

Beyond the Scene of the Crime:

Investigating Place in Golden Age Detective Fiction

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I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted anywhere for any award. Where external sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged.

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Abstract

Place is both physical and conceptual; in fiction, place offers an initial basic orientation, but also fulfills many more complex roles. This thesis considers place in the Golden Age detective novels of Agatha Christie, Gladys Mitchell, and Dorothy L. Sayers to establish place as a point of critical engagement, and uses place to re-consider influential works in the genre. The exploration of place uncovers textual clues that are not necessarily detective clues, complicating these novels and dismantling deceptive assumptions about the homogeneity of the Golden Age.

The evidential place, or “the scene of the crime”, provides a physical setting for the crime itself and the clues that it generates, but it is rarely the most important or revelatory place in a detective story. Christie developed a place-typology that defined much of her work: the house, the village, London, and the holiday convey distinct meanings from early in her career. These places evolve over decades of social commentary, but each maintains a core of structural meaning. Character and place often develop in tandem, and Mitchell is particularly interested in the distortions of the relationship between the two. She rejects the rationality of the genre, and uses place and focalization to embed psychological questioning in her novels. Sayers considers place a central “artistic unity” of the novel. She presents place as a socially constructed unit, and through notions of “belonging” or being “out of place”, she interrogates structures of milieu. Place becomes a central focal point in her later novels, through which she questions contemporary values and identities.

In all of these authors’ work, the detective is a figure representative of modernity, developed through his or her relationship to place. Place also takes the investigation outside of purely plot-based channels, and into sociological and psychological areas of questioning.

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Introduction: The Place of Place in Fiction

To make an artistic unity it is, I feel, essential that the plot should derive from the setting, and that both should form part of the theme.

Dorothy L. Sayers, "Gaudy Night"

The most elemental orientation of a reader to a narrative text is through its evocation of places. Setting is immediately positive and reassuring until action and character are gradually unfolded.

Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature*

While it may seem evident, in fiction as well as in fact, that all stories must happen *somewhere*, the participation of that somewhere in the story is frequently overlooked. "Setting", far from being a reassuring, stationary backdrop for a dynamic plot, is often deeply integral to its mechanics and meanings. This thesis asserts the essential role of place as a literary element and examines its operation in an ostensibly plot-driven genre. Many of the claims herein are applicable to place in fiction as a whole, but I have chosen to focus on detective fiction, specifically that of the British "Golden Age", or inter-war period.¹ The reasons for this choice are twofold. First, a new emphasis facilitates a new perspective on a genre often dismissed as simplistic and reductive: attention to an under-utilized mode of analysis reveals a level of complexity in this fiction that has been overlooked in the past. Conversely, this exploration of place extends far beyond its obvious evidential role in the detective novel, demonstrating that the most readily apparent uses of place are often not the most revealing.

Wesley A. Kort asserts that "[t]he language of place and space is always a part of narrative discourse and can be a principal locus of a narrative's power and significance."² However, despite the prominence of place in many works of fiction, the

¹ For the purposes of this work, the dates of the "Golden Age" are 1920-1945. See below for further explanation of this definition.

² Wesley A. Kort, *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* (Gainesville: Florida University Press; London: Eurospan, 2004), p. 11.

fact remains that, as J. Hillis Miller observes, it “has hardly given rise to a distinct mode of the criticism of fiction, as has the criticism of character, or of interpersonal relations, or of narrators and narrative sequence.”³ The “elemental orientation” of place informs the reader: What is supposed to happen in this place? What does this place represent? What types of narrative does it characterize? Narrative typologies, whether established through history, genre, or individual oeuvre, create an “elemental orientation” from which to approach a narrative, or a place. For T.S. Eliot, “Sherlock Holmes reminds us of the pleasant externals of nineteenth-century London”, and “he may continue to do so even for those who cannot remember the nineteenth century.”⁴ This evocation of memory suggests the instinctive, and pervasive, nature of the assumptions readers make about place.

I have chosen to consider three writers in this thesis who, though united by time period and genre, could hardly be more diverse. The ways that they establish and use place are as different as their writing styles: Agatha Christie presents brilliantly deceptive inversions of the readers’ expectations and prejudices, Gladys Mitchell experiments with the genre’s Gothic heritage and popular psychoanalysis, and Dorothy L. Sayers endeavors to fuse the detective plot with a complex and personal novel of manners. One might say that Christie’s places are structural, Mitchell’s psychological, and Sayers’ holistic. The emphasis on different aspects and actions of place in the work of each author is various, but far from arbitrary; my intent is to emphasize the unique contributions of each author to the genre, as well as the particular nature of their response to place. In Christie’s work, many subtleties of expression may pass unnoticed in a casual, plot-oriented reading; revisiting a text to consider its relationship to recurring place-types reveals small, apparently inconsequential, details. This re-orientation offers a new perspective on the composition and intention of novels usually presumed to be “known” and formulaic. The author’s careful craftsmanship becomes apparent, as well as her concentrated and consistent attention to national

³ J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 9.

⁴ T.S. Eliot, “The Complete Sherlock Holmes Short Stories: A Review”, in *The Baker Street Reader* ed. by Philip A. Shreffler (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 17-20 (first publ. in *Criterion*, April 1929), p. 17.

preoccupations such as work, status, modernity, and domesticity. The impact of place is much more immediately evident in Mitchell, to the extent that its particulars sometimes overshadow the story (Julian Symons dismisses her entire oeuvre because of his impatience with “travelogue details”⁵). In her best novels, however, place looms, spectre-like, a seemingly conscious agent pursuing its own agenda, and infiltrates unexpected corners of plot and narrative. Place in Sayers’ novels, like her detective, becomes more detailed and painstakingly characterized over the course of her career. Her character’s reactions to places in which they find themselves, from pride to amusement to disgust, illuminate both character and place; the author’s observations on the large variety of places in her novels, which equally range from satirical to tender, provide some of the most illuminating, and engaging, detail in her work.

The detective format has been dismissed as a formulaic and unproductive reading experience; Umberto Eco, an avowed enthusiast, declares that,

Paradoxically, the same detective story that one is tempted to ascribe to the products that satisfy the taste for the unforeseen or the sensational is, in fact, read for exactly the opposite reason, as an invitation to that which is taken for granted, familiar, expected.⁶

The genre received scant critical attention until the 1980s, notwithstanding the pioneering analytical work of practitioners including G.K. Chesterton, Willard Huntington Wright (S.S. Van Dine), and Dorothy L. Sayers. Despite, or perhaps because of, its codifications, the detective novel’s use of place is at least as complex as in less genre-specific narratives. Far from being the simplistic clue-puzzle characterized by Marjorie Nicholson as an “escape from literature”,⁷ many detective novels develop nuanced portrayals of place that allow a far more complex reading to emerge from the plot-driven stereotype. Some critics, notably Alison Light, have

⁵ Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder* (London: Pan, 1992) [1972], p. 134.

⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1979), p. 120.

⁷ Marjorie Nicholson, “The Professor and the Detective”, in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), pp. 110-127 (first publ. in *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1929, pp. 483-493), p. 113.

explored the relationship of the detective form to Modernism, complicating the perspective on a genre known mainly for its attention to form.⁸

The intent of this thesis is thus to reclaim the status of place as a point of critical engagement, and to establish the Golden Age detective novel as a crucial forum for its development. The Golden Age of detective fiction in Britain is generally known as the period when the novel overtook the short periodical story in popularity, a change that Colin Watson attributes largely to the growth of lending libraries as a source of middle-class entertainment.⁹ Chronologies of the period vary: some critics place its beginning in 1913, with the publication of E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*, and others in 1920, with that of Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. The end is variously placed in 1936, with the publication of Dorothy L. Sayers' last novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, or in 1939, at the beginning of World War II. This thesis extends that definition to include the duration of the war; detective novels continued to be extremely popular during the war, but with few exceptions employed the style and themes of the pre-war years through 1945. In addition to the novels of this period, I have considered some later works by Christie and Mitchell, both of whom continued writing for decades.

The Golden Age saw a surge in the production and the popularity of the detective novel, and the innovations of that period continue to influence the genre's development in the present day, in literature as well as in the newer medium of television drama. Christie, Mitchell, and Sayers represent entirely different visions of detection and the novel, but all were extremely popular and widely read. Christie has been the subject of many academic, biographical, and popular studies, and Sayers has been alternately

⁸ Alison Light, *Forever England* (London: Routledge, 1991); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011); Nicholas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns, "Agatha Christie: Modern and Modernist", in *The Cunning Craft*, ed. by Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 1990), pp. 120-134.

⁹ Colin Watson, *Snobbery With Violence: English Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 28-35.

reviled and lauded for her intellectually inclined detective fiction.¹⁰ Mitchell has never been considered at length in a critical study, but her enormous and varied body of work warrants a place alongside these two acknowledged giants of detective fiction, particularly with regard to her thorough and creative evocation of place. As she began her writing career slightly later, her work comments, often satirically, on Golden Age norms and at the same time creates its own very distinct fictional world.¹¹ My addition of Mitchell also reflects the breadth of popular detective fiction from the interwar period and beyond. All three authors considered here employ place in a distinctive manner; their individual handling of the topic both demonstrates the variety of its literary possibilities and allows insight into the central concerns of their work. Before proceeding to an examination of the work of Christie, Sayers, and Mitchell, we must establish initial premises about how to define place, how the reading of place is theorized, and how place particularly operates in detective fiction.

Toward a Definition of “Place” in Narrative

This thesis endeavors to establish a meaningful literary interpretation of place, taking into account the meanings attributed to it and created within it; the way it is written, understood, and lived within the text; its personalization within a narrative; and the potential for place-based narrative focalization, in which the story is, in effect, seen through a place. Place is a distinct narrative constituent, as much as character or plot,

¹⁰ Christie published sixty-six detective and mystery novels between 1920 and 1976, few of which have ever been out of print. In addition to her own autobiography, she is the subject of several factual and fictionalized biographies. Known widely as the “Queen of Crime”, she has been a central focus of Golden Age criticism and scholarship.

Sayers wrote only twelve detective novels, but was also a prolific critic and scholar of the genre. Her work, which is often self-consciously literary, divides both popular and critical opinion, but has remained in print and received sustained critical attention.

¹¹ Mitchell published seventy-one detective novels, as well as detective short stories, children’s books, and a handful of adventure novels, between 1929 and 1984. She received praise from such varied commenters as Philip Larkin, Edmund Crispin, and Vita Sackville-West, and many of her novels have been through multiple print runs (currently, her work is being re-published in the UK by Vintage and in the US by Amazon). She has been mentioned in several genre studies, and is the subject of a very thorough tribute website (www.gladysmitchell.com), but no critic has heretofore given her work serious and sustained attention.

and must be evaluated on its own and in conjunction with these other, better-defined narrative elements. A fictional place contains its own unique values that define it as a place, and that can also define the narrative itself. Nonetheless, the term “place”, used throughout this thesis, requires some initial explanation.

Michel Foucault famously proposed that,

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.¹²

Though the emerging consensus seems to be that place and space in literature are, since the 1990s, receiving a growing share of academic attention, the field is still diffuse. Most existing literary studies focus on related, but not precisely similar, subjects such as description, landscape, and environment.¹³ All of these subjects may be considered part of place, or share its concerns, but place has a much wider scope. Kort’s *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* (2004) is one of the most ambitious attempts to approach the topic as a whole, and along with Leonard Lutwack’s *The Role of Place in Literature* (1984), one of the most broadly convincing explorations of the subject. Kort’s differentiation of narrative place-relations, “cosmic or comprehensive, social or political, personal or intimate,”¹⁴ reflects the socio-geographical construction of place that I develop in this section. A more recent addition to the field, David James’ *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space* (2008), asks “to what extent do places in fiction mediate our response to the very texture of narrative prose by functioning not simply as background scenarios but as vibrant figures in their own right?”¹⁵ James’ study endeavors to reconcile the “structural, stylistic, and sensuous

¹² Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” (“Des Espaces Autres”), *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986) pp. 22-27 (p. 22).

¹³ Jane Suzanne Carroll, *Landscape in Children’s Literature* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Stephen Siddall, *Landscape and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Janice Hewlett Koelb, *The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁴ Kort, *Place and Space*, p. 20.

¹⁵ David James, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space: Style, Landscape, Perception* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 1.

aspects of literary space”, and addresses a more diverse array of texts than its predecessors, including mid-century middlebrow and contemporary novels.¹⁶ The analysis of place in this thesis tends in the opposite direction; it endeavors to illustrate the complexity of place by confining the subject to single genre and period genre, while contending that place can indeed serve as a “network” of textual experience.

Because there is relatively little critical discussion of place as a distinct topic, it is hardly surprising that the terminology that surrounds it is slippery. It is useful, therefore, to examine the varying uses of “place” and related terms in the work of different scholars and critics. In order to define “place”, it must be differentiated from space, location, setting, landscape, and scene. I have drawn from the writings of humanist geographers to establish my terminology, because of their particular emphasis on the cultural and individual response to places. Yi-Fu Tuan, often acknowledged as the founder of the field, characterized it as the joint study of geography and humanism: “[h]umanistic geography achieves an understanding of the human world by studying people’s relations with nature, their geographical behavior as well as their feelings and ideas.”¹⁷ Because of this emphasis, humanist geographers have given a great deal of attention to the personalized meanings of place.

Lutwack, one of the only literary scholars to centralize the term “place”, writes,

To represent the class of phenomena under investigation, the term *place* seems more satisfactory than any other. It is more comprehensive than *scene*, *setting*, or *landscape*; and it is more appropriate than *space*, a category of philosophical and scientific enquiry that is too far removed from sensory and imaginative experience to be of much value in literary studies. (emphasis original)¹⁸

I have chosen the word “place”, as opposed to “space”, “location”, or “setting”, largely because it connotes relationships and belonging, and implies a particular *characterization*. We speak of finding “the right place”, being in “the wrong place at

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, “Humanistic Geography” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66.2 (1976), pp. 266–276 (p. 266). “Humanistic”, Tuan’s original term, has largely been superseded; the specialism is currently known as “humanist geography”.

¹⁸ Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984), p. 27.

the wrong time”, feeling “out of place”, or “getting my own place”, all of which impart an emotional value to the idea. Tim Cresswell, in *Place: A Short Introduction* (1994), describes place as “a word wrapped in common sense”, “both simple and complicated”.¹⁹ Place, he contends, “is not just a thing in the world, but a way of understanding the world.”²⁰ The specificity of place contrasts to the abstract nature of space, which connotes expanse and amorphousness (in such uses as “spacious”, “outer space”, “cyberspace”) rather than defined boundaries and specificity.²¹ John A. Agnew writes: “[s]pace is regarded largely as a dimension within which matter is located or a grid within which substantive items are contained.”²² As defined in environmental geography, space is that which can be reproduced or reconstructed. Lawrence Buell characterizes space as a repeatable unit with no particular relationship to its context, such as a chain shop or restaurant.²³ A space can also be a receptacle, into which an experience can be projected. Art galleries are frequently described as “spaces”, because they are understood not primarily by their physicality, but by their contents.

Place is created when space acquires emotional resonance or interpretable meaning.²⁴ Though the two terms oppose each other, they are also interdependent. Tuan writes,

“Space” is more abstract than “place.” What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. [...] The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa.²⁵

The idea of “endowment with value” is crucial to my understanding of place. To be a useful literary construct, place must have an affective, as well as a cognitive, resonance. Edward S. Casey echoes these sentiments: “[p]lace is what takes place

¹⁹ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (London: Blackwell 1994), p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹ Indeed, some contemporary geographers, such as Thomas L. Friedman in the popular *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), associate “space” with contemporaneity and progress, and “place” with nostalgia.

²² John A. Agnew, “Space and Place” in *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, ed. by John A. Agnew and David N. Livingstone (London: SAGE, 2011), pp. 316-330 (p. 316).

²³ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 63.

²⁴ Buell, *Environmental Criticism*, p. 145; Joseph A. Kestner, *The Spatiality of the Novel* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1978), p. 70.

²⁵ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 6.

between body and landscape.”²⁶ It is action, and interaction, that create “places” as *place*. However, place remains, at least in part, defined by its physicality. For Cresswell:

Places are neither totally material nor completely mental; they are combinations of the material and the mental and cannot be reduced to either. A church, for instance, is a place. It is neither just a particular material artifact, nor just a set of religious ideas; it is always both. Places are duplicitous in that they cannot be reduced to the concrete or the “merely ideological”; rather they display an uneasy and fluid tension between them.²⁷

The meanings attributed to an individual place, or a type of place, are composed both culturally and individually, super-imposing meaning onto the material, and making place out of the juncture between the two. To complicate matters further, the physical place may contain both an assumed (socially accepted) use and an active (individualized) use. As often happens in detective novels, the assumed use may conflict with its active use, creating a narrative tension through contested interpretations of that place.

In adopting this geographically based definition, I am reversing the differentiation between space and place that Mieke Bal proposes. She positions place as “an element of the fabula [...] the topological position in which the actors are situated and the events take place” whereas “space”, in her definition, is place “in relation to its perception”.²⁸ Agnew credits Henri Lefebvre with one of the first attempts to re-unify ideas of space and place:²⁹ Lefebvre uses the term “space” exclusively, but differentiates between physical, preexisting spaces and “produced” spaces. He separates the latter into “spatial practice”, “representations of space”, and

²⁶ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 29.

²⁷ Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 13.

²⁸ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985/1997), p. 133. This differentiation is similar to, and presumably based upon, that of Michel de Certeau in *Arts de Faire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984/88), p. 117-118. I mention Bal’s because it deals specifically with narrative place/space.

²⁹ Agnew, “Space and Place”, p. 320.

“representational spaces”,³⁰ arguing that the meaning of a space is established through use:

Everyone knows what is meant when we speak of a “room” in an apartment, the “corner” of the street, a “marketplace”, a shopping or cultural “centre”, a public “place” and so on. These terms of everyday discourse serve to distinguish, but not to isolate, particular spaces, and in general to describe a social space. They correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute.³¹

Much as “spatial practice” is both understood and established through use, the understanding of a place, as Cresswell describes, is both preexisting and evolving. The notion that there is a commonly understood meaning and use of “social spaces” such as those above allows an author of fiction to evoke an “elemental orientation”, but at the same time to undermine the stability of accepted “spatial practice.” As will become clear in Chapter Two, one of Christie’s lasting contributions to the detective genre is a restructuring of the inherent meanings of such presumably intelligible places as the house and the village.

An essential part of the definition of place is its relationship to action. The authors whose words begin this introduction, though also deeply invested in the meaning of literary place, use another term, “setting”, which is problematic because of its connotations of passivity. As Kort observes, “when readers take note of the language of space in a narrative, they usually do so by referring to ‘setting’. But ‘setting’ condemns the language of place to inherently passive and secondary roles.”³² Though it is a useful term, and certainly a component of place, Gillian Tindall describes “setting” as an almost offensive word to an author whose works incorporate place as an essential element: “[t]heir novels are not just ‘set’ in Paris, Paraguay or wherever; they have grown there.”³³ Lutwack also rejects the term:

Setting denotes a place of action in both narrative as well as drama and to that extent is an important category of place in literature, but *setting* is

³⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³² Kort, *Place and Space*, p. 15.

³³ Gillian Tindall, *Countries of the Mind: The Meaning of Place to Writers* (London: Hogarth, 1991), p. 1.

not adequate to describe the use of spaces unrelated to action, such as metaphors or evocations of places in the speeches or consciousness of characters. (emphasis original)³⁴

The “setting” of a novel only gives the reader a very basic “where”; when that “where” takes on resonance in the course of the narrative, it is no longer merely a setting.

“Location” is another orienting word, though not interchangeable with setting. I interpret it here as an absolute of specified latitude and longitude, or as the position of one place relative to another. “Location” carries a connotation of exactitude, and hints at authenticity: films or television programs may be shot “on location”, which imparts an idea of verisimilitude lacking in a studio production (however, this verisimilitude itself is often falsified as Romania stands in for medieval England, or New Zealand for Middle Earth). Eudora Welty uses “location” almost interchangeably with “place” in her essay “Place in Fiction”, but attributes to it a distinct emotional resonance:

“[l]ocation pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place partakes in the history of feeling, and feeling of history partakes of place.”³⁵ Welty’s terminology evokes a sense of authenticity in her reference to history, implying that place, as “location”, has an inherent, accepted meaning that it may impart to fiction.

Landscape, also, is a component of place, but not analogous to it. In *Topographies* (1995), Miller chooses the word “landscape” to define a concept similar to that which I define as place, writing: “[t]he landscape is not a pre-existing thing in itself. It is made into a landscape, that is, into a humanly meaningful space, by the living that takes place within it.”³⁶ However, his use seems to overreach the usual meaning of the word: its first definition in the OED is as “A picture representing natural inland scenery”, and its second, “A view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view”.³⁷ Stephen Siddall makes a more productive argument

³⁴ Lutwack, p. 28.

³⁵ Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction”, in *Critical Approaches to Fiction*, ed. by Shiv K. Kumar and Keith McKean (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. 249-264 (p. 254).

³⁶ Miller, p. 21.

³⁷ “landscape, n.” 1. a. “A picture representing natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a sea picture, a portrait, etc.” 2. a. “A view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view; a piece of country scenery.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, 2014 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/105515>> [accessed 28 August 2014]

for landscape as a product of interaction when he writes, in *Landscape and Literature* (2009), “when the land becomes landscape, it is, so to speak, consumed. Like the farmer who makes the land productive, the tourist and the artist are using and adjusting the land they see for their purposes.”³⁸ Jane Suzanne Carroll grounds her study of children’s literature in landscape history, suggesting that it “[treats] landscape not simply as a backdrop to human action, or as a surface that can be apprehended in a single gaze, but as a complex series of strata in which human culture and geographical space intersect.”³⁹ The idea emerges that landscape is not so “natural,” or indeed neutral, as it is supposed to be. Kort asks “whether or not ‘landscape’ can still be suggestive of a relation to natural space...in a humanly constructed and controlled world”.⁴⁰ The word in this regard retains some connotations of its relationship to visual art: Cresswell reduces landscape to “an intensely visual idea,” declaring that “the viewer is outside of it”.⁴¹ However, Jeff Malpas suggests that “landscape art, and especially landscape painting, should not be construed as merely the presentation of a view, but as rather the *view* of a view” (emphasis original).⁴² Thus, the visuality of the landscape is itself necessarily mediated.

Likewise, the mediation of fictional place, for instance when it is presented from the perspective of a single character, may be only one possible view of many. The personalization of landscape emerges as a particularly important point in Chapter Four, on Mitchell’s *The Rising of the Moon* (1945). In that novel, the physical imagery of landscape, and its combination of man-made and naturally occurring features, creates a symbolic notion of place that acts alongside the narration of plot. Mitchell uses rivers and waterways as both symbolic landscapes and as personalized places; in this she follows a tradition identified by Lutwack in which the traditional, repeated use of landscape in painting, poetry, and fiction establishes “a system of archetypal place symbolism” for particular landscapes: “mountains have come to represent aspiration

³⁸ Siddall, p. 9.

³⁹ Carroll, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Wesley A. Kort, “‘Landscape’ as Place-Relation”, in *The Place of Landscape: Concepts, Contexts, Studies*, ed. by Jeff Malpas (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), pp. 27-44 (p. 28).

⁴¹ Cresswell, *Place*, p. 11..

⁴² Jeff Malpas, “Place and the Problem of Landscape”, in *The Place of Landscape: Concepts, Contexts, Studies*, ed. by Jeff Malpas (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), pp. 3-26, (p. 12).

and trial; forests and swamps, peril and entrapment; valleys and gardens, pleasure and well-being; deserts, deprivation”.⁴³ The qualities invested in place allow the novel to expand far beyond plot; the landscape is an extension of the narrator himself, and his *view* gives the story its psychological resonance.

In the context of detective fiction, the word “scene” cannot be entirely divorced from that of place. There is an inherent theatricality in the word “scene”, which is particularly relevant with regard to the performative aspect of crime. According to Joseph A. Kestner, “‘scene’ is a moment dramatized in a specific location [...] Scene, even in a pictorial sense, has direction, which distinguishes it from the nondirectional nature of place.”⁴⁴ “The scene of the crime” will be addressed in detail in Chapter One, which illustrates the deceptive nature of the evidential place. I also explore other possibilities for the true role of the scene in the crime: it plays a significant part in defining the detective, and often becomes a metaphorical “scene” that links various narrative modes. A scene has a specific intent; the staging of a performance or a tableau has an intentional surface narrative that, in detective fiction, often conflicts with an underlying reality. Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot defines detection with a theatrical metaphor in *Three Act Tragedy* (1934), a novel which is particularly concerned with the possibilities of constructed “scenes”:

“You have the actor’s mind, Sir Charles, creative, original, seeing always dramatic values. Mr. Satterthwaite here, he has the playgoer’s mind, he observes the characters, he has the sense of atmosphere. But me, I have the prosaic mind. I see only the facts, without any dramatic trappings or footlights.”⁴⁵

The term “scene” is particularly useful for the narrative content of a place: it may refer to a static image as well as a performance, but in a “scene”, the narrative is necessarily foregrounded. Thus, it is the most obvious component of place in detective fiction, but, as demonstrated in Chapter One, that role is a limited one, and it is only by moving beyond the “scene” that we may discern a more complex definition of place.

⁴³ Lutwack, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Kestner, p. 69.

⁴⁵ Agatha Christie, *Three Act Tragedy* (London: Collins, 1935), p. 225

Individual scenic elements, that is, parts of a place, may also generate their own symbolic readings, effectively becoming places in their own right. Physical structures found in different locations, such as stairs, windows, or hallways, have implications that are distinct from those of the building in which they are located. Lutwack comments, for example, that “in connecting places on different levels, stairs symbolically afford a passage from one mode of existence to another.”⁴⁶ As these man-made structures contain their own symbolism, natural elements, too, can contain meaning that is separable from that of the landscape in which they are situated: Chapter Four discusses the particular meanings of the various waterways in Mitchell’s *The Rising of the Moon*. Particular scenic elements, whether natural or built, may clarify or contradict the place-meaning of a larger place. As we will see in Chapter Six with respect to the motif of the window in Sayers’ *Gaudy Night* (1935), the symbolism of certain places may be heightened by the presence of windows, hallways or other liminal places, which often inform the plot or characters.

Buell writes that “place is succinctly definable as space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness.”⁴⁷ Eric Prieto considers place “a *human* relation. There is no set of immanent ontological features adhering to a given site that would allow us to define it as a place.” (emphasis original)⁴⁸ The integration of the physical, the symbolic, and the performative, creates place in literature as well as in philosophies of geography.

Agnew separates the components necessary to make up a place into

[T]hree major elements: *locale*, the setting in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional); *location*, the effects upon locales of social and economic processes operating at wider scales; and *sense of place*, the local “structure of feeling”. Or, by way of example, home, work, school, church, and so on, form nodes around which human activities circulate and which can *in toto* create a sense of place, both geographically and socially. Place, therefore, refers to discrete if ‘elastic’ areas in which settings for the constitution of social

⁴⁶ Lutwack, p. 39.

⁴⁷ Buell, *Environmental Criticism*, p. 145.

⁴⁸ Eric Prieto, *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 13.

relations are located and with which people can identify. (emphasis original)⁴⁹

Agnew draws these distinctions sociologically, but the import of his analysis, in its drawing-down from the general to the specific and its expansion from the material to the emotional, is equally relevant to an understanding of place in fiction. The physical presence of place as a setting is established first, then, a common, collective understanding of meaning is laid upon it. Finally, the text develops, through narration, focalization, allusion, or characterization, a particular “structure of feeling” that is the individualized response to a place. The “sense of place” identified by the writer, a character, or a reader cannot stand alone as the identifier of place-ness, but all are active components of place as it exists in literature.

Reading Fictional Place

Place is not incidental to fiction; it is a defining factor. A number of theorists have attempted to systematize the reader’s apprehension of place; these approaches have resulted in three primary models, not necessarily mutually exclusive, which may be termed relational, descriptive, and experiential. Bal, despite the brevity of her discussion of space and place, grants it an essential narratological potential:

[When] space is ‘thematized’ [...] it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an ‘acting place’ rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes subordinate to the presentation of space. The fact that ‘this is happening here’ is just as important as ‘the way it is here’ which allows these events to happen.⁵⁰

While it is possible, she contends, to relegate place to the background, it is equally possible that it combines dynamically with character or plot.⁵¹ Welty maintains,

⁴⁹ John Agnew, “Representing Space”, in *Place/Culture/Representation*, ed. by James Duncan and David Ley (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), pp. 251-271 (p. 263).

⁵⁰ Bal, p. 136.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140-141.

“Every story would be another story... if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else.”⁵² For Lutwack,

Place gets into literature in two ways, as idea and form: as attitudes about places and classes of places that the writer picks up from his social and intellectual milieu and from his personal experiences, and as materials for the forms he uses to render events, characters, and themes.⁵³

However, after the writer has finished the creative process, and completed the process of describing, characterizing, and focalizing, that place is still only partially complete.

The crucial contribution of the reader, according to Tzvetan Todorov, is “construction”:

What exists, first of all, is the text, and nothing else; it is only by subjecting the text to a particular type of reading that we construct an imaginary universe on the basis of the text. The novel does not imitate reality, it creates reality.⁵⁴

Place can be, to borrow Lutwack’s phraseology, a vehicle for “sensory and imaginative experience”,⁵⁵ but rather than communicating in exactitudes, it allows the reader to participate in the creation of the fictional experience. In *Genres in Discourse* (1978/1990), Todorov illustrates how the “universe” of the text enables the communication of the narrative from author to reader:⁵⁶



The journey from narrative intent to comprehension is mediated by the “imaginary universe”, conveyed from author to reader by means of the text. Todorov does not mention place in his analyses, but his focus on the “imaginary universe,” which he divides into “mode” (description),⁵⁷ “time,” and “vision” (focalization) reflects an

⁵² Welty, p. 254.

⁵³ Lutwack, p. 12.

⁵⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 41.

⁵⁵ Lutwack, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Todorov, *Genres*, p. 42.

⁵⁷ In his later *Introduction to Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), Todorov defines “mode” as “the degree of presence of the events evoked in the text” (p. 28).

engagement with similar concerns: all of these elements, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, are constituent parts of what is here termed “place.”

Eco refers to a “generative process” of relational reading in which the reader is “an active principal of interpretation”,⁵⁸ even if he or she lacks any consciousness of having made a contribution. As Todorov points out, “we do not cease to construct because the information is insufficient or erroneous.”⁵⁹ A wide gulf may separate the text and a generative reading of it. Ruth Ronen describes the tension between the two:

It is true that the literary text does not necessarily supply the amount of information needed for the construction of a coherent world [...] yet information about the fictional world is always sufficient insofar as the text controls the amount of information it conveys.⁶⁰

Ronen stresses that “fictional places [...] are inherently incomplete. Their incompleteness is owing not to the verbal mode of their construction, but to their fictionality.”⁶¹ A text cannot communicate a complete “imaginary universe”, so the reader must participate in its construction.

Alexander Gelley observes that, in the nineteenth-century novel, “one of the primary goals of the representation of objects and locales was to endow these entities with what may be termed ocular value, that is, not merely to designate them but to render them visible”.⁶² The fact that place in fiction has largely been discussed with relation to nineteenth-century novels, such as those of Dickens and Hardy, demonstrates how the theoretical discussions around place have focused on *described* place. In these cases, as Rosa Mucignat writes, “space is endowed with specific properties, details and a sense of material solidity that tend toward exhaustiveness.”⁶³ Despite the still-prevalent assumption that description is the most salient aspect of creation of fictional,

⁵⁸ Eco, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Todorov, *Genres*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ Ruth Ronen, “The Construction of Fictional Space in Narrative Texts” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1984), p. 232.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁶² Alexander Gelley, “The Represented World: Toward a Phenomenological Theory of Description in the Novel”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37.4 (1979), pp. 415-422 (p. 417).

⁶³ Rosa Mucignat, *Realism and Space in the Novel, 1795-1989: Imagined Geographies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 6.

visual description is only one aspect of the process of visualization and visibility. Beyond “ocular value”, a place must imply, or reverberate, or deceive; more revealing than description are narrative context, allusions, and connections that guide the reader (or a “reader” within the text, such as the detective) toward the true meaning of the place. Frederik Tygstrup argues that in Modernism, place “presents an imaginary construction that schematizes intuitions and relations between intuited elements; it is not a visualization of an imaginary piece of reality, but an autonomous means of conceiving a reality that sometimes coalesces with visibility, sometimes not.”⁶⁴ Ultimately, the layered understanding of place, developed above with respect to Agnew’s geographical definition, takes on the role of Lefebvre’s “representational space” as that which “overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects”.⁶⁵ Place is, simply, that which makes the physical meaningful.

Description, understood as “a graphic or detailed account of a person, thing, scene, etc.”, or even as “verbal representation” is sometimes a vital part of the creation of fictional place, as it is in Mitchell’s *The Rising of the Moon*. However, in novels such as Christie’s it is far more useful to understand description as “mentioning recognizable features.”⁶⁶ Specific features of a place, even ones that seem negligible, often take on the character of a clue, as the reader endeavors to create a whole place out of fragments. The sense of place so prominent in the Holmes canon, for instance, is not produced by description, but rather conveyed through a series of individual, largely fleeting, images:

Ten minutes later we were both in a cab, and rattling through the silent streets on our way to Charing Cross Station. The first faint winter’s dawn was beginning to appear, and we could dimly see the occasional

⁶⁴ Frederik Tygstrup, “Still Life: The Experience of Space in Modernist Prose” in *Modernism*, ed. by Ástráður Eysteinnsson, Vivian Liska, 2 vols. (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007), I. pp. 253-269 (p. 259-260).

⁶⁵ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, p. 39

⁶⁶ OED, description 2a. “The action of setting forth in words by mentioning recognizable features or characteristic marks; verbal representation or portraiture.”
2b. “A statement which describes, sets forth, or portrays; a graphic or detailed account of a person, thing, scene, etc.” < <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/50741> > [accessed 27 August 2014]

figure of an early workman as he passed us, blurred and indistinct in the opalescent London reek.⁶⁷

Ronen describes the false dichotomy between action and description as, “a theoretical opposition incompatible with textual experience”;⁶⁸ places are not described, so much as they are lived through the text.

It is a notable phenomenon that readers identify the fictional place they have created, as though it were textually extant. As Gregory Currie puts it, “[m]ost of us think we understand phrases like ‘the world of Dickens’ or ‘the world of Barcester,’ but could give no satisfactory account of them if asked to do so.”⁶⁹ During my research on Sayers’ *Gaudy Night* (1935), I discussed the novel with several people who insisted that they remembered a map of the Oxford college in which the novel takes place, though no map was published in any edition of the novel. In fact, maps as a general feature of Golden Age detective fiction are far more unusual than they are assumed to be. Chapter One explores the persistence of the idea of mapping, and some of the reasons for its omission in novels that dwell on the physicality of place; Chapter Six, which focuses on *Gaudy Night*, returns to the theme to address the particular significance of the map’s absence in that novel.

In Golden Age detective fiction, the imperative of realism is at work for most authors, even if liberally sprinkled with genre-dictated suspensions of disbelief and occasionally leavened with the supernatural. Of course, each author has a different relationship with the very idea of “reality.” Christie contends that “real people, real places. A definite place in time and space” are essential to her work, and insists that it is based in “the fantastic facts of daily life”.⁷⁰ Mitchell, on the other hand, frequently embraces the fantastic and abnormal, and relies on the unflappability of her detective to ground the plot. Sayers’ concern with the observable details of life is increasingly evident as her

⁶⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Abbey Grange” from *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, 2 vols, ed. by William S. Baring-Gould (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967), II. pp. 491-507 (first publ. in *The Strand Magazine*, September 1904), p. 491.

⁶⁸ Ruth Ronen, “Description, Narrative, and Representation” in *Narrative*, 5.3 (1997), pp. 274-286 (p. 283).

⁶⁹ Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p54.

⁷⁰ Agatha Christie, Introduction to *Passenger to Frankfurt* (London: Fontana Collins, 1973) [1970], pp. 7-12 (p. 10).

work becomes “less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel”.⁷¹ Chapter Five will address her use of signifiers such as addresses and brand names to create a contemporary social history, particularly evident in *Murder Must Advertise* (1933). The desire for the “real” in fictional place is a notable influence in the settings of popular contemporary detective novels. From Sara Paretsky’s Chicago to Henning Mankell’s rural Sweden, contemporary detective fiction is routinely praised for its authenticity and detail. Similarly, these concerns also affect the reception of contemporary television crime drama. Ben Lawrence praises the atmospheric setting of the recent *True Detective*, and considers the lack a sustained sense of place a weakness of contemporary British productions: *Line of Duty* and *Broadchurch*, he writes, “fell down when you scrutinised exactly what sort of community [they were] trying to portray.”⁷²

Robert Alter separates novels into the self-conscious, which “systematically flaunts its own necessary condition of artifice” and the realist, which “seeks to maintain a relatively consistent illusion of reality.”⁷³ Detective novels, however, accept a structure of artifice *as* reality. There is an implicit contract in the reading of detective fiction: according to Kathleen Gregory Klein, “the mystery writer, text, and reader are joined together by equal parts genre, intent, and repetition.”⁷⁴ The reader who has what Bertold Brecht calls the “intellectual habit”⁷⁵ of detective fiction accepts the qualified reality of that fictional world. The experience of place in the detective novel, or any novel, is developed in relation to previous fictional experiences. Klein believes the skill of the mystery is the ability to “test each text against its peers.”⁷⁶ The novel that Alter evokes as a “vehicle for vicarious experience”⁷⁷ becomes an experience in itself. Todorov develops this theory in “How to Read” (1977):

⁷¹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 208.

⁷² Ben Lawrence, “Where are they now?”, *Telegraph Review*, 14 March 2014, p. R21.

⁷³ Robert Alter, *Motives for Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 12.

⁷⁴ Kathleen Gregory Klein, “Women Times Women”, in *Women Times Three: Writers, Detectives, Readers*, ed. by Kathleen Gregory Klein (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1995), pp. 3-14 (p. 8).

⁷⁵ Bertold Brecht, “On the Popularity of the Crime Novel”, trans. by Aaron Kelly and Martin Harvey, in Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller And Northern Ireland Since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 167-171 (p. 167).

⁷⁶ Klein, p. 10.

⁷⁷ Alter, p. 11.

In the perspective of reading, the text is both the product of a system of pre-existing literary categories, and the transformation of this same system; the new text modifies the very combination-reservoir of which it is the product.⁷⁸

Eco also acknowledges this process when he observes that, “frequently the reader, instead of resorting to a common frame [derived from experience], picks up from the storage of his intertextual competence already reduced intertextual frames; genre rules produce textual frames more reduced than common frames.”⁷⁹ Chapter Two addresses the meanings, both presumed and actual, of such frames, as clearly established in Christie’s work. As Todorov proposes, “instead of replacing one text by another, reading describes the relation of the two. For reading, the text is never *another*, it is multiple.” (emphasis original)⁸⁰ The reader’s participation in place construction, because it necessitates intertextual reading, is always unstable, and at least partially uncontrollable by the author and unquantifiable by the scholar. Genre may be helpful in this instance, in that it presumes, according to Eco, a “reduced” set of frames that allow a more focused method of construction. At the same time, the reader must remain aware that these reduced genre references exist among many other possibilities, and that the detective novel is always designed to deceive.

Genre, Focalization, Convention

References, or frames, allow the attribution of meaning to fictional places, and thus establish place as a focalizing element of narrative. How a place is prioritized, contextualized, or developed, if it is allied to a character, or presented as a cynosure of plot, influences the development of the novel. Kort observes that the balance of place with character and plot can significantly influence the narrative style and tone:

⁷⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 239-240.

⁷⁹ Eco, pp. 21-22.

