions also as a lover's defender and helps them find the harmonious relationship.

In this fictional world the characters do not act arbitrarily, they act in a way to accomplish their aims. The murders are thus always planned and well prepared. The individual motives are crucial to enable the detective (and readers) to explore the real nature of a crime. “In the Golden Age there also exist the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. In some stories (*the ABC Murders*), it seems that this rule is broken at the beginning, but finally

it is confirmed” (Sýkora, 18). Three major types of detective stories are distinguished – “whodunit, howdunit, and whydunit” (Sýkora, 19). Sýkora adds, that “being itself a canonical form, whodunit is the most famous, its basic question being the identity of a perpetrator” (19). Of course the three types are related and often blend into each other.

In the Golden Age, a great emphasis was put on the specific environment and the mystery placement. In its consequence, many subgenres appeared, such as the “country-house mystery, in which the circle of suspected is restricted to a microcosm of inhabitants of a particular place” (Sýkora, 15). Christie was very fond of this subgenre and having grown up in the country in a big house, many of her detective stories take place in the countryside. “A locked room mystery on the other hand explores the method used to commit apparently impossible crime (howdunit) in a closed space. Combination of these two gave rise to a snow-bound mystery and a murder afloat” (*The Mousetrap, The Death on the Nile*) (Sýkora, 15). The isolation and the impossibility for characters to leave the place bring the readers a very attractive claustrophobic atmosphere.

3 Social Conditions between the Wars

3.1 Classes and Their Standard of Living

The most acute issue in the inter-war British society was the overwhelming unemployment and poverty during and after the Great Depression in the early 1930s. “The unemployment soared to levels the country had never experienced before” (Fraser). The most affected was the working class, whose members (especially the unemployed) were often forced to live in terrible conditions in slums. “For the unemployed there was misery, idleness, and often abject poverty” (Robson 166).

The expansion of the new industries (electrical equipment, motor industry) in the 1930s together with the stable prices brought the improvement of economic situation. People now had enough money “to spend on houses, cars, vacuum cleaners, wireless sets, and a wide range of other consumer goods” (Robson 144). As a result of the expansion of individual firms and the new industrial processes, the number of clerical workers and professional men increased. They were encumbered with the higher rate of taxation though. The changes in the social conditions can be also illustrated on the decreasing number of domestic servants who preferred to work in factories for higher wages and shorter working hours. “Households which had kept five servants dropped to two; those formerly with two to one; and the rest of the middle class made do with a daily woman” (Taylor, 177). The middle-class’ standard of living improved also due to the boom of public schools in the post-war years. New boys’ public schools were established in 1920s and girls had the opportunity of private education. Many middle-class families were moving to the suburbs or to the country.

The romantic and peaceful countryside also often lured rich politicians and businessmen. “They wanted to own a country house not because it was a step on the way to Parliament but because they were in love with the idea of a country house – because it represented to them peace, tradition, beauty and dignity” (Girouard 302). The social changes did not avoid the countryside too. “Fewer servants, the influence of America and the reaction of the post war generation against their parents all played their part” (Girouard 310). These features gave rise to unconventional households, the behaviour of guests also slightly changed. They did not change for tea anymore, although they still changed for the dinner. The territories in the house restricted for men and women were in decay. The billiard (very famous in the

men's company) was gradually replaced by bridge, which brought the sexes together in the drawing room.

3.2 Status of Women

Suffragette Movement, looser fashion and morals, new jobs – these all are the features showing the changing role of women in the 1920s and 30s.

The Suffragettes, who began to fight for the equal rights with men already before the War, finally gained (at least partly) what they wanted, that is the right to vote. In 1918, the Parliamentary Reform Act was passed which gave the vote to women over the age of thirty, but only to those who were householders or the wives of householders. They didn't achieve full equality of voting rights until 1928. The Act in 1918 also allowed women to be elected into Parliament, but there were never more than twenty women M.P.s in the inter-war years. "The entry of women into politics was only a symptom of a bigger change. The role and status of women were changing" (Robson 174).

This change can be also seen in the new working opportunities for unmarried women (the tradition of married women to be at home was still very strong). They worked in shops, offices, or took jobs as workers in the new factories. "A minority of intelligent 'career girls' had the opportunity to study at universities of Oxford and Cambridge and to find more attractive professions, although they seldom reached the top ranks" (Robson 175). The introduction of women to the 'new' business world meant, that they were paid less than men. This fact became a part of their later efforts to secure equal pay for equal work.