⁸⁰ Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, p. 238.

The language of place in a narrative is often subordinate to the language of character, as when descriptions of a room or house serve to indicate a character's personality, tastes, or social standing. The language of space can also be subordinate to plot, as when it provides places where events can occur. However, the language of space begins to dominate character and plot when it determines the kind of characters that are likely to appear in certain locations or the kinds of events that occur.⁸¹

As this thesis will illustrate, the dominance of different elements within place, and their narrative roles, fluctuates throughout a given text. In my analysis, place is the first dominant element in the "typical" detective novel because it provides evidence and frames a potential plot, victim, suspect, and so forth; subsequently it becomes more useful as a modifier of character and a tool for conveying information external to the detective plot. Of course, there are many detective novels that are far from typical, and this thesis considers several in order to show how place is used to not only re-establish generic conventions but subvert them as well. In *The Rising of the Moon* and *Gaudy Night*, place continually returns to dominance, asserting itself as a force in the narrative action.

Both Ronen and Bal point out the limitations of textual place: while "space is always implicitly necessary,"⁸² "fictional places are inherently incomplete."⁸³ However, place is a useful tool for the author to direct the reader's attention toward, or, frequently in the case of detective fiction, *away from* the relevant points of the narrative. Conventions and typologies of place can be of particular use to the detective novelist because they allow the subversion of what *ought* to happen in a specific place. Lutwack emphasizes the potential of place to alter perceptions, noting that "[a] response to a place becomes material for characterization when it is individualized, that is when it does not conform to the customary response and when it cancels or exaggerates the impact place qualities usually have."⁸⁴ Chapter Three uses novels by Christie and Mitchell to consider the interconnectedness of character and place, and the ways that character or perception can be distorted if place becomes too influential.

⁸¹ Kort, *Place and Space*, p. 16.

⁸² Bal, p. 140.

⁸³ Ronen, "Construction of Fictional Space" p. 230.

⁸⁴ Lutwack, p. 71.

A character's perception of or relationship to a place is also a way to introduce the idea of "atmosphere", wherein, according to "the physical attributes of a place are selected [...] to depict or mirror a psychological environment".⁸⁵ Robert D. Hume identifies the idea specifically with the Gothic:

The distinguishing mark of the early Gothic novel is its atmosphere and the use to which that atmosphere is put. The involvement of the reader's imagination is central to the Gothic endeavor [...] In retrospect the Gothic atmosphere seems mechanical, even in the greatest of these novels, but originally its purpose was to arouse and sensitize the reader's imagination, giving it further play than it ordinarily enjoyed, and the use of the supernatural was clearly meant to contribute to this imaginative stimulus.⁸⁶

Maurizio Ascari asserts, in *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction* (2007), that the rationality of the detective story exalted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century obscured its other roots in earlier Gothic and sensational fiction: "from its inception, the discourse on detective fiction discarded the sensational lineage of the new genre, grounding its literary status on its association with scientific method and highbrow literature."⁸⁷ However, as Catherine Spooner observes, Wilkie Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle, among other nineteenth-century authors whose narratives appear to ultimately advocate logic and reason, "evoke [the supernatural] in order to articulate psychological disturbance."⁸⁸ Despite the emphasis on rationality and logic in the Golden Age, however, the Gothic influence on detective fiction does not leap from Poe and Collins to Hammett and Chandler with a brief pause at Chesterton.

Many authors in the interwar period employ Gothic tropes, and some, including Mitchell, fully embrace the destabilizing possibility of the Gothic within the detective genre. The liberation of the reader's imagination through the effective deployment of atmospheric elements, a tool for the development of darkness and suspense by Gothic authors, became in the hands of detective novelists another weapon of misdirection in

⁸⁵ Michael Cohen, "Atmosphere", in *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*, ed. by Rosemary Herbert et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 28.

⁸⁶ Robert D. Hume, "Gothic versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel" *PMLA* 84.2 (1969), pp. 282-290 (p. 284).

⁸⁷ Maurizio Ascari, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1.

⁸⁸ Catherine Spooner, "Crime and the Gothic" in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 245-257 (p. 249).

the fair-play game. Detective fiction frequently exploits the dubious nature of “atmosphere” by conjuring it, then pointedly, though not convincingly, dismissing it:

They passed inside into the cool of the hall. Mary shivered a little.
Elinor looked at her sharply.
She said:
“What is it?”
Mary said:
“Oh, nothing—just a shiver. It was coming in—out of the sun....”
Elinor said in a low voice:
“That’s queer. That’s what I felt this morning.”⁸⁹

Mary Ellen Snodgrass defines atmosphere as “an intangible ambiance or appeal, the outgrowth of verbal clues—obvious physical terrain, implied emotional aura, dynamic thought, and subtle foreshadowing”.⁹⁰ “Intangible ambiance” is often connected to a signifier, such as a place, that gives atmosphere a context for its suggestive power and allows it to be read as a clue in itself.

Although it was broad daylight, the courtyard looked eerie and desolate. It was silent, too, and the surrounding buildings seemed to shut out the sun. It was curious, she thought, that none of the windows, even of the new buildings, overlooked it. It seemed chilly out there. Mrs. Bradley made a careful exploration, even parting continually the long weeds to make certain that the surface of the courtyard was everywhere the same. This examination yielded nothing.⁹¹

In these examples, common sense is asserted, or a reasonable explanation is offered to dispel the atmosphere, to brush away the idea of the Gothic itself. George E. Haggerty suggests that the strength of place in the Gothic lies in “the use of setting as metaphor for internal states—[it] also begins to suggest the final usefulness of metaphor as an interpretive tool.”⁹² In the passage above, from *When Last I Died* (1941), Mitchell’s psychoanalyst detective Mrs. Bradley finds herself deeply suspicious that something is wrong with Nonsuch House, despite her logical disbelief of the rumors that it is haunted. In Mitchell’s work, place often forms a link between the conscious and the unconscious. For Christie, a sense of “atmosphere” is usually the work of

⁸⁹ Agatha Christie, *Sad Cypress* (London: Collins Crime Club 1933), p. 98.

⁹⁰ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), p. 15.

⁹¹ Gladys Mitchell, *When Last I Died* (London: Michael Joseph, 1941), p. 113.

⁹² George E. Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), p. 93.

subconscious observation, which informs the alert character, and in turn the reader, that the situation is not as it seems.

Story and setting are tied together in the novels quoted above, and many others, in an organic and mutually dependent pattern. In the second example, the famous haunting of the house conceals a far more horrible murder than the one for which it is known. In the first, from Christie's *Sad Cypress* (1933), the house provides the true motive for murder, as it represents wealth, as well as the false motive, the lost love of the heroine. The crimes in these novels could be committed by the same characters in other locations, but they would then cease to be the same crimes. At the same time, the evocation of atmosphere creates suspense, and undermines the certainty of detection. As Caroline Levine points out in her analysis of Victorian realist suspense, "the doubts of suspense are not put forward only to be mastered and dismissed: doubting itself has become the central activity of the text."⁹³ The detective novel is rarely a pure puzzle of logic; at the same time as it maintains the ideal of the true and verifiable solution, it admits other, more mysterious and unquantifiable influences. This thesis expands the notion of place from the descriptive and evidential toward the psychological and symbolic; as early as Chapter Two, in the discussion of Christie's typological structures, the idea emerges that place has inherent, influential qualities, and that these may be beyond the scope or control of the detective plot.

⁹³ Caroline Levine, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 78.

Observation, Orientation, Detection

Detective stories have a specific concern with place in that their signature components—clues, means, and modes of seeing—are usually related to the physical environment. I have, in several instances, separated detection, within novels and series, from adventure, suspense, or pursuit; detection as a particular interaction with place develops as a theme. The “detective plot” however, is not always the same as the activity of detection. The former is the traditional concept of progress from clue to clue, leading to a definitive solution, whereas the latter prioritizes observation and information of all kinds. Place may be an important factor in crimes themselves: as well as providing the mechanics of the puzzle, such as alibis and clues, place often serves as a motive, catalyst, or excuse for the crime. Additionally, place may act as a focalizer in order to develop or exploit narrative expectations. Place may also have symbolic significance, as it does in Christie’s house novels, which frequently represent the odd relationships of a circle of suspects through strained and unconventional living arrangements. The reader is aligned with the detective, a competitor in the game of observation, and an expert reader of signs; all the while, however, the reader is predisposed to see place in certain ways, relying on the inter-textual frames of previous experience.

The particular importance of place in detective fiction is not, as might be presumed, its foundation in observable facts. It is true that place often functions, as will be discussed in Chapter One, as a circumscription of suspects, motives, and means. The more essential role of place, though, is its ability to imply, or intimate, clues not immediately present in the detective plot. Place also provides a degree of narrative stability in a story that revolves around an unanswered question. Lutwack contends that place must be foundational in the narrative, “because place is too necessary in the rendering of action, which must have a specific locale to occur in, and of character, which cannot fully exist without an environment to which it owes its identity through constant orientation.”⁹⁴ In this sense, place establishes a stable narrative framework in detective

⁹⁴ Lutwack, p. 17

fiction that *allows* acts of disorientation. The opposition of these forces is a particular feature of the detective form: it must display its mechanism and promise some resolution, while at the same time keeping the reader off-balance and “out of place”.

Douglas McManis, in one of the only previous articles on place and Golden Age detective fiction, praises Christie’s and Sayers’ experimentation with place and its integration into their work:

Each accepted the requirement to provide a setting and to have setting be an ordinary place, but neither agreed to the limitation that the setting should serve merely as the background for the story and not be too obtrusive in the development of a plot. Instead, the relationship between plot and setting was determined by the needs of each individual story.⁹⁵

For Sayers, the need to integrate plot and theme with place was part of her quest to rehabilitate the detective novel, and to re-establish it as a novel of manners. In her capacity as a reviewer of crime novels, she protested against:

[D]etective stories composed entirely of plot, without theme, or with the theme a mere incidental embroidery. We have even had stories divorced from their settings: bodies are discovered (for instance) in churches, theatres, railway stations, ships, aeroplanes, and so forth, which might just as well have been discovered anywhere else, the setting being put in only for picturesqueness and forming no *integral* part either of theme or plot. To make an artistic unity it is, I feel, essential that the plot should derive from the setting, and that both should form part of the theme.⁹⁶

As Agnew points out:

Rather than just a “frame” for the investigation of gender, ethnicity, class etc. categories, place now represents the ambition to show how complex and dynamic the cross-germination of such categories and the activities to which they refer can be.⁹⁷

Place is no longer, in this discussion, relegated to the status of “frame” or “lens”, but a subject in itself: the examination of place in detective fiction demonstrates that the genre is more sophisticated, multi-layered, and even subversive than existing readings have established. The diversity of ways that Christie, Mitchell, and Sayers approach

⁹⁵ Douglas R. McManis, “Places for Mysteries” *Geographical Review*, 68.3 (1978), pp. 319-334 (p. 320). There is at least one other article on the topic, Deborah Bonetti’s “Murder Can Happen Anywhere”, in *The Armchair Detective* 14.3 (1981), but I have been unable to obtain a copy.

⁹⁶ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 217.

⁹⁷ Agnew, “Space and Place”, p. 326.

and employ place illustrates the breadth of the subject as well as the variety of authorial approaches realized in the apparently restrictive Golden Age.

Despite my focus on three women authors, I have not specifically addressed the genre as a forum for women's writing. Howard Haycraft predicted in 1941 that "[t]he rise of the feminine author in the field of detective fiction may well serve some future scholar as the subject of a learned thesis",⁹⁸ a statement which has already proven prophetic. Much excellent feminist criticism of detective fiction already exists, including Maureen T. Reddy's *Sisters in Crime* (1988), Susan Rowland's *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* (2001), and Carla T. Kungl's *Creating the Fictional Female Detective* (2006). Also, of course, interwar and middlebrow fiction has been significantly re-evaluated since the publication of Light's seminal *Forever England* (1991). The significance of women authors in the Golden Age no doubt contributes to the continuing success of women authors in the crime genre; whereas women authors publish only about 30 percent of English and American "literary" fiction,⁹⁹ anecdotal evidence suggests that women write nearly half of published crime fiction. Laurel Anne Young points out that the surge in women authors in the Golden Age contributed to "a sense of irreverence towards detective conventions: the impulse to re-work the genre",¹⁰⁰ and it is in that re-working that my primary concerns arise. Interestingly, Lutwack associates the emergence of place as a concern in the nineteenth-century novel with women's concerns: "[i]t is no accident that emphasis on place begins to assume real importance in fiction when the plight of female characters is the subject."¹⁰¹ Much of the analysis herein has a distinctly feminist basis, as it must considering the profound shift that these writers engendered. Each of the authors herein approached particular subjects that would later be read in a feminist context; even Christie, who was long seen as

⁹⁸ Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1941), p. 128.

⁹⁹ Ruth Franklin, "A Literary Glass Ceiling?" *New Republic*, 7 February 2011 <<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/82930/VIDA-women-writers-magazines-book-reviews>> [accessed 27 August 2014]

¹⁰⁰ Laurel Anne Young, "(Re)Inventing a Genre: Legacy in Women's Golden Age Detective Fiction" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2005)

¹⁰¹ Lutwack, p. 109.

upholding a status quo, is now noted for her attention to the domestic,¹⁰² and her particular attention to children and the elderly.¹⁰³ Significantly, it is often in “feminine” concerns that the most significant clue to her stories is to be found. Given such a shift in emphasis, it seems natural that Christie, along with Mitchell and Sayers, participated in a significant reconsideration of the detective hero/heroine, who moved in this period from a superhuman thinking machine to a far more human, if often still fanciful, creation. Mitchell made a significant contribution in this field, creating the first professional heroine of a novel series.¹⁰⁴ Her work, like that of Sayers, interrogates notions of professionalism and often mocks traditional notions of femininity. It was perhaps Sayers who gave the subject the most serious consideration; her detective novels introduced themes of gender equality that she later explored in talks and essays.¹⁰⁵ The particular idea of place as a site for the interpretation of a “women’s issue” comes to the fore in my final chapter on Sayers’ *Gaudy Night*. In addition, the topics of class and social structure, as analyzed by Watson in *Snobbery With Violence* (1987), and reinterpreted by Light in *Forever England*, are inevitably concerns in this thesis. Issues of gender, class, and economics, among others, appear in dialogue with place, and as part of the theoretical framework that surrounds and creates it.

Several previous studies have gestured toward the importance of place to detective fiction, but most existing work reduces the subject to that of location or setting. Patrick D. Murphy writes,

Most writers of mystery and detective stories rely on developing a series of novels built around a single character, or occasionally a team. These

¹⁰² Anna-Marie Taylor, “Home is where the Hearth Is: The Englishness of Agatha Christie’s Marple Novels”, in *Watching the Detectives: Essays on Crime Fiction*, ed. by Ian A. Bell and Graham Daldry, (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 134-148 (pp.142-144).

¹⁰³ Birns and Birns, p. 130.

¹⁰⁴ Mrs. Bradley is not the first female professional detective. The first is usually acknowledged to be Mrs. Paschal in *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1861), by W.S. Hayward; there were a number of detective heroines, particularly in periodical stories, between that point and the 1920s, who were either employed by the police, private detectives, amateurs, or (during and after World War I) spies. She is, however, the first female character to be both a detective heroine and a member of an established profession.

¹⁰⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Are Women Human?” and “The Human-Not-Quite-Human”, in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Gollancz, 1946) pp. 106-127.

characters are usually long-term inhabitants of a particular locale, which facilitates the overlapping of this fiction with literary regionalism.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, literary regionalism is a more appropriate term for the concern of the majority of these works, which usually use a city or region as a contextualizing device for a particular writer.¹⁰⁷ Some of these, such as Barbara Pezzotti's *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction*, are illuminating with regard to the geography or history that affect the writer's creation. Others are simply plot summaries that assert the importance of place, but offer little or no analysis of its function in the novel.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, there are numerous guides to the actual locations in which fictional narratives are set,¹⁰⁹ an interesting comment on the notion of the literary "reminder" and the reader's desire to actualize an experience of a fictional place. Nonetheless, the complexities of place in the detective novel are beginning to emerge as topics of academic engagement: Rebecca Mills' "Dying Beside the Seaside: Leisure, Crime, and Sexuality on Christie's Beaches",¹¹⁰ presented at the 2014 Agatha Christie conference at Exeter University, resonated with my own work, identifying particular social and sexual constructions relating to beaches in two novels.

Place is an essential narrative component that has received relatively little attention, and this thesis is a partial attempt to rectify that lack by demonstrating some of its narrative possibilities. I have chosen to focus on the Golden Age not only because of its enduring popularity and its influence on the development of the genre, but because it

¹⁰⁶ Patrick D. Murphy, *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries, and Fields* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), p. 120.

¹⁰⁷ Barbara Pezzotti, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction: A Bloody Journey* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012); Gary J. Hausladen, *Places for Dead Bodies* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000); David Geherin, *Scene of the Crime: The Importance of Place in Crime and Mystery Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008); Tindall; G.J. Demko, *G.J. Demko's Landscapes of Crime* <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~gjdemko/toc.htm>> [accessed 17 April 2014].

¹⁰⁸ Gillian Mary Hanson, *City and Shore: The Function of Setting in the British Mystery* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004); Hanson, *Riverbank and Seashore in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006).

¹⁰⁹ Allan Foster, *Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle Locations: A Visitor's Guide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010); Judith Diana Hurdle, *The Getaway Guide to Agatha Christie's England* (Oakland, CA: RDR Books, 1999); Julian Earwaker and Kathleen Becker, *Scene of the Crime: A Guide to the Landscapes of British Detective Fiction* (London: Aurum Press, 2002).

¹¹⁰ Rebecca Mills, "Dying Beside the Seaside: Leisure, Crime, and Sexuality on Christie's Beaches" (paper presented at conference presentation at *Agatha Christie: Crime, Culture, and Celebrity*, Exeter University, 14 April 2014).

was indeed a time of profound innovation and creativity. Place in its many guises, those of setting, allegory, focalizer, atmosphere, and others, plays a pivotal role, as authors find ways to manipulate the tensions underneath the smooth surface of the detective novel, while maintaining the unity of place, plot, and theme. Despite my numerous references to the foundational Sherlock Homes canon, another reason to focus on the Golden Age is the explosion of the novel in that period. As we will see in Chapter Two, Christie set a number of her early short stories in London, where a limited milieu, such as a ball or a block of flats, is easily denoted; this technique serves as an admirable shorthand typology of place, but does not allow for the development beyond that closed-circle setting. The Golden Age novel, because of its length, allows the integration of place with plot, character, and theme, and facilitates its expansion into a major narrative element.

In my view, one of the difficulties of previous studies of place, including Kort's and James', is that they make their claims over too broad a literary scope. By focusing on a specific era and nationality, in one genre, I hope to demonstrate the various workings of the subject of place within a limited field. Additionally, literary studies have also most often focused on authors who are identified with geographical specificity, such as Hardy, Faulkner, and Dickens. The use of place in the detective novel is widely understood to be technical (evidential) rather than conceptual, thus my argument for its pervasive influence both brings a new quantity to the study of detective fiction, and emphasizes the pervasive work of literary place.

The detective novel, not usually supposed to be a complex literary form, appears throughout this thesis as an important locus of development for narrative place. Place and detection are linked, though not always in the ways that they have been assumed to be. Chapter One explores the foundational nature of place as evidence in the detective novel, and how deceptively primary that evidential place can be. The following chapters progress into more complex uses of place, from Christie's revealing typologies, to Mitchell's psychological experimentation, to Sayers' performative milieux. Place assumes many guises: these authors take advantage of place's hybrid

character as both a physical and experiential entity in order to create atmosphere, subvert assumed meanings, establish character, and create mystery. The investigation of place illuminates individual works, and offers a new perspective on the influence of the Golden Age.

The Scene of the Crime: Place as Evidence

The most readily apparent role of place in detective fiction is as a locus of evidence. Detective fiction, as opposed to crime or mystery fiction, is characterized by its focus on the process of investigation, and on the evidential basis thereof. According to Van Dine's "Twenty Rules for the Writing of Detective Fiction",

The detective novel must have a detective in it; and a detective is not a detective unless he detects. His function is to gather clues that will eventually lead to the person who did the dirty work in the first chapter; and if the detective does not reach his conclusions through an analysis of those clues, he has no more solved his problem than the schoolboy who gets his answer out of the back of the arithmetic.¹

Evidence, discovered through investigation, and on which deductions are based, is a definitive component of detective fiction, and the detective's accumulation (and over-accumulation) of facts necessarily associates it with the concrete and physical. As the site of the crime and its investigation, place is often defined as a container of information, in which clues are discovered and alibis tested.

From the inception of detective fiction with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter", the physical scene of the crime assumes a central purpose in the story. Poe observes, "it has always appeared to me that a close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident—it has the force of a frame to a picture."² Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) ties place, evidence, and investigation together with the well-known clue of the smudged

¹ S.S. Van Dine, "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Fiction", in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), pp. 189-193 (first publ. in *American Magazine*, September 1928), p. 190.

² Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition (1846)" <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237848?page=4>> para. 2 [accessed 22 August, 2014].

paint on Rachel Verinder's sitting room door;³ this example demonstrates how misleading theories drawn from physical evidence are as integral to the function of detective fiction as correct ones. Evidential place, in the end, provides the clues that lead to the ultimate solution. At the same time it generates mystery by disorienting the reader, sometimes alongside detective, who misreads the clues and arrives at a series of incorrect conclusions.

The scene of the crime, counter-intuitively, is rarely the most important or revelatory place in a detective story. Nonetheless, it often establishes the physical starting point of the investigation. The delineation of such a scene, and the requirement of "fair play", by which, as Ronald Knox declared, "[t]he detective is bound to declare any clues which he may discover"⁴ is part of the rigid structure of the genre, which was both promoted and exploited by writers of the 1920s. Novels of this period are often characterized by an emphasis on "fair-play": authors joining the eminent Detection Club, founded in 1928 by Anthony Berkeley, also had to "solemnly swear never to conceal a vital clue from the reader".⁵ Such "commandments" were knowingly ironic: many of their rules had already been, and would continue to be, bent to the point of breakage by founding members of the club, such as Christie. However, the fair presentation of evidence, and the logical progression of the detective from one clue to another, were considered points of honor by most writers and readers. Nearly a century later, fair cluing is still considered necessary by many authors and readers of crime fiction.

"The scene of the crime" is necessarily the detective's first stop; the evidence therein may or may not betray the culprit, but it is usually a center of some vital information.

³ Rachel and Franklin Blake spend the day painting an Italianate decoration on the door before the night that the Moonstone is stolen. The smudges on this paint allow Sergeant Cuff to assign an approximate time to the crime and, later, to connect a nightshirt (and thus its presumed owner) to the scene of the crime.

⁴ Knox's "Ten Commandments" were written as part of the establishment of the Detection Club: Ronald A. Knox, "A Detective Story Decalogue", in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), pp. 194-196.

⁵ "The Detection Club Oath", in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), pp. 197-199 (p. 198).

As established in the Introduction, the term “scene” is inherently dramatic. Kestner writes,

“[S]cene” is a moment dramatized in a specific location and thus it is that the scene in the novel, whether in the “pictorial” sense of background or setting in the specialized sense of “dramatized in location,” is eminently spatial by this reliance on location. In contrast to place, scene is never anthropomorphized.⁶

The “scene”, then, is the location of the factual and visible, distinguishable from “place” by its lack of relation beyond itself. Scene has no character of its own, but is, essentially, defined by performance. Ronen also uses the theatrical metaphor in her consideration of fictional space: “[t]heatrical space is divided into *scenic space*, a space immediately presented, and *extrascenic space*, presented verbally by the characters.” (emphasis original)⁷ Though extrascenic space is equally part of the fictional place, scenic space, presented directly to the reader, provides a particular, tangible, kind of information, associated with the recording and deciphering of clues. An accurate description of the evidential place is therefore an expected component of the detective narrative.

The “scene of the crime” is the specific location of the criminal act; as such, it contains objects or delineates spatial relations that may later be identified as evidence. It is, in one sense, a location of the criminal’s “staging” of the crime, through which he or she attempts to create a misleading impression. Peter Hühn characterizes the criminal’s attempts at deception as “rewriting” the story of the crime:

In order to prevent detection, the criminal suppresses as many traces as possible, and those that cannot be completely suppressed (for instance, the dead body itself) he manipulates so that they point to no coherent story at all (the crime then appears a “mystery”) or to a different story (suicide, accident, murder by some other person). In a manner of speaking, the criminal writes the secret story of his crime into everyday “reality” in such a form that its text is partly hidden, partly distorted and misleading.⁸

⁶ Kestner, p. 69.

⁷ Ronen, “Construction of Fictional Space”, p. 94.

⁸ Peter Hühn, “The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction” in *Modern Fiction Studies* 33.3 (1987), pp. 451-466, p. 454.

The “scene of the crime” is the material expression of this rewriting, or restaging, of the actual event. It is equally essential, though, as the place in which the detective takes on his role. Hühn allies the detective’s activities to “sign-interpretation, meaning-formation, and story-telling”, recasting him as a reader of the criminal’s traces and, simultaneously, a writer of the “true” narrative of the crime.⁹ The detective’s examination of the literal traces of the crime, “footprints, objects found near or on the dead body, the presence or absence of persons at the time of the murder, and so on” is reflective of the figural “hidden story”.¹⁰ Heta Pyrhönen points out that the detective, “knowing that the scene of the crime is at least partially a manipulated surface, [has] to observe it closely, trying to decide what items constitute clues.”¹¹ Thus, the scene of the crime exists at least in part so that the detective may establish his or her mastery of their ability to, as the reader, read the scene.

The twentieth-century explosion of detective fiction begins when Sherlock Holmes invites Dr. Watson to accompany him to the scene of the crime in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), saying, “We may as well go and have a look.”¹² The detailed description of that crime scene is overridden by the detective’s striking ability to “read” the evidence presented therein. Holmes’ actions establish a model for the relationship of the detective to the crime scene:

As he spoke, he whipped a tape measure and a large round magnifying glass from his pocket. With these two implements he trotted noiselessly about the room, sometimes stopping, occasionally kneeling, and once lying flat upon his face. So engrossed was he with his occupation that he appeared to have forgotten our presence, for he chattered away to himself under his breath the whole time, keeping up a running fire of exclamations, groans, whistles, and little cries suggestive of encouragement and hope. As I watched him I was irresistibly reminded of a pure-blooded, well-trained foxhound [...] For twenty minutes or more he continued his researches, measuring with the most exact care the distance between marks which were entirely invisible to me, and occasionally applying his tape to the walls in an equally incomprehensible manner. In one place he gathered up very carefully a

⁹ Ibid., p. 453.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 454.

¹¹ Heta Pyrhönen, *Murder and Mayhem: Narrative and Moral Problems in the Detective Story* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999), pp. 65-66.

¹² Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, I (first publ. in *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*, 1887), p. 166.

little pile of grey dust from the floor, and packed it away in an envelope.¹³

The image of the detective busily at work at the scene, and defined by his interaction with that scene, became so much a standard of the genre that it is mocked by nearly all of Holmes' heirs. Christie's Hercule Poirot prefers sedentary reasoning to industrious crime-scene investigation, a predilection that indicates the progress of the detective from a hunter to an analyst. Nonetheless, both the author and the character understand the stereotype of the detective against which Poirot is cast:

“It is not so that the good detective should act, eh? I perceive your thought. He must be full of energy. He must rush to and fro. He should prostrate himself on the dusty road and seek the marks of tyres through a little glass. He must gather up the cigarette end, the fallen match? That is your idea, is it not?”¹⁴

The detective's responsibility in the text is to “read” the clues, and Poirot takes on his role by refusing to characterize material clues, or the “scene of the crime” as singularly important. It is interesting to observe that, in contemporary police procedural television drama, there is a notable trend toward the use of the scene of the crime as a primary site of evidence. In contemporary fiction, despite the stock “ profiler” character, there is a tendency to “deal more in material facts than in psychology”,¹⁵ as Sayers phrases a genre-deprecating comment in *Gaudy Night*. The tension between detection as a fact-gathering exercise and as a more holistic endeavor is evident in the development of the genre in the inter-war period; while the deductions of Christie's and Sayers' detectives remain strictly evidence based (Mitchell does not always follow the same rules), clues are often of a less-tangible nature. This point is further emphasized when absence itself as a clue, as in Sayers' *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928).¹⁶

¹³ Ibid, p. 171.

¹⁴ Agatha Christie, “The Kidnapped Prime Minister”, in *Poirot Investigates* (London: Bodley Head, 1924), pp. 195-230 (first publ. in *Sketch* 1578, 25 April 1923), p. 218.

¹⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, (London: Gollancz, 1935), p. 391.

¹⁶ The absence of General Fentiman's poppy on Armistice Day indicates to Lord Peter that the General died earlier than supposed. (p. 63) Sayers attempted to include another “clue of absence” in *Whose Body?* (1923), that the body in the bath is not that of the Jewish financier because it is not circumcised; she was not allowed by her publisher to refer directly to this clue, but Lord Peter alludes to it, saying, “I don't know anything about Levy, but I've seen the body, and I should say the idea was preposterous” (Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923), p. 27).

Pyrhönen observes the fundamental link between the clue and the definition of detection in the narrative:

Because the exact boundaries of the crime and the code (or even the idiolect) in which it is written are obscure at the outset, gathering data marks the detectives' first entry into the solving of a crime. Knowing that the scene of the crime is at least partially a manipulated surface, they first have to observe it closely, trying to decide what items constitute clues.¹⁷

It is this gathering, the interaction with the scene, that actually *makes* the detective a detective. Even when not accompanied by physical activity such as Holmes', the interpretive ability of the detective, asserted (usually) through interaction with physical evidence, is definitive. Pyrhönen's connection of the "scene of the crime" to the physical/narrative manipulations of the criminal also illustrates an important broadening of the term. As demonstrated in Chapter Two's investigation of Christie's typologies, the "scene of the crime" develops to incorporate the larger place that surrounds the specific place of the "scene." In other words, the bedroom in which Emily Inglethorpe dies in Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* is the "scene of the crime," meaning that the events that took place in that room made a set of actions into a crime. The house in which that room is situated, however, may equally be construed as a wider "scene" in that it contains the stage and the context for these actions as a whole. It is within this larger sense that the novel establishes a closed circle of suspects, one of whom must have committed the crime. This device, common to many Golden Age novels, has often been interpreted as part of an underlying social agenda (variously, to illustrate both its conservatism and its innovation¹⁸) but its structural role is of equal importance. For Kort,

The language of place becomes even more determining when [...] action or characters are restricted to a particular place. Characters are thrown or held together by the confines of the space, and they are forced by place not only to deal with one another but also with the spatial concerns that they share.¹⁹

¹⁷ Pyrhönen, pp. 65-66.

¹⁸ David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) p. 107; Symons, p. 25; Robert S. Paul, *Whatever Happened to Sherlock Holmes?: Detective Fiction, Popular Theology, and Society* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997) p. 89; Light, p. 94.

¹⁹ Kort, *Place and Space*, p. 16.

Place, if it is textually or thematically prominent, is likely to dictate much of the action and perception that generates story. The first, and most basic, role of place in fiction is to provide a container for action: crime and the subsequent process of detection are the defining elements of the genre, and the scene of the crime is the place that encompasses, and enables, that process.

The evidential place is also crucial to the structure of the detective narrative. Alluding to the Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzet*, Todorov identifies a duality at the heart of the “whodunit”, distinguishing between “the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.”²⁰ His analysis presents the crime as the actual event, and the investigation as the effort to narrate that event. The unique aspect of detective fiction, he proposes, is that the two stories are present at the same time in the text. Hühn explains this simultaneity as the tension between the criminal who is attempting to re-write, or falsify, the story of the crime and the detective who is trying to read, and thus to write, the true story. Todorov posits that the simultaneous, rather than sequential, presence of these two stories represents their defining characteristics:

To explain this paradox, we must first recall the special status of the two stories. The first, that of the crime, is in fact the story of an absence: its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book. [...] The status of the second story is, as we have seen, just as excessive; it is a story which has no importance in itself, which serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime.²¹

If the narrative’s structural import is contained in the crime, then its meaning can only be recovered through evidence; as the crime itself cannot be presented in the text, the investigation claims primacy by incorporating evidence that is a part of the original story of the crime. Because physical evidence can only be claimed through the evocation of a physical place, that place forms a crucial bond between the “absent” and “present” stories that characterize the genre. Whether the evidence-based scene of the crime is central or peripheral, then, serves to indicate the text’s intentions: is it a story of solution, or of detection? As the following chapters will show, Christie, Mitchell, and Sayers, along with other authors of the Golden Age, were at least as engaged in

²⁰ Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, p. 44.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 46.

interrogating the idea of detection as in providing solutions; their versatile uses of place allow them to conduct an “invisible” investigation inside the visible one.

The tension between these two stories, the writing and re-writing of the crime, also establishes the evidential place as the locus of suspense. From the evidential scene, with its concealed story, the text draws a succession of possible interpretations; until the revelation of the solution, multiplicity generates uncertainty and apprehension. As Ronald R. Thomas observes,

The detective story is a literary form founded on doubt and suspicion, conditions it seeks to control not by denying them or by establishing an absolute certainty in their place. Rather, by linking doubts together, the detective story provides a tentative but sustainable fiction of coherence.²²

Despite the apparently proscriptive structure of the genre, the idea of the unknowable, drawn from previous incarnations of the Gothic and mystery genres, persists in detective fiction. The crucial difference, of course, in Golden Age work is the addition of the detective. Levine relates the sensation of narrative suspense to that of scientific inquiry:

[T]he results of [an] experiment, if they are in the least unconventional, expose narrowly conventional convictions as partial, misguided, and insufficient. But even when the results confirm and resettle conventions, the delay before that resettling leaves them pointedly up in the air. Indeed, the very pleasures of suspenseful narrative lie in the anxiety, the uneasy sense that the world may not conform to predictable outcomes. To have an experience of suspenseful uncertainty is to acknowledge that there is more than one credible ending to the narrative, more than one potentially plausible solution to the mystery. In this context, closure does not so much dictate an arbitrary conclusion, as it compels us to recognize the *otherness* of the world, the ever-present possibility that the facts may refuse to validate our prejudices.²³

The creation of suspense is dependent on the polysemic nature of any clue and of the evidential place itself. The detective’s role is to analyze and test, in a scientific manner, the possibilities of the clues and the place. Traditionally cast as the opponent of unreason, the detective re-asserts the predominance of rationality. Siegfried

²² Ronald R. Thomas, *Dreams of Authority: Freud and the Fictions of the Unconscious* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 203.

²³ Levine, pp. 46-47.

Kracauer goes so far as to state that: “[r]eason does not constitute for [the detective] an end toward which he directs himself, instead he is its personification.”²⁴ The association of the detective with rational and scientific thinking is more frequently made explicit in pre-war work: Sherlock Holmes is introduced as he is in the process of developing a test for the age of blood stains.²⁵ Though the scientific detective is rare in the Golden Age, even the quintessential elderly lady detective Miss Marple contextualizes her detective activity with a scientific metaphor: “Nothing, I believe, is so full of life under the microscope as a drop of water from a stagnant pool.”²⁶ Kracauer differentiates between the “character” and the “principle” of the detective, defining the detective’s function as that of a “non-person”. He continues, “[a]s God created man in his image, so reason is created in the abstract shadow of the detective.”²⁷ However, this vision of rationality is not borne out in the novels of the Golden Age: the abstractions of truth and reason, like the perfect solution, are ostensibly defining attributes of detective fiction, but may be equally as deceptive. In casting the detective as the perfect reasoner, the text gestures toward science and rationality, but in fact much of its satisfaction lies in the suspended state.

Even if, as Tom Lamont believes, “[s]uspense is the first thing to die on a reread,”²⁸ the detective novel still offers potential for the unknown. Frank Kermode proposes,

Even in a detective story which has the maximum degree of specialised “hermeneutic” organisation, one can always find significant concentrations of interpretable material that has nothing to do with clues and solutions and that can, if we choose, be read rather than simply discarded, though propriety recommends the latter course.²⁹

²⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *Le Roman Policier (Der Detektiv-Roman)*, trans. by Geneviève and Rainer Rochlitz (Paris: Éditions Payot, 1972) [1925], p.79. (translation my own) Kracauer uses the Latin word *ratio* instead of “reason”, I believe to highlight the analytical, methodological connotations of this word in the particular context of the detective novel.

²⁵ In *The Scientific Sherlock Holmes: Cracking the Case with Science and Forensics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), James O’Brien argues that the reason for the continued popularity of Sherlock Holmes is that the detective’s scientific reasoning provides a background and foundation for otherwise fantastic stories.

²⁶ Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (London: Collins, 1930), p. 168.

²⁷ Kracauer, *Roman Policier*, p. 79.

²⁸ Tom Lamont, “The pleasure of rereading”, *Observer*, 8 April 2012 <www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/08/rereading-favourite-books-pleasure?CMP=tw_t_gu> [accessed 6 September 2014].

²⁹ Frank Kermode, “Secrets and Narrative Sequence,” in *On Narrative*, ed. by W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago; London : University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 133-155 (p. 83).

The evidentiary nature of the detective novel provides more “interpretable material” than the solution can incorporate, much of which is embedded in the fictional place. It is not only the reading process that questions closure: the novels considered here challenge the generic assumptions of their time, as well as those opposed on them retrospectively. The scientific omnipotence of early detective heroes gave way in the Golden Age to a potential fallibility that gestures towards twentieth-century Modernism and the uncertainties of the post-World War I world.³⁰ The “refusal of seriousness” and “retreat from old-fashioned notions of the heroic”³¹ that Light observes in the work of Agatha Christie were part of the detective novel’s movement away from positivism. Nicholson points out the detective’s shortcomings and the narrative emphasis on process:

Our detective is made in our image and in that of the author; like ourselves, he can make mistakes; he is no longer omniscient or ubiquitous. We are passing away from the strong silent man who, after days of secret working, produces a villain whom we could never have suspected. Sometimes, indeed, the detective is wrong until the last chapter; sometimes again, both he and we suspect the villain long before we can prove his guilt, and our interest, like the detective’s, is less in the discovery than the establishment of guilt.³²

Detective fiction is partly defined by such uncertainty, because it centralizes the *process* of detection. The reader’s generically-based knowledge that a solution exists, and will be presented, validates Kracauer’s portrayal of the detective as a higher power, but the texts themselves contains no such promises.

While the Golden Age detective novel was theoretically reorganizing itself away from the scene of the crime, it remained substantively (and ideologically) bound to it. This contradiction required novelists to in some way display the “scene of the crime”, even while emphasizing, as Mrs. Bradley puts it, “inference, deduction, and the laws of probability.”³³ Some novels transform description of a scene into a psychological portrayal of a character; particular attention is paid in later chapters to this technique in

³⁰ A forerunner of this Golden Age trend was E.C. Bentley, in whose seminal first novel, *Trent’s Last Case* (1913), the detective fails to solve the case.

³¹ Light, p. 69.

³² Nicholson, pp. 116-117.

³³ Gladys Mitchell, *Nest of Vipers* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979), p. 188.

Mitchell's and Sayers' work. In Christie's *Cards on the Table* (1936), Poirot asks the four suspects to recall all they can about the room in which the murder was committed; their observations, according to the detective, give him a valuable insight into their personalities. "Whether they try to hinder or to help," he argues, "they necessarily reveal their *type* of mind." (emphasis original)³⁴ Even when described by an objective third-person narrator, the scene of the crime is not a neutral site of information, and rarely, if ever, does it attempt to be. "Red herrings" may be presumed to litter the scene, but even apparently reliable information may become deceptive.