Robson mentions "the young woman of the 1920s was much freer, much more self-confident than her Victorian or Edwardian predecessor" (175). 'Flappers' were called the young unconventional women who were drinking and smoking, listened to jazz and wore excessive makeup. They were looked at by the older generation with suspicion, also for their loose sexual behaviour and immodest clothes.

4 Depiction of Social Classes in Christie's Novels

4.1 The Upper-Middle Class

As previously mentioned, the Golden Age detective fiction (especially the country-house mystery) had a firm structure. It also included the distribution of society constituted mainly by the middle class. It is an unwritten rule though that in almost every Christie's country-house mystery there is one pompous mansion with a prominent personage living in it, who is often not very popular among local residents. Such figures are: Colonel Protheroe in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Lord Whitfield in *Murder is Easy*, and Marina Gregg in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*.

Colonel Protheroe (although not having much space in the story) is described as a very unpleasant man. His first wife left him for his bad moods and the second wife finds him difficult to live with too. When he is murdered, it is not easy to find out who actually killed him, for almost everybody wished he was dead for some reason. A concrete manifestation of his bad nature can be found in the fact that he forbade his former wife to see her daughter Lettice, with whom she lived in a great house called the Old Hall. Lettice represents the kind of a spoiled snobbish (and naïve) girl who looks down on everyone else in the village. This stereotyped character also often appears in Christie's novels. Miss Cram presents a decided opinion on Lettice when complaining to Mrs. Clement about having nobody to talk to:

She's too high and mighty for the likes of me. Fancies herself the County, and wouldn't demean herself by noticing a girl who had to work for her living. Not but what I did hear her talking of earning her living herself. And who'd employ her, I should like to know? Why, she'd be fired in less than a week. Unless she went as one of those mannequins, all dressed up and sidling about. She could do that, I expect.
(Christie, *Vicarage* 68)

Lord Whitfield, an important figure in the small village of Wychwood-under-Ash is not as hated by other inhabitants as Colonel Protheroe, for he did a great deal for the development of the village and is generally respected. Being himself of humble origin (his father was a

shoemaker), he had to work hard to become a successful businessman. He realizes his social rank and never hesitates to boast about his achievements in life:

I had none of your natural advantages. My father kept a boot-shop – yes, a plain boot-shop. And I served in that shop when I was a young lad. I raised myself by my own efforts, Fitzwilliam – I determined to get out of the rut – and I *got* out of the rut! Perseverance, hard work and the help of God – that’s what did it! That’s what made me what I am today. (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 43)

He believes in progress. He hires expensive architects to modernize his house and the houses he bought in the village and turned them into public buildings (museum, library). His enthusiasm and poor taste doesn’t always meet understanding though. He had an argument with doctor Humbleby about the new water supply, for example.

Despite considering himself a respected person, Lord Whitfield is often mocked and ridiculed by others. Knowing he comes from a working-class family, the residents cannot reconcile with his played aristocracy and pretended respectability. Only the chauffeur, when being fired for driving drunk in his car, dares to tell him what everybody thinks:

You won’t have this and you won’t have that, you old bastard! *Your* estate! Think we don’t all know your father kept a booth-shop here? Makes a laugh ourselves sick, it does, seeing you strutting about as cock of the walk! Who are you, I’d like to know? You’re no better than I am – that’s what you are. (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 216)

In contrast to Lord Whitfield there is Honoria Waynflete, an impoverished aristocrat and a proper lady. She comes from an important upper-class family and she was once engaged to Lord Whitfield in times when he was a young poor lad. Of course, her family didn’t approve the engagement with a working-class man, but she was devoted to the fight against social prejudices, as Lord Whitfield reveals:

The fat was in the fire all right when Honoria announced she was going to marry me!
Called herself a Radical, she did. Very earnest. Was all for abolishing class distinctions.
She was a serious kind of girl. (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 220)

The roles changed, when Lord Whitfield cancelled the engagement and gradually worked his way up to a successful businessman, while Honoria's family lost all the fortune. Moreover, Whitfield later bought their house, turned it into a library and Honoria became his employee. Not surprisingly, she felt humiliated and became a bitter woman.

Although impoverished, Honoria Waynflete is still perceived as a noble aristocrat lady while Lord Whitfield with all his luxury is presented rather as a comic figure. It provides an interesting study of English society and their inability to deal with the changing world (after the WWI) where the origin and social status doesn't play the most important role anymore.

Marina Gregg (similarly to Lord Whitfield) is a representative of the newly emerged aristocracy. She also used her own skills to achieve wealth and luxury. Christie wrote *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* in the early 1960s, in the time when the social distinction was not the determining issue anymore. It is well reflected through the behaviour of the middle-class inhabitants of St. Mary Mead who are not as envious and more tolerant. They are all truly excited about the arrival of the famous actress Marina Gregg. She buys the Gossington Hall, the mansion that once belonged to Mrs. Bantry, who surprisingly doesn't bear her a grudge, as one would expect. The behaviour of Marina Gregg also isn't seen as the snobbish-lady character; on the contrary she is very friendly to everyone and excited about her moving to such a lovely peaceful place. The class distinction tends to disappear in this novel, the more explored theme being the nature of the villagers.

4.2 The Middle Class

As outlined above, the middle-class society plays an important role in Christie's novels. She was born in the small town Torquay to a middle-class family (her father was an American businessman). She thus knew the atmosphere, nature and manners of the middle class very well. Since she started to write during WWI and continued to write for the next sixty years,

her work clearly reflects the social changes which were quite intensive during and after the two Wars.

Occasionally, it is possible to find pieces of information about the financial situation at their time. In *Murder is Easy*, Miss Pinkerton explains why she does not travel first class:

Of course, I don't usually do that. I mean, I should consider it an *extravagance*, what with taxes and one's dividends being less and servants' wages so much more and everything. (Christie 18)

Similarly, some hints appear about how people dressed themselves. Again, in *Murder is Easy* Bridget Conway speaks about hats and the interesting trend of dyeing them when the colour went out of fashion:

Well, about twenty years ago, people *did* paint hats – one season you had a pink straw, next season a bottle of hat paint and it became dark blue – then perhaps another bottle and a black hat! But nowadays – hats are cheap – tawdry stuff to be thrown away when out of fashion. (Christie 90)

As the proof of looser morals in fashion in 1930s Miss Marple serves to explain why Mrs. Protheroe couldn't have the pistol when being witnessed approaching the crime scene:

My dear Colonel Melchett. You know what young women are nowadays. Not ashamed to show exactly how the creator made them. She hadn't so much as a handkerchief in the top of her stocking. (Christie, *Vicarage* 64)

More important is Christie's ability to explore human characters that provide the readers with a clear image about the nature of the then society. In her country-house mysteries, stock village (middle-class) characters such as vicar, lawyer, doctor, or retired military man usually appear.

The character of the vicar plays an essential role in the *Murder at the Vicarage*, where he is also the narrator of the story. Despite the decreasing number of churchgoers, the church still remains an important place for gathering of villagers and the doors of the vicarage are rarely closed, for the inhabitants often pay him visit to ask for help or just to have a conversation. He is respected by everyone in St. Mary Mead. He uses his role of a trusted man and tries to investigate the murder on his own. He has a wife Griselda, who is twenty years younger and who he married “at the end of twenty-four hours’ acquaintance” (Christie, *Vicarage* 6). Mr. Clement describes her:

My wife’s name is Griselda – a highly suitable name for a parson’s wife. But there the suitability ends. She is not in the least meek. [...] She is most distractingly pretty and quite incapable of taking anything seriously. She is incompetent in every way and extremely trying to live with. She treats the parish as a kind of huge joke arranged for her amusement. (Christie, *Vicarage* 6)

This paradox of having an attractive and slightly crazy wife together with his own weaknesses (he likes reading detective stories) makes him a very likeable character.

Another respected figure in villages is the doctor. He is usually a friendly fellow, popular among the inhabitants and yet absolutely professional. Like Dr Haydock from *The Murder at the Vicarage*, who is “a good fellow, a big, fine, strapping fellow, with an honest, rugged face” (Christie 35). His professionalism shows the ability not to express emotions. “His eyebrows went up when I pointed silently across the room. But like a true doctor he showed no signs of emotion” (Christie 36). Dr Haydock finds himself in an ambivalent position in the story, when he tries to convince the vicar that people are not always fully responsible for their deeds. One of his patients was diagnosed encephalitis lethargica, or sleeping sickness, and he is very afraid that he might have actually committed the crime: “It’s a strange disease – has a queer moral effect. The whole character may change after it” (Christie 98). At this point Dr Haydock shows a strong sense of morality justifying the criminals and condemning the death sentence:

Clement, I believe the time will come when we'll be horrified to think of the long centuries in which we've indulged in what you may call moral reprobation, to think how we've punished people for disease – which they can't help, poor devils. You don't hang a man for having tuberculosis. (Christie, *Vicarage* 98)

This is one of the rare moments, when Christie deals with moral issues. Dr Haydock is presented as a pragmatic man which he shows also later in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, when he is already an old man going into retirement and having only few patients, who don't want to accede to new methods of medical treatment promoted by young doctors. Instead of prescribing Miss Marple loads of pills (as the young doctor does) he realizes she is simply growing old and only needs some distraction from the boring life. He thus orders her to find some hobby (which she finds in investigating the murder).