One telling anomaly of evidential place is that that presumed chestnut of the genre, the map of the scene of the crime, is in truth quite rare. Phillip and Juliana Muehrcke note that "maps appeal in a natural and logical way to our visual sense and to our need for conceptualization."³⁵ The map, however, has a relatively minor history in detective fiction. *The Notting Hill Mystery* (1862-3), generally regarded as the first detective novel,³⁶ is written as a correspondence and includes diary entries, depositions, an analyst's report, and a crime-scene map; these elements were largely overlooked by other detection pioneers like Collins and Poe, but re-appeared toward the end of the century in the work of Conan Doyle and his contemporaries.³⁷ Maps are frequently presumed to have risen to prominence in the Golden Age: numerous scholarly works include confident statements such as, "plans of the house were an indispensable aid to the aspirant solver of detective stories."³⁸ Christie famously used a house and room plan, and a reproduced clue, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), and a scene of crime plan in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), but she abandoned the tactic early in her career. Mitchell's heroine Mrs. Bradley uses a map to illustrate a lecture entitled "Mistakes the Murderer Made"³⁹ in *The Saltmarsh Murders* (1932), a darkly comic

³⁴ Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table* (London: Collins, 1936), p. 133.

³⁵ Phillip C. Muehrcke and Juliana O. Muehrcke, "Maps in Literature", *Geographical Review* LXIV.3 (1974), pp. 317-338 (p. 319).

³⁶ Symons, p. 62-3; used as a promotional point for the 2012 British Library edition.

³⁷ Anna Katherine Green incorporated two maps into *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), and Arthur Conan Doyle used facsimile clues in "The Adventure of the Reigate Squire" (1893), "The Adventure of the Dancing Men" (1903), and "The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter" (1904).

³⁸ Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1980), p. 24.

³⁹ Gladys Mitchell, *The Saltmarsh Murders* (London: Gollancz, 1932), p. 247.

riposte to Christie's *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930). For most authors, maps were decorative elements, and by no means a required element of Golden Age novels. Sally Bushell also assumes a false prominence for the map in the Golden Age, writing:

The full emergence of the house plan as an intrinsic characteristic of detective fiction coincides with that of the popular subgenre of the "whodunit," which dominated British crime writing between the wars. The map's presence signals the intrinsic spatiality of a genre concerned with Who did What, Where, and to Whom, while also allowing repeated playing out of combinations by the reader.⁴⁰

However, Bushell makes a number of interesting observations about the possible roles of the map in the detective story: it is a far more complex object than readers, or characters, necessarily understand. Because it is presumed to be a "neutral scientific object",⁴¹ its veracity and relationship to the story is unquestioned. Bushell cites the deceptive quality of maps in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*: "[t]he maps appear to ground events by presenting an objective, empirical account that will contribute to the search for truth. However, they also partly distract, since the information they provide – in this novel, at least – ultimately proves irrelevant."⁴² If the "fair play" novel is actually set up as a contest between the writer and the reader, as was widely understood at the time, the map might be assumed to give too much away. However, Bushell's argument contradicts this assumption: the map might, in fact, be a powerful tool for authorial deception.

Curiously, many of the novels most particularly bound up with the spatiality of place eschew mapping: Sayers, while writing *Gaudy Night*, "engaged a kindly and competent architect to design me a feasible college, so that I should not tie myself up in my own geography"⁴³, but, as discussed in Chapter Six, no map appears in the novel, despite its extensive place-description. The same is true of Mitchell's *The Rising of the Moon*, the subject of Chapter Four: though its exhaustive descriptions of the narrator's routes take up much of the text, and though these descriptions accord with the geography of a

⁴⁰ Sally Bushell, "The Slipperiness of Literary Maps: Critical Cartography and Literary Cartography" *Cartographica* 47:3 (2012), pp. 149–160 (p. 154).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴³ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p. 214.

factual place, no map accompanies the text. That readers presume that maps exist in these texts indicates that they experience the literary place as “mappable”. Why, then, are maps not omnipresent? The rarity of the map may betray alternative authorial agendas: literally de-materializing the scene of the crime, the lack of a map points away from the “scene” as fixed document and toward the “scene” as performance.

Though Ronen points out that “[t]heoretical discourse lures us into thinking that literary texts are neatly divided into narrative and descriptive parts”,⁴⁴ this refusal of mapping illustrates precisely the opposite. The text, being necessarily both narrative and descriptive, creates place as an entity that is defined by and exists throughout the story, and that cannot be divided from the events therein. The narrative and the fictional place are mutually dependent, and detection develops them together. The above texts use place to establish the psychological state of the protagonist and the theme of the novel; Mitchell portrays Simon Innes’ growing understanding of the adult world with great subtlety in *The Rising of the Moon* through his narration of the town where he lives, and Sayers compounds the mystery of *Gaudy Night* by showing Shrewsbury College through Harriet Vane’s eyes. The places in which the novels occur not only contain the events, acting as a physical background for action, but offer the narrative physicality of the place as a metaphor for another kind of experience.

Narrative place cannot, of course, ever be truly evidential, because, as Ronen observes, it can never be “complete”. What place does provide, in a way that only a scenic element can,⁴⁵ is an alternative source of information: about individuals, relationships, perspectives, prejudices, desires, inclinations, and assumptions. David James observes

[H]ow partial the transmission of scenic details can be. The recording of places and atmospherics in these fictions depends so intensively on the behaviour, responses and preoccupations of perceiving characters as to involve us in the cognitive work of perception itself. [...] Landscapes in fiction this require a kind of *transactional* reading that moves between character, action and style: an interactive approach that’s alert to perceptual dilemmas or personal decision taking place in different

⁴⁴ Ronen, “Description”, p. 274.

⁴⁵ Similar “scenic” information may be provided by, for instance, clothes, as admirably expounded in Jane Custance Baker, “What can the Cultural Historian Learn from the Use of Clothes in Detective Fiction Between the Wars?” (doctoral thesis in progress, Goldsmiths, University of London).

settings across a given plot, but on that also substantiates our notion of space as a dynamic and affecting property of aesthetic form. (emphasis original)⁴⁶

Thus, the “scene of the crime” is merely a beginning. Hühn characterizes the detective as a reader of an evidence-based text, but asserts that it remains difficult to ascertain what constitutes “evidence”:

The assumption of, and the search for, a hidden story inscribed in everyday reality has the effect of transforming the world of the novel into a conglomeration of potential signs. All phenomena may lose their usual, automatically ascribed meanings and signify something else [...] Thus, by effectively deautomatizing signification and making things "strange," the enigma of the murder endows the everyday world with a rich potentiality of unsuspected meanings.⁴⁷

The scene of the crime may offer some information to the detective, or the reader, but the real evidence is in the narrative place as a whole. Chapter Two considers a typological classification of the novels of Agatha Christie. It explores how four types of place defined her work from early in her career, and examines the meanings of these place types, as well as how those meanings evolved from the 1920s to the 1960s. Christie provides an excellent foundation for the study, because she adhered so consistently to her own typologies. The clear set of meanings she establishes in her use of place contrasts strongly with the variability in those of Mitchell and Sayers; this clarity, though, enables a more nuanced understanding of Christie’s work, as well as that of her contemporaries.

⁴⁶ D. James, p. 14.

⁴⁷ Hühn, p. 454-455.

“You’d be surprised if you knew how very few
distinct types there are”:
Agatha Christie’s Typologies of
the House, the Village, the City, and the Holiday

While the “scene of the crime” provides a foundation for the detective novel’s plot, Chapter One has illustrated the limitations of the evidential place. Place first serves a structural role: it provides a physical setting for the crime itself and the clues that it generates; it allows the detective to establish himself as a “reader” of the criminal’s signs; and it limits the number of suspects and their means of committing the crime. The scene of the crime is also part of the process by which the story’s possibilities multiply and disrupt, until the solution is revealed. However, place’s structural function, to enclose suspects and provide a setting for the plot, is only one aspect of its role in the text. In fact, it is often a defining element of the narrative, as it is in the work of Agatha Christie, the “Queen of Crime”, whose work features in virtually all studies of Golden Age detective fiction.¹ As Kort observes, “the language of space begins to dominate character and plot when it determines the kind of characters that are likely to appear in certain locations or the kinds of events that occur.”² Though Christie’s use of place is rarely the most pronounced aspect of her individual works, distinct divisions between place-types appear over the course of her career, each of which establishes particular expectations of plot and character therein. An overview of her novels and stories reveals how these place-types come into being, and how they are refined and altered over time.

¹ Christie wrote sixty-six detective and mystery novels, beginning with *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920. Her first six novels were published in the UK by The Bodley Head, but the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), marked her move to Collins, where she stayed for the rest of her career. She also wrote six romantic novels (under the name Mary Westmacott), 154 detective short stories, the majority of those in the 1920s, and numerous plays, some of which were based on her novels. (Several of her other plays have subsequently been novelized by Charles Osborne.)

² Kort, *Place and Space*, p. 16.

Christie's novels and stories, though they take place in a variety of actual locations, are largely divisible into four place-types: the house, the village, London (or the city), and the holiday (or the exotic).³ These divisions differ from those proposed by Earl F. Bargannier, who identifies five "principal settings: foreign, in transit, London, the village and the country house."⁴ His division of Christie's work is based purely on setting; as defined in the Introduction, however, setting is only one of the elements that make up a place. Place also incorporates a communally and individually determined "structure of feeling"⁵, which is developed in conjunction with characters and plot. Each of the four place types outlined in this chapter functions first as a "scene of the crime": an evidential place and a circumscriptive device. However, the distinct types are far more revealing than W.H. Auden suggests in "The Guilty Vicarage". He lists several "closed societies": "(a) the group of blood relatives (the Christmas dinner in the country house); (b) the closely knit geographical group (the old world village); (c) the occupational group (the theatrical company); (d) the group isolated by the neutral place (the Pullman car)."⁶ Indicating that the literary function of each place-type is roughly equivalent, he overlooks a wealth of revealing detail. Lutwack observes,

Repeated association of some generic places with certain experiences and values has resulted in what amounts almost to a system of archetypal place symbolism. Thus, mountains have come to represent aspiration and trial; forests and swamps, peril and entrapment; valleys and gardens, pleasure and well-being; deserts, deprivation; houses, stability and community; roads or paths, adventure and change. From these basically concrete associations more specialized meanings are generated to form materials for literary genres like the pastoral, medieval romance, and Gothic novel, in which there is a steady relationship between settings and literary form.⁷

The recurrence of certain kinds of places in fiction has generated a meaning for these places that can, in later instances, signify what type of text or plot to expect. "Space is not the 'outside' of narrative," argues Franco Moretti, "but an internal force that shapes

³ See Appendix: Agatha Christie's Place-Types.

⁴ Earl F. Bargannier, *The Gentle Art of Murder* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1980), p. 22. Pyrhönen also points to Christie's "typical settings: the manor house, the country village, the fashionable city dwelling, the holiday resort, the exclusive girls' school, or the train" (p. 191), but she uses this example to illustrate the theatricality of Christie's places.

⁵ Agnew, "Representing Space", p. 263.

⁶ W.H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage", *Harper's Magazine* 196.1176 (1948), pp. 406-412 (p. 407).

⁷ Lutwack, p. 31.

it from within. Or in other words, in modern European novels, *what* happens depends a lot on *where* it happens.” (emphasis original)⁸ Each of Christie’s types develops a distinct set of assumptions, both within itself and with respect to other texts, that come to define the plot, characters, and form of the narrative. The house engages with problematic re-structurings of family, while the village uses tropes of apparent knowability to obscure truth. In London, Christie finds a network of communities in which authentic identity is easily obscured; the holiday presents a different performative space, in which the performance of the criminal is concealed by that of the tourist.

There is a vocabulary of place in detective fiction, ranging from the country house to the dark alley. Within the place-typology of the genre, though, there is an individual author’s place-typology, which expands and builds upon itself to form a very specific idea of what certain places do, or do not do; who may be there, and who may not; and how the narrative may alter as those expectations are supported or subverted. Place acts as a lexicon, a framework for the composition and interpretation of the text.

Kestner proposes

[A] ‘grammar’ of locations throughout the history of the novel, such as the house, the window, the staircase, the prison, the room; these locations recur, one may argue, not only because human beings inhabit them (setting) but because certain actions occur there (dramatized moment, scene).⁹

Thus, the places in which a novel is set are an essential part of what type of novel it turns out to be. As a corollary to that idea, the fictional meanings of a place evolve to produce a set of expectations dependent on previous fictional characterizations of that place-type. According to Lefebvre, a “spatial economy” creates specific place-based expectations:

This economy valorizes certain relationships between people in particular places (shops, cafes, cinemas, etc.), and thus gives rise to connotative discourses concerning those places; these in turn generate “consensuses” or conventions according to which, for example, such-

⁸ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 70.

⁹ Kestner, p. 70.

and-such a place is supposed to be trouble-free, a quiet area where people go peacefully to have a good time, and so forth.¹⁰

In most studies of her work, Christie's novels have been considered primarily in socio-historical terms, to which place might seem extraneous. However, place, when defined as "space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness",¹¹ assumes a complex textual function. The paramount social questions of Christie's work, those of class, social roles, modernity, and, most particularly, personal, familial, and national identity appear in new guises in the consideration of place.

It is particularly useful to consider Christie's novels at this point because they can be so clearly separated into types; other novelists also employ related types, but Christie clearly thematizes them and their intrinsic cultural concerns. These types establish assumptions at the beginning of the story, which are active both within the text and for the reader, allowing the author to utilize or subvert typological expectations. As discussed in the Introduction, place is *not* synonymous with setting. Instead, place types are, in Lefebvre's words, "*representational spaces*, embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not ..." (emphasis original).¹² Christie's place-types, while naturally related to their settings, offer much more than simple visuo-literary information. McManis calls Christie "the mistress of thumbnail characterization, a stylistic feature that applies to her settings as well as to her characters."¹³ Her typically sparse descriptions, though, belie the importance of place in her novels. R. A. York comments that "the very fact that she is easy to read and enjoy suggests that her writing takes for granted a mass of assumptions about the relationships and acts that appear in stories".¹⁴ These assumptions are a large part of the creation of place for Christie, who felt that "writing plays is much more fun than writing books, because you haven't got to bother about long descriptions of places and people."¹⁵ In truth, even short descriptions are rare in her work, as she felt, "it must be

¹⁰ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, p. 56.

¹¹ Buell, *Environmental Criticism*, p. 145.

¹² Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, p. 33.

¹³ McManis, p. 321.

¹⁴ R.A. York, *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1.

¹⁵ Agatha Christie, interview, BBC radio, 13 February 1955.

a background that readers will recognise, because descriptions are so boring.”¹⁶

Despite this lack of conventional description, place plays a significant role in Christie’s work: rather than a literarily visual element, it becomes a structural one.

In order to examine the creation of the four main typological structures within Christie’s work, each section of this chapter considers an inter-war work as well as a later text; while her career extended into the 1970s, the ethos that informed her work remained largely inter-war, or, perhaps, post-World War I. Thus, as is true of Mitchell’s work discussed in Chapter Four, works written after 1945 are relevant to a study of the Golden Age. This does not imply that neither writer developed—as much as Christie has been criticized for conservatism, she has been lauded as a social observer¹⁷—but it acknowledges the establishment of an authorial intention. Nicholas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns observe that though Christie’s characters have been disparaged for their “stock” nature, her use of types engages with modernist stylistics:

Christie’s use of the social mask, her employment of the type, of the generic rather than the specific character, is not only an essential aspect of her stories of crime and detection, but constitutes a vision of society, text, and discourse that transcends any specific mystery formula.¹⁸

The typology of places is at least as essential in considering Christie’s contributions to, and manipulation of, the genre. The selections discussed below illustrate a set of formal typological principles that underlie both the structural similarity of all her novels and their ostensible differences in time and location. These novels are all part of Christie’s Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple series, because the relationship of the detective to the place is an essential element of her place-typology; the use of these series also makes it easier to perceive the work’s continuities over time. The house, the most highly stereotyped Christie place, was the setting of her first novel, as well as that which she employed most frequently throughout her career. It is an essential opening for a re-evaluation of her narrative strategies.

¹⁶ Quoted in Francis Wyndham, “The *Algebra of Agatha Christie*”, *The Sunday Times*, 17 February 1966, p. 25.

¹⁷ The variety of social readings of Christie is enormous; a change in trend was marked by Alison Light’s chapter on Christie in *Forever England*.

¹⁸ Birns and Birns, p. 122.

The House: Uncanny Homes and Unnatural Families

The house in Agatha Christie's work is often interchangeably described as a "country house"; as such it is the inheritor of a traditional form and a progenitor of modern stereotypes. However, Christie's house is actually a far more complex and flexible place that evolves over time. Though founded on a previously-existing country house form, the house expands from that to contain a focused examination of domestic pressures, social expectations, and, particularly, family.

Christie was certainly not the first detective novelist to employ the country house setting; indeed, it has been used extensively since Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868), widely considered the first detective novel. Many Golden Age writers began their series with a country house mystery, whether because of the proven appeal of the setting or because of the simplicity of creating a closed circle of suspects: Philip MacDonald's *The Rasp* (1924), Anthony Berkeley's *The Layton Court Mystery* (1925), Margery Allingham's *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929), Gladys Mitchell's *Speedy Death* (1929), and Ngaio Marsh's *A Man Lay Dead* (1934) are all country-house debuts, most from authors who rarely revisited the setting.¹⁹ The country house novel, often associated with this period, is one of the most stereotyped detective settings. It has been parodied by some contemporary novelists, including James Anderson and M.C. Beaton, and reconsidered by others, including Reginald Hill and Elizabeth George.²⁰ The country house may be the setting most ineluctably associated with the Golden Age detective novel and its "long weekend" glamour; its association with the detective story is continuously revived, popular in game form as Cluedo (first released 1949) and as escapist fantasy in "murder mystery" weekends. Other art forms have also been used to comment on the country house detective story, in such works as Tom

¹⁹ A country house was the eponymous setting for A.A. Milne's only detective novel, *The Red House Mystery* (1922). Dorothy Sayers set her second novel, *Clouds of Witness* (1926) at the Denver "shooting cottage", and Georgette Heyer used the country house in many of her detective novels, including *Why Shoot a Butler?* (1933) and *The Unfinished Chue* (1934).

²⁰ James Anderson, *The Affair of the Blood-Stained Egg Cosy* (New York: McKay, 1975); M.C. Beaton, *Kissing Christmas Goodbye* (New York: St. Martin's Minotaur, 2007); Reginald Hill, *Recalled to Life* (London: Collins, 1992); Elizabeth George, *Payment in Blood* (New York: Random House, 1990).

Stoppard's play-within-a-play *The Real Inspector Hound* (1964) and Robert Altman's film *Gosford Park* (2001).

Despite this sustained popularity, the contemporary notion of the country-house detective story depends on an essential misunderstanding. George Grella writes, “[t]he typical detective story 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.”²¹ The country-house stereotype exists with equal power in the popular imagination: Blake Morrison writes, “few plots in fiction are as familiar as a murder committed during a country house weekend.”²² While superficially accurate, this interpretation identifies the country house novel as the apotheosis of the Golden Age, “an exploration of a posh and stylized milieu” and “a calm and virtually unruffled world.”²³ This reductionist approach typifies the assumptions that prevail about the house in detective fiction. A number of the novels mentioned above do concern a house party, but that image did not spring from detective fiction itself, nor did it persevere in the detective genre. Instead, the idea of the country house as a center for a society gathering is a distinctly pre-war idea, a standard of the British novel from Jane Austen to Oscar Wilde. There may have been a measure of nostalgia, or safety, in this choice of setting: it indicates a world of glamour and high society, punctured by humor before it was ever disrupted by murder. During World War I, P.G. Wodehouse began to publish both his Blandings and Jeeves series, further cementing the idea of the country house as a place for gatherings of moneyed aristocrats. His comic idylls, particularly appealing in wartime, cemented the idea of the country house weekend in the popular imagination far more than any detective novel. The glamorous image of the country house weekend also complemented a trend in the popular press. An

²¹ George Grella, “Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel”, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 4.1 (1970), 30-48 (p. 30). This generalization is also employed by scholars including, but far from limited to: Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1982), p. 182; Paul, p. 89; James E. Bartell, “The Bureaucrat as Reader”, in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. by Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (Westport, CT, London: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 177-192 (p. 183).

²² Blake Morrison, “The Country House and the English Novel”, *Guardian Review*, 11 June 2011 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/11/country-house-novels-blake-morrison>> [accessed 6 September 2014].

²³ Grella, p. 33.

appetite for gossip and scandal rapidly succeeded that for news of war, and English people of all classes were regular readers of “the society pages”. The combination of the confined setting of the house with the allure of high society, therefore, created a successful first novel formula for the detective genre, but the house party was not in fact an important milieu in the Golden Age.

That the “country house party” is considered a quintessential setting for the detective novel exemplifies a critical tendency to overlook the impact of place in the text. While many country house novels do center on shooting parties and sinister secrets, Golden Age detective novels rarely do, and Christie’s emphatically do not. Instead, they develop an entirely different set of possibilities. For her, the house represented not visitors, but inhabitants. She defended her repeated use of the setting, saying: “people complain that I always set my books in country houses. You *have* to be concerned with a house: with where people *live*.” (emphasis original)²⁴ Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti posit that domestic concerns are entwined with the novelistic concerns of women writers, engaging the house from a personal, intimate standpoint.²⁵ Light, in her re-appraisal of Christie, stresses that, “[w]hen she does use big houses, they are seldom described as repositories of national character or a lost civility; it is their character as private homes which appeals to her.”²⁶ As will be demonstrated in the following examples, rather than styling these texts as “country house,” it may be more relevant to contextualize them as “family house.”

Christie’s ascendancy as a writer of the country house mystery exists in part because of her timing—*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was published in 1920, at the beginning of the post-war detective novel boom—and in part because she used the place repeatedly. The house, in various guises, dominates a catalogue of her settings during the twenties, and again throughout the forties and fifties. Overall, up to twenty-five of Christie’s novels, as well as many short stories, are centered around a house. That house, though

²⁴ Quoted in Wyndham.

²⁵ Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti, “Reading the House: A Literary Perspective”, *Signs*, 27.3 (2002), pp. 837-846 (p. 842-4).

²⁶ Light, p. 81.

it is generally understood as a country estate, sometimes morphs into a suburban villa,²⁷ and is sometimes repurposed as an institution;²⁸ its meaning and implications change over time. In all of these cases, though, Christie sustains an essential notion of house-ness that defines the place of the novel. Jonathan Culler suggests why such continuity is particularly useful for the detective novelist: “[p]recisely because the reader expects to be able to recognize a world, the novel ... becomes a place in which models of intelligibility can be ‘deconstructed’, exposed and challenged.”²⁹ Christie set her novels in a world that she felt her readers could easily identify, but she manipulated and altered the basic assumptions of that world so that it remained relevant throughout her career.

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the house initially appears to Arthur Hastings, a soldier returning from the war, as a gracious and idealized vision of the English home. However, his projections of Englishness, family bonds, and comfortable wealth hide far more complicated realities. Styles Court houses an uncomfortable re-construction of the traditional family, and no one within it is able to convincingly maintain that image. The house, though referred to as a “home” at various points in the text, is distinctly separate from the idea of home as a place of belonging, comfort, and security. Instead, it evokes a sense of what Sigmund Freud famously terms “The Uncanny” (*Das Unheimliche*, 1919). Freud’s argument refers frequently to an earlier essay written by Ernst Jentch, for whom:

[E]very language [...] provides particular instances of what is psychologically correct or at least noteworthy in the way in which it forms its expressions and concepts. With the word *unheimlich* [“uncanny”] the German language seems to have produced a rather fortunate formation. Without a doubt, this word appears to express that someone to whom something “uncanny” happens is not quite “at home” or “at ease” in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him.³⁰

²⁷ *Crooked House* (1949), *Pocket Full of Rye* (1953)

²⁸ *They do it with Mirrors* (1952), *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959)

²⁹ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 222.

³⁰ Ernst Jentch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”, trans. by Roy Sellars, *Angelaki*, 2.1 (1996) [1906], pp. 7-8.

Freud's investigation, in a thorough linguistic exploration of the *unheimlich*, considers that the word *heimlich*, as well as its accepted meaning, "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, etc.,"³¹ contains a secondary meaning: "concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others".³² He writes: "[t]hus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*."³³ This duality of meaning, which emphasizes the unavoidable presence within the "home-like" of the uncanny, is particularly resonant in a consideration of the domestic in the detective novel; instead of indicating the familiar, the home suggests concealment or duplicity.³⁴ Indeed, Christie's houses, even when they are secondary settings, are nearly always more indicative of concealment than of comfort.

"House" and "home" seem, at least in English, to be nearly equivalent terms, but the gulf between the two is notable in Christie's work. Families are fractured, as in *Styles*, overpowering, as in *Crooked House* (1949), or decaying, as in *The 4:50 from Paddington* (1957). Hardly ever does an uncomplicated nuclear family appear; when it seems to, as in the short story "The King of Clubs" (1923), it is in itself a concealment.³⁵ The house in Christie is not a destination for a weekend party, but a locus of the problematic family. In addition, the inhabitants of these houses are rarely titled aristocrats; though the families are moneyed enough to retain grand houses, the individuals range from middle-class professionals to wealthy widows to dependent relations. The question of money is an important, and fraught, one; one person uses financial power to manipulate others, and this situation is often a motive for crime.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" (*Das Unheimliche*), in *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., ed. by Anna Freud, trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001) XVII [1919], pp. 217-256 (p. 222).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 223.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁴ Kathy Mezei has also observed the importance of this duality to the detective novel, in her essay "Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll", *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30.2 (2007), pp.103-120.

³⁵ In "The King of Clubs", a film star flees from the scene of a crime to the home of the ostensibly straightforward Oglander family; the outward simplicity of that family is disrupted when it is revealed that she is their other daughter and they have all hidden the relationship in order to give her an apparently unbiased alibi.

Light observes that the pre-war country house, as inherited from the romantic novel, appears in a new, thoroughly post-war form here:

Whilst 'Styles' is a country house, it is not a hallowed place disturbed by the horror of crime. Christie's image of family falls far short of sanctification, but it also fails to shock the reader. Instead we are asked to take for granted that members of a family will be at each other's throats....³⁶

The sense of the uncanny in houses like Styles Court springs largely from the disruption of a traditional, predictable family structure, a disruption that occurs within the narrative as well as in the reader's expectations. The first-person narration of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* highlights the disparity between the family as it is and as it is expected to be. Captain Hastings' perspective is the foundation of the uncanny in the text: his initial impressions of the family are gradually destabilized by his observations, and those of the detective. Light calls Hastings "a representative of the pre-war world, [who] seems a casualty of history as well as of the Front".³⁷ When he arrives at Styles Court, Hastings describes it simply as "fine old house",³⁸ situated in "the flat Essex country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed impossible to believe that not so very far away, a great war was running its appointed course." (13) The opposition of the house's bucolic situation to the field of war emphasizes its apparent peace and tranquility; the soldier-narrator is calculated both to establish this relationship and to undermine it. It is evident from an early point in the novel that Hastings is inclined to generalize, and to form opinions quickly and without analysis; his traditional expectations, which are obviously misplaced, allow the reader to anticipate the arrival of the detective and his corrective observations.

Setting a tone for her vast body of work in this first novel, Christie provides little in the way of place description. Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick note Christie's "economy of detail": "[h]er method is like the poet's use of synecdoche wherein one aspect of the subject is used to signify the whole. The details are explicit in such

³⁶ Light, p. 67.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (London: Bodley Head, 1921), p. 14. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

instances, but the implications are pervasive”.³⁹ In her earliest novels, place-description is particularly sparse, and relies largely on short phrases interspersed between passages of dialogue:

She led the way round the house to where tea was spread under the shade of a large sycamore.

A figure rose from one of the basket chairs, and came a few steps to meet us. (15)

As Maida and Spornick suggest, details compensate for the lack of physical description: tea suggests graciousness and civility, the sycamore implies heritage, and the basket chairs connote luxury. Shortly after, other characters appear: their voices “floated through the open French window near at hand” (16), out of which they step “on to the lawn.” (17) Both the French windows and the word “lawn” imply the size and character of the house: it must be large enough to have a series of big windows, and possess enough attached land to have grounds, both of which identify it as a wealthy residence. Ronen remarks that “fictional places, like other fictional entities, are inherently incomplete. Their incompleteness is owing not to the verbal mode of their construction, but to their fictionality.”⁴⁰ Because the fictional place is inherently incomplete, constructed in the mind of the reader from a tree and a window, it is also extremely flexible. The descriptive incompleteness of Styles allows the reader to make it into the perfect country house, understanding the place both as instinctively and as imperfectly as the narrator Hastings. It is also salient that Hastings’ introduction to the house is entirely *outside*. Monica Fludernik notes that “the front [...] of a house is typically related to the pragmatic criteria of use”: it is understood as a “place of entry” for the character to whom it is presented.⁴¹ Instead, Hastings is directed *around* the house, and he views its exterior. This first interaction with the house, then, signifies his position as an outsider, and hints that not only the house, but the family itself, is presenting a façade.

³⁹ Maida and Spornick, p. 171.

⁴⁰ Ruth Ronen, “Construction of Fictional Space”, p. 230.

⁴¹ Monica Fludernik, *Fictions of Language, the Language of Fiction* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005), p. 47.

In eighteenth century literature, according to Lutwack, “the noble house [...] comes to represent family distinction, social organization, and individual character.”⁴² The figuration of this noble house is still evident at this point in the twentieth century, and the family therein are still acting the part of the local aristocracy. However, as Light points out,

If country houses evoke ancestry, settled traditions, and kinship, Christie’s, when they do feature, fail on all counts, seeming mainly to interest the writer at the point at which they are no longer occupied by aristocrats but are modernised by the middle classes.⁴³

Indeed, Christie uses the connotations of these houses to emphasize the differences between the people who might be expected to live there and the people who do in fact live there. Hastings’ friend John Cavendish, for example,

[p]ractised for some time as a barrister, but had finally settled down to the more congenial life of a country squire. He had married two years ago, and had taken his wife to live at Styles, though I entertained a shrewd suspicion that he would have preferred his mother to increase his allowance, which would have enabled him to have a home of his own. Mrs. Cavendish, however, was a lady who liked to make her own plans, and expected other people to fall in with them, and in this case she certainly had the whip hand, namely: the purse strings. (11)

While John may play the role of the “country squire”, he is actually dependent on his step-mother. He complains that Styles “should be mine now by rights, if my father had only made a decent will.” (27) The power of the middle class is exerted through money, and the consequent hazards of that power are emphasized by comparison with the hereditary entitlements of the upper class. If this family were actually aristocrats, John Cavendish would be a country squire in his own right, and his mother a dependent: thus, the fortune-hunter Inglethorpe would not have married Mrs. Cavendish, and she would not, consequently, be murdered.

The idea that traditional structures provide safety, whether physical, emotional, societal, or financial, motivates many of Christie’s characters to cling to such structures, or ape them; however, her works repeatedly prove that their safety is

⁴² Lutwack, p. 109.

⁴³ Light, p. 80.

illusory. While the family group assembled at Styles Court has the outward appearance of familiarity and traditionalism, Light remarks that “[t]his is a world of interlopers”.⁴⁴ While some of these “interlopers” are identified as such, others, who just as clearly fail to belong to the family unit, are overlooked by the narration. Hastings himself is an interloper, as a long-term guest of a family he knew in the distant past; because he presumes knowledge, but lacks self-knowledge, he fails to correctly identify other interlopers. Jentch remarks that, to the average person, “[t]hat which has long been familiar appears not only as welcome, but also – however remarkable and inexplicable it may be – as straightforwardly self-evident.”⁴⁵ Hastings lays little emphasis on the irregularities to which he is accustomed, such as the Cavendishes’ matriarchal family structure, but over-emphasizes those that are new to him, such as the presence of Alfred Inglethorpe, of whom he remarks: “It struck me that he might look natural on a stage, but was strangely out of place in real life.” (17) As Jentch comments, “[i]t is an old experience that the traditional, the usual and the hereditary is dear and familiar to most people, and that they incorporate the new and the unusual with mistrust, unease and even hostility.”⁴⁶ Hastings attributes his sense of the uncanny to Inglethorpe’s presence, rather than to the greater structural unease in the household. Thus, though some of his observations are accurate, they are unreliable because of his biases; his narrative creates another layer of the uncanny, wherein the reader is aware that the narrator only provides part of the picture.

Inglethorpe is the obvious interloper in the ostensibly traditional family, but the charming and penniless Cynthia equally falls outside the family orbit. Though Hastings does not make this distinction himself, he observes it in action:

“Cynthia,” called Mrs. Inglethorpe, “do you think you could write a few notes for me?”

“Certainly, Aunt Emily.”

She jumped up promptly, and something in her manner reminded me that her position was a dependent one, and that Mrs. Inglethorpe, kind as she might be in the main, did not allow her to forget it. (21)

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 67.

⁴⁵ Jentch, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Of course, the most significant interloper is Hercule Poirot himself, who is introduced to the novel as a Belgian refugee. He is doubly defined as an outsider, by his foreignness and by his status as a refugee, whose displacement is involuntary and violent. He is also elderly; though Christie later “saw what a terrible mistake I had made in starting with Hercule Poirot so *old*”,⁴⁷ it was, for Light, part of a post-war “quest for a bearable masculinity”.⁴⁸ Cora Kaplan calls Poirot “an absurd protagonist with a serious point of view”,⁴⁹ and it is such contrast that defines his character from the beginning. Hastings’ initial description positions him as a different kind of outsider:

Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible; I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this quaint, dandyfied little man, who, I was sorry to see, now limped badly, had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. (35)

Poirot does not represent disruption or the uncanny, because he is not supposed to belong, and does not intend to. Instead, as the consummate outsider, he can observe irregularities rather than react to them emotionally. Both Jentch and Freud argue that emotion and expectation are essential to the experience of the uncanny; Jentch writes that in a successful fictional presentation, “the uncertainty does not appear directly at the focal point of his attention, so that [one] is not given the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away; for the particular emotional effect, as we said, would hereby be quickly dissipated.”⁵⁰ This characterization echoes the idea of the clue, hidden in plain sight, which is so crucial to the “fair play” ethos of the Golden Age detective story. The narrator, or the reader, senses the uncanny, and cannot see the clue of its cause. The detective, on the other hand, sees the clue for itself, without the emotional encumbrances of belonging.

⁴⁷ Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1977), p. 282.

⁴⁸ Light, p. 73.

⁴⁹ Cora Kaplan, “‘Queens of Crime’: The ‘Golden Age’ of Crime Fiction”, in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1920-1945*, Vol. 8, ed. by Maroula Joannou (London: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 144-159 (p. 149).

⁵⁰ Jentch, p. 13.

Poirot identifies himself as an outsider to English society, and continues throughout his career to separate himself from the English gentleman:

He had dressed carefully for his luncheon party and was satisfied with the result.

He knew well enough the kind of clothes that were worn in the country on a Sunday in England, but he did not choose to conform to English ideas. He preferred his own standard of urban smartness. He was not an English country gentleman. He was Hercule Poirot!⁵¹

Though he is, as demonstrated below, firmly linked with London, Poirot remains an outsider in England, and often chooses to emphasize this fact. He exploits others' perceptions of his "outsiderness" as a weakness; a large part of his self-definition as a detective is the fact that he does not, and cannot, belong. He is, however, present throughout the narrative of most of the novels in which he appears, representing a continual opposition to the familiar structures of his environment. That he is specifically an outsider to the house confirms how much that setting is identified with an idealized sense of Englishness.

Poirot, separated from the action by location, nationality, and personality, is distanced further from the action in *Styles*, and in several other novels and stories, by the first person narration of Captain Hastings. Hühn comments that, "[s]tructurally, the companion's unenlightened narration of the detective's reading causes the reproduction [...] of the discrepancy between the surface of the text (the signifiers) and the hidden meaning (the signifieds) with which the detective himself is confronted."⁵² Hastings' interpretation of the information in the case redoubles the mystery rather than clarifies it for the reader; his "deductions" are more likely to mislead than to enlighten. As noted above, such inaccurate guidance increases the reader's sense of the uncanny rather than dispelling it, since the potential unknown may be the un-narrated. The impartiality of the detective, with which Poirot views the household, is contrasted with and obscured by Hastings' emotional red herrings. The irregularities that Hastings remarks are not necessarily the most significant, but those which fall outside of his understanding of the house as an example of Englishness, comfort, prosperity, and

⁵¹ Agatha Christie, *The Hollow* (London: Collins, 1946), p. 91.

⁵² Hühn, p. 457

peace: the “strange unreality” of Mr. Inglethorpe (39), the “peculiarity” of Dr. Bauerstein’s appearance at the scene of the crime (156), and the discomfort of Cynthia’s position as a dependent after the death of her benefactor (205-206). Poirot, meanwhile, discovers practical information, but also accurately assesses of the emotional state of the household: it is not until he tests Hastings’ response that the latter “realize[s] there was an emotional lack in the atmosphere.” (57)

Descriptions of the house are similarly impressionistic, and information they provide is generally subjective. As discussed in Chapter Three, subjective description reveals a great deal more about the focalizing character than about the place itself. Styles is generically described as “fine”, “glorious” (27), “beautiful” (57), but its period, style, and size remain unclear. Rooms in the house, with the exception of Mrs. Inglethorpe’s bedroom, are not described but only designated: the dining room, the drawing room, the study. Specific location within the house, too, is irrelevant: Poirot takes Miss Howard aside into “the little morning-room” (182), which never otherwise appears in the text. Relative locations, however, are essential. The view from the drawing room into the hall, for instance, allows Hastings and others to witness Mrs. Inglethorpe carrying her coffee up to her bedroom with her (41). Again, it is Poirot’s role to contextualize these relationships and analyze their impact on the case. The relevant information is there for the reader as it is for him, though the textual clues embedded in the narrative are may be overlooked as the reader compensates for the place’s “fictional incompleteness”.

The only actual description in the novel is in the evidential mode: plans are provided of the bedroom and of the upper floor, but not for the house in its entirety. Chapter One mentions that such “evidence” often exists to mislead, as it does in this instance. Rather than placing evidential value in a map or plan, the novel instead places it in individual perception. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* contrasts ways or means of seeing, and continually emphasizes perspective. Mucignat develops the idea of the “map-like novel”, which is “interested primarily in relations among locations (centre and periphery, high and low, favorable and hostile, and so forth) and not so much on

the qualities of individual places.”⁵³ In Christie’s work, these relations are always primary, not only within specific texts, as above, but between types, and between the idealized past and the present. As will become evident in this chapter, particularly in the sections on the village and the holiday, such comparisons are as essential in the establishment of place-types by what they are *not*.

Description in this novel, and in most of Christie’s work, does not “evoke the quality of sensuous experience”.⁵⁴ However, the smallest irregularity may reveal a clue: one example in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* is an unremarked linguistic shift. The simple nominative description of rooms in Styles Court acknowledges the household’s patriarchal structure: the private room of the head of the family, where she conducts business, would normally be referred to as a study, but in this case it is called her “boudoir” (36, 70).⁵⁵ The feminization of this business-oriented space serves as another reminder that this household is out of order, that its structure is unnatural. The strangely gendered notion of ownership and privacy is confirmed when, later in the novel, John directs the lawyer to be shown into his “study” (94). Such minor aberrations, visible from outside the text, seem to be invisible within it, except to the detective.

Because the house in Christie revolves around the family structure, and because that structure is inwardly-focused, the detective must be an outsider. Poirot is the ideal detective for the house novel, because of his essential outsider nature, but Miss Marple, though she is characterized as an insider detective in village novels, also performs the outsider role in several house novels. When she appears in this context, of course, the meaning of the term changes: typically she is identified as an outsider by her age and sex, qualities that allow others to assume she may be intellectually dismissed. Miss Marple enters *A Pocketful of Rye* (1953) by acquaintance with the murdered maid rather than with the family, further diminishing her status. Like Poirot, she uses

⁵³ Mucignat, p. 83.