The different attitudes towards the medical treatment are presented also in the *Murder is Easy*, where the representative of the old generation is Dr Humbleby, who is (similarly to Dr Haydock) a popular figure in the small village Wychwood-under-Ashe. As his young opposite stands Dr Thomas, who is attractive, ambitious, but “over-shadowed by Humbleby who was a man of very definite magnetism” (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 59). There was a tension between them, for “Thomas was all for newer methods of treatment and Humbleby preferred to stick to the old ways.” (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 60). For some reason, Christie always gives a better impression to the older reactionary doctor than to a young progressive one. It is another hint that shows the nature of English-village society, their conservatism and inability to adopt the progress that took place in all fields of study all over the world.

Police officers must also be accounted for in the stock figures of Christie's novels. Their position is unenviable, though. Christie was well aware that they cannot exceed a certain level of likeability for they cannot be as kind, intelligent, and easy-going as private detectives. They are thus often depicted as rude and unpleasant, and slightly stupid characters. The residents of St. Mary Mead make fun of them all the time during their investigating the murder of Colonel Protheroe in the *Murder at the Vicarage*. Miss Cram, after finding out that Lawrence Redding was arrested, remarks: “I couldn't believe my ears when I heard the police had arrested him. Still one always hears they're very stupid – the

country police” (Christie, *Vicarage* 69). Mary, the servant of Mr. Clement also shows a lack of respect as Inspector Slack complains: “Doesn’t like the police, [...] I cautioned her – did what I could to put the fear of the Law into her, but no good. She stood right up to me” (Christie, *Vicarage* 88).

Nevertheless, only those policemen who refuse to cooperate with the private investigator (Miss Marple) usually possess these qualities. In *The Mirror Crack’d from Side to Side* the role of the main police investigator is performed by Miss Marple’s nephew, who is very bright and kind to everyone. The narrator of the *Murder is Easy*, the retired police officer Luke Fitzwilliam is a very likeable character too. It seems that as long as the policemen are not in the private investigators’ way, Christie leaves them alone and trusts their judgement, but otherwise she gives them a hard time.

4.3 The Working Class

The working class in Agatha Christie’s novels is represented exclusively by servants. References to poverty or unemployment are rarely mentioned, although these were burning social issues before and during the Wars. One rare example of a mention of bad social conditions come from Miss Bence, a photographer in *The Mirror Crack’s from Side to Side*, referring to memories of her mother:

My mother had eight kids. She lived in a slum somewhere. She was one of hundreds of people, I suppose, who write to any film actress that they happen to see or hear about, spilling a hard luck story, begging her to adopt the child a mother couldn’t give advantages to. [...] My mother sold me for a mess of pottage, if you like, but she didn’t sell me for advantage to herself. She sold me because she was a damn’ silly woman who thought I’d get ‘advantages’ and ‘education’ and have wonderful life. (Christie 176)

It may seem hypocritical to completely leave poverty out of her work, but again it must be stressed that life in the village was different from that in the city and the life in the fictional

village (in the country-house mystery) differed even more. There was no place for social disorders or economic depression. For the detailed descriptions of living in poverty there were other writers, such as George Orwell, but 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.

An independent observer would suggest that servants are being mocked in the books studied. Not once do the employers praise them for their work; on the contrary, they keep complaining about them. After the WWI, the domestic service lost the 'prestige' it once had had. Working class now had a range of better-paid job opportunities to choose from. Servants didn't need to be trained and have a certificate to find a job anymore. In domestic service, unskilled and inexperienced young girls appeared, yet the middle-class families were aware that if the girl became better, they might not be able to afford her. Griselda confirms this fact in *The Murder at the Vicarage*:

You know how little we can afford to pay a servant. If once we got her smartened up at all, she'd leave. Naturally. And get higher wages. But as long as Mary can't cook and has these awful manners – well, we're safe; nobody else would have her.
(Christie 72)

It is a paradox that even when they are not satisfied with her service they do not dare to say something in order not to lose her. The vicar Clement admits:

Mary has never given satisfaction to me. I confess that I have a hankering after a room thoroughly dusted and tidied every morning. Mary's practice of flicking off the more obvious deposit on the surface of low tables is to my thinking grossly inadequate. (Christie, *Vicarage* 144)