⁵⁴ Gelley, p. 417.

⁵⁵ OED, boudoir, a: “A small elegantly-furnished room, where a lady may retire to be alone, or to receive her intimate friends.” < <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/21956> > [accessed 15 August 2014]

underestimation to her advantage: “for an old lady like me, who has all the time in the world, as you might say, it’s really expected of her that there should be a great deal of unnecessary talk.”⁵⁶ She seems a negligible presence, as easily dismissed as Poirot the foreigner. Her role in the house is subtle, and her opposition is far less obvious than Poirot’s; she uses the “familiarity” of her own type, and acts as a counterpoint to the falsity of the house.

A Pocketful of Rye re-constructs the post-World War II country house as a suburban villa. The suburban house, easily accessible from the City and surrounded by golf courses, does not evoke the same aristocratic notions as the country house, but it still presumes upon tradition. Inspector Neele is struck by the misleading name of the house, and the disjuncture between his expectation and its reality:

Call it a lodge, indeed! Yewtree Lodge! The affectation of these rich people! The house was what he, Inspector Neele, would call a mansion. He knew what a lodge was. He’d been brought up in one. [...] The lodge had been small and attractive from the outside, and had been damp, uncomfortable and devoid of anything but the most primitive form of sanitation within. [...] But this place, this pretentiously named Yewtree Lodge was just the kind of mansion that rich people built themselves and then called it “their little place in the country.” It wasn’t in the country, either, according to Inspector Neele’s idea of the country. (24)

As Mezei and Briganti note, “symbolic *names* signifying social status and genealogy or, equally, aspirations to social status, are ... easily recognizable signs of one’s place in English society.”⁵⁷ That Yewtree Lodge is “the kind of house that rich people built themselves,” indicates that it is a fundamentally different novelistic place from the inter-war house. It has no connotations of heritage, only of money. Any claim to cultural inheritance is hollow, as it exists only in the name of the house; the people who named it, Christie implies, do not know the difference, and do not care. The incongruity of the name and the place evidences a further disjuncture between the implication and the actuality of the house, in which the uncanny has become merely the artificial.

⁵⁶ Agatha Christie, *A Pocketful of Rye* (London: Collins, 1953), p. 164-165. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁵⁷ Mezei and Briganti, p. 841.

Richard Gill proposes that, for a number of late modernists, “the demise of the country house dramatizes the material, social, and moral bankruptcy of the old order in the new era”,⁵⁸ but for Christie the house maintains a unity of place, defined by the dis-unity of family. The murder of the patriarch in *A Pocketful of Rye* is described as “breakfast with the Borgias” (13), reiterating the corruption of the family ideal. Though this business-minded modern family is certainly different than the pseudo-aristocracy in the Styles case, the house-motif demonstrates a consistency of type. Houses such as Styles Court and Yewtree Lodge are aligned with the most dominant inhabitant, who controls the money and is typically the murder victim. The imbalance of power in these houses is often used to sustain a false family structure.⁵⁹ The Fortescue family in *A Pocketful of Rye* is an example of this imbalance: the patriarch exercises too much control over the lives of his adult children, and he is reckless with the business on which they depend. In this he is similar to Emily Inglethorpe, who is reckless in her personal relationships, and also exerts an unnatural control over her family. Both exert an unnatural dominance over the lives of their adult children and dependents; by exerting financial control they attempt to reconstruct an ideal family, but in fact create a perversion of the domestic ideal in which the economically subservient are infantilized. Any attempt to rebel against this false formation will, as it is made clear, be punished by exclusion from the financial construct that substitutes for family.

The Fortescue family, and their pretentious house, represent a new kind of monetary power based on this unnatural dominance. All the witnesses in the novel agree that Rex Fortescue was “a twister” (22), “a definite bully” (30), and “a bit of an old crook” (38) in the business world; his dishonest success is never considered a real motive for his murder, which is clearly, as Inspector Neele realizes, “an intimate family affair” (78). Nonetheless, his character demonstrates an essential change in the head of the household and, by extension, the house itself. Mrs. Inglethorpe, in a novel set during World War I, is the head of her household, and as such exercises a position of unnatural

⁵⁸ Richard Gill, *The English Country House and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), pp.162-163.

⁵⁹ This pattern may also be observed in *Dumb Witness* (1937), *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938), *Death Comes as the End* (1944), *Crooked House*, *The 4:50 from Paddington* (1957).

and uncomfortable dominance, given by her control of the family fortune. On the other hand, she is generous with her time and money, organizing charity events and housing refugees. In contrast, Rex Fortescue is dishonest, grasping, and autocratic, and does not have a sense of humanity to temper his power: having disinherited his younger son, he threatens the elder with a similar fate when questioned about his handling of the family business. Kort suggests that, “personal spaces [...] not only acquire qualities from the persons who inhabit them, but also bring out those qualities.”⁶⁰ These novels offer the suggestion that as much as the house is an expression of the householder, it is also an influence on his or her personality. Thus the woman who presides over the aristocratic country house adopts some of its virtues, whereas the self-made man can assimilate no virtues from his hollow house or community.

The family is still the center of the house, but it has been further abstracted from the traditional ideal. The inter-war presentation of the house is first idealized, then breaks down, but the post-WWII house is broken from the beginning.⁶¹ Christie insinuates in much of her work, not only in house novels, that the forms of the pre-war world, false as they may be, offer a measure of security. Following World War II and the economic strife of the 1930s, she argues, the powerful no longer reflect the society that they control. The chief difference between the country house and the suburban house may be that the first is, to a degree, part of an established and traditional order, and that the latter is a phenomenon of the contemporary, post-WWII world. Pat Fortescue, a traditionally country-English character who has married into this distinctly modernized family, is aware that she is out of place in the household:

“It’s nice in here today,” she said. “With the fire and the lamps and you knitting things for babies. It all seems cosy and homely and as England ought to be.”

“It’s as England is,” said Miss Marple. “There are not so many Yewtree Lodges, my dear.” (148)

⁶⁰ Kort, *Place and Space*, p. 84.

⁶¹ Rex Fortescue dies in his first appearance, and his family, with a young and frivolous second wife, a painfully cautious son and his discontented wife, and a downtrodden daughter all in the family house, as well as an estranged son abroad, is obviously irregular and unhappy. Shortly after Rex Fortescue’s death, his wife and the maid are also murdered, apparently to fit in with the nursery rhyme “Sing a Song of Sixpence”. Miss Marple comes to investigate because she trained the maid for service, and feels a sense of responsibility. Her traditional appearance and demeanor gain her entry to the house even though she does not know the family.

Miss Marple is characterized as a representative of “authentic” England, as opposed to the family at Yewtree Lodge, whose priorities are dangerously out of balance. Despite the novel’s emphasis on Rex Fortescue’s ill-gained wealth, the imbalance does not come from the family’s social or economic position; it is instead more deeply rooted in personal relationships. Numerous critics assert, in the words of James E. Bartell, that “[m]urder is a momentary expression of the breakdown of the rules that tie a social class together. It is assumed that the principles that govern this class are generally viable and work to produce a basic social harmony”.⁶² However, Christie insists on the essential and hazardous normality of the criminal, who is nearly always a member of the family or the community. Crime is not a breakdown of societal norms in her work, but a confirmation of them: Inspector Neele and Miss Marple both find the situation essentially familiar. Christie stresses that such possibilities lurk in all families, and in all houses.

A Pocketful of Rye is a noteworthy example of Christie’s fondness for nursery rhyme references in her titles and plots. Light observes that the author “plays deliberately with the metamorphosis of the everyday and the comfortable into the unfamiliar and the sinister,” and emphasizes “the unsteady boundary between the homely and the malevolent.”⁶³ The unsteadiness of this boundary is, of course, that which allows sensations of the uncanny to intrude on the idealized space of the home. The nursery rhyme also evokes the comfort and apparent security to be found in traditional forms, and betrays the hollowness of such forms by using them to define a murder plot. In addition, the simple fact that they *are* nursery rhymes surely alludes to the dangerous infantilization that stems from an over-emphasis on the economically-constructed nuclear family.⁶⁴ This theme recurs outside of the house as well: the crime in *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe* (1940), briefly discussed in the city section below, is prompted by the dangerously paternalistic attitude of a national figure.

⁶² Bartell, p. 183.

⁶³ Light, p. 88.

⁶⁴ As well as original titles, Christie also uses Shakespearean and Biblical allusions, though less frequently and relevantly than nursery rhymes.

The house, that most traditional of settings, rebuts the idea that the detective novel executes a complete and tidy reconstruction of order. Instead, the house in Christie indicates a destabilization of that which should be dependable; though individual instances are resolved, the greater pattern persists. In her later work, houses do not even always indicate a primarily familial structure; in *They do it with Mirrors* (1952), a Victorian estate has been converted into a home for delinquents, and in *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959), the house has become a school. The passage of time is particularly evident in the two novels in which Christie re-visits the setting of a previous work: *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962) sees Miss Marple's friend Dolly Bantry's home sold to movie stars, and in *Curtain* (1975), Poirot and Hastings return to Styles Court, which has become a guest house. These alterations reproduce, perhaps even more drastically, the shift in emphasis that characterizes the transformation of the country house into the suburban villa. All of the house novels, in different ways, demonstrate a desire to claim ownership of heritage and cultural power. At the heart of their failure is the inadequacy of economic power to replicate either the security of hereditary entitlement, or that of the nuclear family.

Whether the house is a country pile, a rich man's plaything, or a respectable girls' school, it internalizes a false ideal. Hélène Cixous' deconstruction of "The Uncanny" recalls a mystery novel: "what is brought together here is quickly undone, what asserts itself becomes suspect; each thread leads to its net or to some kind of disentanglement."⁶⁵ The house represents the infinite entanglements of the family, and Christie asks if it is possible to escape these ties. The only time she directly addresses the question is in *Crooked House*: the patriarch Aristede Leonides believes that "In a family [...] there is always one strong character and it usually falls to this one person to care for, and bear the burden of, the rest of the family."⁶⁶ Leonides leaves his fortune, and thus his power, to his granddaughter Sofia, but at the conclusion of the novel she agrees to marry the narrator and to "forget the little Crooked House. [...] Don't worry

⁶⁵ Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')", *New Literary History* 7.3 (1976), pp. 525-548, 619-645 (p. 525).

⁶⁶ Agatha Christie, *Crooked House* (London: Collins, 1949), p. 136

about them any more.”⁶⁷ Sofia’s implied refusal of family duties demonstrates that it is possible to break the dangerous pattern of dependence that characterizes Christie’s families, and it is revealing that she does so by agreeing to forget the *house*. The house, though all its manifestations, engaged Christie throughout her career. Her ominous figuration of the unhomelike house refuses to provide the stability of tradition or the security of family; she insists instead that this most recognizable, this most known of places, in fact shelters the most dangerous unknowns.

The Village: The Unknowable Known

The village is another frequently stereotyped setting of the Golden Age detective novel. Auden confesses his love for the detective story, but “find[s] it very difficult [...] to read one that is not set in rural England,”⁶⁸ and McManis wonders “how many Americans have the image of an English village that is based on Christie’s presentations of St. Mary Mead, the village of the sagacious Miss Marple.”⁶⁹ Barrie Havne refers to the “locus classicus [...] that most familiar closed world, the English country village,”⁷⁰ and Watson satirizes “Mayhem Parva”, the tiny hamlet rife with crime.⁷¹ Because it is considered a staple of the genre, it is surprising that the village is the least common type among Christie’s places. The reputation of the village as a place for detection, though, is nearly equal to that of the house. While the village as a place is more like its stereotype than the house, many of its subtleties belie its traditional perception. On the contrary, Christie’s village enacts a process of deconstruction with respect to its place-type as well as to the structure of the detective story itself.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 191.

⁶⁸ Auden, p. 406.

⁶⁹ McManis, p. 322.

⁷⁰ Barrie Havne, “Closed-World Settings and Open-World Settings”, in *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*, ed. by Rosemary Herbert et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 77.

⁷¹ Watson, p. 165.

The village, like the house, seems familiar and predictable at a cursory glance, but further examination complicates its apparent simplicity. Sherlock Holmes famously remarks that “the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside,”⁷² but the village, a fictional place strongly founded in the work of Mrs. Gaskell and her contemporaries, did not feature regularly in detective fiction until the Golden Age. J.S Fletcher may have been the first author of detective fiction to set a significant proportion of his work in the village, but several Golden Age authors, particularly Gladys Mitchell, Miles Burton, and Patricia Wentworth, made frequent use of the setting; Dorothy L. Sayers explored its isolation and limitation,⁷³ and Edmund Crispin mined it for comedy.⁷⁴ The village’s place in the genre is functionally similar that of the house: it alludes to tradition, security, and an idealized version of Englishness, but its apparent identity is susceptible to significant variation and inversion. Christie re-works and re-uses traditional assumptions about the village in order to restructure the comprehension of the place as a whole. She first addresses the place in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), wherein the narrator, Dr. Sheppard, writes,

Our village, King’s Abbot, is, I imagine, very much like any other village. Our big town is Cranchester, nine miles away. We have a large railway station, a small post office, and two rival “General Stores.” Able-bodied men are apt to leave the place early in life, but we are rich in unmarried ladies and retired military officers. Our hobbies and recreations can be summed up in one word, “gossip.”⁷⁵

Despite the appearance in this novel of features later to define Christie’s village (including the gossipy spinster), she did not at this point fully concentrate on the village itself. However, the basic place-image above reappears in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930).

⁷² Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Copper Beeches”, in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, II, [1892], pp. 114-132 (p. 122).

⁷³ In *Unnatural Death* (1928), Sayers uses a stereotypical village setting in which the “known” opposes the “unknown” anonymity of the city; in the later *The Nine Tailors* (1934), she pursues a much more complex meditation on physical isolation, national character, and individual desire.

⁷⁴ *Buried for Pleasure* (1948) satirizes the ideal country village; instead of a bucolic retreat, it is a microcosm of eccentricity in which a murder is barely notable.

⁷⁵ Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: Collins, 1926), p. 7.

The Murder at the Vicarage introduces Jane Marple, the quintessential village detective who embodies the contradictions of the place. Miss Marple brings the village to prominence in Christie's oeuvre: she is introduced in a village setting, and she continually uses her local village of St. Mary Mead as a point of reference in her investigations. Although, as noted above, she detects in a variety of other settings, the village makes at least a brief appearance in nearly all the novels that feature Miss Marple, as she departs from home on an investigation, or returns gratefully once it is completed. This repetition provides a vital linkage of character and place, but it also allows Christie to trace the experience of the place over time. McManis notes that:

With each repeat something about it was different from earlier invocations. The processes of change affected the village and its surrounding area almost in the same way that the processes of aging slowly but surely took their toll on Miss Marple, both sets of processes being realities of the world from which Dame Agatha drew her inspiration. A quarter of a century after its introduction to readers, the village of St. Mary Mead showed most of the urban encroachments of post-World War II into rural Britain.⁷⁶

Christie was always aware of the impact of time on her fictional places, and uses Miss Marple's observations to examine the changes and continuities of the village.

Though a village is the setting for only four of the twelve Miss Marple novels,⁷⁷ and only the much later *The Mirror Crack'd* is centered in St. Mary Mead,⁷⁸ Miss Marple's identification with her home is a central part of her character. Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker point out that, "Miss Marple belongs to the criminal society, which in her case is pared down to the microcosm of a village."⁷⁹ The intimate acquaintance possible when the detective is an insider rather than an outsider changes the characterization of the crime, the criminal, and the detective. While Sherlock Holmes' dictum situates a vague sense of menace in the countryside, Miss Marple locates such menace with great specificity within the community. Shaw and Vanacker continue:

⁷⁶ McManis, p. 322.

⁷⁷ *The Murder at the Vicarage*, *The Moving Finger* (1942), and *A Murder is Announced* (1950), and *The Mirror Crack'd*

⁷⁸ *The Body in the Library* (1942) takes place in the community, but, as will be discussed in the last section, it is really a holiday novel, as the proper focus is on a nearby seaside resort.

⁷⁹ Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 2.

Miss Marple's integration into the village makes of her a greater moral force than if she came from outside to solve the crime; not only is the criminal one of us (for it is rare in Christie for the murderer to be a stranger) but the detective is one of us too, and her continued presence reminds us of the nearness and inevitability of retribution.⁸⁰

The intimacy of the village necessitates pre-existing personal connections between characters, including the detective and the criminal.⁸¹ Though previous critics have stressed that the criminal is an unsuitable force within the community,⁸² Miss Marple's empirical method of detection indicates that the criminal is a natural part of the community, and that criminal actions, similarly, are only an extreme extension of ordinary behavior. The crime in *The Murder at the Vicarage* is effectively the same as that in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*: the murder of a husband by his wife, the murder of a wife by her husband, both in order to obtain money and change partners. However, Albert Inglethorpe in the earlier novel remains a interloper, tied to no one in the case after the death of his wife; Anne Protheroe, on the other hand, is presented as a central, sympathetic character, who is fully a member of her community. This transformation in the nature of the criminal is as essential that of the detective. While the criminal has always been "one of us" in a technical, evidential sense, she is now "one of us" in a far more personal sense.

Initially, the village is portrayed as static and stable. The vicar's role as narrator echoes the Church's position at the center of the village and reinforces a deceptive idea of traditionalism and security.⁸³ It is because of the static nature of the village, rather than in spite of it, that Miss Marple, who before the crime seems merely a busybody, becomes a detective. Before there is any real event to disturb the placidity of the

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 3.

⁸¹ In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the unpopular Colonel Protheroe is found shot in the vicar's study. Lawrence Redding, an artist and the lover of Anne Protheroe, the colonel's wife, confesses to the murder, but it is quickly proven that he could not have done it. Miss Marple, who lives next door to the vicarage and has a view of Redding's studio, is part of the lovers' scheme because they know she will see them and be able to give them alibis.

⁸² Auden writes that the crime must take place in "an innocent society in a state of grace [...] [before] the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis (for it reveals that some member has fallen and is no longer in a state of grace). The law becomes a reality and for a time all must live in its shadow, till the fallen one is identified. With his arrest, innocence is restored." (p. 407-408) This conception of the criminal as an outsider persists in contemporary analyses such as those of Taylor and Grella, among others.

⁸³ Mitchell employs a similar technique in *The Saltmarsh Murders*, which is narrated by the curate. Though her disruption of the accepted norms of the village is far more radical, she too implies that this disruption, rather than stability, is the typical condition of the village and of normal life.

village, watching is an activity in itself, and speculation is an entertainment. As Thomas Narcejac comments, “[i]n this society of mutual detection, the detective is a spontaneous product”.⁸⁴ Miss Marple’s nephew, the modern novelist Raymond West, regards St. Mary Mead as “a stagnant pool,” but she points out that “Nothing, I believe, is so full of life under the microscope as a drop of water from a stagnant pool.”⁸⁵ The conditions of the village, contrary to expectation, are ideal for the development of her particular detective abilities.

The distinguishing characteristic of the village novel is its investment in the criminal and the detective as members of the same group; Miss Marple characterizes the intimacy of the village as a microcosm of humanity. She explains her technique to the vicar Mr. Clement, who narrates the novel:

“[L]iving alone, as I do, in a rather out-of-the-way part of the world, one has to have a hobby. There is, of course, woolwork, and Guides, and Welfare, and sketching, but my hobby is - and has always been - Human Nature. So varied - and so very fascinating. And, of course, in a small village, with nothing to distract one, one has such ample opportunities for becoming what I might call proficient in one’s study. One begins to class people, quite definitely, just as though they were birds or flowers, group so-and-so, genus that, species that. Sometimes, of course, one makes mistakes, but less and less as time goes on. And then, too, one tests oneself. One takes a little problem - for instance, the gill of picked shrimps that amused dear Griselda so much - a quite unimportant mystery but absolutely incomprehensible unless one solves it right. [...] It is so fascinating, you know, to apply one’s judgment and find that one is right.”

“You usually are, I believe,” I said, smiling.

“That, I am afraid, is what has made me a little conceited,” confessed Miss Marple. “But I have always wondered whether, if someday a really big mystery should come along, I should be able to do the same thing. I mean - just solve it correctly. Logically, it ought to be the same thing. After all, a tiny working model of a torpedo is just the same as a real torpedo.”

“You mean it’s all a question of relativity,” I said slowly. “It should be - logically, I admit. But I don’t know whether it really is.”

“Surely it must be the same,” said Miss Marple. “The - what one used to call the factors at school - are the same. There’s money, and the mutual attraction people of an - er - opposite sex - and there’s queerness of course - so many people are a little queer, aren’t they? - in fact, most people when you know them well. And normal people do

⁸⁴ Thomas Narcejac [Pierre Ayraud], *Une Machine à Lire: Le Roman Policier* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1975), p. 178. (translation my own)

⁸⁵ Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (London: Collins, 1930), p. 168. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

such astonishing things sometimes, and abnormal people are sometimes so very sane and ordinary. In fact, the only way is to compare people with other people you have known or come across. You'd be surprised if you knew how very few distinct types there are in all." (218-219)

Miss Marple's observations of people form the basis of her detective method, but her watchfulness is a part of the novel even before she assumes the role of detective. The first time she is mentioned, she is grouped with other village ladies who are coming for "tea and scandal" with the vicar's wife, Griselda:

"Who is coming?"

Griselda ticked them off on her fingers

"Mrs. Price Ridley, Miss Wetherby, Miss Hartnell, and that terrible Miss Marple."

"I rather like Miss Marple," I said. "She has, at least, a sense of humour."

"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." (10)

Gossip is, as in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, a recreation in the village. Miss Marple, though not the most gossipy of the elderly ladies, is the most knowledgeable: Mr. Clement observes that "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." (19) Miss Marple, unlike Poirot, is situated immediately within an environment that is a constituent part of her character and method. Melissa Schaub calls her "a sort of living Panopticon",⁸⁶ a figure whose detective ability stems directly from her proclivity to observation.

Observation is, before the crime, an end in itself; it is not until near the conclusion of *The Murder at the Vicarage* that Miss Marple defines this pastime as a detective methodology. Her disquisition on the "hobby" of "Human Nature" describes the technique enacted throughout: when she compares Colonel Protheroe's murder with "Miss Hartnell's opal pin – left most imprudently in a frilled blouse and sent to the laundry" (87-88) and with "the money for the Choir Boys' Outing [...] actually taken by the organist" (88), she utilizes reasoning based not on traditional models of social

⁸⁶ Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 21.

stratification, but on the internal logic of situations. Her explanation echoes Locke's empiricist explanation of the "relation" of ideas:

The understanding, in the consideration of anything, is not confined to that precise object: it can carry an idea as it were beyond itself, or at least look beyond it, to see how it stands in conformity to any other. When the mind so considers one thing, that it does as it were bring it to, and set it by another, and carries its view from one to the other.⁸⁷

Miss Marple's methods of detection, founded on a series of relational models, enable her to carry the village beyond itself as a "small working model" from which she can extrapolate reliable deductions anywhere, about any group of people. Her method demonstrates Hühn's proposition that:

One essential factor in the detective's eventual success is his ability to question preconceived notions and break through automatized modes of perception: because the clues normally appear in suggestive contexts that automatically trigger (erroneous) assumptions about their significance, the master-detective consciously frees himself from such suggestions, thus being able to formulate an unorthodox interpretation of the mystery.⁸⁸

As Catherine Kenney writes of Sayers' Miss Climpson, Miss Marple "reads" experiences: "[s]uch deduction may appear to be mere intuition or guesswork, especially to those not literate in the language of appearances, but it is actually the result of learning how to interpret experience in its smallest, most subtle details."⁸⁹ The collapse of social distinctions in Miss Marple's methodology may seem problematic, but it is indicative of the way she de-contextualizes information in order to analyze it accurately. She also collapses notions of criminal severity, comparing murder to petty theft and adultery. Because Miss Marple examines people and situations through an independently-established, rather than socially-generated, set of typologies, she becomes a detective who can "read" on an abstract level.

Miss Marple's behavior in the community, her watchfulness, is such an important precondition in the novel that the murderers incorporate her presence into their plan for the

⁸⁷ John Locke, "Of Relation", in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Works of John Locke*, ed. by J.A. St John (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854) [1690], pp. 449-454 (p. 449).

⁸⁸ Hühn, p. 455.

⁸⁹ Catherine Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), p. 133.

crime. The relationship between the activities of the detective *before* the crime and the performance of the crime itself contradicts Hühn's model of the "classical" detective novel. He illustrates the relationship between criminal and detective as that of a writer and a reader, though the writer in this case wishes to obscure meaning: the criminal and the detective are further characterized as competing writers, one endeavoring to tell a false story, the other a true one.⁹⁰ In Todorov's dual story model, which references that of the Russian Formalists, these interests are at odds with one another, and they function separately.⁹¹ However, Hühn argues that in the hard-boiled type of story, "interpretation, as practiced by the private eye, is presented as an interaction between the reading subject and the object (the text) in which neither side remains a stable entity."⁹² Miss Marple's interaction with the murderers falls somewhere between these two models: while her reading of the criminals' narrative is not that which they intend or "write" for her, the very fact that she is present as a "reader" before the inception of the crime affects its execution. With deprecating self-awareness, she relates how her own evidence was intended to be part of the plot:

"Just before twenty-past six she passes my garden and stops and speaks, so as to give me every opportunity of noticing that she has no weapon with her and also that she is quite her normal self. They realized, you see, that I am a noticing kind of person." (242)

The relationship of the crime and the witness is a telling example of the intimacy of the village, in which observation and supposition are an accepted part of life, so much so that they seem almost correlative with openness and knowledge. Raymond Williams comments that, in apparent contrast to the "opacity" of the city setting, "experience and community [...] in the country [are] essentially transparent." But, he continues,

[T]his is not the whole story, and once again, in realising the new fact of the city, we must be careful not to idealise the old and new facts of the country. For what is knowable is not only a function of objects—of what is there to be known. It is also a function of subjects, of observers—of what is desired and needs to be known. And what we have then to see, as throughout, in the country writing, is not only the reality of the rural community; it is the observer's position in and towards it; a position which is part of the community being known.⁹³

⁹⁰ Hühn, pp. 454-458.

⁹¹ Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, pp. 44-46.

⁹² Hühn, p. 461.

⁹³ Williams, p. 165.

The observer is, as Christie notes repeatedly, an integral part of the village; the criminals' expectation of observation illustrates Miss Marple's character, but, more importantly, it typifies the interdependency of village life. However, the staged openness of the crime also depends on the erroneous assumption of the village as a "known".

Miss Marple's knowledge of the village as an active system, a language, defeats that of the murderers, who assume that it is static. Slavoj Žižek remarks,

The very deceit the murderer invents to save himself is the cause of his downfall. Such a paradoxical conjunction in which it is the very attempt at deception that betrays us is of course possible only in the domain of "meaning," of a signifying structure.⁹⁴

Anne and Lawrence attempt to take advantage of Miss Marple's habits, incorporating their knowledge of the village's patterns into their crime. They fail because, as a superior reader of patterns and behaviors, she is able to "grasp the possible meaning of 'insignificant details,'" and "to apprehend absence itself (the nonoccurrence of some detail) as meaningful".⁹⁵ After Anne shoots her husband, she joins Lawrence at his studio, and, according to Miss Marple,

"They go in together – and, human nature being what it is, I'm afraid they realize that I shan't leave the garden till they come out again! [...] When they do come out, their demeanor is gay and natural. And there, in reality, they made a mistake. Because if they had really said goodbye to each other [as Lawrence told the vicar he intended to do], they would have looked very different." (242-243)

They have anticipated their actions being watched, but the detective sees the meaning in non-evidence (in this case, absence of natural emotion) as well as evidence. Earlier in the novel, she explains that her relational system is "like reading a word without having to spell it out." (87) This self-proclaimed ability reflects Žižek's insistence on knowledge of an existing language as the foundation of comprehension. By characterizing herself as a reader, though of people rather than signs, Miss Marple

⁹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 57.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

integrates observation into action. The apparently passive activity of watching is, in the village, a force that structures behavior and creates meaning.

The village, within the narrative itself, is idealized by all of its inhabitants as knowable; not only do they expect to have information about others in the community, but they feel that they are entitled to it. When they do not, as in the case of Mrs. Lestrangle, the unknown woman who has moved into St. Mary Mead, they gossip, theorize, and guess about her history (20). Mr. Clement admits that he himself is curious:

I wondered more and more what had brought such a woman as Mrs. Lestrangle to St Mary Mead. She was so very clearly a woman of the world that it seemed a strange taste to bury herself in a country village.
(24)

He sincerely wants to offer her help and counsel, but even for him, her unknowability is problematic in the context of the village: “We are not used to mysteries in St Mary Mead” he muses as he leaves her house after she refuses to confide in him (25).

According to *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*, “In the early novels of Agatha Christie, the village stands for permanence in a changing world, a simpler, stratified way of living that contrast with the fragmenting complexity of city life.”⁹⁶ This formulation completely fails to distinguish the essential characteristic of Christie’s village novels: the place may seem static, but that this surface appearance belies an experience “full of life as a stagnant pool.” In these novels, murder does not alter the fundamental nature of the village; instead, crimes makes it necessary to reconsider the basic characteristics of place. The village of bucolic harmony and rustic simplicity is a creation of nostalgia, within the text itself as well in the critical assessment thereof. Miss Marple’s insistently, though gently, pessimistic outlook implies that the transparent and orderly village never existed in the first place.

Miss Marple’s identity as a detective is intimately connected with the village, even when she acts in another place, because of her methodology. Analysis-by-association remains the basis of Miss Marple’s detection: she uses the village as a reference point

⁹⁶ Dale Salwak, “English Village Milieu”, in *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*, p. 134.

in all of her cases. Even in later novels, particularly *The Mirror Crack'd*, she believes 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 had always been. And though using slightly different phraseology, the subjects of conversation were the same.⁹⁷

The village, as McManis observes, is as much a barometer of wider social change as the house. However, like the house, it retains a place-based significance founded upon a notion of what “the village” means: to the inhabitant, the detective, and the reader.

To Hercule Poirot, the village presents a different countenance than to Miss Marple: he approaches the village as an outsider, but as one who is fully aware of its codes. In *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*, Poirot goes to the small and unattractive village of Broadhinny to clear a man wrongly accused of his landlady's murder.⁹⁸ The village contrasts with his own modern and orderly home in the city, where the novel begins; he finds the manor house turned ill-equipped guest house extremely uncomfortable, and struggles to understand the village's apparent lack of community structure. Through Poirot's eyes, this village is impenetrable rather than instantly recognizable. In contrast to the inter-war village, “[n]obody has been in Broadhinny very long,”⁹⁹ and, as Superintendent Spence says, “The war has complicated things. Records destroyed—endless opportunities for people who want to cover their traces” (90). Despite this apparent loss of legibility, the village retains its essential contrast of visibility and opacity. Also, crucial distinguishing features are still recognizable: its information network, personified in the postmistress, in whom Poirot instantly recognizes “the brains of the village” (47); and a “lingering feudal spirit” that prompts villagers to defer to Major Summerhayes “because his father and his grandfather and many great-great-

⁹⁷ Agatha Christie, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, (London: Collins, 1962), p. 19.

⁹⁸ Mrs. McGinty has been brutally murdered, apparently for her money, but Superintendent Spence, the investigating officer, is dissatisfied. Poirot finds that she has cut out an article about murderesses from the paper, and believes that one of these women is in Broadhinny. He sets out to discover which, and finds that the local celebrity, playwright Robin Upward, is in fact adopted, and has killed Mrs. McGinty to prevent his adoptive mother discovering that his real mother was a killer.

⁹⁹ Agatha Christie, *Mrs. McGinty's Dead* (London: Collins, 1952), p. 63. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

grandfathers had lived at Long Meadows” (145). The practice of village life, though, no longer seems so outwardly reliable as in earlier novels.

Poirot is pointedly excluded from the village structure, by his self-presentation as well as by the attitude of the residents. Spence suggests that he go to Broadhinny in disguise, but Poirot considers it more effective to tell everyone his purpose (25). As in the house novel, the other characters underestimate him: “it’s all very well, but with that moustache and everything, how *can* one take him seriously? Do you really mean he’s *good*?” (78). Poirot’s appearance and mannerisms associate him with the metropolitan, and initially exclude him from village-based knowledge. When he warns Mrs. Upward of the danger of withholding information, she replies,

“You will excuse my saying that you don’t perhaps appreciate the pattern of our English country life.”
“In other words you say to me, ‘You are only a damned foreigner.’”
Mrs. Upward smiled slightly.
“I shouldn’t be so rude as that.” (110)

In this case the structure of the village apparently excludes the detective. Christie herself wrote that, “Hercule Poirot, a professional sleuth, would not be at home at all in Miss Marple’s world.”¹⁰⁰ However, though he is patently not at home, Poirot is still an able reader, and can understand the “pattern” of village life, and of crime. As a village insider, Miss Marple extrapolates from its known patterns, but Poirot imposes his rational ability onto the place. The fundamental difference between the insider and the outsider detective has as much to do with their approaches to the pattern of the case—personalization versus rationalization—as with the character of the detective.

Though the two detectives’ perception and handling of the place is radically different, and though the village itself is altered, central motifs remain that still form a “pattern” or “language” of the place. The idea that enables Poirot to solve Mrs. McGinty’s murder comes from the most basic, and deceptive, concept of the village: that of its knowability. He explains to Superintendent Spence: “A *secret de Polichinelle* is a secret that everyone can know. For this reason the people who do not know it never

¹⁰⁰ Christie, *Autobiography*, p. 433.

hear about it—for if everyone thinks you know a thing, nobody tells you.” (171) The “open secret” of Robin Upward’s adoption, which is known to the village but must be deduced by the outsider, reveals to Poirot a motive for the murder.

In both their deceptions and in their realities, these differing constructions of the village depict a place that, again, refuses an established idea of the safe, comfortable known. Instead, Christie’s novels present a far more complex place, in which gossip and intimacy blur into voyeurism and secrecy. The village detective appears not as a repository of folk wisdom, but as a highly trained and skilled reader, who sees through set patterns to a more comprehensive language of place. The detective who enters from outside, on the other hand, must integrate established patterns into his reasoning in order to correctly orient himself to the problem. Christie subverts another idealized image in this most “traditional” of detective forms: bucolic peace is not disturbed by crime, but crime instead echoes, on a larger scale, the everyday fallacies of the village. As the village opens out into the world, the next section will address how the great city draws itself in. Attempts to disentangle London, though, prove as futile as those intended to simplify the village.

London: The Performance of the City

The city has been one of the most important places in detective fiction since the inception of the genre. The unnamed narrator of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” deduces the profession and character of passers-by in the “dense and continuous tides of population”;¹⁰¹ his absorption in the scene is reflected in the titular old man, who “refuses to be alone”, and is only comfortable in “the heart of mighty London”,¹⁰² surrounded by people. This first hint at the detective character is thoroughly bound up in the city, and foreshadows Poe’s later creation, C. Auguste Dupin, whose Paris was

¹⁰¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd”, in *The Collected Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2004), p. 208.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 213.

succeeded by the London of Conan Doyle: London is inextricably associated with the Sherlock Holmes stories, and with the character of Holmes himself. The idea of late-Victorian London as a center of innovation and industry is crucial to the Holmes canon, and to a widespread fictional comprehension of the time and place itself. One of the central motifs of the Holmes stories is travel, which illustrates the modern technologies of the era, but also emphasizes the size of the city, and the distinctions between its neighborhoods and populations. Williams notes that, for late Victorian readers and writers, “[t]he perception of ‘darkest London’ in the largely separated East End, was a consequence of the blaze of light in that part of the city which was a national and international capital.”¹⁰³ By the end of World War I, however, authors readily acknowledged that the city’s spheres were not so easily separable. Instead, in their fragmented conception of the city, London is a place in which paths cross and social delineations slip. The separation of city spaces in earlier detection is partially a separation of the criminal and the civilized, whereas, in Golden Age London novels, no such separation is possible. For instance, Josephine Tey’s *The Man in the Queue* (1929) echoes Poe’s title, but instead of separating types of people as Poe does, Tey unifies a various population, who wait in a queue to obtain theatre tickets. Likewise, Christie’s London acknowledges the possibilities of transport and transition,¹⁰⁴ but she is less concerned with journeys and more interested in the spaces where encounters between individuals take place: the theatre, the dinner party, the boarding house.

Though London is not as important a novelistic place for Christie as the house or the holiday, it is the most-used location in her short stories. It may have been particularly useful in the short-story format because of the ready confluence of individuals and circumstances; not only are there large gatherings at which crime may take place, as in “The Affair at the Victory Ball” (1923), but meetings, both planned and unplanned, may be easily staged, as in “The Third Floor Flat” (1929). The city also offers a ready opportunity for disguise, as no one is expected to have known anyone else for long, or very intimately. In Christie’s novels, London is a self-sufficient world, containing all

¹⁰³ Williams, p. 229.

¹⁰⁴ These themes are far more important for Sayers, as demonstrated in Chapter Five.

sectors of society, and allowing them to brush against each other in a way that is not possible outside the city. A crucial feature of these stories and novels is the self-containment of various small groups, but at the same time, the way they converge and collide in the city despite social and financial differences.

Also, crucially, the city is the natural place for the professional detective to conduct his business. Hercule Poirot is as closely identified with London, and all that is cosmopolitan and metropolitan, as Miss Marple is with the homey, old fashioned village. His preference for the contemporary is made explicit in the beginning of *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*:

Poirot turned in to the courtyard of his block of flats. As always his heart swelled in approval. He was proud of his home. A splendid symmetrical building. The lift took him up to the third floor where he had a large luxury flat with impeccable chromium fittings, square armchairs, and severely rectangular ornaments. There could truly be said not to be a curve in the place. (7)

Poirot's home is an expression of his love of order and symmetry. His flat represents, in its modernist interiors, the "order and method" he prioritizes in detection, and includes comforts and conveniences only available in the city. Hastings returns to London in *The ABC Murders* (1936) to find Poirot "installed in one of the newest type of service flats in London."¹⁰⁵ As a natural denizen of the city, Poirot desires modern amenities; however, as Light notes, he also represents himself, with his courtly manners and careful attire, as "a relic from the late nineteenth century. [...] A cosmopolitan as well as a metropolitan, Poirot is clearly a creature of the Jazz Age as much as he is a left-over from the Edwardian riviera."¹⁰⁶ This ability to convey a sense of the past, while simultaneously embracing the most modern allies him with London, a city which united the historical and the contemporary as much in the twenties and thirties as it does in the present day. Though Poirot is elderly, and is in fact dismissed as "too old" by a prospective client in *Third Girl* (1966), his affinity with the city allows him to understand its changing dynamics throughout his career.

¹⁰⁵ Agatha Christie, *The ABC Murders* (London: Collins Crime Club, 1936), p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Light, p. 73.

The detective, as exemplified by Poirot, is a natural habitué of the city. From a practical standpoint, the metropolitan environment is a sensible choice for a writer of detective stories: the size of the city makes it more likely that crime will occur there than anywhere else. A growing sense of fragmentation expressed a particular need for the orienting process of the detective novel. Williams writes, “[t]his social character of the city—its transitoriness, its unexpectedness, its essential and exciting isolation and procession of men and events—was seen as the reality of all human life.”¹⁰⁷ The figure of the detective thus grows out of the city in order to oppose the city; detection is at once an antidote to Modernism and its natural product. Brecht and Walter Benjamin, among others, consider the genre a direct response to conditions of contemporary life. Benjamin considers the crime novel an ideal opposition to the fearful indefiniteness of the railway journey,¹⁰⁸ and Brecht writes that the intellectual satisfaction to be found in the crime novel counters a sense of futility:

This process of making observations, drawing conclusions and thus coming to a decision gives us all kinds of satisfaction, if only because everyday life seldom grants us such an effective process of thought. [...] In most cases we are not in a position to make use of our observations at all – whether we make them or not has no influence on the course of our social relations. We are neither master of our conclusions nor master of our decisions.¹⁰⁹

The detective novel would merit a place in Modernist studies simply because of its formal opposition to the movement; in truth, however, through its definitive solutions, it provides a counterbalance for the indefiniteness associated with Modernism, and at the same time plays upon the same fundamental anxieties. For Todd Herzog, “the criminalistic fantasy [...] converts the impenetrable lived world into the apprehensible narrated world of the detective novel. Despite the apparent simplicity of the genre, it is thus uniquely suited to capture modern metropolitan life in its complexity and contradictions.”¹¹⁰ The detective novel’s apprehensibility and activity somehow

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 234.

¹⁰⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Travelling with Crime Novels”, trans. by Aaron Kelly and Martin Harvey, in Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller And Northern Ireland Since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005) [1930], pp. 165-166.

¹⁰⁹ Brecht, p. 169.

¹¹⁰ Todd Herzog, *Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), p. 20.

counter an uncomfortable sense of societal malaise or unease. Nicholson considered the detective story

[A]n escape not from life, but from literature. [...] we have revolted from an excessive subjectivity to welcome objectivity; from long-drawn-out dissection of emotions to straightforward appeal to intellect; from reiterated emphasis on men and women as victims either of circumstances or of their glands to a suggestion that men and women may consciously plot and consciously plan; [...] most of all, from a smart and easy pessimism which interprets men and the universe in terms of unmoral purposelessness to a rebelief in a universe governed by cause and effect.¹¹¹

Nicholson's gleefully bitter comparison mocks both Modernism's self-awareness and the fact that the power of reason is re-claimed for literary thought in such an unassuming form. Her enthusiasm provides a foretaste of Hühn's argument for the narrative satisfaction of the detective novel.

Light situates Christie's style firmly within Modernism because of its "refusal of seriousness, of the cumbrous and weighty, as well as of the moral sententiousness of the older generation. [...] her conversation pieces perfect the art of the throw-away remark, the topical and perishable."¹¹² As noted above, Christie imparts important information, and communicates character and place, through small details rather than descriptions. Her London novels and stories, as a body, consider many qualities of the city, from the difficulty in finding affordable housing to the ease of covering up one's history. Formally, the work characterizes London in a modernist style by considering it in snippets: a restaurant, a flat, a party, a shop. London appears, not through a broad overview of the city, but through scenes within it. It is their multiplicity and variety that imply the great city beyond; by using delineated settings, Christie contains the practical structure of the detective narrative while using the junctures and contrasts of various places to consider multiple possible London experiences.

Despite his age, Poirot never strikes the incongruous figure in the city that he does in other places (in a typical instance, Dr. Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

¹¹¹ Nicholson, pp. 113-114.

¹¹² Light, p. 68.

comments that he must be a “retired hairdresser. Look at that moustache of his.”¹¹³). In London, Poirot is a figure who commands respect; he is consulted by the police and by private clients from all walks of life. The early short stories set him up as a well-known figure of London society, whose cases come frequently from his association with the police, but also from royalty (“The King of Clubs” (1923)), diplomats (“The Submarine Plans” (1923)), and from average people who have heard of him in the press (“The Adventure of the Clapham Cook” (1923)). This variety of clients is part of Christie’s characterization of London as a meeting-place, where people and societies overlap, and where potentially dangerous collisions occur. *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) begins in a theatre, *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe* (1940) in a dentist’s office, and “The Third Floor Flat” (1929) in the stairwell of Poirot’s block of flats. The coincidental quality of these meetings reinforces the necessary confluences of the city. However, in all these instances, “coincidence” is simply a correlative of *coexistence*: “the occupation of the same place or part of space.”¹¹⁴ Hastings terms his and Poirot’s meeting with Jane Wilkinson in *Lord Edgware Dies* “a very curious coincidence”,¹¹⁵ but in fact their encounter is natural in the context of the city: that well-off theatregoers go to supper in the same West End hotel is more likely than unlikely. Of course, coincidence or simultaneity may be manipulated (by the author or a character). An apparently unexpected “coincidence,” like this one, may be understood as a performance made possible by the city.

According to York, “Christie’s world is a world of theatricality and secrecy, both of which extend well beyond the immediate circumstances of crime and are obstacles to any sense of full community.”¹¹⁶ A “sense of community” is in a certain sense a practical impossibility in the city: which community? London was, between the World Wars, the largest city in the world. According to the contemporary sociologist Albert Lepawsky, “the monstrous metropolitan and suburban region” contained

¹¹³ Christie, *Roger Ackroyd*, p. 19.

¹¹⁴ OED, coincidence, 1a, < <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36005> > [accessed 15 August 2014]

¹¹⁵ Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* (London: Collins, 1933), p. 12. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹¹⁶ York, p. 6.

[T]en official Londons overlapping one another [...] each one representing the metropolis in its various stages of governmental growth. These are the City of London, the County of London, Police London or Greater London, Port London, Drainage London, Water London, Electricity London, Transport London, Planning London, and Traffic London. Off center here, skewed a bit there, each of these concentric areas, increasing in radius and in population from the smallest to the largest, kaleidoscopes out from the London nucleus.¹¹⁷

This multiplicity of “Londons” further distinguishes the city from the village; the latter is simply and traditionally defined, and though those definitions are liable to slippage, they are still relevant to the relationships and plots enacted therein. The city, however, can be various different entities, organizationally or experientially. The experiential multiplicity of the city, characterized as a modernist quality by Woolf,¹¹⁸ is also an essential identifier of the city in Christie’s work. Malcolm Bradbury describes Modernism as “an art of cities”,¹¹⁹ and Williams observes the concurrent emergence of the modern metropolis and modernist attitudes; he also notes “one important literary response ... the new figure of the urban detective”.¹²⁰ For Christie, that detective was emphatically Hercule Poirot.

Lord Edgware Dies, Christie’s first London detective novel,¹²¹ is particularly concerned with the social dynamics and living arrangements of city dwellers.¹²² The crime in the novel occurs because very different social groups mingle in the modern

¹¹⁷ Albert Lepawsky, “The London Region: A Metropolitan Community in Crisis”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 46.6 (1941), pp. 826-834 (p. 827-828).

¹¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The London Scene* (London: Snowbooks, 2004) [written 1931-1932]; *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 1926) [1925].

¹¹⁹ Malcolm Bradbury, “The Cities of Modernism”, in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 96-104 (p. 96).

¹²⁰ Williams, pp. 40-42.

¹²¹ I have categorized *The Secret Adversary* (1922) and *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929) as London novels, but these fall more into Christie’s “adventure” work, and deal less with detection.

¹²² *Lord Edgware Dies* begins in a theatre; Poirot and Hastings are attending a performance by Carlotta Adams, an American actress who specializes in impersonations. At dinner afterward, they encounter the actress Jane Wilkinson, Lady Edgware, who is with film star Bryan Martin. Jane asks Poirot to visit her husband and persuade him to grant her a divorce. Lord Edgware tells Poirot that he has already written to his wife and acquiesced; that night, Edgware is murdered. The murderer is a woman who announced herself as Lady Edgware, and went into his study, but Jane Wilkinson was at a dinner in Chiswick at the time. Because of her brilliant impersonation of Jane, Poirot suspects that Carlotta Adams is the murderer, but when he goes to her flat she is dead. Poirot discovers that Carlotta went to the dinner, and Jane Wilkinson murdered her husband, then murdered Carlotta. Jane wants to marry the Duke of Merton, but he does not believe in divorce, so she must be a widow. The case is confused by suspicions about Ronald Marsh, Edgware’s nephew, and Geraldine Marsh, Edgware’s daughter.

city: Jane Wilkinson is an actress, already married to a lord, who wants to marry a duke. The actors' role as modern-day aristocrats is satirized in the novel, particularly through Jane's character. She lives in "one of the most opulent of the Savoy suites" (18), and dresses in couture, but she "sees one thing only in life—what Jane wants." (19) She is not presented as the exemplar of actors—the other actors in the novel, Bryan Martin and Carlotta Adams, are more skilled performers, as well as more sympathetic characters—but she is the one who seizes a position of authority by using her fame. The contrast of the theatrical and aristocratic milieux is highlighted through Jane's difference from both her husband and the man she wants to marry. Hastings describes the Duke of Merton as "the kind of character that seemed to have stepped out the Middle Ages by some regrettable mistake. His infatuation for the extremely modern Jane Wilkinson was one of those anachronistic jokes that Nature so loves to play." (206) These two individuals are separated by a greater factor than class; while Jane's aspiration is certainly portrayed as overreaching, it is their basic understanding of the world that sets them apart. Jane represents the single-mindedness of the one-industry town Hollywood and the opportunism of America, whereas Merton is allied with the history and conservatism of his hereditary title.

The novel opposes London to Hollywood with respect to the two places' societal expectations. Lord Edgware assumes Jane wants to re-marry an actor because she asked him for a divorce when she was in Hollywood (41). In Hollywood, it is implied, actors only interact with other actors; film stars are an isolated society there, but in London, they are involved with a variety of other individuals and social groups. Jane's social climbing is ill-fated in part because she reaches too high in the class system, but more essentially because she fails to see beyond the role she wishes to play. All of Christie's London novels, to some degree, hinge upon one character impersonating another, or creating an identity. While Jane is portrayed as a product of Hollywood in this novel, she is, on a larger thematic level, a representative of London. A "born actress" (54), who is always playing a role, she is one of Christie's quintessential London criminals, for whom disguise is a natural state of being.

Lord Edgware Dies principally uses residences to represent both the experiences, and the characters, of their inhabitants. London appears here with much more evidential specificity, though still with little visual detail, than it does in most other novels. The details of each individual's neighborhood and type of dwelling reveal their character, social position, and income. Jane Wilkinson's suite at the Savoy suits her flamboyant personality as well as her status as a film star. Bryan Martin, also a star, lives in "a big block of buildings near St James' Park" (56); his residence indicates that while he can afford luxury and a prestigious location, he prefers less ostentation. Lord Edgware's home exemplifies his character as unmistakably the Savoy does Jane's. His house in Regent Gate is "an imposing one—well-built, handsome, and slightly gloomy. There were no window-boxes or such frivolities." (39)¹²³ The study in which he receives visitors is chilly, furnished in dark colors, and dimly lit by one window (40), reflecting his oppressive personality. Lord Edgware's house facilitates concealment, which reinforces the disgust and fear other characters express towards him, and enables the murder plot. The sight lines inside the house obstruct vision: the butler must stand back against the wall to open the door, so he cannot see visitors clearly as they enter (69, 98-99), and a witness looking down from the upstairs balcony can see only the back of a person walking from the entrance to the study (74-75). The confusion about who has a key to the house also reinforces its atmosphere of secrecy and separation (70).

Houses, as discussed above, often reflect or reinforce the personality of the householder. However, the unique aspect of the London novel is that multiple kinds of habitats exist in close proximity. The varying temporalities of these places also reinforce the potential for transience in the city: Jane lives in a hotel, Carlotta Adams rents a flat where she plans to reside for a short time while performing in London; presumably Bryan Martin and Donald Ross also rent their flats because of the flexibility required by their professions. In contrast, Lord Edgware has a large and traditional house, and the Duke of Merton lives at Merton House. The Duke is the only

¹²³ The fictional Regent Gate is presumably meant to be adjacent to Regent's Park, in one of the formal Nash terraces surrounding the park. Ronald Marsh is confused about whether or not someone entered number 17 as he waits by the taxi (153-4); the houses surrounding the park are flat-fronted and uniform in appearance.

character whose home is not geographically located, the implication being that he is so important and his home so well-known that everyone is familiar with it: this conceit emphasizes his place in established society. Again, the important thing is relative rather than specific location. All of these places provide information about their inhabitants' roles in the city, and in the social structure of the novel. The city thus offers a measure of legibility as well as obfuscation; as Brecht remarks, everyone leaves traces in detective novels, and a case may lead from "a disappearing domestic at one end [to] a cold-blooded murder at the other."¹²⁴ The urban detective, of course, is the character for whom the city forms a legible whole.

The "extremely modern Jane Wilkinson," a "born actress," is Christie's first well-defined example of the London criminal; embracing the potential for social multiplicity in the city (throughout the novel, she is known interchangeably as Jane Wilkinson and Lady Edgware), she also exploits its geographical multiplicity to construct her alibi. She accepts an invitation to Sir Montagu Corner's dinner party in Chiswick, where she is impersonated by Carlotta Adams, and goes to Lord Edgware's house to murder him during that time. In doing so, she appears simultaneously two different places: while Chiswick is effectively London, the size of the city distances it from the other areas of action in the novel, which are centered around the West End, Kensington, and Regent Gate. Sir Montagu declares, "I would not live in London for a million pounds" (132), illustrating the perception of "city" and "not-city" that makes the alibi so absolute. Ronald Marsh's alibi that he was at the opera can be easily disproven because of the ease and speed of central London transport (167-169), but as J.C. Bernthal says, "the idea that the murderer was in Chiswick gives her an alibi as though it were sixty miles away, not six."¹²⁵ Jane's alibi is all the stronger because it is theoretically as well as physically positioned outside the city.

For Maida and Spornick, Christie's villains often have "a double dimension: that of a respected member of the community, a cover that tends to fool the public; and that of

¹²⁴ Agatha Christie, "The Adventure of the Clapham Cook", in *Poirot's Early Cases* (London: Collins, 1974), pp. 23-36 (first publ. in *Sketch* 1607, 14 November 1923), p. 36.

¹²⁵ J.C. Bernthal (jcb228@exeter.ac.uk), (21/11/12), email to Brittain Bright (bbright@post.harvard.edu).

the inner man”.¹²⁶ While this theory describes some characters in Christie’s novels, the London criminal has an extra dimension of anonymity. The contrast of the “inner man” with the “respected member of the community” can only work in a place with a powerful sense of interiority, like the house or the village; such contrast is impossible in the city, because a sense of community is temporary, artificial, or absent. Dr. Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Mrs. Protheroe in *The Murder at the Vicarage* wear the mask of the upright citizen, but the city murderer disappears into a role. He or she does not contrast a secret interior self with a respectable exterior, but instead exists as an endless series of exteriors, which are secret and false in themselves. Alistair Blunt, a prominent banker who becomes a murderer in *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe*,¹²⁷ confesses that he and his wife used “a repertoire of seven or eight characters” when there was no necessity to hide their relationship because “we *enjoyed* the secrecy of it.” (emphasis original)¹²⁸ For him, as for Jane Wilkinson, disguise is a chosen way of life.

Jane is shown, through her profession and the different names by which she is known, to be defined largely by successful disguise; she is *only* the cover, the sum of the parts she plays. The doubling when she appears to be in two places at once, and “plays the role” of herself, stresses the centrality of acting and disguise to her character. Acting is not merely a job for Jane, but a way of being, and her constant performances undermine the notion of a stable “spatial practice” within the city. Actors are always suspect in Christie despite, or perhaps because of, their frequent presence in her London novels. Practically, actors reference the city as the locus of the performing arts, and because the socio-cultural importance of the theatre was a part of the city as portrayed to those outside it. There is little sociological data on theatrical attendance, but literary evidence from novels such as *The Man in the Queue* suggests that it was common for audience members to see a play numerous times, and to travel into the city

¹²⁶ Maida and Spornick, p. 75.

¹²⁷ The prominent banker Alistair Blunt and his wife began to disguise their relationship when he met and bigamously married, with her knowledge, a second wife. Even after his second wife’s death, they continued their charade; when their relationship is discovered by a blackmailer, it leads to a triple murder.

¹²⁸ *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe*, (London: Collins, 1940), pp. 244-245.

to attend the theatre.¹²⁹ As representatives of the city, actors also emphasize, again, the suspect multiplicity of city life.¹³⁰ Chapter Three returns to the theme of theatricality in *Three Act Tragedy* (1935).

In the case of the London novel, Hercule Poirot's job is to reconcile the various roles played by the criminal characters. Poirot, unlike his predecessor Sherlock Homes, rarely adopts a false character. If he plays a role, it is a consistent one throughout his career. The detective, as a stable, knowable entity, opposes the unknowable disguises of the murderer. According to Kracauer, reason is not an end for the detective; instead, "he is its personification".¹³¹ Instead of demonstrating the process of reasoning, Kracauer asserts, the detective is an abstraction of reason itself. The detective novel, in his view, is a pseudo-world, in which "a perfectly rationalized civilized society [...] embraces a radically unilateral point of view".¹³² The reductionist tendency to see the detective novel as an exercise in rationality is rarely adequate, and it certainly is not in Christie's city novels, which exercise modernist tendencies to challenge this unilateral vision of the genre. The detective, however, is in this case a satirical "personification of reason." Poirot's insistence on "order and method", his repeated visual association with angular contemporary architecture and ornament, and his personal fastidiousness all stand for "reason", both in his own mind and for the reader. When he plays a role, he also acts the part of "reason". *Lord Edgware Dies* begins with Hastings' recollection of "that day in Poirot's prim neat little sitting-room when, striding up and down a particular strip of carpet, my little friend gave us his masterly and astounding résumé of the case." (7) The precision of Poirot's environment, person, and performance, signify the orderly mind that enables him to contain, rather than to undo, the multiplicity of the city. The "performance" in which he re-tells the story of the crime effectively counters those performances designed to deceive him.

¹²⁹ Tey was also a prominent playwright, under the name of Gordon Daviot, and thus was familiar with the theatre attendance customs of the time.

¹³⁰ The criminals of London novels are not universally characterized by multiple roles, but the ease with which identities may be altered in the city is addressed to some extent in all the London novels. *The Secret Adversary* (1922), *The ABC Murders*, *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945), and *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955) particularly involve extended or repeated periods of disguise.

¹³¹ Kracauer, *Roman Policier*, p.79.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

As mentioned above, Christie maintains thematic unity in her place-types even as she acknowledges changes in those places' physical manifestations; the same is true of the city. The theatricality and multiplicity of the city are only intensified in her last London novel, *Third Girl* (1966). *Third Girl* conjures a city of the young largely characterized by menace rather than by the optimism usually associated with the 1960s youth culture. The novel dwells on the anonymity of the city; Mrs. Oliver muses on a modern block of flats, "How extraordinary human beings were when you considered them like this, emerging purposefully from these large tall buildings—just like anthills".¹³³ The title itself, which refers to the practice of flat-sharing, is drawn from advertisements:

"THIRD GIRL for comfortable second floor flat, own room, central heating, Earl's Court." "Third girl wanted to share flat. 5gns. week own room." "4th girl wanted. Regent's park. Own room." (20)

These living arrangements offer independence, but also generate instability. "They don't keep tabs on each other all the time, these girls" (50), notes one character; a sense of indifference is implied as correlative with freedom. This new contrast presented by the city reflects Richard Dennis' observation that the conception of city life in the early twentieth century "contrast[ed] fears and opportunities: burgeoning worries about loss of identity, alienation, and brute indifference in fast growing metropolises [were] set against the awareness that urban life brought opportunities for advancement".¹³⁴ The modernist sensibility of the city, its impermanence and impersonality, only intensifies in Christie's presentation of 1960s London.

Alterations in the village, though meticulously noted, do not change the essential nature of the place, but physical alterations in the city amplify its alienating quality. New buildings are compared to anthills, factories (26), matchboxes (75), and prisons (219), comparisons that accentuate the growing anonymity of London. The confused girl who appeals to Poirot in the beginning is notable only in her lack of appeal; Poirot romantically envisages "beauty in distress," but finds Norma Restarick's appearance

¹³³ Agatha Christie, *Third Girl* (London: Collins, 1966), p. 73. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹³⁴ Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 82.

almost painfully undistinguished: “there were hundreds of girls looking exactly the same” (8).¹³⁵ As in earlier London novels, the solution to the case lies in multiple identities. In *Third Girl*, however, the confusion generated by masquerade is overwhelmed by an oppressive sense of anonymity, repetition and interchangeability. The physicality of the new city, observed most critically by Mrs. Oliver, appears in blocks of offices and flats of overwhelming size, all of which minimize and displace individuals. Though it might be supposed that the ambiguity of these new buildings would be opposed to a sense of security generated by traditional buildings, the opposite is true: a sense of anonymity seems to have spread out over the older parts of the city. Older areas of the city may appear reassuringly ordinary (111) or frighteningly disorienting (95-96), but they lose the revealing specificity of neighborhoods in *Lord Edgware Dies*.

The impersonality of the flat-share arrangements echoes that of the flats themselves:

All the rooms of the flats were papered the same with an artificial raw wood pattern. Tenants could then display their modern pictures or apply any forms of decoration they fancied. There was a foundation of modern built-in furniture, cupboard, bookshelves and so on, a large settee and a pull-out type of table. Personal bits and pieces could be added by the tenants. (28)

The flats indicate possibilities for personalization, but are resolutely uniform. They are, in Buell’s sense, spaces rather than places: they are abstract containers (“space”) rather than meaningful “centers of felt value”¹³⁶ (“place”). As Lefebvre writes, “large housing estates achieve the concept of *habitat*, by excluding the notion of *inhabitant*, that is, the plasticity of space, its modeling and the appropriation by groups and individuals of the conditions of their existence.”¹³⁷ The individual flat never quite becomes a place; its place-ness is subsumed by uniformity and a notion of convenience. The plot is, in fact, dependent on the exact sameness of the flats. Furthermore, the

¹³⁵ Norma Restarick, a “third girl” living in a modern flat, comes to Poirot because she thinks she might have committed a murder. He discovers, with the aid of Mrs. Oliver, that she is in fact being drugged and framed by a conman posing as her long-lost father, and his female partner, who poses as both Norma’s stepmother Mary Restarick and her flatmate Frances Cary.

¹³⁶ Tuan, *Space and Place*, qtd. in Lawrence Buell, *Environmental Criticism*, p. 63.

¹³⁷ Henri Lefebvre, “Industrialization and Urbanization”, in *The Right to the City (Le droit a la ville)* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968), repub in *Writings on Cities*, ed. by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 65-85 (p. 79).

flat's indistinctness allies the place with Norma, who appears until the conclusion as vague and plain. It also hints at the resolution to the case:

“Norma was always, technically, I suppose, the Third Girl—but when I looked at things *the right way round* it all fell into place. The missing answer, the lost piece of the puzzle, every time it was the same—the third girl.”

“It was always, if you comprehend me, *the person who was not there.*” (248)

As long as Norma is presumed to be the third girl, she is understood as unstable or unknown. Birns and Birns remark that, “the term ‘Third Girl’ has an intriguing resemblance to the Lacanian idea of the ‘Third Term,’ the agent of language and the symbolic that disrupts the narcissistic stability of the mother-child dyad.”¹³⁸ The effort of the case, before the criminals can be identified, is to correctly determine what (or who) is unknown.

Again, the London criminal is the consummate actor. Mary Restarick, Norma’s stepmother, and Frances Cary, her flatmate, are the same person. These women are superficially extremely different: Mary is conservative, bourgeois, and feminine, while Frances is artistic and modern. Their contrasting appearance and demeanor is highlighted by the backgrounds against which they appear. Again, the separation of the city from the “non-city” is a factor in establishing alibis and differentiating roles. In *Third Girl*, one of Christie’s most complete physical descriptions of a village (23-32) differentiates it from the city; the village and the “conventional house” (33) in *Third Girl* are a perfectly-staged background for Mary Restarick, though Poirot wonders “whether she were not carefully playing the part of the English lady absorbed in her garden.” (34) In the persona of “arty type” Frances Cary (57), her heavy makeup and world-weary attitude appear to Mrs. Oliver “quite natural ... among the beatniks, acting as a model.” (154) McManis remarks that “characteristics of place [may] be used as part of the puzzle that must be resolved in order to solve the crime”.¹³⁹ In Christie, place is often a clue to character; conversely, the creation of separate personae in different environments employs place as a tool of deception. Poirot suspects deception

¹³⁸ Birns and Birns, p. 132.

¹³⁹ McManis, p. 321.

in part because the character is *too* suited to her environment. At the conclusion of *Third Girl*, he calls attention to the centrality of character-in-place:

“We want a little more help. There’s still one person missing. Your wife is a long time joining us here, Mr. Restarick?”

“I can’t think where Mary can be. I’ve rung up. Claudia has left messages in every place we can think of. By now she ought to have rung up at least from somewhere.”

“Perhaps we have the wrong idea,” said Hercule Poirot. “Perhaps Madame is at least partly here already—in a manner of speaking.” (245)

It is not only the plot mechanics that develop the importance of location in this passage, but the language. The repetition in this exchange of place words—“here”, “where”, “every place”, “somewhere”—articulates the significance of relative locations. Mary Restarick must be “somewhere”; she cannot be found elsewhere because she is actually already present.

Third Girl’s mystery is the opposite of that in *Lord Edgware Dies*: two characters who never appear at the same time, as opposed to one character who appears in two places at once. However, similar clues betray the “performance” of the crime: Frances Cary trained at R.A.D.A., and Mary Restarick’s vague air of unreality troubles Poirot. Again, he has to consider the performance itself in order to see through it, and this performance is also contextualized in the mechanics and possibilities of the city. The performative aspect of the city is destabilizing, but it is also integral; London’s many definitions, neighborhoods, and populations allow endless reinvention, and thus provide an ideal environment for the criminal inclined toward disguise.

Christie’s relatively small body of London novels is unified by motifs of theatricality and multiplicity. Thus, novels that take place only partly in the city, such as *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), *Three Act Tragedy*, and *The ABC Murders*, are usefully classed as London novels because they revolve around these motifs. Christie’s modernist tendencies emerge to their greatest extent in her London novels, while her obsessively rational city detective opposes the abstraction therein. Her London is a city of actors, aristocrats, and dilettantes, but also of students, secretaries, and financiers; these people often have little in common besides the city itself. As a technique for creating a

deceptive narrative, the city enables multiple identities and allows coincidence; as a thematic type, it forms an extended meditation on the meaning of identity and the place of the individual in the metropolitan world. Disguise as a way of life in the city novel contrasts with disguise in the holiday novel, in which it appears as an escape from everyday life.

The Holiday: Tourism and Fantasy

In the three previous typologies, Christie shares fictional terrain with numerous other detective novelists, of the Golden Age and beyond. The holiday, however, was a uniquely Christie specialism; no other novelist of the time used exotic locations with nearly the same frequency. Sayers wrote two holiday novels, and they are, for different reasons, arguably her weakest. Mitchell is the only other novelist of the period to have employed a holiday setting with any frequency, but she did not develop its motifs extensively, as she did those of the village and the school. The scarcity of holiday novels is surprising, considering the intuitive link between transport and detective stories proposed by Benjamin in “Travelling with Crime Novels”, and the increased leisure of the middle class noted by Symons as a factor in the ascendance of the crime novel.¹⁴⁰ Both transport and leisure time were significantly modern concepts, and the idea of the holiday—a short break for the employed middle class as opposed to an aristocratic Grand tour—was a fairly new one in the interwar period. There was an interwar madness for literary travel: Paul Fussell notes that Jonathan Cape’s Traveller’s Library series produced 180 titles between 1926 and 1932.¹⁴¹ Christie, however, was the detective novelist who made it her own. For Light,

[I]t is the pleasures of travel which dominate her plots in the 1930s. [...] Christie captures a middlebrow world of burgeoning tourism which at its most expensive could include Nile cruises and journeys on the Orient

¹⁴⁰ Symons, pp. 106-107.

¹⁴¹ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 59.

Express, but less luxurious forms of holiday-making and sightseeing too.¹⁴²

As in her other typologies, Christie's holiday novels constitute both a recognition of ongoing societal restructuring, and a commentary on the phenomenon.

Fussell differentiates between different eras and modes of exploration, travel, and tourism; Christie's work is most often situated in the latter camp, "that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for [the tourist] by the arts of mass publicity."¹⁴³ The tourist is the consumer of experience, who both desires and fears the novelty of the unknown. An essential feature of the holiday novel is that normal English life is left behind. However, the tourist is not an adventurer, and to leave that normalcy behind, he or she must do so in the safety of a group, usually one composed mostly of fellow Englishmen. This paradoxical practice allows the tourist to re-orient himself with relation to that "normal" life. The holiday presents itself as an adventure into the unknown, in which the participants may reinvent themselves. Unlike the dangerous performances of the city, these roles are temporally limited by the duration of the holiday, but the falsity inherent in the holiday itself—it is a pretense, a temporary escape from the normal course of life and work—lends itself to the detective plot.

Fussell writes,

What distinguishes a tourist are the motives, few of which are ever openly revealed: to raise social status at home and to allay social anxiety; to realize fantasies of erotic freedom; and, most important, to derive a secret pleasure from posing momentarily as a member of a social class superior to one's own ... the tourist is best described as a fantasist equipped temporarily with unaccustomed power.¹⁴⁴

Tourism itself seems a suspect exercise, implying falseness, almost criminality, in the mere idea of the tourist. In the juncture of the holiday and the detective novel, though, tourists may be fantasists, criminals, or both.

The holiday type comprises novels that might be called the exotic, or even the adventure type: as well as tourist-oriented holidays at the seaside, in boats or on trains,

¹⁴² Light, pp. 89-90.

¹⁴³ Fussell, p. 38-39.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

there are archaeological excavations and political thrillers. These stories do not always take place against an international background; though some of Christie's characters, like their author, travel widely, others holiday closer to home. Christie spent considerable time in the Middle East, and set several stories and novels there; more of her novels, however, take place at British seaside resorts. These settings seem more "familiar", but an essential idea of the "other" place remains a defining feature. Bargannier, one of few critics to recognize the distinct typologies essential to Christie's oeuvre, differentiates between travel and transport, but despite the famous murders on trains, boats, and planes, both travel and transport are secondary to the larger concept of the holiday.

The first novel of Christie's that might be termed a holiday novel (despite its adventure rather than detective structure) is *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924). In this novel, the protagonist, Anne Beddingfield, defines the holiday novel's narrative agenda:

I should like to make it clear here and now that this story will not be a story of South Africa. I guarantee no genuine local colour—you know the sort of thing—half a dozen words in italics on every page. I admire it very much, but I can't do it.¹⁴⁵

When Anne sets off on her journey, it is not motivated by the destination of South Africa, but by "facing the world and pursuing my adventure."¹⁴⁶ "[L]ocal colour"—the usual point of a travel-based narrative—is subordinate. Critics have found fault with the fact that Christie's holiday novels often do not integrate themselves with their locations: Bartell, for instance, calls them only "ostensibly different settings" for a "typical situation".¹⁴⁷ Although some of the novels, perhaps most notably *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) include significant description of the surroundings, these rarely define the crime. Instead, at the heart of these stories is the abstract idea of the holiday itself. While each has an individual setting, an exterior location, the true place of the holiday novel is the out-of-the-ordinary, the exotic, the other. The holiday, whether domestic and abroad, acts as a catalyst for crime and detection because of its inherent otherness. The crucial definition of the holiday, as a place, is not its individual location

¹⁴⁵ Agatha Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* (London: Bodley Head, 1924), p. 147.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Ch. 9

¹⁴⁷ Bartell, p. 183.

but its role in separating the participants from the normal and usual structures of life. The place of the holiday, then, might be best defined as *placelessness*.

Placelessness may be quite literal, as in *Death in the Clouds* (1935), which takes place in an airplane; it may also be allegorical, as in *Death on the Nile* (1937), in which Poirot cautions a young woman: “so you too have embarked on your own private journey—a journey on a swift-moving river, between dangerous rocks, and heading for who knows what currents of disaster”.¹⁴⁸ This sense of placelessness links the holiday to Foucault’s notion of the “crisis heterotopia”, in which necessary change must always take place “nowhere”.¹⁴⁹ The placelessness of the holiday abstracts it from existing mores and societal constructs, but it also creates a place that is justified by its *lack* of orientation to the participants’ known world.

At the beginning of *Evil Under the Sun* (1941), Miss Brewster remarks, “This isn’t the sort of place you’d get a body!” but Poirot disagrees:

“You forget one thing, Mademoiselle.”

“Human nature, I suppose?”

“That, yes. That, always. But that was not what I was going to say. I was going to point out to you that here every one is on holiday.”

Emily Brewster turned a puzzled face to him.

“I don’t understand.”

Hercule Poirot beamed kindly at her. He made dabs in the air with an emphatic forefinger.

“Let us say, you have an enemy. If you seek him out in his flat, in his office, in the street—*eh bien*, you must have a *reason*—you must account for yourself. But here at the seaside it is necessary for no one to account for himself. You are here at Leathercombe Bay, why?

Parbleu! It is August – one goes to the seaside in August – one is on one’s holiday.”¹⁵⁰

The holiday novel creates a closed circle of suspects (sometimes completely closed, as in *Death on the Nile* or *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934)), but more importantly it offers an integral excuse for the presence of any person. Like the city, the holiday location enables a dangerous ease of disguise and re-definition. When Poirot points out

¹⁴⁸ Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile* (London: Pan, 1950) [1937], p. 81.

¹⁴⁹ Foucault, p. 24-25.

¹⁵⁰ Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, (London: Collins, 1941), p. 19. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

that anyone may disguise his motives for being on holiday, a Christie reader interpolates a reference to *Murder on the Orient Express*, the first of a significant group of 1930s holiday novels; in this instance, the diverse disguises of the group are part of one greater disguise. It is more usual, however, that various characters adopt new roles independently, either for the personal, socially-oriented gratification about which Fussell writes, or for more nefarious purposes. On holiday, the detective's greatest difficulty is often differentiating between the two.

The destabilization evoked by the city is also active within the holiday; though the change of scene is in this case voluntary it again sets the type firmly in a modernist context. Christie's work, as always, demonstrates her unsettled worldview: when her characters meet at resorts or on journeys, they form transitory communities based on superficial character assessments and stereotypical patterns. Poirot draws a triangle in the sand in "Triangle at Rhodes" (1936), a predecessor of *Evil Under the Sun*; this pattern is meant to represent the relationship between the characters, but it actually represents the presentation or performance of that pattern. The apparently familiar triangle pattern, as he realizes, is a staged event, a simulacrum of a known pattern that hides another pattern underneath. A love triangle, in a setting such as the village, is recognized for what it is: Anne Protheroe and Lawrence Redding in *The Murder at the Vicarage* cannot change the apparent structure of their relationship, so they attempt to mask that of the crime itself. In a holiday narrative, the criminals deceive with performances that reflect known and predictable relationship patterns, but such patterns ultimately represent only the loss of meaning in the placelessness that is the holiday.

Evil Under the Sun, which takes place at an island resort in Devon, contemplates the distortion of visible patterns. It appears that the gullible Patrick Redfern is being drawn away from his virtuous wife by the man-eating actress Arlena Stuart. When Arlena is murdered, it becomes clear that the obvious triangle pattern is incorrect. The traditional triangle, in which the unwanted spouse is eliminated, is the true pattern in the village novel, but in the case of the holiday novel, it is a distraction before the crime rather than an explanation afterward. In *Evil Under the Sun*, the apparently guileless

young married couple are in fact the murderers, who have used Arlena Stuart for her money and then disposed of her. They use the holiday to create images of themselves, designed to deflect suspicion.

Fussell's fantasist tourist, a figure aligned naturally with the concept of the holiday, thus takes on a sinister aspect. *Evil Under the Sun* acknowledges that people behave differently on a holiday: Mrs. Gardener, a garrulous American, says, "Being a small place, we all talk to each other and everybody knows everybody. If there is a fault about the British it is that they're inclined to be a bit standoffish until they've known you a couple of years." (12) Kracauer suggests a hotel lobby as the ideal meeting place of the detective novel, because, while apparently civilized, it is necessarily transient and unknowable. He compares it to a church, which houses a knowable and stable community; the hotel lobby, on the other hand, "is the space that does not refer beyond itself".¹⁵¹ The holiday community may be equally compared to that of the village or the house: in these contexts, the life of the group is the predominant concern, whereas, on holiday, as Poirot says, "it is necessary for no one to account for himself." The holiday community is unstable, because it depends so heavily on superficial and potentially fictional participants. For Kracauer "the peripheral equality of social masks"¹⁵² that characters assume in hotels represents "the disguised quality of lived existence as such".¹⁵³ Christie's work, particularly during the 1930s and 40s, asserts the alienating, modernist quality of the holiday and acknowledges the inherent unknowability of others. Light finds that "Christie's travel setting produce a Chinese box effect: 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."¹⁵⁴ By characterizing the holiday as an "escape" from the conditions of contemporary life, the holiday novel briefly allows an illusion of "community". Soon, however, the modernist experience reasserts itself. The

¹⁵¹ Sigfried Kracauer, "Hotel Lobby", in *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 173-185 (first publ. in *Der Detektiv-Roman* (1925) 63-76), p. 177.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 184.

¹⁵⁴ Light, p. 91.

unknown, or unfamiliar, place to which characters flock on holiday signifies the far more hazardous experience of unknowable people.

Christie's novels acknowledge that unknowability, and give her characters awareness that casual impressions act as a substitute for real relationships. Asked to give his estimate of other guests by the Chief Constable, Poirot acknowledges, "Superficially, that is easy." (102) Poirot himself asks Christine Redfern, "You had doubtless [...] formed an opinion of Mrs. Marshall, of the kind of woman she was?"; she replies, again indicating the distinct standards of the holiday, "I suppose one always does that more or less when one is staying in hotels." (123) As Poirot recognizes in *Murder on the Orient Express*, a passing unity in this illusory place may be achieved by a crime. Žižek remarks:

The corpse as object works to bind a group of individuals together: the corpse constitutes them as a group (a group of suspects), it brings and keeps them together through their shared feeling of guilt. [...] The role of the detective is, again, precisely to dissolve the impasse of this universalized, free-floating guilt by localizing it in a single subject and thus exculpating all the others.¹⁵⁵

The inherent falseness of the holiday community leaves such "shared guilt" as the only real communal experience or bond. Because of this, the rationalism of the detective dissolves a temporary community by invalidating its one interconnection.

Of course, the superficial impressions and the false presentations of individuals are only one aspect of the holiday's untruthfulness; as Fussell remarks above, the destination is a packaged entity, designed for consumption. This is evident in the indignant responses of Mrs. Castle, the hotel proprietor in *Evil Under the Sun*, who worries that the reputation of her resort has been damaged by murder: "That such a thing should happen in my hotel! [...] it does so reflect on an establishment." (82) A major part of the holiday's desirability comes from aspiration, or as Fussell might put it, role-play; the destination that forms the setting for this activity must itself be aspirational. The packaged idea of the "foreign", "exotic", or "exclusive" appeals to

¹⁵⁵ Žižek, p. 59.

the tourist, and to the reader of the detective novel, though the latter knows that these idealized constructions are necessarily flawed.

One of Christie's most detailed explorations of the idealized place occurs in *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965). This late-career novel explores a number of the same themes as her earlier work—superficiality, role-play, and tourism—but it places far greater emphasis on the location in which these themes are enacted.¹⁵⁶ It also illustrates another important shift: the majority of Christie's earlier holiday novels feature Poirot as the detective (of her first nine holiday novels, Poirot is the hero of seven), but later ones feature Miss Marple. The change of detective bespeaks a change in the conception of the holiday itself between the 1940s and the 1960s, and the role it plays for Christie. During the political upheavals of the 1930s and the Second World War, holiday novels are prominent in her oeuvre, but in the late 1940s and 1950s, the holiday virtually disappears;¹⁵⁷ this shift forms an interesting contrast to the explosion of travel literature following World War I.¹⁵⁸ During the post-World War II period, Christie largely focused on the house and the village, dealing with changes in the fabric of British life, as seen in *A Pocketful of Rye* and *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*.