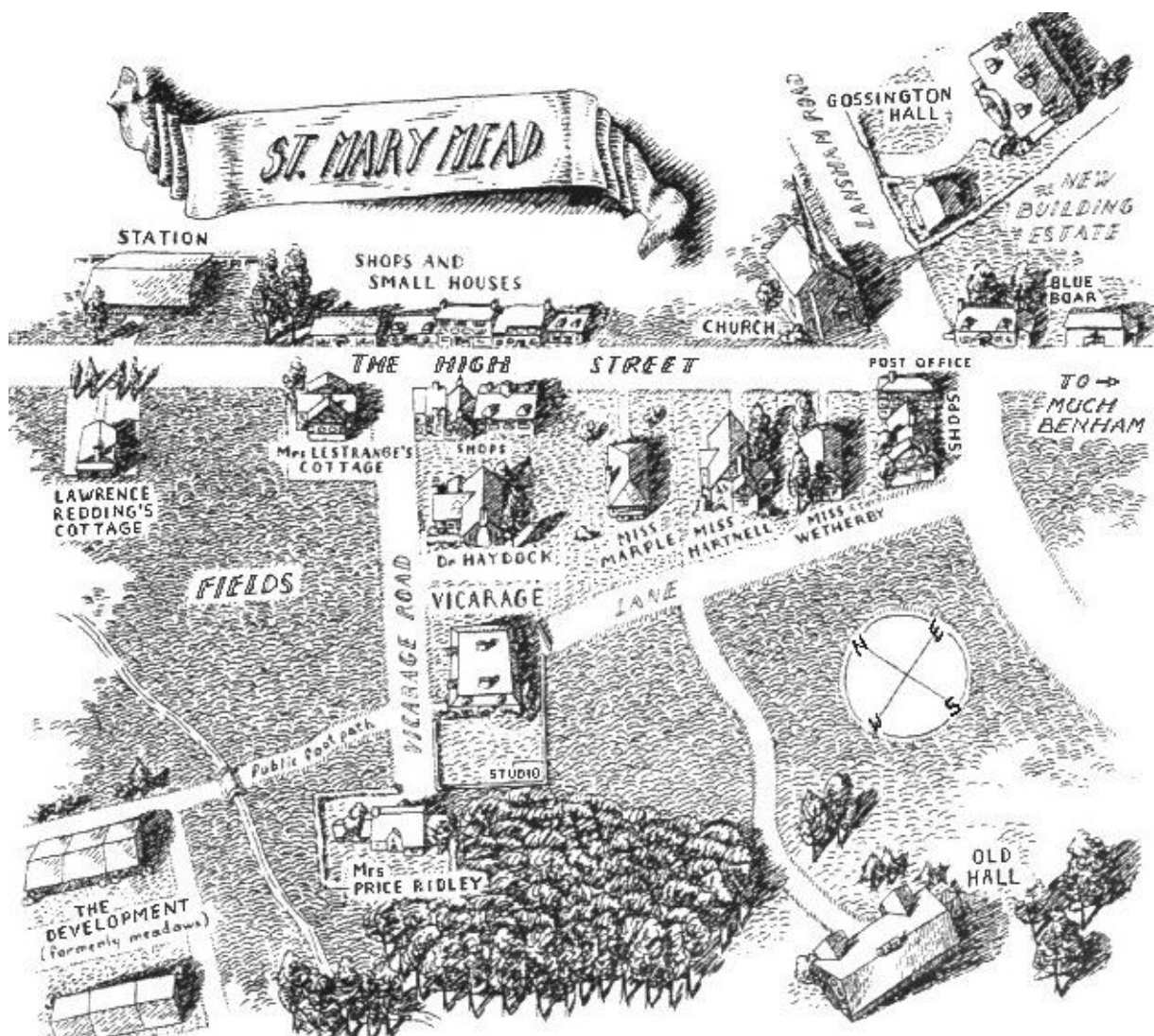
Even Miss Wayflete in the *Murder is Easy* remarks that it is almost impossible to find a decent maid:

Well, of course, she wasn't at all a good servant. But nowadays, really, one is thankful to get *anybody*. She was very slipshod over her work and always wanting to go out – well, of course she was young and girls *are* like that nowadays. They don't seem to realize that their time is their employer's. (Christie 73)

Although the maids don't give a good account of themselves in Christie's novels, they have enough space and appear as independent characters, and not marginally. For example, in another of Christie's detective story, *At Bertram's Hotel*, the maid who works in the hotel helps Miss Marple to investigate a murder and plays an essential role in the plot.