In the 1960s, Christie revived the holiday, with Miss Marple as the leading character; in these novels, the modernity and aspiration of the inter-war holiday has been replaced by ironic reflection on an idealized “Englishness.” *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965) and *Nemesis* (1971), particularly, explore the flaws in apparently safe and traditional institutions, pursuits, and individuals. In *At Bertram's Hotel*, the eponymous place forms the heart of the novel. Miss Marple returns to visit the hotel where she stayed as

¹⁵⁶ Miss Marple takes a holiday at Bertram's Hotel (a London institution based on Brown's), at which she had spent time as a young woman, and finds it surprisingly unchanged. The intentional perpetuation of this old-world atmosphere is explained as financially motivated (the hotel is supposedly designed to appeal to foreign visitors) but Miss Marple, and later the canny Chief-Inspector Davy, suspect that its scrupulous respectability is hiding something. Davy begins to unravel a ring of thieves, whose schemes depend upon impersonations of the respectable visitors of Bertram's, and whose profits are smuggled out of the country in guests' luggage.

¹⁵⁷ Only two holiday novels, *They Came to Baghdad* (1951) and *Destination Unknown* (1954) were published between 1942 and 1964. Both of these novels place a much greater stress on adventure than detection, and neither features a series character.

¹⁵⁸ Fussell, pp. 9-23.

a young girl and finds it “just as it had always been. Quite miraculously so”.¹⁵⁹

Because she sees the place with “her usual clear-eyed common sense,” she is disturbed by the unnaturalness of the hotel’s old-world perfection, and aware that its very perfection indicates a serious flaw.

The novel begins with a description of the “quiet pockets” of the West End, where, “[i]f you turn off on an unpretentious street from the Park, and turn left and right once or twice, you will find yourself in a quiet street with Bertram’s Hotel on the right side. Bertram’s Hotel has been there a long time.” (7) The hotel is presented as an unchanging oasis in a changing world:

There had, of course, been many other hotels on the model of Bertram’s. Some still existed, but nearly all had felt the winds of change. [...] Bertram’s, too, had had to change, but it had been done so cleverly that it was not at all apparent at the first casual glance. (7-8)

The cultivation and preservation of the past is the object of the construction and packaging of place at Bertram’s. When asked “how do all these old dears manage to come and stay here?” Mr. Humphries, the proprietor of the hotel, responds,

“Oh, you’ve been wondering about that?” Mr. Humphries seemed amused. “well, the answer’s simple. They couldn’t afford it. Unless—

He paused.

“Unless you make special prices for them? Is that it?”

“More or less. They don’t know, usually, that they *are* special prices, or if they do realise it, they think it’s because they’re old customers.”

[...]

“But how can that pay you?”

“It’s a question of atmosphere . . . Strangers coming to this country (Americans, in particular, because they are the ones who have the money) have their own rather queer ideas of what England is like. [...] they’ve read *Cranford* and Henry James and they don’t want to find that this country just the same as their own! So they go back home afterwards and say: ‘There’s this wonderful place in London; Bertram’s Hotel, it’s called. It’s just like stepping back a hundred years. It just *is* old England!’” (14-15)

Humphries acknowledges that the “old dears” are “so much *mise en scène*”, whose presence helps him to create a particular, and unique, setting. Though there are modern

¹⁵⁹ Agatha Christie, *At Bertram’s Hotel* (London: Collins, 1965), p. 21. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

amenities of all kinds, it is key to the hotel that people “feel that nothing has changed since the turn of the century” (15-16). Of course, Miss Marple is instantly suspicious of the hotel’s appearance of constancy, despite its appeal. She muses that,

She had never expected, not for a moment, that things would be as much like they used to be, . . . because, after all, Time didn’t stand still . . . And to have made it stand still in this way must have cost a lot of money . . . Not a bit of plastic in the place! . . . It must pay them, she supposed. The out-of-date returns in due course as the picturesque . . . Look how people wanted old-fashioned roses now, and scorned hybrid teas! . . . None of this place seemed real at all . . . Well, why should it? . . . It was fifty – no, sixty years since she had stayed here. And it didn’t seem real to her because she was now acclimatised in this present Year of Our Lord – Really, the whole thing opened up a very interesting set of problems . . . The atmosphere and the *people* . . . (49)

The detective’s assessment of the place is practical, recognizing the expense necessary to create Bertram’s anachronistic appearance; she also identifies the palpable and disturbing unreality of the place. Christie conveys this unreality to the reader by contrasting the hotel to the authenticity of Miss Marple herself; she is old-fashioned, but aware of her relation to the contemporary world. Shaw and Vanacker point out that the irony that “the most anachronistic and nostalgic of all the characters in the novel, Miss Marple, is the means by which this exposure is effected: the myth dismantling itself.”¹⁶⁰ The detective is, in a sense, a *real* anachronism, which enables her to recognize the false anachronisms of the hotel.

Fussell writes of the desire of the tourist for a recognizable, familiar, easily digestible version of the travel experience: “Tourist fantasies fructify best when tourists are set down not in places but in pseudo-places. [...] Pseudo-places entice by their familiarity and call for instant recognition: we have arrived.”¹⁶¹ Bertram’s hotel proclaims itself, with pride, a perfect pseudo-place. The appearance that visitors recognize as “old England” is created with calculation, great expense, and performance. Not only are the fittings of the hotel carefully recreated so that “by 1955 it looked precisely as it had in 1939” (7), but the hotel is cast like a play. The “old dears” who pay a less prohibitive rate are part of an ensemble, as are the staff, including the “highly satisfactory

¹⁶⁰ Shaw and Vanacker, p. 54.

¹⁶¹ Fussell, p. 43.

chambermaid [...] a real chambermaid looking unreal” (50): she is, it is revealed in the conclusion, an actress. Miss Marple’s sense that the hotel “really seemed too good to be true” (22) is echoed by Chief-Inspector Davy when he begins to investigate the extremely respectable hotel (122). When Inspector Campbell protests, “I should have said if there was one place in London that was absolutely above suspicion—,” Davy replies “And what a useful thing to have that reputation!” (134)

Christie deconstructs, through the eyes of both detectives, the efforts being made to maintain the hotel’s image, and the purpose behind that image. Both Miss Marple and Davy recognize the skillful mingling of the authentic and the counterfeit that creates the atmosphere of Bertram’s; the deception and self-deception this subterfuge employs is an excellent example of what Kracauer calls “a relation to the nothing.”¹⁶² The hotel is constructed as a recognizable type, but because it is purposefully created rather than naturally occurring, its falsity reflects on all the activities within it. The slippage of its perfect image, she points out, is due to “a lot of little things, people claiming a friend or an acquaintance – and turning out to be wrong.” (244) Confusion arises from the mingling of authentic and counterfeit, disturbing basic identifications of meaning: thus, the hotel as a place can only be understood with reference to itself, rather than to any other experience. *At Bertram’s Hotel* is the only Miss Marple novel that contains no village parallels; she compares her experiences at Bertram’s instead with experiences of the past, highlighting its unnatural presence in its contemporary setting. She is unsurprised when Davy tells her that the hotel is the headquarters of a major crime syndicate.

“So there was something wrong with this place?”

“There was and is everything wrong with it.”

Miss Marple sighed.

“It seemed wonderful at first – unchanged you know – like stepping back into the past – to the part of the past that one had loved and enjoyed.”

She paused.

“But of course, it wasn’t really like that.” (185)

¹⁶² Kracauer, “Hotel Lobby”, p. 179.

The revelation of the hotel's true activities fails to shock her because she has recognized it as "a beautiful performance. But it *was* a performance – not real." (244) She recognizes throughout that the idealization of the past is a falsehood, and the tourist experience a fantasy constructed to conceal a greater falsehood. Bertram's Hotel, the performance at the heart of the conspiracy, is also necessarily the heart of the novel. It is the central role of this destination, and its purposeful construction and packaging, that position *At Bertram's Hotel* as a holiday novel. Bargannier considers it a London novel; however, while it takes place in the city, and the plot occasionally reaches out into the city, the hotel as a tourist production is the mainspring of the novel's complex structure. It is central to the plot as the hub of the criminal organization, and it is central to the theme of this novel, the instability of appearances. The hotel is a perfect holiday construction: it is a self-contained destination, an example of Fussell's pseudo-place and Kracauer's pseudo-world, which facilitates the role-play of the holiday to a dangerous degree.

The holiday in Christie may be initially defined as an experience intentionally created for the tourist to safely leave home and the familiar without becoming entirely disoriented. However, its tangential relation with reality also unlocks the potential for other, criminal, experiences to be mapped onto the concept of tourism. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, the murderers' plan is suggested by the train itself. In *At Bertram's Hotel*, this pattern is reversed and the holiday experience is constructed as a cover for criminal activity. The crime and the holiday, however, maintain a crucial interdependence; as the holiday is a planned escape for the innocent from reality, it is a planned escape for the criminal from guilt. The holiday novel, not coincidentally, typically ends with the characters setting off for their homes, often with changed outlooks and relationships: the holiday, rather than being a break between periods of sameness, becomes a transformative experience. Christie is, as always, distinctly aware of her world's changes, and mocks the longing for tradition and continuity in novels like *At Bertram's Hotel*; her holidays, when they are interrupted by a corpse and cease to be packaged experiences, become engines of a necessary transformation for all concerned.

The Construction of a Typology

Gelley writes,

We may begin our effort of terminological clarification by viewing description in fiction as an instance of a topos, and in a double sense: first, as a recurrent literary device associated with certain genres and, second, as a typical locale or spot whose associations derive more from cultural and mythological sources than strictly literary ones.¹⁶³

Agatha Christie created, within her own work and for her genre, a distinct set of place-based topoi that both address existing stereotypes and create their own mythology. Each of the four types of Christie novel has a resonance of its own; though they appear with varying prominence throughout her career, the house, the village, the city, and the holiday largely define the expectation and construction of Christie's novels. Some are more easily categorized than others, but after establishing the basic concerns of each type, it is possible to assess novels that seem to have a more ambiguous relationship to place. Considering the typology of these novels often illuminates subtle place-indications within the narrative that meaningfully impact its interpretation.

For instance, *The ABC Murders*, though its crimes are scattered all over the country, may be identified as a London mystery because of its prominent use of transport and its emphasis on unknowability; once this identification is established, the typology highlights the performative aspect of the plot. Similarly, *Three Act Tragedy*, which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Three, appears to have three distinct parts; these are revealed, however, to be aspects of one London story, in which actors are always to be suspected. *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) takes place on an archaeological dig rather than a tourist holiday, but the delineation of the place as "other", and the way that the agenda of the crime is overlaid onto that of the dig, marks it as one of the holiday type. One novel that seems very unusual, *Death Comes as the End* (1944), is set in ancient Egypt; however, it is clearly a house mystery because of its family-centered focus.

¹⁶³ Gelley, p. 415.

Some novels, such as *Peril at End House* (1932) and *Taken at the Flood* (1948), straddle two typologies, bringing together the masquerade of the holiday and the city into the family-oriented house. Other novels initially appear to be one type but reveal themselves to be another: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is staged and presented by the criminal to appear as a house novel, but reveals itself as a village novel through its networks of information. In a more complicated instance, *The Body in the Library* opens in a house, and hints toward the village, but these settings, while important to the development of the plot, are typological red herrings: the real place of the novel is the holiday, with its integral possibilities of role-play and escape. In this case, as in a few others, identifying the true place of the novels contributes to a nuanced interpretation of the novel. Not only are the criminals to be found at the seaside resort, but the resort itself, and the way it brings together the leisured and the aspirational, is vital to the construction of the mystery.

The four places designated in this chapter are not the only possible typological understanding of Christie's work. It would certainly be possible to further separate these place typologies, and to designate "traveling" novels or "altered house" novels, or to broaden them into, perhaps, the rural and the urban. However, the separation into the four categories of house, village, London, and holiday seems to best accommodate the variations between types and their similarities over time and specific location. Throughout Christie's career, while some novels are patently of one type, others may be more slippery. Once considered with reference to other novels, however, themes emerge in all the narratives, and the fundamental concerns of the story unfold.

Four types may indeed seem "surprisingly few" for Christie's enormous oeuvre, but as Brecht writes,

Whoever exclaims, "always the same!", when he notes that a tenth of all murders take place in a vicarage has not understood the crime novel. [...] The originality lies in other things. Indeed, the fact that one feature of the crime novel is the variation of more or less fixed elements even grants the whole genre its aesthetic benchmark.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Brecht, p. 167.

The various deployment of these four place-types reveals Christie's interests at different periods of her career, external pressures on her work, and her sociological observations. More essentially in this context, they indicate the distinct meanings attached to the selection of place, within an individual work or a literary movement. Typology serves here to illustrate various possibilities of the focalizing place. Chapter Three will move on from this point to consider how the focalizing place affects character in Christie's *Three Act Tragedy*; this will be set alongside two of Mitchell's novels in order to demonstrate these authors' different handling of the relationship between character and place, and their thematic concerns. This thesis will return to the notion of place types, the separation of places, and the textual role of place-comprehension in the work of Mitchell and Sayers. Christie's typologies, because they are so distinct, and developed throughout her considerable career, play a significant part with regard to the understanding of place in the Golden Age, as well as in the subsequent development of the detective novel.

Subject(s) to Place: Interdependent Place and Character in Agatha Christie and Gladys Mitchell

As Christie's typologies begin to demonstrate, place is far more deeply involved with the dynamics of narrative than its simplest, locative, definition suggests. A type of place, or a specific place developed through the course of a text, provides extensive information about characters' expectations, perspectives, and relationships; place may be interrelated with character to such an extent that one creates the other. For Lutwack,

Setting in fiction is more intimately related to character than it can ever be in drama because it functions as the detailed and continuous environment in which character is formed and to which character reacts over a long period of time.¹

If *where* these stories take place makes them the kind of stories that they are, it also establishes meaning for the characters therein. Novelist Lawrence Durrell hypothesizes that people are fundamentally attached to and affected by their natural and manmade environments: not only are "human beings [...] expressions of their landscape,"² but fictional characters, too, "exist in nature, as a function of place."³ This connection recalls Tuan's concept of *topophilia*, "the affective bond between people and place or setting."⁴ The development of character in a text, much like that of place, depends not only on description but on the accumulation and assimilation of textual details and relationships. Stephen Cohan defines character as "an imaginative configuration produced by the collusion of text and reader to coordinate objective and subjective fields into a virtual existence."⁵ As with fictional place, fictional character is inherently

¹ Lutwack, p. 17.

² Lawrence Durrell, "Landscape and Character", in *The Lawrence Durrell Travel Reader*, ed. by Clint Willis (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004), pp. 3-13 (first publ. in *New York Times Magazine*, 12 June 1960), p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 4.

⁵ Steven Cohan, "Figures beyond the Text: A Theory of Readable Character in the Novel", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 17.1 (1983), pp. 5-27 (p. 21).

incomplete; its completion, and final iteration, must rest with the reader. Association of character with place is one of the means by which a character may be more fully established. Lutwack somewhat reductively asserts that “[s]etting is immediately positive and reassuring”;⁶ while “setting” may be definitive, it is passive and static, whereas “place”, an active force in the text, continues to develop throughout.

In literature, the affect of place is essential, both within the text and regarding the text, and in detective fiction, the relationships of character and place sometimes become almost correlative to evidence. As is common in Christie’s house novels, a single character may impress his or her personality and desires onto a place; characterization of the place and the person then becomes simultaneous and interdependent. Kort suggests that, “[p]ersonal spaces [...] not only acquire qualities from the persons who inhabit them but also bring out those qualities. Mutuality is created between a dwelling and its inhabitant.”⁷ In more complex instances of “mutuality”, character and place appear almost symbiotic, as in Christie’s *Peril at End House* or Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928). The detective may also have a telling relationship with a particular place or place-type: Chapter Two has shown how Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot are each identified with a particular environment that furthers their characterization, and, more importantly, contextualizes their method of detection.

In other instances, as Mucignat points out, “space forms the framework that [...] structures the plot and determines who characters are and how they behave.”⁸ This chapter examines the different ways that Christie and Mitchell handle place as an influence on character. Both authors create a number of characters who feel and react to the effects of place, whether consciously or unwittingly. Christie’s *Three Act Tragedy* (1935) and Mitchell’s *The Devil at Saxon Wall* (1935) are particularly interesting because place is understood as a central concern within the texts themselves; this is notable in that place must usually, as in the previous chapter, be drawn out of its background role to become visible as a fundamental part of the narrative. As Tuan

⁶ Lutwack, p. 37.

⁷ Kort, *Place and Space*, p. 84.

⁸ Mucignat, p. 6.

qualifies his definition: “[t]opophilia is not the strongest of human emotions. When it is compelling we can be sure that the place or environment has become the carrier of emotionally charged events or perceived as a symbol.”⁹ This chapter, as well as following chapters that address Mitchell’s *The Rising of the Moon* and Sayers’ work, will show how place may become the affective center of the novel, and how, in such instances, it is profoundly linked with character construction.

Acting in Place: Christie’s *Three Act Tragedy*

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Christie uses place types, as well as individual places, to create characters. Maida and Spornick claim,

[A] Christie setting does not support any form of behavioral determinism. Unlike Dickens and other detective story writers who dwell on the adverse effects of social conditioning, Christie treats environment as *place*. And a Christie setting does not support a form of naturalism, for the inexorable forces of fate and nature do not press upon her characters. (emphasis original)¹⁰

While the sense of inevitability evident in the work of Collins or Sheridan Le Fanu does not emerge strongly in Christie, it is nonetheless difficult to remove characters’ actions from their environment. For Christie, place is a tool, a format for action; her work does not exhibit determinism so much as structuralism. Places facilitate, or hinder, specific types of action and expression, and characters rarely exhibit any awareness that they are performing to a pattern. The crucial exceptions, of course, are Christie’s detectives, whose success depends on their attention to the legibility of such patterns.

In Mitchell’s work, on the other hand, legibility is not always restricted to the detective. Characters are frequently able to see the structure and meaning in places, with varying

⁹ Tuan, p. 93.

¹⁰ Maida and Spornick, pp. 171-2.

results: some resist these meanings,¹¹ some exploit them,¹² some embrace them,¹³ and others gleefully submit to their influence.¹⁴ Though Mitchell's detective, Mrs. Bradley, is most able to correctly "read" the narrative signs, and so retains dominance of the narrative, she is far from the only character who endeavors to find legibility in place. Both Mitchell's criminals and protagonists often have an active engagement with the environment of the novel: character development is often presented in terms of a struggle to find "the right place" or to "get out of this place". Mitchell's places, therefore, are powerfully defined by characters' responses to them. P.D. James writes of her own practice of integrating place into the narrative through character:

[I]t is important [...] that the setting, which being integral to the whole novel, should be perceived through the mind of one of the characters, not merely described by the authorial voice, so that place and character interact and what the eye takes in influences the mood and the action.¹⁵

Likewise, Mitchell's characters dictate the contextual meaning of place, and their divergent responses to place conversely become material for characterization.

Christie rarely develops the kind of detailed interaction between place and character that defines much of Mitchell's work; instead she used her larger typological frameworks to illustrate relationships. The instances in which she chooses to dwell on these relationships are, consequently, particularly revealing. Much of her personal investment, as previously stated, was in the house: she felt that "You *have* to be concerned with a house: with where people *live*." (emphasis original)¹⁶ Habitation was essential to her understanding of the character of a place.¹⁷ *Peril at End House* (1932)

¹¹ In *The Saltmarsh Murders*, the murderer is the vicar's wife, who seeks to re-define the morality of the village to conform to her own mania. (references are to novels mentioned in this thesis that demonstrate these tendencies, particularly in the criminal characters)

¹² *When Last I Died* concerns a house that is allegedly haunted; a charlatan takes advantage of its reputation to fake a poltergeist manifestation, and his wife uses the house's reputation, and the faked events, to conceal a series of murders.

¹³ *St Peter's Finger* (1937) takes place in a convent where the appeal of the cloistered life becomes clear even to Mrs. Bradley; a powerful desire to be a part of this environment motivates the murderer.

¹⁴ The crime in *The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop* (1929), as discussed below, centers on a place with a powerful atmosphere. All of the characters in the novel make choices, consciously or unconsciously, about how to react to this atmosphere, and the murderer takes it almost as an inspiration for the crime.

¹⁵ P.D. James, *Talking about Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2009), p. 111.

¹⁶ Quoted in Wyndham, p. 25.

¹⁷ This sentiment appears in her life as well as in her work: her Devon house contains a frieze painted by Canadian soldiers housed there during World War II, which Christie left in place, feeling that the traces of those people were part of the life of the house.

begins a strand in Christie's work of place-performance that leads to *Three Act Tragedy* and *Cards on the Table* (1936). Places are uniquely present in these novels, not as backgrounds but as dynamic forces. The heroine-cum-murderer in *Peril at End House* is equated powerfully with her home, as though it is part of her very being. From a practical perspective, her intimate knowledge of the house and its surroundings allows her the means and opportunity to stage a murder effectively. This performance, though, indicates a deeper identification of the house as a performative place. She says to Poirot early on in the novel, "I love End House. I've always wanted to produce a play there. It's got an—an atmosphere of drama about it."¹⁸ When Poirot elucidates the case at the end, he continues to use the dramatic metaphor: "How well she played her part! Magnificently! Oh, yes, she staged a fine drama here. [...] It was from the house that Mademoiselle Nick took her inspiration."¹⁹ Place is, in this instance, the center of the narrative structure, and the catalyst for a character's actions. End House acts as both *place* and *scene* in that it is the real, affective center of the action and the background for the staged simulacrum thereof. The dual role of the place echoes the dual role of the character: both Nick's real character and her performed character are informed by the place that surrounds and motivates them.

In *Peril at End House*, Christie began a thorough exploration of the performative linkage of character and place. She carried that idea further with *Three Act Tragedy*, which focuses on the famous actor Sir Charles Cartwright, and the way that he adapts his self-presentation to place and context with uncanny facility. The perceptive Mr. Satterthwaite observes his host in Cornwall:

Sir Charles was a well-built, sunburned man of middle age. He wore old, grey flannel trousers and a white sweater. He had a slightly rolling gait, and carried his hands half closed as he walked. Nine out of ten people would say, "Retired Naval man—can't mistake the type." The tenth, and more discerning, would have hesitated, puzzled by something indefinable that did not ring true. And then perhaps a picture would rise, unsought, the deck of a ship—but not a real ship—a ship curtailed by hanging curtains of thick, rich material—a man, Charles Cartwright,

¹⁸ Agatha Christie, *Peril at End House* (London: Collins, 1932), p. 78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

standing on that deck, light that was not sunlight streaming down on him.²⁰

Though Christie avers that Sir Charles is “a gentleman first and an actor second” (16), a sense of inauthenticity is already incorporated in her presentation of the character. This first impression is re-iterated throughout the novel as Mr. Satterthwaite observes Sir Charles unconsciously adopting mannerisms of appropriate roles in a variety of situations. Depending on the location and situation, he is “the sophisticated yachtsman of the South of France” (56), “Aristide Duval, the head of the secret service” (31), Ellis, the butler with “a guilty conscience” (107-108), as well as various versions of “himself”.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, actors are always suspect in Christie; their facility with the multiple versions of the self, so crucial to the detective novel, makes them apt criminals. Pyrhönen observes that the criminal always projects a counterfeit self: “[b]y changing their own appearance [...] impersonators try to impose a false and deceptive pattern on reality, one which shows them as innocent and someone else as the guilty party.”²¹ These performances take the place of authentic selves, reflecting the generic structure described by Todorov in “The Typology of Detective Fiction”: “[w]e are concerned then in the whodunit with two stories of which one is absent but real, the other present but insignificant.”²² Between the (absent) story of the crime and the (present) story of detection, the detective novel allows for multiple layers of and motives for concealment; in most cases, these are created by multiple characters, each of whom who have something to hide. Each layer is successively stripped away as the detective exposes the true story of the crime and the real self of the criminal. The actor-murderer in Christie is particularly adept at presenting the insignificant and untruthful story, but when he or she also creates other characters, those false entities add their own layers of concealment and disorientation.

²⁰ Agatha Christie, *Three Act Tragedy* (London: Collins, 1935), p.13-14. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

²¹ Pyrhönen, p. 198.

²² Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, p. 46.

With characteristic sleight-of-hand, Christie inverts the apparent plot of *Three Act Tragedy*, that centering on Sir Charles' amateur investigation, to reveal Sir Charles himself as another actor-murderer, whose very adaptability is at the root of his crimes.²³ An actor's alternative identities are often emphasized by place: Chapter Two describes the distance between the two actors that appears to separate Jane Wilkinson from her crime in *Lord Edgware Dies*. In *Three Act Tragedy*, "other" places continue to provide false alibis, but they also enable Sir Charles' deceptive repertoire of parts. Birns and Birns remark,

Many, if not all, of the characters in Christie's novels are playing roles, so that although it is the murderer who is revealed to be the most hypocritically estranged from his or her performed self, Christie suggests a general doubleness in the human character. This allows her to cast suspicion in all of her characters, giving her a satisfying list of possible villains. But it also creates a vision of life in which the self is "presented" in what sociologist Erving Goffman has described as "the staged reality we call 'everyday life'".²⁴

All of these selves depend, for their plausible existence, on a "stage", or a place to contextualize their performance. Mutuality between character and place, usually an indicator of stability and long-term attachment, emphasizes in Sir Charles' case the changeability of the person. His friend Sir Bartholomew Strange calls him "a better actor in private life than on the stage", and remarks on his adaptability:

"I thought the 'simple fellow, with his love of the sea' would run for six months. Then, frankly, I thought he'd tire of the part. I thought the next thing to fit the bill would be the weary man of the world at Monte Carlo, or possibly a laird in the highlands—he's versatile, Charles is." (15)

The doctor's use of the word "run" explicitly associates Sir Charles' choice of location and habitation with the run of a play, and his "part" with the performative nature of his own life. Early in the novel, Sir Charles casts himself in the role of investigator,

²³ Sir Charles, Poirot discovers, wants to be married, but already has a wife in an asylum. His oldest friend, Sir Bartholomew, has arranged her care and kept it secret. Because Sir Charles wants to marry bigamously, he decides to kill Sir Bartholomew. He stages a "dress rehearsal" to test his method, in which an elderly clergyman dies. He then kills Sir Bartholomew while acting as his temporary butler. Poirot is puzzled by the order in which the deaths occur until he realizes the theatricality of the entire case, and recognizes this rehearsal for what it is. In the American version of the novel, Sir Charles suffers from megalomania, for which he has been hospitalized. Sir Charles acts as though he is cured, but fears that Sir Bartholomew suspects he is not, and is paranoid that he will have him committed again, against his will.

²⁴ Birns and Birns, p. 123.

abandoning his more obvious role-play. However, this too is necessarily a performance, because the novel features Poirot, who is of course the real detective.

Poirot, however, has a keen theatrical sense. Though he claims to “see only the facts, without any dramatic trappings or footlights” (225), he identifies the staging of the crime as crucial evidence. Aware that he “was, in fact, looking not at reality but at an artfully painted bit of scenery” (236), Poirot recognizes the first murder as a “dress rehearsal”: “Sir Charles was an actor. He obeyed his actor’s instinct. He tried out the murder before committing it.” (248) The actor, even in the final scenes, attempts to re-claim authority through an appropriate role:

Sir Charles Cartwright rose slowly to his feet and strolled to the fireplace. He stood there, his hand on his hip, looking down at Poirot. His attitude, Mr. Satterthwaite could have told you, was that of Lord Englemount as he looks scornfully at the rascally solicitor who has succeeded in fastening an accusation of fraud on him. (243)

Like several of Christie’s other actor characters, though, he has no real self on which to fall back, only an increasing number of roles. When he accepts defeat, “Sir Charles seemed suddenly to have aged. It was an old man’s face, a leering satyr’s face.” (250) His only identification in the text remains that of the performer: Poirot concludes the case with another theatrical metaphor, saying, “he will only choose his exit. The slow one before the eyes of the world, or the quick one off stage.” (250)

The actor loses himself in parts, but equally in places. The foundation of Sir Charles’ performances in their environment reinforces the notion of mutuality between character and place, but the temporary quality of his associations renders them dangerously fragile. Malpas argues that comprehension of, and identification with, place is an essential part of the formation of self-identity:

[T]he mental life of the subject is dependent on the subject’s active engagement with the surrounding environment and so on its situatedness within a particular place. The specific dependence of self-identity on place is an obvious consequence of the way in which self-conceptualisation and the conceptualisation of place are both interdependent elements within the same structure. Our identities are thus bound up with particular places or localities through the very structuring of subjectivity and of mental life within the overarching

structure of place. Particular places enter into our self-conception and self-identity inasmuch as it is only in, and through our grasp of, the places in which we are situated that we can encounter objects, other persons, or, indeed, ourselves.²⁵

For Malpas, basic understanding of the self becomes a corollary of a relationship with place and a personal formulation of it. Transience, then, must be hazardous if self-conception changes along with environment. Sir Charles' roles, and the places in which they are enacted, are intended and expected to be temporary. These "settings" ground his performances, and sustain them over a period of time, but the connection between adopted place and adopted character can never be so stable as the true mutuality between characters and particular, static places such as houses. Malpas goes on to argue that place-identification is actually necessary for the formation of personal identity: "the search for a sense of self-identity is often presented in terms of a search for place."²⁶ It is only through identifying a personal place that one may be able to develop a concrete sense of self; thus, it is only through a stable identification with place that a fictional character may become fully formed.

This search for identity (or the endeavor to establish a coherent false identity) again reflects the structure of detective fiction itself. Dirk Van Helle writes, "the investigative stage [is] the most interesting part of the detective formula because it is marked by trial and error. It is the proto-version of what would later be referred to as "stream-of-consciousness."²⁷ As noted in Chapter One, the detailed observation that is the foundation of the detection process starts as a place-based process. Throughout an investigation, the detective extrapolates meaningful information from objects or situations, creating a theoretical framework that dismantles and reconstitutes the meaning of the place within which detection occurs. The detective novel re-forms ideas about place and character that exist both within the text and outside it, and thus bespeaks a decidedly modernist questioning of identity. Christie's actors, who have no stable place with which they can identify, are constructed as criminal largely in that

²⁵ Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 177.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁷ Dirk Van Helle, "Modernism, Consciousness, Poetics of Process", in *Modernism*, ed. by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), p. 321- 338 (p. 328).

they have no verifiable self. The necessity of place as an external character-signifier bespeaks an inherent unknowability, of others as well as of the self.

The Psychological Supernatural: Mitchell's *The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop* and *The Devil at Saxon Wall*

The quest for knowability takes on a very different form in Gladys Mitchell's work. As mentioned above, her characters have a much less static, and more self-aware, relationship to place. When Sir Charles, Christie's actor-criminal, creates a part, he develops it in accordance with an appropriate setting, choosing place specifically to support a role, and tailoring the character to fit that place. In Mitchell's novels, such role-play becomes even more dangerous, because characters are rarely able to control their environments. Particularly in *The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop* (1929), *Come Away, Death* (1937), and *When Last I Died* (1941), characters' potential for crime is heightened by the suggestive, or suggested, power of a place. *The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop* features another sort of actor-criminal: George Savile is an eccentric artist with a penchant for costumes, who is so susceptible to the suggestive power of place that he commits a grotesque murder.²⁸

As discussed further in Chapter Four, Mitchell is less concerned with the formulaic nature of the detective genre, and more interested in its ability to explore abnormality and individuation. In her novels, Mitchell expressed a lifelong interest in psychology, particularly Freudian psychoanalysis: her detective, Mrs. Bradley, is a psychoanalyst who appears both as a freelance amateur detective and as a consultant to the Home Office. Mrs. Bradley's profession distinguishes her investigative process from that of other detectives, pushing the investigation in the novels into psychological, rather than evidential, channels. Thus, Mitchell's frequently detailed use of place emphasizes not

²⁸ As Mrs. Bradley demonstrates, Savile is the murderer in intent rather than deed. The victim, Rupert Sethleigh, is actually already dead, having struck his head on the Stone of Sacrifice during a fight, before Savile decapitates him on the Stone and cuts him into joints to hang in the butcher's shop.

only the structure and character of places themselves, but their impact on the mind of the individual. Her construction of place reflects Casey's argument:

In contrast with Kant's view that we construct space by a formal transcendental activity, we are not the masters of place but prey to it; we are subjects of place or, more exactly, *subject to place*. Such subjection ranges from docility (wherein we are the mere creatures of a place, at its whim and in its image) to appreciation (by which we enjoy a place, savoring it) to change (whereby we alter ourselves as a function of having been in a certain place). (emphasis original)²⁹

The choice of the word "subject" implies that the person or character is submissive to, and subordinate to, place. This formulation grants place a pronouncedly active role in the narrative: if it has power over character, it has power over the trajectory of the story itself, not merely its typological structure.

Again, the only character usually exempt from this subjection to place, who is thus able to see its impact on others, is the detective. Christie's and Mitchell's different evidential emphasis appears in the way that places are expressed in the texts: while "place" in Christie is an integrated social environment, "place" in Mitchell is an external force, which may or may not be influenced by characters' actions. Her characters *feel* places powerfully. *The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop* takes place in and around the Manor House in Mrs. Bradley's village of Wandles Parva. The site of the murder, in the Manor House wood, is a clearing surrounding the Stone of Sacrifice, an ancient altar that inspires fear and revulsion in a number of characters: it is described as "a loathsome, toad-like thing"³⁰, and "that horrible Stone" (151), and even Mrs. Bradley finds that "it reeks of evil." (194) The physicality of the place, including the stone itself and the clearing of trees where it stands, expresses itself as a psychological impulse: some characters are repelled and go out of their way to avoid it, and others are drawn to it as a place of concealment *because* others avoid it. The performative potential of character-place interaction again looms large in this novel. Unlike Christie's novels, in which characters choose the places appropriate to these performances, Mitchell's work

²⁹ Edward S. Casey, "Body, Self, and Landscape", in *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 403-423 (p. 415).

³⁰ Gladys Mitchell, *The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop* (London: Gollancz, 1929), p. 35. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

allows the places themselves to dictate the performance. The Stone of Sacrifice and its overtones create an irresistible environment for George Savile. His suggestibility is akin to that of Sir Charles in *Three Act Tragedy*, but he does not create environments to play his parts; instead, he responds theatrically to the environment or situation in which he finds himself. The set, so to speak, precedes the play. Savile reveals his mental instability because he is overly “subject to place”. In Mrs. Bradley’s analysis, “His fetish seems to be exactitude and laborious attention to correctness of detail” (274); so, finding a body on a “Stone of Sacrifice”, he ritually decapitates it. He even “dresse[s] for the part he [plays] in his imagination” (253), assuming the costume of Robin Hood when he tries to shoot Mrs. Bradley with an arrow, and the costume of a butcher when he deposits the jointed body in a butcher’s shop. She explains that “the Stone itself would be such a temptation to him.” (252) In this, as in later novels, Mitchell leaves open the question of whether it is possible for place to have an intrinsic power of its own, or whether such power is only a projection of characters’ needs and desires.³¹

The ominous place at the center of this novel, though, does not have a universally similar effect. Though places may be *interpreted* differently in Christie, they create different *responses* in Mitchell. Thus, it is not the place’s apparent meaning that shifts between characters, but its actual, enacted meaning. For the teenage hero Aubrey in *The Mystery of the Butcher’s Shop*,

[The clearing] was a horrid place. There could be no other opinion. Sinister, ghostly, grey, the Druids’ Stone bulked menacingly large, and the ring of whispering pines, like courtiers round a cruel, evil king, stood tall and straight and still. (60) (emphasis original)

Despite the vivid horror of his description, the place actually spurs him to an act of valor (attempting to protect his cousin by concealing evidence) and one of mischief (burying a fish in a hole resembling a grave). He fears the place, but instead of being cowed by its atmosphere, he purposefully resists it. Another young man, whose lover wants to conceal their relationship from her father, takes her to the clearing, using its foreboding reputation as a means of concealment. Even a place with such a powerful potential for psychological influence may be manipulated, which demonstrates that

³¹ This question is somewhat tangential in this instance, but becomes pivotal in *When Last I Died*.

while certain individuals are indeed subject to place, others retain the ability to alter a place's meaning through their actions.

Mitchell's version of place is far from static: enacted through multiple characters, place-meanings become varied and changeable. Every place must consequently be considered as a hybrid of many perceptions and reactions as opposed to a single, reproducible pattern. In Christie's work, it is rare for more than one character to give a report of a place, thus rare for the reader to receive a variety of impressions. Mitchell, on the other hand, often toys with non-matching accounts of places and events, highlighting the role of perception in description: in these instances, place takes a prominent role in the consciousness of the narrative as a whole. Kort observes that, "when the language of space becomes dominant in a narrative, especially by bearing negative or threatening potential, characters are more determined by their situations than they otherwise would be and are put into more reactive than initiative roles."³² Mitchell's *The Devil at Saxon Wall* (1935) focuses on a particularly negative place, which inspires a variety of peculiar reactions. The titular village is initially described through the eyes of Constance Middleton, who comes there as a bride, as:

[A]n ugly, stragglng place, and Constance disliked and feared the people. They were like no villagers that she had ever seen. She had a poor memory for verse, but every time she encountered any of the inhabitants of Saxon Wall there came into her mind the line "ugly, squat, and full of guile." They had thick, dirty, fair hair, unkempt and more like frayed rope than anything else she could think of, narrow, shifty eyes under curiously straight brows, low foreheads, big splayed feet, as though they were unaccustomed to the wearing of hard leather boots, and large, coarse hands on the ends of abnormally long arms. Both men and women seemed stupid and ferocious, so that, mixed with her fear of them, was a good deal of disgust. Even the children were ugly, and most of them threw stones at her whenever they saw her.³³

This image of the villagers, almost Neanderthal in aspect, is the first hint toward the nature of the village itself. These villagers are as unlike the villagers of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, or even *The Saltmarsh Murders*, as it is possible to imagine. In fact, they establish the village of Saxon Wall in direct contrast to the ultra-civilized form

³² Kort, *Place and Space*, p. 16

³³ Gladys Mitchell, *The Devil at Saxon Wall* (London: Penguin, 1939) [1935], p. 12. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

expected in the Golden Age detective novel, and re-figure its typological tropes of knowability and insularity. The appearance of the villagers of Saxon Wall allies them completely with their environment. Buell comments on place determinism, observing that, even in Wordsworth, “rural figures look, indeed often are, battered into misshapeness by place-bound impoverishment”, which he considers was intended to illustrate “the persistent malformation of rural character”.³⁴ The isolation, poverty, and ugliness of the place, and its residents, is not causal but integral.

The strangeness of the setting is unusual even in Mitchell’s work. Alter opposes “self-conscious” and “realist” novels,³⁵ but detective novels, and perhaps other genre novels, frequently fall between the two. Alter writes, “The self-conscious novel [...] was never meant to be an abandonment of mimesis, but rather an enormous complication of it: mimesis is enacted as its problematic nature is explored.”³⁶ The detective novel may embrace and utilize such mimesis, but it is also continually turning the idea upon itself. Christie’s novels embrace the mimesis of typological repetition, while continually complicating and re-structuring that idea. Mitchell’s work complicates the relationship of artifice and realism even further, by rejecting “reality” while still claiming a place within the genre form. As further explored in Chapter Four, she frequently engages with a Gothic sensibility that was at odds with the tight resolutions more common in the Golden Age detective novel. Horace Walpole, in much the same vein, opposed the Gothic to the Enlightenment: *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), he felt, was “not written for this century which wants only cold reason”.³⁷ The Golden Age emphasis on rationality was not outside Mitchell’s grasp, but she found the possibilities of irrationality far more appealing. *The Devil at Saxon Wall* resists mimetic accessibility, instead presenting a place so outlandish that it might be termed surrealist.

³⁴ Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 143.

³⁵ Robert Alter, *Motives for Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁷ Quoted in Peter K. Garrett, *Gothic Reflections: Narrative Force in Nineteenth-century Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 1.

Constance Middleton's point of view provides the introduction to this novel, and thus establishes an image of menace and ugliness that characterizes Saxon Wall. Lutwack observes that:

A character's subjective response to places may serve to convey states of mind and feeling in a concrete way. [...] A response to a place becomes material for characterization when it is individualized, that is when it does not conform to the customary response and when it cancels or exaggerates the impact place qualities usually have.³⁸

This first chapter juxtaposes two epigraphs, one about a criminal poisoner in a play,³⁹ and one from a psychological text about hysteria,⁴⁰ which bring Constance's perspective into question. Her fear appears superstitious, which reflects the superstitious and pagan behavior of the villagers themselves, but it also reveals her mental breakdown in a situation of domestic abuse.⁴¹ Mitchell, who departs in many ways from the prescriptive structure of the traditional detective novel, frequently uses what Dorrit Cohn calls "psycho-narration",⁴² as well as what Gérard Genette terms "variable focalization",⁴³ in order to float between characters' points of view. This technique allows the author to maintain a third person narration of limited omniscience as well as emphasize the perspective of one character at a time. Haggerty writes that Poe's use of the short story enables him to express sensation through his narrator: "[i]n focusing on the teller of the tale, Poe shows how the supernatural can be made convincing without rendering the work absurd."⁴⁴ Mitchell's floating focalization

³⁸ Lutwack, p. 71.

³⁹ John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, Act III, scene vii, quoted in *Saxon Wall*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Robert S. Woodworth, *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* [1931], quoted in *Saxon Wall*, p. 7.

⁴¹ Constance is married in the beginning of the novel to the erratic Hanley Middleton, who brings her to his ancestral home at Saxon Wall. Despite his violence toward her and numerous affairs, most importantly with Martha Passion, their maid, Constance stays and has a child, soon after which she dies. Hanley appears to have died as well, but it is revealed later that he faked his own death in order not to be blamed for his wife's. Hanley has visited the local witch, Mrs. Fluke (his affair with her daughter Martha, also results in the birth of a child, Richard, who is switched for Constance's baby and raised as the legitimate heir). This family is closely tied to Hanley, and, according to Mrs. Bradley, "the village accepted unconditionally the Scriptural interpretation of madness, i.e. demoniacal possession" (276). They later facilitate his reappearance, but turn on him when he goes too far in impersonating Reverend Hallam. The villagers also believe that he is in some way responsible for the drought which plagues the village.

⁴² Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). Cohn emphasizes the importance of the third-person narration of internal thought in contrast to internal monologue, pp. 11-12.

⁴³ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, ed. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 192.

⁴⁴ Haggerty, p. 89.

achieves much the same result; various characters' perspectives even validate each other.

Even the neutral authorial voice does not dispute the negative qualities of the village. After Constance's death and the apparent death of her husband,

The vicar died, and Doctor Crevister retired, and the Long Thin Man, the village public house, passed into the hands of a couple from Essex. The other long thin man, the patron and familiar, it was said, of old Mother Fluke the witch, still slept in his long barrow on the hill called Guthrum Down, and for eight or nine years the village peaceably returned to its dirt and its lies and its ugly clodhopping sins and its Saturday pint and a half, the last no longer paid for out of Hanley Middleton's patrimony, but none the less enjoyed, since, apart from any other consideration, it happened to be better beer, and even the inhabitants of Saxon Wall, dead to all other decent feeling, could distinguish and comment on the difference. (29)

Only one observation in this passage is qualified: "it was said" that mythical long thin man (a spirit or devil supposed to live in the Neolithic barrow outside the village) was the witch Mrs. Fluke's familiar. Otherwise, the reader is evidently meant to accept the "dirt, lies, and sins", and even the existence of the long thin man himself, alongside the factual information about the vicar's death and the doctor's retirement. The eeriness and improbability of the village are not only perceptual, they are part of its existence.

The narrative next adopts the perspective of the writer Hannibal Jones, who is following Mrs. Bradley's advice to find a "sufficiently interesting and secluded village" (34) in which to recover from his writer's block.

It took him nineteen days to discover and annex the village of Saxon Wall. It was long, straggling and unkempt. It was away from main roads and apparently unacquainted with the progress of what people who put cleanliness before godliness call civilisation. The farmyards of its immediate vicinity smelt sourer, its inhabitants looked more dour and unfriendly, its cottages were uglier in conception, arrangement and colouring and its public-house more surprisingly named than any of the others he had passed by or encountered during his tour, so he adopted it at sight, and decided to stay in it a good long time. (34-35)

Jones finds Saxon Wall perversely appealing, even relaxing, but despite his difference of personal opinion, its aspect seems unchanged. Though Jones expresses the state of

the village with wry humor, it is apparent that even to the optimistic observer the place lacks the external charms of “the village” as it is has previously been characterized in this type of fiction.

However, in this remarkable place, Jones finds himself in “a state of grace.” (38) A religious theme is established throughout the novel as strongly as that of witchcraft: in addition to the Church of England, the novel mentions numerous other sects and organizations, including Baptists, Methodists, and the Salvation Army, as well as missionaries. It also alludes to Taoism and Santeria in a confusion of influences that de-stabilizes the claim of any religion. Nicholas Fuller compares the novel to a Mystery play,⁴⁵ arguing that the detective novel’s usual juxtaposition of good and evil here takes on a uniquely religious dimension. However, neither side is clearly defined; the insane Hanley Middleton takes the place of the Reverend Hallam,⁴⁶ whereas the witch-like Mrs. Bradley is the voice of reason and resolution. Mrs. Bradley, though a notably eccentric version of Kracauer’s “manifestation of reason”, refuses the explanation that any supernatural power, religious or otherwise, is the cause of the village’s troubles. Throughout the novel, she references Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1906-1915), an anthropological study of mythology and religions; this point of reference at once emphasizes the inadequacy of mythical and spiritual explanations for the events of the narrative, and re-iterates the falsity of both sides’ attribution of blame to non-human agency.

Mrs. Bradley recognizes the fact behind Martha Passion’s apparently hyperbolic declaration that “the devil’s in this village” with dispassion: “The devil’s in the village! How extraordinarily true. Is she giving us a hint, I wonder, or did the words slip out by accident?” (202) By discounting superstition, Mrs. Bradley understands that the words, whether superstitious or cryptic, have a referent in reality: “the devil” is a man, Middleton, who, like Sir Charles Cartwright and George Savile, attempts to conceal his

⁴⁵ Nicholas Fuller, review of *The Devil at Saxon Wall* <<http://gadetection.pbworks.com/w/page/7931858/The%20Devil%20at%20Saxon%20Wall>> [accessed 23 August 2014]

⁴⁶ To further complicate this reading, the real Hallam’s given name is Merlin, which would seem to indicate an allegiance to magical rather than ecclesiastical power.

crimes, and his madness, by adopting several characters. He has exploited the innate primitiveness of Saxon Wall and evasiveness of its residents to conceal his crimes and machinations: the devil, in this case, is a character who can manipulate the presentation of place. The influence of specific places on performance that is so central to *Three Act Tragedy* and *The Mystery of the Butcher's Shop*, however, is not a part of the construction of place in *The Devil at Saxon Wall*. Instead, the place itself is characterized as one aspect of an ongoing performance, constructed for a particular purpose and co-opted for another. According to the notes at the end of the novel,

Mrs. Bradley later expressed the opinion that the inhabitants of Saxon Wall were incapable of making straightforward statements. In her unprejudiced opinion, even their lies were elliptical.

She hazarded a guess that this peculiarity dated from the days of the Norman Conquest, when the Saxons of those parts, too cunning to tell direct lies to their overlords, resorted to these maddening half-statements and oracular pronouncements. (275)

The apparent limitations and contradictions of the village are, in Mrs. Bradley's analysis, a purposefully cultivated form of resistance and self-protection.

The Devil at Saxon Wall apparently undermines several conventions about the village, most notably that of inherent knowability. The falsification of families forms a motif throughout the novel, of which the baby-switching storyline is only one part. The Fluke sisters' denial of their relationship to each other,⁴⁷ their ongoing battle with their mother, and Hanley's reappearance as his own fictional brother are aspects of the puzzle that must be cleared away in the process of detection; however, it becomes clear that these obfuscations are only part of the performance, as the truth is known to those who are "of" the village. There remains an apparent dichotomy between "insiders" and "outsiders" in the village, but this too comes into question. Mrs. Bradley observes that, "for such an unusually awful village, Saxon Wall has a high percentage of most respectable inhabitants" (251). While the village, in its first impressions and in its ongoing presentation, seems to embody the worst qualities attributable to a rural situation—superstition, ignorance, cruelty, inwardness—its "respectable inhabitants",

⁴⁷ Martha Passion does not mention her sister, Mrs. Tebbutt, who is one of Hanley Middleton's carer/servants, and Mrs. Tebbutt denies any relationships in the village until directly confronted. The connection between the two, though, forms an unknown link between Jones and Middleton.

who include maiden ladies, a doctor, a publican, and a postmistress, represent classic village types. The negative aspects attributed to “the villagers” serve largely to differentiate those who are “of” the village and those who live there but are, for various reasons, considered outsiders. This apparent distinction, however, lacks true meaning; the language of the narrative does not seem to include the “respectable inhabitants” in the community, but they are certainly so in practice. More significantly, all are, in Casey’s terminology, decidedly “subject to place.” Even Jones becomes so integrated into the collective deception that he is fooled by Middleton’s impression of his friend Reverend Hallam. The true “outsider” is Mrs. Bradley, who refuses to accept the backwardness of the village as it is presented. The only other character who correctly assesses the situation is Nao, the Reverend Hallam’s Japanese servant; though he does not actively dispute the false narrative, his foreignness, like that of Poirot, enables him to see the hollowness of these apparently essential distinctions.

The Saxon resistance establishes a purpose behind the indisputably unattractive image of Saxon Wall, even centuries after this strategy has outlived its usefulness. What remains, for the purposes of the detective novel, is a human impulse to externalize blame and fault, and a primitive rejection of logic. The almost nihilistic vision of the village contradicts the apparent resolution of the detective plot; the place seems to resist the natural process of alteration through gradual change in its population as much as it resists attempts to modernize the houses or exhortations to attend church. While the conclusion evokes the rhetoric of purgation as Martha exclaims, “Tis the devil abroad! [...] He’s cast out of heaven, and Michael’s master there. [...] Praise be to God!” (270), the village does not seem to experience the removal of the criminal as a cathartic experience. The novel ends suddenly in a deluge of rain evoking “the terrible mercy of God” (271), but that abrupt conclusion is marked by the absence of indicators toward change and development that are typical in the genre. Instead, the appendix of Mrs. Bradley’s conclusions resolves the narrative in an analytical, rather than transformative, manner. The village exists to be observed, rather than to be acted upon. Its static nature is unusual, not only in Mitchell’s oeuvre, but in all of the Golden Age;

its power lies in its evocation of the primitive impulses that motivate even the most civilized individuals.

Casey writes that, “To be (a) subject to/of place is to *be what we are as an expression of the way a place is.*” (emphasis original)⁴⁸ Place allows, encourages, or forces characters to be as they are, to reveal themselves, or to create themselves. While Tuan refers to topophilia, Gaston Bachelard offers “topoanalysis”, as “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives. In the theater of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant rôles.”⁴⁹ The self-conscious mimesis of the detective novel is perfectly enacted in the theatricality of Christie’s structural work, in which setting and character are necessarily mutually dependent. In Mitchell’s work, however, place may be a point of access to a character, but equally character and place can compete for narrative prominence and control. The divide between the two may best be expressed in terms of whether the narrative place is exterior or interior to character; Christie’s places and characters are part of a system, but Mitchell’s act upon one another. The problematic nature of place in *The Devil at Saxon Wall* is largely in understanding who is presenting the place, and who is affected by that presentation. The variable focalization of the narrative, which becomes increasingly distant from Jones as he is increasingly drawn into the falsified image of the village, reveals more about the characters than about the strangely intransigent place itself.

Mitchell’s novels are rarely neatly structured or plotted, as is considered typical of the genre and period. Instead, they are more often meandering examinations of a question, idea, or thought. Sayers wrote of character-creation that an author might, “take some passing mood of one’s own mind and say to one’s self, If this fleeting mood were to become a dominant attitude of mind, what would my behavior be under given circumstances?”⁵⁰ Mitchell took what might, for another author, have been discounted

⁴⁸ Casey, “Body, Self, Landscape”, p. 451.

⁴⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 8.

⁵⁰ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 219.

as passing fancies and created narratives around an examination of them. Her earliest works conform to some Golden Age structures, though they interpret them radically on occasion, but increasingly, from the mid-1930s, she seems less interested in resolution and more engaged with the exposition of psychological questions. Interestingly, place plays an ever more important role in her novels, to the extent that it sometimes overrides both plot and character, as it does in *Hangman's Curfew* (1941). In more successful novels, however, it illuminates both. Chapter Four explores *The Rising of the Moon*, in which the narrative place is tied intimately to the psychology of the narrator himself.

“When things become a little abnormal”:
The Externalization of Character Psychology
in Gladys Mitchell’s *The Rising of the Moon*

Pre-conceived notions of place may be used in the detective novel to illuminate or to deceive, and the intra-textual development of place often acts as a clue to character or motive. Because it is so intuitively comprehensible, but also because it is so mysterious, place may alternately or simultaneously play multiple narratological roles, as it often does in the work of Gladys Mitchell. Mitchell’s novelistic landscapes, as mentioned in Chapter Three, are often as effective at expressing a psychological state as they are in conveying physical information. Particularly when her novels deviate from a neutral third-person perspective, they characterize place in a way that expresses the psychological sensations and motives of the characters, or of the narrative itself. *The Rising of the Moon* (1945) makes place particularly evocative: it embodies the narrator’s experience of the borderline between childhood and adulthood. The textual landscape transforms into a network of signs, enabling the reader to analyze the narrator through the place as a psychoanalyst analyzes a patient through a dream. The focalization of the novel recalls that of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), but hints at the same time toward the Gothic mood of Poe’s work as the narrator attempts to come to terms with the unknown and the abnormal. Mitchell challenges the expectations of the detective form, not only by rejecting its rationality and closure, but in prioritizing an investigation of marginality over the detective plot, she develops a complex interplay of detection and psychoanalysis, and of character and place.

Unlike her contemporaries, Mitchell does not regard the detective form as one to be venerated, or rejuvenated; rather, she is more interested in using the form to explore psychological mystery in a manner reminiscent of Poe. Like Poe, also, her stories are powerfully influenced by a sense of place; as mentioned in Chapter Three, Mitchell

integrates place with other elements of the narrative in many diverse ways over the course of her career. Her œuvre is far more inconsistent in both style and content than that of Christie, or those of other contemporaries like Freeman Wills Crofts and Patricia Wentworth. Like these novelists, though, Mitchell uses the same detective, who ages imperceptibly and remains a basically constant entity despite inhabiting a changing contemporary world. Because Mitchell made a similar choice to Christie's, and began her series with a "little, old, shriveled, clever, sarcastic sort of dame",¹ her work also has a less-dependable developmental and chronological structure than that of Sayers, Allingham, or Nicholas Blake, whose detectives age and mature during the course of a series, and thus have transformative experiences and changing world-views. Mitchell, also, was apparently unconcerned by the demands of authorial consistency that motivated Christie to continue the popular Poirot series despite finding him a "detestable, bombastic, tiresome little creature"² or that necessitated Sayers' "drastic surgical operation"³ to overhaul the character of Lord Peter Wimsey. Because Mitchell did not depend on her writing for a living (she kept her job as a teacher until she reached retirement age) and because she had a reliable relationship with her publisher,⁴ she was able to write experimentally throughout her career. Her œuvre is variously considered an example of "fascinating unpredictability"⁵ or "bland indifference to consistency",⁶ but its thematic and stylistic breadth is undeniably noteworthy.

Mitchell establishes psychoanalysis as a key part of her concept of detection and her detective's process in her first novel, *Speedy Death* (1929), which introduces Mrs. Bradley. Though she proclaims herself "a psychologist, not a policewoman," Mrs.

¹ Gladys Mitchell, *Speedy Death* (London: Gollancz, 1929), p. 11.

² Agatha Christie, "Hercule Poirot: Fiction's Greatest Detective", in *The Agatha Christie Centenary*, ed. by Lynn Underwood (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 30-32 (p. 32).

³ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p. 218.

⁴ Mitchell had early-career working relationships with Victor Gollancz (1929-1933) and Grayson & Grayson (1934-35), but Michael Joseph published all of her novels from *Dead Men's Morris* (1936) to the posthumous *The Crozier Pharaohs* (1984).

⁵ William A. S. Sarjeant, "Gladys Mitchell: The Last of the 'Golden Age' Writers", in *Armchair Detective* 18.4 (1985).

⁶ James Sandoe, New York Herald Tribune, <<http://www.gladysmitchell.com/sarjeantessay.htm>> [accessed 6 September 2014].

Bradley solves the case using her knowledge of Freudian theory.⁷ Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan characterize this novel as “something of a false start”⁸ for Mitchell, and much of the psychological material employed to establish Mrs. Bradley’s profession and avocation does appear facetious and simplistic. She identifies the murderer after finding the drowned victim’s watch in a water jug,⁹ and when her suspect destroys a travel clock, she correctly suspects that its owner is in danger, explaining, “Smashed clock, smashed woman”; she goes so far in this instance as to call the object the “Freudian clock”. “My dear man,” she explains to the police inspector, “she positively flung it on the ground when she saw them kissing! [...] I shall incorporate the incident in my *Handbook to Psycho-Analysis*.”¹⁰ Despite the tongue-in-cheek quality of this evidence, Mrs. Bradley, in this instance as in her later, more complicated cases, actually employs Freudian reasoning rather than merely alluding to psychology.

Craig and Cadogan note that,

Allowing for the edge of fantasy [...] [Mrs. Bradley] exemplifies a type of professionalism which transcends sexual distinctions. She is different from Miss Marple or [Wentworth’s] Miss Silver in another important respect: her intelligence is shown in operation, not merely stated.¹¹

Mitchell believed that the ideal detective novel should “combine the primitive lust and energy of the hunter with the cold logic of the scholarly mind,”¹² and Mrs. Bradley may certainly be described in this vein. The choice of a female detective concentrates power in Mrs. Bradley’s hands; in fact, the intellect, personality, and independent wealth with which she endows the heroine place her in perhaps a greater position of power than any other female detective in fiction. Her professionalism is an essential part of this equation; despite P.D. James’ declaration that “I cannot think of a single

⁷ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 28. Like many other elements of Mitchell’s work, her terminology for Mrs. Bradley’s profession is inconsistent. She identifies herself as a psychologist on her first appearance in *Speedy Death*, a psychoanalyst and a psychologist in *The Saltmarsh Murders*, and a psychiatrist in *The Rising of the Moon*. Because of her repeated references to Freud, I have chosen to use the term psychoanalyst.

⁸ Patricia Craig, and Mary Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates: Woman Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (New York: St. Martin’s press, 1981), p. 180.

⁹ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, pp. 69-72.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 161.

¹¹ Craig and Cadogan, p. 181.

¹² Gladys Mitchell, “Why Do People Read Detective Stories?”, in *Murder Ink: The Mystery Reader’s Companion*, ed. by Dilys Winn (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1977), p. 15.

detective story written by a woman in the 1930s which features [...] a woman in any real position of political or economic power,”¹³ Mitchell wrote many. Mrs. Bradley is one of the first professional women to appear as a protagonist of detective fiction. While there are certainly earlier detective heroines,¹⁴ Mrs. Bradley is an unusual example in the interwar period for having her own career in an established and respected profession: Mitchell reminds the reader in nearly every novel that she is a fully qualified medical doctor. She also perhaps the first psychoanalyst-detective, and as such, is an important precursor of the emphasis on criminal psychology that has, in the last generation, become a central element of mainstream crime fiction and drama. Mitchell’s various passions, for education, sports, and literature, are prevalent motifs throughout the novels, but it is her interest in Freudian psychology that largely dominates the Mrs. Bradley series, not only in the heroine’s profession and style of detection, but in the structure of the narrative itself. Mitchell claimed that “Freud has no influence, so far as I know, on my characters,”¹⁵ but her engagement with psychoanalysis and psychology appears in various guises in most of her work, as she manipulates the detective form to explore ideas of desire, perversion, and insanity.

The Rising of the Moon is in many ways the consummation of Mitchell’s experiments of the 1930s and 40s; it plumbs the relationships between character and place and between psychology and narrative, and in doing so, marks the end of the author’s most innovative period. The techniques and structures that define the novel are present in various predecessors. For instance, the aesthetic motives for murder presented in *The Longer Bodies* (1930) and *Death at the Opera* (1934) introduce a sinister note into the idea of eccentricity that appears with increased menace in the character of Mrs. Cockerton in *The Rising of the Moon*.¹⁶ The most narratologically atypical features of the novel are its internally-focalized first-person narrator and its use of physical place

¹³ P.D. James, p. 99.

¹⁴ Even in the Victorian age, there were professional female detectives, and later, spies.

¹⁵ Gladys Mitchell, Interview by B. A. Pike, “In Praise of Gladys Mitchell”, *Armchair Detective* 9.4 (1976), pp. 250-260 (p. 57).

¹⁶ In *The Longer Bodies*, the murder is committed because the victim disturbs the murderer’s enjoyment of a musical recording, and is detected because the murderer’s accomplice, an artist, uses a particularly ugly statue to sink the corpse in a pool, betraying a desire to “kill” bad art. In *Death at the Opera*, an elderly connoisseur of light opera kills an inoffensive teacher playing Katisha in a school production of *The Mikado*, because her understudy is a better performer.

as an expression of character psychology, both of which are to be found, separately, in Mitchell's novels of the 1930s. When she deviates from standard detective novel usage of limited-omniscience third-person narration, Mitchell associates narrative style as well as content with the character of her narrator. As M. M. Bakhtin observes, "[w]hat is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own horizon within someone else's horizon."¹⁷ The heightened sense of the ridiculous that distinguishes *The Saltmarsh Murders* (1932) springs from its focalization through the bumbling curate Noel Wells. That first-person narrator, one of only a handful in Mitchell's work, sets the tone of the novel, a parody that acknowledges its debt to Wodehouse as well as to Christie. *The Saltmarsh Murders*, which occasionally diminishes mystery in favor of humor, is a comedic precursor of *The Rising of the Moon*, both in its exclusive first-person narration and in its use of the detective form to pursue a parallel narrative agenda. As in her later, more serious work, Mitchell is engaged not with the detective story as an end in itself, but as a form that lends itself to the subversion of expectations. The humor of *The Saltmarsh Murders* is at odds with its portrayal of psychopathy (*The Spectator* called it a "grotesque tragi-comedy"¹⁸), much as the innocence of *The Rising of the Moon*, which is narrated by a child, is at odds with its serial killer plot. Later novels featuring multiple points of view, most notably *When Last I Died* (1941) and *Sunset Over Soho* (1943), cast doubt on the reliability of the narrative voice and undermine the sense of certainty expected of the detective novel. Despite their entirely different tones, however, *The Saltmarsh Murders* is structurally closest to *The Rising of the Moon* because of its sustained focalization through a single narrator, and because of that narrator's personal investment in, and unconventional presentation of, the novel's detective plot.

The Devil at Saxon Wall, discussed in Chapter Three, marks a point of transition in Mitchell's writing. Humor is still present in the work, but it is used to punctuate a

¹⁷ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 365.

¹⁸ *The Spectator*, 16 April 1932, p. 28, <<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/16th-april-1932/28/the-saltmarsh-murders-by-gladys-mitchell-gollancz>> [accessed 6 September 2014]

darkening tone. From this point, place becomes an increasingly important feature of Mitchell's writing. *Come Away, Death* (1937) expands upon the idea, introduced in *The Mystery of the Butcher's Shop*, that a storied environment can play upon a suggestible mind, with potentially dangerous results. Indeed, specific places in these novels so dominate the narrative that they assume a disproportionate influence over the narrative place as a whole. As the large town in *The Rising of the Moon* shrinks into insignificance beside the river and canal, the convent in *St Peter's Finger* (1938), which Mrs. Bradley reaches quickly, after dark, by walking over the moor from the village, seems impossibly remote and isolated. Both the situation of the convent within the landscape and its own physicality separate it and its residents from the nearby village. When Mrs. Bradley first approaches it, "[t]he high walls and the gaunt, stark church threatened those without yet gave an impression of guarding those within. But all dark deeds seemed possible—she had noticed it before—in tall buildings seen by moonlight."¹⁹ Later in her investigations, as she casts doubt on the community's stability, the sense of isolation and menace penetrates the space of the convent itself:

The church was vast and high. The sound of the nuns' chanting came as though from a very great distance, and to the fastness of God penetrated the sullen, booming crash of breakers on rocks—sure sign, they had told her, of a tempest—a sound she had not heard at the convent before.²⁰

Mitchell's environments rarely affect the power of the detective, but they certainly exert a strong influence on other characters, often even before taking on the negative associations of crime. Place dominates many of the novels, taking on a more active role at times than any of the characters.

Even more significantly, Mitchell constructs place as a physical expression of character psychology. While she disclaimed his influence on her characters, Freud's theories surely influenced Mitchell's plots: her heroine Mrs. Bradley identifies herself as a psychoanalyst "old-fashioned enough to consider Sigmund Freud the high priest of the mysteries of the sect."²¹ Mitchell emphatically did not, as LeRoy Panek suggests most

¹⁹ Gladys Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger* (London: Michael Joseph, 1938), p. 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

²¹ Mitchell, *The Saltmarsh Murders*, p. 46.

detective novelists did, “avoid mention of the substance of his works”.²² However, Freud’s influence is visible, equally though not so obviously, in her construction of fictional environments. Crime and its discovery are frequently linked with the built environment, and architecture acts as a materialization of the structures of consciousness, as in the example above, in which the sensation of physical distance in the church reflects the philosophical distance between the nuns’ religious conviction and Mrs. Bradley’s inquiry. The detective and psychoanalytic processes are always allied in Mitchell’s work, both in the detective’s approach to the investigation and in the author’s representation of places.

According to Freud, “[p]sychoanalysis asks nothing more than that we [...] apply this process of deduction to our own person.”²³ Freud’s own citation of detective plots has been noted many times: not only does he use metaphors of detection, as above, but as Graham Frankland notes,

[Detective fiction] is a genre whose conventions require that every ambiguous element, every gap presented to the reader be an indication of the absent presence of a crime. This crime is the absolute signified hidden in a mass of equivocal signifiers. In his reading of psychic texts Freud similarly assumes that there is an intricate design whose every detail is a fragment of a fixed and reconstitutable truth which is both brilliantly hidden and crying out to be read.²⁴

Many of Freud’s explanations of mental processes parallel the Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzhet* frequently used by critics following Todorov’s lead to illustrate the structure of the detective novel. As Freud continues in *The Unconscious*,

[A] psychic act generally goes through two phases, between which is interposed a kind of inspection (*ensorship*). In the first phase the act is unconscious. [...] If, on being inspected, it is rejected by the censorship, it is not allowed to proceed to the second phase; it is then said to be ‘repressed’ and has to remain unconscious. (emphasis original)²⁵

²² LeRoy Lad Panek, *The Origins of the American Detective Story* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), p. 110.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *The Unconscious*, trans. by Graham Frankland (London: Penguin, 2005) (*Das Unbewusste*, first publ. in *Internationale Zeitschrift für ärztliche Psychoanalyse* 3.3 (1915)), p. 53.

²⁴ Graham Frankland, *Freud’s Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 152.

²⁵ Freud, *Unconscious*, p. 56.

The postulation of multiple layers of consciousness echoes the simultaneous action of multiple theoretical narratives as well as the subjection of one narrative to the other. Frankland and other critics maintain that Freud's prose was influenced by detective fiction (particularly that of Conan Doyle), but equally the detective novel reflects Freud's work: as Marty Roth observes,

[T]he manners and methods of the detective are much like those of the psychoanalyst as he appears in Freud's writing: the detective listens to repeated accounts of the same incident, listening for gaps or discrepancies; he reads behavior; he identifies secondary formations [...] and he uncovers repression.²⁶

Few detective novelists cite Freud as frequently as Mitchell, but psychology and psychoanalysis, as societal trends and linguistic models, echo throughout the Golden Age. For Mitchell, who tackled his themes frequently, Freud's theories figure not only in the discovery of motive and the journey toward solution, but also in narratology and the construction of literary place.

Mitchell's novels often seem to suggest that the structures of psychoanalytic deduction can be externalized. The hidden stories that are the necessary revelation of the detective novel reflect unconscious desires and anxieties, emotions characterized by Freud as being, like the *sjuzet* of a detective novel, conspicuously absent: "the information provided by consciousness is riddled with gaps; in healthy and sick people alike, psychic acts frequently take place that we can explain only by presupposing other acts that are not registered by consciousness."²⁷ The absent or displaced information in the novel is precisely that which must be put into place by the detective, much as the psychoanalyst must discover the patient's unconscious motivations in order to effect a cure. The literal physicality of place in Mitchell's novels is also affected by that which is apparently absent, but must be present. In *The Saltmarsh Murders*, a lonely house tenanted by a pornography smuggler is connected via a concealed tunnel to the village inn, run by an incestuous couple.²⁸ The tunnel is a successful plot mechanism that

²⁶ Marty Roth, *Foul & Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p. 170.

²⁷ Freud, *Unconscious*, p. 50.

²⁸ Mitchell, *Saltmarsh Murders*, pp. 268-269.

allows the murderer to approach the isolated cottage unseen, but it is also a demonstration of the psychological link between the two murders (the first in the pub and the second in the cottage), through the physical link created by the tunnel. The instances of sexual deviance are largely ignored by the detective, but the tunnel's role as a representation of the illegal and immoral ultimately betrays its role in the crime. Originally constructed by smugglers bringing liquor to the inn, the tunnel has apparently been sealed up. Mrs. Bradley is told that there is no entrance from the tunnel to the inn, but, because it is necessary to the material and psychological case, she concludes that it must have been re-instated, and become the murderer's route to the cottage.²⁹ As she writes in her notebook:

Good Heavens! I'm wrong about the whole thing. The passage has no outlet at the inn. It has been bricked up these fifty years or so!

I must be right! That passage must have a new outlet made by [the innkeeper] Lowry. He may have been a lover of Cora McCanley before Burns came on the scene....³⁰

The new entrance to the tunnel is established, and Mrs. Bradley's analysis stands. Having been doubly-hidden, both in folklore and in fact, it is doubly-revealed in the course of the story. The new entrance is motivated by concealed sexual behavior, and thus can also be read as an externalization of that secret act; thus, the tunnel is also a fitting vehicle to be adapted by the murderer, a woman disgusted to the point of insanity by all sexual activity. The metamorphosis of the tunnel's use from smuggling, to adultery, to murder, reflects its nature as a vehicle for that which, in Freud's words, must be "censored" or "repressed". Mrs. Bradley, as a psychoanalyst and detective, discovers its evidential meaning by reading its figurative ones.

Mitchell also uses architectural structures as revealing foils for psychological ones in *When Last I Died* (1941). This novel is one of her masterpieces, in which she re-invents the haunted house novel as a psychological thriller. The mysterious Nonsuch house, which has been the scene of an apparent poltergeist manifestation and a possible murder, has "foundations very much older than the present superstructure."³¹ Mrs.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 277

³⁰ Ibid., p. 287

³¹ Gladys Mitchell, *When Last I Died*, p. 98.

Bradley observes its peculiar physical features, such as an extraordinarily narrow and steep back staircase, and a courtyard that is not overlooked by any windows, the menace of which seem to reach beyond the tourist value of “the Death Room and the Death Spot and the Cold Room and the Haunted Walk.”³² The house, she learns, has been “so altered and rebuilt and that, you’d hardly see the old bits unless you were something in the building line yourself.”³³ The allusion to expertise in this instance is significant. Though Mrs. Bradley is a psychoanalyst rather than an architect, she is able to perform a similar deconstruction and uncover the secrets of the house, which are literally buried in its medieval foundations. The physicality of these examples demonstrates an integration of place, space, and character psychology that reaches beyond the stimulus/response mode discussed previously. In both *The Saltmarsh Murders* and *When Last I Died*, the ideas of concealment and re-writing take on a physical identity in the text, and that physicality plays an evidential role in the solution.

The Rising of the Moon tackles the idea of the unconscious/conscious divide differently: the point of view of the child narrator describes a distinct separation between childish impulse and adult reason (though these are not always applicable to children and adults respectively). The first half of the novel, in which the children act alone, may be characterized as a novel of adventure, the second, in which Mrs. Bradley joins the narrative, as a novel of detection. The narrator’s maturation is reflected in this transition from child to adult form, each of which has a characteristic environment and a particular mode of description. Malpas notes that,

As a sense of the past is tied to a sense of place, so is memory, particularly personal and autobiographical memory, similarly tied to place and location. Moreover, as memory is in turn tied, in certain important respects, to narrativity, so the connection between memory and place is indicative [...] of a parallel connection between place and narrative.³⁴

The narration of place through character allows the reader, and the detective, to access a character’s memory, inevitably revealing information. Considering the foundation of

³² Ibid., p. 88.

³³ Ibid., p. 89.

³⁴ Malpas, *Place and Experience*, p. 181.

psychoanalysis in personal narratives, it is surprising that Mitchell, who refers so frequently to Freudian thought, did not write more often in the first person. *The Rising of the Moon* visualizes detection, desire, and the dangers of adulthood through the landscape, and stands as a unique achievement of characterization and psychological exploration, accomplished through the narrative place.

Psychogeography: Landscape, Perception, and Narration

The Rising of the Moon is dominated its physical environment. In this novel, Mitchell fuses her earlier experiments, with place as a psychological expression and with point of view, to produce the novel that is arguably her best. Narrated by the thirteen-year-old Simon Innes, it documents Simon's adventures with his younger brother Keith as they investigate a series of Ripper-style murders in the springtime darkness of their suburban town. The perspective of the novel is that of a child who is beginning to understand adult reality, but is still able to indulge in make-believe, and remains uncertain which is more desirable. The narrative place reflects the tension between these desires, and takes on a central role in the mental landscape of the character. Its integration with the personality of the narrator establishes *The Rising of the Moon* as a unique instance of dual-focalization: the place may be seen through Simon, but, just as essentially, Simon may be seen through the place.

The physical characteristics of the novel's environment, which is crisscrossed with rivers, streams, man-made canals, and subsidiary waterways, evoke the multiple deceptions that obscure the case and the young investigators' roundabout methods, as well as the difficulties of Simon's progress towards adulthood: the physical landscape is at once a narrative metaphor and an externalization of a psychological process. The relationship between personal identity and place, discussed in previous chapters, is a central part of the psychogeographical arguments of Tuan, and later of Malpas, Casey, and Cresswell. However, none of these studies mention the comprehension, or

narration, of place as an expression of personal psychological experience. Peter Hunt proposes that in children's literature, "not only do the complex layers of history embedded (as it were) in the landscape enrich the texture of the stories, but the meanings of the landscapes themselves provide a subtext for the journeys: places *mean*."³⁵ Though *The Rising of the Moon* is not a children's book, Mitchell uses her child narrator to establish a particularly intimate relation with the place of the novel, one which reveals the narrator's emotional experience and development.

In the first pages of the novel, Simon describes the relationship of the waterways to the geography of the town. The phraseology clearly establishes their primacy in his own view:

The high street ran parallel with the river, and a dozen alleys led from the road to the docks and the riverside. Some of them bent to meet others, but for the most part, once past the small, old houses, the stables, the mills, the repair shops, the smithies, or whatever else there was tucked away behind the stream of traffic which congested the narrowest bottle-neck out of London, the intrepid explorer found himself on the river front past which sailed the barges drawn by tugs on their way between London and the docks of our little artery of a town.

Further to the west the high street crossed the canal, and here more alleys and a complication of riverside houses which made a town inside our town, and whose inhabitants seemed to have nothing to do with the rest of the population, offered a wide and exciting field for the explorer."³⁶

The importance of the town as a commercial outpost of the capital is never mentioned again, and the narrator's attention is clearly focused on the notion of himself as an "explorer". He dismisses an apparently thriving business area as "whatever else", choosing instead to emphasize the unknown. The lure of the potentially dangerous is affirmed when, after the murders, "[c]hildren were forbidden to play down by the canal"; Simon admits, however, that "on the whole, they took no notice." (95) The children, as in most of Mitchell's novels, live by their own codes, and while they are aware that they must outwardly abide by those of the adult world, they rarely respect them.

³⁵ Peter Hunt, "Landscapes and Journeys, Metaphors and Maps: The Distinctive Feature of English Fantasy", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 12.1 (1987), pp. 11-14 (p.11).

³⁶ Gladys Mitchell, *The Rising of the Moon* (London: Michael Joseph, 1945), p. 8. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

The pastoral appearance of this initial presentation quickly gives way to a far darker and more confusing vision of the waterways. The boys' unconventional progress through this particular environment is marked by diversions, trespasses, and impediments:

We crossed one of the mouths of our little river, as it ran beside the canal which had been cut from it, by means of narrow lock gates which were not used for boats but only to regulate the water. Then we had to cross two bridges. Once across these we ran up a narrow path between the two basins where there was a village of disused hoppers and barges, and came past the little public house called the *Brewery Tap* and into Catherine Wheel Yard. This alley led up to the high street, and very shortly we were on our way up Half Acre to Mr. Taylor's field. (29)

Such descriptions create topographical complexity, and are at once explanations and barriers to easy comprehension; the added, perhaps unnecessary, complications reflect the structure of the detective novel. Poe praises "minuteness of detail, especially upon points which have no immediate bearing upon the general story"; Haggerty explains that this insistence on detail is "a way of making the context of the bizarre more immediately acceptable to the reader and thereby rendering the bizarre itself as a matter of fact."³⁷ The descriptions in *The Rising of the Moon* are often overwhelmingly detailed, with a childish quality of meticulous documentation that accepts the bizarre as an aspect of daily life. The voice of the teenage boy, still in many ways a child, is trying to claim a place in an adult world, but he often finds that world beyond his comprehension; thus, the bizarre is simply incorporated into a wider field of things the narrator does not yet understand.

The Rising of the Moon is a singular work, crucial both to this study and to the history of detective fiction, because it so explicitly associates the place with the narrator himself. The characterization of place in the novel is completely dependent on the narrator, Simon, and the dual nature of the adolescent narrator is key to the complexity of the novel's structure and to readings of the landscape therein. Young narrators in fiction not intended solely for a child audience are uncommon, though validated in

³⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, review of *Sheppard Lee* (1836). Quoted in Haggerty, p. 90.

classics such as Stephenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Recently, however, highly-regarded novels such as Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) and Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002) have created a trend making child narrators more acceptable in adult fiction. Though both of these novels are variations on a detective plot, they have been considered more "literary": the boundaries that restrict genre seem to theoretically discourage this sort of experimentation. Perhaps, however, these successes facilitated the publication of the Flavia de Luce series by Alan Bradley, beginning with *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* (2009), which is the first adult-audience series to give a child narrator a leading detective role. The nature of the child as a natural outsider to sinister events is a possible reason for this scarcity; both Haddon and Sebold, in different ways, position the child as an outsider-with-access.

Mitchell addresses the difficulty of the child investigator's access, as Simon and Keith gather much of their information about the case indirectly. Instead of asking questions, which they know will result in their exclusion from the conversation, they remain quiet and listen as the adults discuss the first murder:

They talked first about what sort of day they had had, but the talk came round to the murder, as we had known it would, and we lay on our stomachs, half under the kitchen table, pretending to read our library books, and listened as hard as we could.

They had forgotten, I think, that we were there. (35-6)

When the boys take their evidence to Inspector Seabrook, he reveals that the first two murders have definitely been committed by the same person, but he refuses to give them the details that demonstrate this fact to the police: he tells them that only that it is proven by "artistic embellishments and so forth." (51) The boys, therefore, are seeking information that is purposefully withheld, not only by the criminal, but by the police:

"If you please, Mr. Seabrook," said I, "what makes you think that the robberies were only a secondary motive, or else the work of a thief who was not the murderer?"