5 The Depiction of the English Village

5.1 St. Mary Mead



Most of the mysteries Miss Marple investigates take place in the village St. Mary Mead, the place where she herself lives. Although the local society suffers a high mortality rate, the village still remains invariably cosy and lovely. It is rather a small village, for there is only one proper street – the High Street with houses and shops along its sides. There are two great mansions located there: the Old Hall (the residence of Colonel Protheroe in *The Murder at Vicarage*) and the Gossington Hall (the house of the famous movie star Marina Gregg in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*). Besides the old Georgian houses around the church (homes of the old maids Miss Marple, Miss Hartnell, Miss Wetherby and the doctor

Haydock's house), the village consists of a quarter of villas built in 1920s with half-timbered pseudo-tudor houses and a new housing development built in 1960s, which stands out like a sore thumb to the old residents (see *The Changing Countryside* below). The transport in the village is ensured by the Inch's Taxi service, which developed from horse vehicles to motor cars. Although the owner sold the company years ago, the name remained the same.

[...] He was not very good with machinery and in due course a certain Mr. Bardwell took over from him. The name Inch persisted. Mr. Bardwell in due course sold out to Mr. Roberts, but in the telephone book *Inch's Taxi Service* was still the official name, and the older ladies of the community continued to refer to their journeys as going somewhere "in Inch", as though they were Jonah and Inch was a whale. (Christie 32)

Christie uses detailed descriptions and St. Mary Mead is thus modelled as any typical English village one can visit today.

5.2 Wychwood-under-Ashe

Wychwood-under-Ashe is another Christie's fictional village in which a series of murders take place (in the *Murder is Easy*). It is rather an obscure place full of mysteries and superstitions with a stifling atmosphere. Jimmy Lorrimer describes its traditions:

Folklore, local superstitions – all that sort of thing. Wychwood-under-Ashe has got rather a reputation that way. One of the last places where they had a Witches' Sabbath – witches were still burnt there in the last century – all sorts of traditions. (Christie 33)

The village is not described in such detail as St. Mary Mead is, but still a reader can create an approximate picture of its appearance. The most important building is the Wych-Hall, the former residence of Miss Wayflete's family, and current museum and library. Other buildings in the village are: a church, a vicarage, a tobacco shop, an inn, and an antique shop held by

the eccentric Mr. Ellsworthy. There is also a new modern building established by Lord Whitfield – the local institute and Lad’s Club, “austere and irrelevant to the cheerful haphazardness of the rest of the place” (Christie 36). Not far from the village there is a place called The Witches’ Meadow, where some mysterious rituals reputedly take place in some days of the year.

It is obvious that Wychwood-under-Ashe was created from the current need of evoking an image of a sinister place with a serial killer living in it, while St. Mary Mead needed to be a nice pleasant village, for Christie was to come back there many times later.

5.3 The Changing Countryside

There is a motif repeating many times in Christie’s village-situated novels, and that is the development, the changing face of villages and small towns, which is so difficult for local (especially older) residents to reconcile with. These changes are noticeable in architecture, new technologies, services, but also in behaviour and morals of people.

The increasing housing development is also one of the first things that flicks through Luke’s head in the *Murder is Easy*. Luke Fitzwilliam is a retired police officer who served in the East and now was coming home to England after many years. When looking out of the window, he says to himself: “The houses too, springing up everywhere like mushrooms. Nasty little houses! Revolting little houses! Chicken coops in the grandiose manner all over the countryside!” (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 10). He experiences another shock when he arrives to his host’s (Lord Whitfield’s) residence dating from the Queen Anne period but which has been renovated by its owner.

It is in fact one of the “castellated abominations” mentioned by Christie in two earlier novels. Stone towers and false facades have been added to make it look like a miniature castle in order to satisfy the owner’s need for ostentatious display of wealth and status. (Zemboj 156)

Luke himself, when arriving at the place, provides the reader with the following description:

He found the gates easily – they were of new and elaborate wrought-iron. He drove in, caught a gleam of red brick through the trees, and turned a corner of the drive to be stupefied by the appalling and incongruous castellated mass that greeted his eyes. While he was contemplating the nightmare, the sun went in. He became suddenly conscious of the overlying menace of Ashe Ridge. (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 37)

Lord Whitfield is properly proud on his masterpiece. It clearly reflects his nature and his absurd need to constantly show off his power and money.

Yes, they tried to put it over on me here! Carry out the original spirit of the building. No, I said, I'm going to *live* in the place, and I want something to *show* for my money! [...] No use living in the past, dear. Those old Georges didn't know much. I didn't want a plain red-brick house. I always had a fancy for a castle – and now I've got one! (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 44)

Further proof of the development was the planned installation of a water supply. Dr Humbleby who was against it was called 'a reactionary'. "Absolutely pig-headed – a diehard of the worst description. [...] He stood dead in the way of progress, [...] He held out against the scheme!" (Christie, *Murder is Easy* 69).

The suspicion of villagers towards the changes is well represented in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* where a new quarter called the Development had just been built. They are afraid of "the sudden influx of strangers to areas that had stable populations for generations" (Kyzlinková 117). The mental processes of Miss Marple when walking through the Development, show precisely the prejudices of local residents against the incomers.

The people, too, looked unreal. The trousered young women, the rather sinister-looking young men and boys, the exuberant bosoms of the fifteen year old girls. Miss Marple couldn't help thinking that it all looked terribly depraved. (Marple, *Mirror* 18)

But as she keeps walking, she gradually realizes that:

The new world was the same as the old. The houses were different, the streets were called Closes, the clothes were different, the voices were different, but the human beings were the same as they always had been. And though using slightly different phraseology, the subjects of conversation were the same. (Christie, *Mirror* 19)

The streets of St. Mary Mead had also changed significantly. It must be stressed that between the *Murder at the Vicarage* and *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* there is a gap of thirty-two years and that the old ladies from the former became even more old in the latter, some of them had already died. "Miss Wetherby had passed on and her house was now inhabited by the bank manager and his family, having been given a face-lift by the painting of doors and windows a bright royal blue" (Christie, *Mirror* 9). The new world was to come and they already were not able to adapt to the changes as quickly as the younger generations did.

"One had to face the fact: St. Mary Mead was *not* the place it had been. In a sense, of course, nothing was what it had been. You could blame the war (both the wars) or the younger generation, or women going out the work, or the atom bomb, or just the Government – but what one really meant was the simple fact that one was growing old. (Marple, *Mirror* 8)

The street, which was once the place where people could buy products from local shopkeepers, grocers, and craftsmen, was now being modernized and those mentioned scarcely managed to keep their shops in the highly competitive environment.

When shops changed hands there, it was with a view to immediate and intemperate modernisation. The fishmonger was unrecognisable with new super windows behind which the refrigerated fish gleamed. [...] At the end of the street, however, where Mr. Toms had once had his basket shop stood a glittering new supermarket – anathema to the elderly ladies of St. Mary Mead.

“Packets of thing one’s never *heard of*,” exclaimed Miss Hartnell. “All these great packets of breakfast cereal instead of cooking a child a proper breakfast of bacon and eggs. *And you’re expected to take a basket yourself and go round looking for things...*” (Christie, *Mirror* 9)

Another social phenomenon that is presented in the book is the new type of independent emancipated woman. Cherry Baker, who lives in the Development, helps Miss Marple with housework. She recalls the young maids who were trained in her house in the past and who “had had skills, rather than education” (Christie, *Mirror* 12), and wonders at the current trend of young women going for the domestic services.

She was one of the detachment of young wives who shopped at the supermarket and wheeled prams about the quiet streets of St. Mary Mead. They were all smart and well turned out. Their hair was crisp and curled. [...] Owing to the insidious snares of Hire Purchase, they were always in need of ready money, though their husbands all earned good wages; and so they came and did housework or cooking. (Christie, *Mirror* 11)

Agatha Christie wrote this book when she was already 72 years old and it is also “the last story that takes place in the closed setting of the English village. The stories following, including the cases of Miss Marple, are set in different places and St. Mary Mead appears only in short passages” (Bunson). It indicates that Christie may have tried to deal with the changes herself and when she did, there was no reason to come back. St. Mary Mead is such a different place in 1960s from that in 1930s that it was probably not a suitable crime scene for her country-house mysteries anymore. Already *The Mirror Crack’d from Side to Side* does not fulfil all the criteria for the country-house mystery of the Golden Age and differs significantly from her former work. Her favourite stock figures do not appear there, for example. Characters also speak openly about the social changes and events that preceded those changes. In consequence, it does not quite correspond to the isolated microcosm which had been always so typical for her country-house mysteries.

5.4 The Nature of Villagers

They say one cannot have a secret when living in a village. This fact is absolutely true in Christie's fictional villages. Rumours, gossips, and the pervasive feeling that everybody knows one's all secrets are the most striking social aspects of life in those villages. Knowing this, it is quite interesting that the perpetrators choose so often just this environment for their crimes. It is not a coincidence, though. It must be remembered that those characters are only puppets controlled by Christie, who is well aware of the stifling atmosphere that can be created in the closed circle of suspects. She often uses talkativeness of the villagers and their inability to keep a secret to solve a crime, which rarely needs a tangible proof, for the perpetrator, under the pressure of public and haunted by conscience, confesses to his/her crime himself/herself.

The inspector, who is called to the village to solve a crime, uses the observations of residents. It proved that the best observers are the old ladies (either widows or old maids), who usually do not have nothing better to do than observe their surroundings. "Miss Marple always sees everything. Gardening is as good as a smoke screen, and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses can always be turned to account" (Marple, *Vicarage* 16). Miss Marple surpasses them, for she has the ability of drawing consequences from the actions she witnesses and at the same time she has a deep knowledge of human nature. Everyone she meets she can see through and find all his/her weaknesses. This gift together with her appearance of a harmless old woman (which had already confused many perpetrators) makes her an ideal amateur detective.

The character of Miss Marple was first introduced in the *Murder at the Vicarage*, but she represented as an annoying lady at the beginning and is not taken seriously. "She's the worst cat in the village," said Griselda. "And she always knows every single thing that happens – and draws the worst inferences from it" (Christie, *Vicarage* 8). As the story proceeds, Miss Marple has the chance to show her bright intelligence and deduction that proved never to be wrong, and she is gradually being paid more and more respect. "I stared at the old lady, feeling an increased respect for her mental powers. Her keen wits had seen what we had failed to perceive." (Christie, *Vicarage* 78).

Villagers (as Christie describes them in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*) have this habit of poking their nose into the things that are none of their business. Moreover, they show their small-mindedness by automatically thinking the worst about the people they do not know. This is extremely annoying especially for those who had moved from the bigger town and who are not used to this kind of behaviour. In a similar position finds herself Cherry Baker, who had moved with her husband to St. Mary Mead.

There's something about a new estate like this that makes people look sideways at their neighbours. Because we're all new I suppose. The amount of back-biting and tale-telling and writing to the council and one thing and another round here beats me! People in real towns are too busy for it. (Christie, *Mirror* 182)

The same prejudice expresses also Mr. Samson when being invited to the renovated Gossington Hall, now a home of the very famous film actress.

Ah, there'll be a lot of wickedness here, I don't doubt. Naked men and women drinking and smoking what they call in the papers them reefers. There'll be all that, I expect. (Christie, *Mirror* 48)

Again, the negative attitude toward strangers is discussed to such an extent only in this atypical novel of Christie's. Of course, they always look with suspicion on a newcomer, especially on a young one (why would he/she move in such a small village? What is his/her motive?), but they are usually not depicted in such a bad light. It seems rather difficult for them to create good relationships with their neighbours though, like they would not trust one another. They rather stick to their families or their closest friends.

6 Conclusion

It must not be forgotten that Agatha Christie is primarily the author of detective stories; the social issues represent only a minority in her works. To escape the reputation of “The Queen of Crime” and the binding rules of the Golden Age she wrote six novels under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott, which enabled her to focus on the human nature and psychology in depth. Nevertheless the extracts prove that social issues do appear in her detective stories too, although marginally. Her characters often mention some themes, such as war, finances, or fashion, just to keep the conversation going, and unwittingly indicate in what period of time they approximately find themselves. Due to the respecting of the rules of Golden genre, they live in isolated world of an English village, but not a timeless world.

Agatha Christie is sometimes criticised for the shallowness of her characters. This critique involves primarily her stock figures, who seem to be somewhat unrealistic, and stereotyped. However, if one looks into the real life, he/she finds out that it is almost impossible to avoid stereotypization either. It was described how policemen are ridiculed by the inhabitants of St. Mary Mead. Jokes on policemen are not unusual even today. The parvenu daughters also often behave contemptuously, as Lettice Protheroe does. Lord Whitfield on the other hand presents the archetype of not very bright man who gains power. Such a man can be found in politics quite easily. And there are many other examples proving this argument.

The reason, why she remains so popular among readers is her ability to create unforgettable characters with their virtues and weaknesses. The statement, that she reflects the reality in her writing, must be doubted though, for her detective stories are encumbered with the rules of the Golden Age and the subgenre of the country-house mystery. However, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* is the exemption. It seems, like Christie would in her farewell with St. Mary Mead give her characters the freedom of saying and thinking whatever they want. It is the only example that can be perceived as a real social study, for these changes really took place in the post-war period and they destroyed the isolation of the peaceful village.

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