"I can't go into all that with you, Simon," he replied. "Whoever killed those girls killed them because he does not like girls. You won't understand, so don't bother your heads about it." (53)

Of course, the boys understand far more than the adults believe they do. During their own investigation, Simon and Keith gather a great deal from public gossip. After the murder of the barmaid, “We hung around to hear all that people were saying. Almost the whole town was there. We saw nearly everyone we knew, and nearly everyone had something to say about the murder.” (42) The murders are the natural topic of conversation for everyone, from the schoolboys to the professionals. As Keith points out, “What else *is* there to talk about?” (85)³⁸

The boys are not told the details of the murders, it is implied, because they are too gruesome. That they are purposefully deprived of first-hand information distinctly establishes them, in the context of this study, as outsider detectives. Adrienne E. Gavin and Christopher Routledge comment, “adulthood is a mystery to children and childhood has become a mystery to adults and neither can ever ‘solve’ the other state”.³⁹ Much as the detective is necessarily an outsider in Christie’s house novels, the child is always an outsider to the adult world. Thus, the juvenile detectives must reconstruct the primary information about the crimes from small details: the overheard and implied become as important as physical information. Repeated references to Jack the Ripper hint at the brutality of the murders, as well as the sexual motivation that the police attribute to them. Even if the reader understands these allusions better than the

³⁸ In *The Rising of the Moon*, Simon (the narrator) and Keith Innes are adventurous boys who become involved in the investigation of a series of murders of young women in their town. They frequently sneak out after dark, and in doing so observe a number of clues. On the night of the first murder, that of a woman in the traveling circus, they see a man with a knife on the bridge over the canal and attempt to follow him. After the second murder, that of the barmaid at the Pigeons, they report the first incident to Inspector Seabrook. Their brother Jack becomes a suspect after the third murder, that of a local farm girl, because he has lost a knife of the type which is used in the murders. The boys find a similar knife in the local antique shop, run by the eccentric Mrs. Cockerton, who enjoys the Innes boys but declares she hates girls. She allows Simon and Keith free run of her shop, where they meet Mrs. Bradley, who has come to assist the investigation as a Home Office consultant. Mrs. Bradley values the boys’ observations and invites Simon to participate in her investigations. She realizes that the murders have all taken place during the full moon; she also deduces that they are spurred by financial motives, as all involve robbery of large sums of cash, but are the work of a maniac, because the bodies are always mutilated. The police suspect Mrs. Cockerton’s lodger, the rag and bone man, but Mrs. Bradley reasons that it is Mrs. Cockerton herself. She attempts to warn the boys, even though Inspector Seabrook doubts her analysis, but they do not understand. When Mrs. Cockerton is preparing to leave town, Simon and Keith discover that she has murdered and cooked the rag and bone man, so that he will continue to be suspected after his “disappearance” and she can escape. The police attempt to use the boys as decoys to catch Mrs. Cockerton, but Simon warns her and she drowns herself in the canal.

³⁹ Adrienne E. Gavin and Christopher Routledge, Introduction to *Mysteries in Children’s Literature: From the Rational to the Supernatural*, ed. by Adrienne E. Gavin and Christopher Routledge (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 2.

narrator, the narrative remains fully under Simon's control, so the reader never obtains the "horrid details" either. Haggerty comments of Poe, "by forcing his readers to fill in the horrid details for themselves, he makes them become more vulnerable to more subtle effects which are to follow."⁴⁰ Likewise, the boys, with the reader of *The Rising of the Moon*, must draw their own conclusions.

When Mrs. Bradley enters the case, the narrative transforms from an adventure story peppered with murders to a detective story based on reasoning and deduction. After the boys are incorporated into the official investigation, they emulate more standard detective techniques, such as summarizing the evidence (134-138), but their perspective remains distinct from that of the police. Mitchell's child narrator complements her detective heroine: Mrs. Bradley is always constructed as an outsider, because of her disconcerting appearance, manner, and profession. Simon's virtue as a sidekick is that he is familiar with the community and the area, but he is still excluded from a specific type of knowledge, and thus will necessarily follow a different train of thought. Though he is trying to be an adult, and a detective, he is neither, but his position as an outsider becomes an asset. In *The Saltmarsh Murders*, Mrs. Bradley chooses Noel Wells to assist her because of his place in the village: "I require your assistance, child. Who is so respectable as the earnest young curate?"⁴¹ That novel winks at Christie's *The Murder at the Vicarage*, in which the vicar/narrator is a Watson figure of gentle humor and fairly standard ability; Wells, on the other hand, has a much closer literary progenitor in Wodehouse's bumbling but good-natured Bertie Wooster. Mitchell draws upon a village typology similar to Christie's (though with substantially different results); positioning Wells as Mrs. Bradley's Watson is a way into that insular community. In *The Rising of the Moon*, the narrator is "much too clever for a Watson" (125); Simon has much more inclination towards detection, but is excluded by his age from serious participation until he meets Mrs. Bradley and realizes, "I was going to have my homework explained to me, and I was going to be called into consultation about the murders" (108). The "intrepid explorer" becomes Mrs. Bradley's guide.

⁴⁰ Haggerty, p. 82.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Saltmarsh Murders*, p. 101.

Crucially, it is his familiarity with the area that she values: “she took the inspector’s map [...] and she made me put my finger on every spot I had named and say how long it had taken us to get there.” (110) As well as orienting the detective, this process integrates Simon into her process on the basis of his place-knowledge, tying physical experience to analytical exercise. When he meets Mrs. Bradley for their first walk, she invites his active participation: “Let us walk up the Manor Road, and as we go you shall answer my questions and direct my attention to such aspects of the crimes as seem to you germane to our inquiry.” (115) His part in the investigation is thus linked with the physicality of exploration.

The Rising of the Moon is, to some degree, an investigation of the nature and possibilities of outsidership, and the child narrator is at once the center of the novel and an observer. The opening lines of the book position Simon and his brother in opposition to the norms of the adult world, both in appearance and sentiment:

We were dressed as we wished to be dressed. Keith wore his bathing costume, a pair of linen shorts and his Wellington boots. I had my riding breeches on, and a pair of grey cycling stockings. I wore a short jacket with military, button-over pockets, a pair of leather gauntlets that flared to my elbows, and I carried a lanyard on my belt and a knife in a sheath at my hip.

It was the beginning of the Easter holiday. Keith was too cold to be comfortable in his garb, and I was too warm in mine, but he had a jacket over his arm, and socks on, inside the Wellingtons, and, as for me, at the age of thirteen I would rather have sweated myself to the bone rather than discard the smallest item of a costume which so well expressed my feeling for romance and my conviction that I was, in the highest sense, a man of destiny. (7)

The marginal position of the narrator is evident even in this short passage, by the contrast between the apparent absurdity of his attire and the self-aware irony of his description. These initial images evoke English literary Romanticism, and gently mock the idealization of the child and of a picturesque landscape tradition. Simon’s quasi-military attire seems quixotic, but his pose as a makeshift warrior is validated by the events of the novel: Craig and Cadogan observe that the text offers “playful homage, in the form of near-ritual exchanges and tests of courage and ingenuity” to fairy tales and

heroic romance.⁴² Simon envisions himself as a knight-errant, a champion, and it is as such that he embraces the role of the detective, who in this case protects the lives of young women.

A child is not typically considered a societal outsider, but the child attempting to interpret an adult situation may find himself in such a position. Establishing the child narrator as an outsider, as Mitchell does here, facilitates his transition into a detective figure. As noted above, unconcealed attempts are made to exclude the child narrator from the adult-dominated narrative, which parallels the frequent deceptions encountered by a more traditional detective figure. None of the adults in the novel, except for Mrs. Bradley, consider the boys as rational, capable thinkers able to contribute to the case. Jack and his wife June dismiss them as too young to understand the family's problems; Inspector Seabrook dismisses the importance of their observations, but then uses them as pawns to catch the murderer; and Christina, the family's beautiful lodger, infantilizes them. Only Mrs. Bradley is able to fully bridge the divide between the adults and the children. She cannot view them exactly as equals, but neither does she view the police as such. When she meets Simon, "she enquired my name and such particulars of my family as old ladies deem essential to their understanding of a child or an adolescent—in which last class she appeared to place both Seabrook and the man from Scotland Yard" (108). She does, however, view the boys as individuals; she gives them credit for their ideas and powers of observation, and acknowledges their right to take part in the investigation of the murders. When Simon asks if he may accompany her to interview a witness, she replies, "Two sets of ears and two ripe intelligences are always better than one." (118) The characterization of the children as outsiders allies them with Mrs. Bradley, the outsider detective who enters "when things become a little abnormal" (111). Despite their youth and their characterization as outsiders and observers, their relationship to the authority represented by Mrs. Bradley places value on the otherness of their perceptions.

⁴² Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, Introduction to *The Rising of the Moon*, by Gladys Mitchell (London: Hogarth, 1985), n.p.

Simon's "feeling for romance", though it is part of childish role-play, leads him directly into detection. *The Rising of the Moon* draws a direct line between the two: Keith says presciently, after the first murder, "I'm not sure this isn't better, in a way, than the circus. After all, the circus only lasts one afternoon, and it's an awful sweat to get in unless you pay. This murder might last us all the holidays." (30) Later, even after the boys are involved in the investigation and the ongoing nature of the crimes is clear there is an allusion between childish entertainment and detection. Troy Boone observes the "generic contradiction" of the child's role in detective fiction, and comments that in *Tom Sawyer, Detective* (1896), Twain "expresses anxiety about the child's involvement in adult mysteries and seeks to soothe this anxiety by presenting detection as a form of curiosity natural to childhood."⁴³ Mitchell, however, pushes her characters further into this anxiety by shifting the children's inquiry into symbolically weighted territory: the most notable instance of this approach is the boys' fishing expedition for the piece of the circus performer's corset (100-102). That their first physical clue is a woman's undergarment alludes to the sexual "investigations" of adolescence, tying their detective activity firmly to the process of growing up. Though they initially treat detection as a game, both realize that it is the first truly serious adult activity in which they have been allowed to take part. Mrs. Bradley considers sending them away for their safety, but Simon argues for their continued involvement, because "to us, the murders offered a field and a scope which nothing else had ever granted us." (140) Mrs. Bradley, who often finds humor in the macabre, understands the fundamental linkage of games and detection. When she proposes a partnership to Simon, she says, "It is fun, and we must have it together, but, first, we must be frank with one another." (111) She regularly alludes to Sherlock Holmes, who famously declares, "The game is afoot!",⁴⁴ telling Simon, "all good detectives have a Watson" (124), and referring to him as "my dear Holmes" (130). These allusions take off on the boys' frames of reference and establish again that she understands their point of view. They disappear later in the novel, as the narrative grows increasingly dark and the boys

⁴³ Troy Boone, "The Juvenile Detective and Social Class: Mark Twain, Scouting for Girls, and the Nancy Drew Mysteries", in *Mysteries in Children's Literature: From the Rational to the Supernatural*, ed. by Adrienne E. Gavin and Christopher Routledge (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 46-63 (pp. 47, 50).

⁴⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Abbey Grange" in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, II, p. 491.

take up a more vital detective role; the progress from games to detection structures the narrative, but also allows that the abnormal psychology of the case thwarts an elegant Holmesian analysis.

The immediacy of the narrative voice in *The Rising of the Moon* places little distance between the events and their recording: the person of the narrator is virtually the same as that of the boy hero. As Genette points out, there is an important distinction between the internal focalization of the first-person narrative taking place in the past, and the external focalization of retrospective narration.⁴⁵ The novel is set distinctly in the “moment of the action” rather than that of retrospection. Stanzel attempts to reconcile the terminology of internal and external focalization by differentiating between the “experiencing self” and the “narrating self”.⁴⁶ In the case of the first-person narrator who is also the hero, he writes, “[t]he narrator’s process and the narrator’s experience form an entity; in other words the reader is constantly invited to keep in mind this existential unity of the experiencing self and the narrating self.”⁴⁷

The Rising of the Moon lays its entire emphasis on internal focalization and the experiencing self. The brief instances in which the narrating, or retrospective, self appears, only draw the reader closer to the first-person perspective by creating sympathy with the boys, as in the introductory passage. More essentially, Simon’s complete control of the narrative, and its focus on the experiencing self, allies the reader with his point of view and further legitimizes his position as detective.

Mitchell’s later novel *Late, Late in the Evening* (1976) also employs a child narrator, but in that case the narration far more distanced from the childish self: the story is framed with retrospective phrases such as “[i]n our day”, and “I know now”.⁴⁸ In that instance, letters written by adult characters are also included in the text, whereas *The Rising of the Moon* remains under the narrative control of the child throughout. Andrew Smith writes of M.R. James that he “[uses] the Gothic as a counterpoint against which a modern (bland) amorality appeared to be developing.”⁴⁹ In Mitchell’s novel, the

⁴⁵ Genette, pp. 198-211.

⁴⁶ Franz Karl Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 72.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁸ Gladys Mitchell, *Late, Late in the Evening* (London: Michael Joseph, 1976), p. 12, 42.

⁴⁹ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Literature*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 130.

closeness of the narration to the action is vital in staging a similar encounter: she develops the Gothic tone by adopting the child's view of the world, which is melodramatic, fantastic, and dreamlike, but still moral and sensitive, and opposes this sensibility to the banal horror with which the adults gossip about its events. The child's ability to recognize and assimilate the bizarre endears him to the psychoanalyst, and enables the narrator, as previously mentioned, to weave a sneaking sense of dread into the fabric of the narrative.

Simon was, by Mitchell's own account, closely allied with the author: "[*The Rising of the Moon*] recalls much of my Brentford childhood (I am Simon in that story and my adorable brother Reginald is Keith)".⁵⁰ The author's personal identification with the character, though, does not privilege the narrating self; instead, her firm insistence on the experiencing self, the hero's perspective alone, assures that the narrative point of view *remains* that of the child. As the narrative is focalized entirely through the child, the entire novel, including its construction of detection as a game, its progress from a light picaresque to a Bildungsroman, and its stress on the landscape, must be understood through the character of Simon.

Ideolocalism: Defining Place through Detection and Desire

Simon's image of himself as "a man of destiny" at the beginning of the novel may be faintly ridiculous, but the child-knight and the detective story both depend a "feeling for romance". As she does in many of her novels, Mitchell uses the detective framework in *The Rising of the Moon* to explore more tenuous possibilities: in this case, she establishes place in Simon's narration as a territory for unspoken desire, as much as a physical environment. The environment of the novel, expressed entirely through his point of view, exemplifies the state that Casey terms "idiolocalism":

⁵⁰ Mitchell, Pike interview.

[I]diolocality invokes the subject who incorporates and expresses a particular place, more especially its *idios*, what is "peculiar" in both senses of this Greek word. And the bearer of idiolocality is none other than the body, the proper subject of place.⁵¹

The particularization of place in the novel, and its focalization, link it distinctly with Simon's emotional and physical self. In the novels discussed in Chapter Three, place acts *upon* characters, but in this instance, the relationship is even closer. The lack of distance between the narrating self and the experiencing self is, again, crucial: the place is expressed as it is experienced.

Simon's anxieties and conflicts are demonstrated in his presentation of the environment as much as in his own consciousness. The alignment of exterior environment and interior life runs throughout the novel, in its major themes as well as in small narrative asides. Many of the incidentals in Simon's narrative reveal his desire for adulthood, and the simultaneous pull of childhood. This conflict is most developed through his interaction with Christina: he is sexually attracted to her, but emphasizes his youth to achieve an intimacy with her that would not be possible if he were even an older teenager.

"Here, Christina!" I said. "Come in a minute and talk to us. We haven't seen you all day!"

"That's not my fault," she said, laughing and coming in and shutting the door. "I can't see in the dark. Where are you?"

"Here," I said; and pulled her down on to my bed, and put my arms round her. She smelt good, and her hands were small and soft, not big and always half-covered with cuts and scratches and callouses, like mine. She always seemed clean and fresh, and made me think of the cool bunches of bluebells that we used to gather in the woods beyond Dead Man's Island and bring home on the backs of our bicycles for her to put in jars. I tried to pull her down to lie beside me, but she would not let me do that. She had never known us as little boys, and it made a difference, I think. (39)

Simon expresses Christina's beauty through natural spaces and objects, through physical experiences of place and time that he associates with her. Her complete female physicality is still largely beyond him, so he expresses his attraction to her through an alternate, remembered physicality of nature.

⁵¹ Casey, "Body, Self, Landscape", p. 415.

He is at once afraid of his feelings for Christina, and thrilled by them. The same is true of the nighttime walks that define the boys' participation in the detective plot. These outings, at first, fulfill their desire for adventure; much as the bluebells are a substitute for Christina's body, these experiences of the night substitute for real danger and exploration. In the first half of the novel, before the entrance of Mrs. Bradley, the abstract and baffling presentation of the case is largely defined by the dreamlike quality of the brothers' excursions:

We passed Mr. Viccary's farm and the fields where we trespassed for mushrooms, mounted the little hill which led up to the station entrance, and, on the other side of the bridge, climbed an easily-scalable fence and dropped down into the allotments.

Half-way over, as the land sloped away to the river, a hawthorn hedge divided the allotments from a small wood through which ran tracks and paths made by trespassing children, for the land was private property.

We soon reached the river, which, in parts, became the canal, and all at once I began to feel horribly nervous. I set a quicker pace, and the way Keith followed close behind me convinced me that he, too, hardly relished the adventure.

The moonlight fell on the grass of the open spaces, and in shafts of greenish yellow between the thin-leaved trees. The river gurgled and splashed, and every now and then it was as though furtive little creatures scurried between our feet in the grasses, or rustled in last year's dead leaves. From a distant farm a dog began to howl. (22-23)

The dreamy quality of the night quickly gives way to the nightmarish, as the boys allow themselves to be influenced by the dark and lonely place. They begin to run: "We were merely two children, suddenly stricken with panic, running away from ourselves, and in no danger, so far we knew, from man or ghost." (23) The dream, as a manifestation of the subconscious, betrays the boys' real desires: their fear is generated, at least in part, by the *need* to feel fear. With the peculiar logic of childhood, when they see a man with a knife: "We were no longer afraid. A burning curiosity possessed us." (24) Curiosity immediately trumps panic, and "we became two bloodhounds on the trail of the man with the knife. Moonlight to me was always romantic and sinister. The murderous man fell within my conception of the night." (24) Simon, who "always moons and dreams" (20), is a romantic story-teller, and the "ideolocality" of the novel situates it firmly in the territory of the dreamlike and the subconscious.

Such interactions with the landscape introduce the detective plot, but also, through the course of the narrative, reflect Simon's changing perspective. The novel's expression of ideolocalism is markedly different in the "adventure" and "detective" portions, the first of which is characterized by the boys' tortuous paths and nighttime explorations.

J. Douglas Porteous writes,

As the child grows and ventures farther from home, awareness progresses from a disconnected knowledge of home and local spaces, through the development of pathway-linked cognitive structures for orienting places, to the sophistication of a map-like perspective of space.⁵²

Each time Simon relates a journey in *The Rising of the Moon*, it builds upon another; he and Keith carry a map of the area in their minds, but the reader's experience of the place is entirely built through their journeys. Mitchell exploits the geography of her own childhood home of Brentford, with its multiple canals and waterside settlements alongside farms and the respectable manufacturing town with its "not fewer than forty public houses" (9). However, the place described is, if not un-mappable, obscured rather than illuminated by description. Much as in Sayers' *Gaudy Night*, the *exclusion* of a map is paradoxically a vital point in the construction of place. Mitchell, like Sayers, purposefully does not include a map, because the literal mapping of the place would distract from its other narrative roles. The psychological import of place in *The Rising of the Moon* makes it, in a sense, impossible to map: if the place were rendered literal it would lose its symbolic power. The real geography of the town is the foundation of the narrative place, but the priority is placed instead upon the impression of place rather than its concrete reality.

The performance of place in the novel, even when it is at its most precise, illustrates far more than spatial relations. Porteous declares that "[c]hildhood is profoundly an otherscape,"⁵³ emphasizing that experiences particular to childhood actually create different perceptual landscapes. Psychologist Jean Piaget associated a child's growth with his or her ability to comprehend space: "perceptual space is organized in three

⁵² J. Douglas Porteous, *Landscapes of the Mind* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 159.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

successive stages. The first of these is based on topological, the second on metric and projective, the third on overall relationships bearing upon displacement of objects relative to one another.”⁵⁴ Both presentations of space-comprehension emphasize the change in perception between varying stages of growth, which is certainly thematized in *The Rising of the Moon*. The novel can be characterized as a Bildungsroman as much as a mystery, and this is particularly evident in the changes in its construction of place. For most of the first half, the boys construct routes through the town that create an often puzzling impression of place-relations: this textual “map” is distinctly that of a child, in that it reveals the need to subvert authority or visibility. The boys’ roundabout routes conceal their true destinations, evoking the effort of the conscious mind to obscure subconscious motivations. The accumulation of detail, which verges on over-complication and hyper-exactitude, also evokes a child’s point of view in its very specificity:

We crossed one of the mouths of our little river, as it ran beside the canal which had been cut from it, by means of narrow lock gates which were not used for boats but only to regulate the water. Then we had to cross two bridges. Once across these we ran up a narrow path between the two basins where there was a village of disused hoppers and barges, and came past the little public house called the *Brewery Tap* and into Catherine Wheel Yard. This alley led up to the high street, and very shortly we were on our way up Half Acre to Mr. Taylor’s field. (29)

The unnecessary details about the use of the lock gates and the exact sequence of the path (which, Simon admits, is not the most direct one) are typical of the place-information given throughout the text. The novel, even at its climax, is full of historical and social asides on the town; these form a clearer picture of the locality, but also influence the narrative pace. The painstaking exactitude of this path-description may be characterized as that of the child attempting to perform the role of an adult; at the same time, however, it bespeaks the precision of the detective mindset.

⁵⁴ Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Child’s Conception of Space*, trans. F.J. Langdon and J.L. Lunzer (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967 [1948]), p. 64. Quoted in Kenneth R. Olwig, “Landscape as a Contested Topos of Place, Community, and Self”, in *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 93-117 (p. 105).

Toward the end of the novel, Simon describes another journey with similar exactitude but in a very different tone. It is the only daytime journey of the novel described in detail, and it is vital to the detective plot: his observations lead to the discovery of the first definite evidence in the case, a cache of hidden money. Simon is walking along the canal path when he sees the rag-and-bone man, who is suspected of the murders, and decides to follow him:

The man was already some distance along the path. I stood at the end of the bridge, and, affecting to look at the water, watched to see whether he crossed by the lock or went on. There was no way out that I knew, unless one had a boat, without crossing the lock or returning to cross by the bridge, so I felt fairly certain that he would cross by the lock.

He did not. He walked past the old lock gates, and disappeared where the canal made a bend and reached the broad waters of the Wyden.

I stayed where I was on the bridge. He had not seen me. I had plenty of time on my hands. It was true that the moment he returned he must see me, but I had hopes that he would not notice a boy who was doing no harm. If he crossed by the lock, I would follow. If he came back over the bridge I felt I should leave it before he set foot on it. I could not endure the thought of his squeezing past me.

I suppose I waited ten minutes, for the clock on the church at the top of Church Alley chimed the quarter, but had not chimed again when he reappeared. To my enormous relief and thankfulness, this time he crossed the lock. As soon as he was gone I ran down the ramp on the other side of the bridge and then hastened along the path he had taken. (183)

The tone of the narration is transformed; rather than that of a curious child, the voice is now that of an energetic young detective actively seeking evidence. The place, too, has transformed from what Porteous describes as the “childscape”, “a compound construct of the imaginative and the actual activity space”,⁵⁵ into a more contextual, and deductively more valuable, landscape. As Malpas observes, memory relates place and narrativity.⁵⁶ Place as a narrative element is profoundly connected to individually-defined meanings; the memory of the narrator evoked in the text must be expressed through place. Simon’s intimate acquaintance with the places he describes, and their repeated appearances throughout the novel, make them familiar; at the same time, however, changes in the tone and mode of narration reflect the changing meaning of

⁵⁵ Porteous, p. 158.

⁵⁶ Malpas, *Place and Experience*, p. 181.

these places. As he observes on the boys' second journey to the circus encampment: "Our outing covered the same ground as last night, but nothing could have seemed more profoundly different." (30) According to Lutwack,

The old, time-honored, unquestioned associations with place are subject to change as the fact of the world itself is being changed. And the pain of adjustment is most apparent as it involves the sexual life of the individual. [...] Literature thus preserves the fundamental and primitive association of the body and world, body and place, portraying the disorientation of the individual in a changing world and the possibilities of reorientation.⁵⁷

In the case of *The Rising of the Moon*, it is not the landscape itself that changes, but Simon's understanding of, interaction with, and description of it. His personal development is deeply allied to the place in which it is performed, and, as a boy on the cusp of adulthood, his experience is expressed through the liminality of the local waterways.

Like the typologies of place analyzed in Chapter Two, psychological landscapes have both pre-established and intra-textual meanings. Malpas dismisses the linkage of "a part of objective physical space with the notion of some subjective emotional or affective quality or set of qualities",⁵⁸ but fiction, unlike geography, establishes such an association between types of physical places and literary meaning. Long-standing conventions contribute to the development of place as a psychological element of narrative, and "ideolocal" narratives such as *The Rising of the Moon* establishes the meaning of place as an individualized experience. The emotional resonance of such places may be traced historically, fictionally, and psychologically. As Lutwack writes,

Repeated association of some generic places with certain experiences and values has resulted in what amounts almost to a system of archetypal place symbolism. Thus, mountains have come to represent aspiration and trial; forests and swamps, peril and entrapment; valleys and gardens, pleasure and well-being; deserts, deprivation; houses, stability and community; roads or paths, adventure and change.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Lutwack, p. 113.

⁵⁸ Malpas, *Place and Experience*, p. 30.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Rivers and waterways, as a means of transport and trade, are historically essential to the establishment of cities and to communication and trade, but equally as borders and divisions. This physical power equates to metaphorical power in ancient mythologies, in which Wyman H. Herendeen says they “assumed a signal place in the poet’s task of remaking the world.”⁶⁰ Herendeen situates the river in literature as an important metaphor for knowledge, particularly “the diviner, intellectual qualities of our imaginative faculties”,⁶¹ and as a structural notion that “assumes an important place in our cultural self-consciousness and is readily adapted to the expression of our social ideals.”⁶² The river, like other features of the natural landscape, has a literary significance that depends only in part on its physicality. The constancy of nature, a repeated theme in the work of the Romantics and the Transcendentalists as in the Renaissance, is accentuated in the case of the river by its simultaneous fixity and motion. Herendeen points out that it is often used to represent time and history, as well as cultural and personal memory:

The language of landscape, and of the rivers which dominate it, is replete with the ideas and ideals which authors naturally—and methodically—used to comprehend and describe their own world. Thus, the distinction literary critics usually make between topographical description and *topothesia*—between the description of real landscapes and of imaginary ones shaped by rhetorical modes and literary genres—is not a genuine one; both are rhetorical modes that can complement one another. “Imaginary” and “real” overlap; the real setting is often perceived in terms of the fictional, and fictional is often adapted to a real, physical world...⁶³

The river may also represent the “stream of consciousness”. In a novel so concerned with the subconscious, the powerful influence of the waterways on the perception of place represents ways in which consciousness may be contained, and the risks associated with that containment.

As noted above, Mitchell used the landscape of her own childhood home of Brentford as the location for *The Rising of the Moon*. Though she renders the physical place

⁶⁰ Wyman H. Herendeen, *From Landscape to Literature: The River and the Myth of Geography* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1986), p. 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

accurately throughout the novel, the way that it is narrated, with great detail but without the geographic specificity of a map, becomes a crucial indicator of Simon's psyche.

For Buell:

The work of the environmental unconscious [...] has to do both with the 'thereness' of actual physical environments and with processes of emotional/mental orientation and expression that can happen anywhere along a continuum from desultory preconscious imitation to formal imaging.⁶⁴

For the author, the place has a "thereness" that allows her to detail it textually. Its presence in her memory accounts not only for its detail, it accounts for its deep bond with the character whose narration in turn creates it for the reader. The symbolic character of the place is an expansion of its presence in the experience of the author and of the narrator. For instance, the river and the canal are facts of Brentford geography, but the contrast between the two is crucial to the construction of the story. The river itself is introduced in the first chapter, establishing the setting; it is linked with a childish sense of innocence and a nostalgic notion of the past (7-8). It is both a natural element and a tool of mankind: the novel mentions natural islands, streams, ditches, and marshes, but also canals, towpaths, bridges, and locks. Some of the confused nature of the descriptive landscape certainly comes from the overlapping of the natural and man-made. The river, which is associated with childish play and innocence, as well as with open space, largely disappears in the text after the first chapter, when it is replaced by the canal, which is bounded by woodland, accessed by trespassing, and associated with that which is forbidden and potentially dangerous. The boys' first nocturnal journey introduces fear and foreboding into the novel; an ominous atmosphere develops as they walk along "the river, which, in parts, became the canal" (23). Herendeen points out that the significance of the river has been altered in the more recent past by human action: "[w]e seldom see unfettered rivers; they are subdued by hydroelectric plants, paved over with roads, or made unapproachable by embankments. Their force is still there, if unseen, and their power is still something to be contended with."⁶⁵ The canal in the novel is initially identified as part of the river,

⁶⁴ Buell, *Endangered World*, p. 26.

⁶⁵ Herendeen, p. 6.

but then takes on its own, more sinister identity. Its separation from the river defines it as a different kind of place, both practically and theoretically. The canal, an apparently “fettered”, controlled river, has a far more threatening aspect than the tidal, natural one; while it continues to serve its commercial and industrial roles by day, it threatens to break free of its man-made repression. As Keith remarks, “It’s very queer how the canal keeps cropping up in all these murders” (85); indeed, it begins to signify potential outbreaks of madness;

Eventually, all associations with water seem to lead back to the canal and its sinister implications; when Jack returns home with wet sleeves on the night of the dairy maid’s murder (66), having apparently washed in the river, it makes even his family doubt his innocence. The waterways are also, through the boys’ repeated journeys and the role these journeys play in their process of detection, associated with Simon’s progress towards adulthood. The crossing and re-crossing of boundaries signify shifts in his physical and emotional experience, and his uncertain feelings about his own transformation. As noted above, the passage in which he follows the rag and bone man pays particular attention to crossing the canal: these crossings are directly associated with the process of detection, illustrating the impact of the investigation on his growth. In addition, this incident has symbolic significance in the detective plot. At three separate points in the novel, the boys see the rag and bone man standing on a bridge (23, 100, 181). These are the only times in the story when Simon sees him in person; while he describes his appearance based on a past meeting, and sees his barrow several times, the text repeatedly places him on the bridge, emphasizing his transience and his marginal social position. Freud theorizes that the bridge

[B]ecomes the crossing from the other world (the unborn state, the womb) into this world (life); and, since men also picture death as a return to the womb (to the water), a bridge also acquires the meaning of something that leads to death, and, finally, at a further remove from its original sense, it stands for transition or changes in condition generally.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Revision of the Theory of Dreams”, in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965) [1933], pp. 8-37 (p. 30).

Thus, the bridge may also be taken as a sign of the danger in which the man himself stands: he is suspected of the crimes, but will also become Mrs. Cockerton's final victim, in her attempt to deflect suspicion. His role in the crimes (whether he is Mrs. Cockerton's partner or her unwitting dupe) is never resolved, so his pauses on the bridge, between one place and another, also indicate the doubt that surrounds him even after the resolution of the case. Simon fears that his crossings may lead to death, but in reality they reflect his transitional state.

All of the waterways are associated with the forbidden. The water's first appearance in the text is when the boys decide *not* to cross to the island; its second is when they sneak out of the house and use the canal path to attempt an illicit entry to the circus grounds. As noted above, night, secrecy, and danger all appear as particular attributes of the canal. The one incident in the day when Simon goes along the Leys (the insular canalside barge community), he says, "at half-past two in the afternoon it seemed fantastic to be afraid of anything, and the whole place was peaceful and quiet." (180) However, this (mis)understanding of the place is quickly shattered when he catches sight of the rag and bone man on the bridge: "I was afraid. I was more afraid than I have ever been in my life except during nightmares, than which no terror is more awful." (181) Immediately, though it is set in the day, the scene by the canal is rhetorically brought back into the night. Despite this incident's place in the second, "detective", half of the novel, the "nightmare" also associates the scene with the dreamlike danger of the first, "adventure", half. The dream has been partly dispelled in favor of a logical reality, but it still rises from the subconscious on the canal and asserts itself in Simon's fear, before the logical conscious regains primacy.

The waterways operate in other ways, though, and the transgressions they provoke are not always negative. The independence Simon claims in the course of the novel comes to fruition at its conclusion, when he ruins Inspector Seabrook's plan to capture Mrs. Cockerton. He and Keith are deployed as bait so that the police may catch her attempting another murder, but Simon consciously refuses the role: "I remembered I was a man, and not a cheese in a trap," (221) and warns her of their approach. Mrs.

Cockerton escapes, but is drowned in the canal: this ambiguous ending may signify that the canal is redeemed and reestablish its connection with the natural and guiltless river, or, conversely, it may more firmly establish her guilt by associating her with the canal's darkness. The significance of the event may be ambiguous, but in either case, the narration indicates the journey Simon has made. By stating his own manhood, as he does increasingly frequently in the course of the narrative, he draws a stark contrast to the childish image he presents at the beginning. The canal, in ending Mrs. Cockerton's life, ends the danger in the village. Stripped of some of its atmosphere of darkness the canal, like the dark mystery of adulthood, loses some of its terrors for Simon.

Psychoanalytical Frames: Women, Water, and Witchcraft

The waterways that define the narrative geography facilitate Simon's internal transformation from a boy to a man, but they are also related, directly and indirectly, with the women in the narrative, particularly with Mrs. Cockerton and Mrs. Bradley. Mitchell frames the entire novel in Freudian terms, but nowhere is that more evident than in its landscape. Freud associates water with birth, and landscapes with femininity, both of which identify this water-dominated fictional environment with women. Women largely define *The Rising of the Moon*. Its detective plot centers on four female victims, a female murderer, and a female detective, while much of Simon's attempt to comprehend the adult world is largely concerned with his effort to understand women. Indeed, women seem to have more power than men in the adult world as observed by Simon: even Jack's downtrodden wife June takes charge when she fears Jack may be accused of murder:

“You'd better get this straight,” she said. “Your knife has gone from the cellar. I suppose you took it with you on Saturday night. I suppose you dropped it. I suppose the police have it by now. I suppose they will ask you to explain how you came to be carrying it along the Manor Road. That's what you've got to think of, my lad.” (89)

Far more important in the story, though, are the women who personify Simon's conflicts: Christina, Mrs. Cockerton, and Mrs. Bradley. The association of the latter two with the waterways is partly a function of the detective plot, but it also creates a primal and dangerous construction of femininity.

Mitchell does not usually identify women as uniquely dangerous; her novels distribute criminal tendencies and dangerous psychoses equally between men and women. She seems, in this sense, to put forth an unconventional argument for gender equality. Despite the strength of Mrs. Bradley's character throughout Mitchell's series, she initially appears in the background of *The Rising of the Moon*. The other women are more prominent before the narrative shift toward detection and logic, and Mrs. Bradley's appearance in the text not only changes the direction of the story, but completes the complicated structure of femininity therein. The primal, the hazardous, and the bewitching are undertones, or unconscious aspects, of Simon's powerful desire for Christina; because they cannot appear in his idealized vision of her, they appear in the characterization of the two older women. Displacement of this kind allies all the women in the novel despite their apparent discrepancies of age, behavior, and appearance. It also allows for repressed possibilities within the narrator as well as in his understanding of the female characters.

Mrs. Cockerton's connection with the canal begins when she provides false evidence about a walk on its banks on the night of the barmaid's murder: "I was about to pass under the railway arch which carries the Great Western line across the canal, when I was aware of a person in the shadows and the horrid sound (in the circumstances) of a knife being sharpened on a stone." (46) Her story seems to corroborate Simon and Keith's sighting of the man with the knife on the night of the circus performer's murder, but later, when they attempt to verify her observations, they find that "There was certainly no stone on which a man could sharpen a knife." (146) This belated discovery is their first real hint of her guilt, and when they return they realize that the path is linked to the barmaid's murder:

There was a light through the trees which bordered the path, and, in the moonlight we could see that another and even narrower path branched off towards this light. We followed the smaller path, and in about a minute, or even less, we found ourselves opposite a blank, uncurtained window. Between it and us stretched the small square courtyard of an inn.

“The *Pigeons*,” breathed Keith. “And I can see into the room behind the bar. Isn’t that where they’re supposed to have kept the cash-box?” (148)

The boys’ detective instincts and their willingness to explore these potentially dangerous pathways prove more powerful than the inaccurate narrative of the criminal. Their journeys are an essential part of the re-writing process, which establishes them as detectives.

Mrs. Cockerton and Mrs. Bradley mirror each other in a number of ways. As criminal and detective, both attempt to “write” the story of the crime, but other generative abilities define them more distinctly in the narrative: they are both depicted as witches, and as mother figures. As discussed above, Mrs. Cockerton’s death in the canal potentially changes its sinister aspect to a redemptive one; at the same time, however, it re-emphasizes a suggestion of witchcraft that is present from the beginning of the novel. The first time she appears, Simon describes her thus:

She was a very queer old lady, tall and Amazonian as Meg Merrilies, and one of her peculiarities was always to wear a hat. We never saw her without this rusty and antique headgear, and she had an air of great dignity and distinction. (9)

Much like Mrs. Bradley, Mrs. Cockerton has a distinctive, and slightly unnerving, physical appearance. Her association with Sir Walter Scott’s Meg Merrilies, “the most notorious witch in all Galloway and Dumfries-shire”,⁶⁷ gives her an eerie, potentially mystic quality. At first Mrs. Cockerton is a benign, even kindly witch. The cluttered upper floor of her shop is one of the boys’ favorite places, where “we went up to nourish our imagination and sense of wonder, and spend an hour or two in hunting for buried treasure.” (11) There is more than a hint of the mystical about the shop and its proprietor: among the treasures that they hope to find is “a witch-ball which she said her mother had had, and which, after her mother’s death, had never been found.” (12)

⁶⁷ Sir Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering* (London: Penguin, 2003) [1815], p. 64.

Unbeknownst to the boys, the shop does house (stolen) treasures, one of which attracts the attention of Mrs. Bradley and provides the opportunity for her first meeting with the boys. The detective, interestingly, appears less witch-like in this novel than in most of her other appearances. Simon's first impression of her is as "an unusual-looking old lady with sharp black eyes, a yellow face, hands like claws and a general expression of knowing all about you and making allowances." (97) Mrs. Bradley is not called a witch in this novel, as she is in *Speedy Death*.⁶⁸ In other novels, she frequently entertains this image and even uses it to her advantage; she even claims to have an ancestress who was tried for witchcraft but who escaped being hanged,⁶⁹ or in another instance, who was a witch and wrote a book of witchcraft.⁷⁰ Even in the somewhat more subtle characterization of *The Rising of the Moon*, though, her all-knowing persona is evident at first glance. When Simon talks to her, "It was soon clear to me that the old lady knew what she was talking about" (109). In this novel, Mrs. Bradley's often-unnerving personality is an asset rather than a threat, as it makes her fully equal to the murderer, thus able to understand, if not to apprehend, her.

The opposition of the two old ladies, murderer and detective, is a subtle motif repeated throughout the novel. Both are generous, even courtly, to the boys, and both expect and demand the boys' allegiance. When Simon first meets Mrs. Bradley, she offers, "You help me with my murders, and I help you with your homework." (111) She takes his answer as read and instructs him:

"I will meet you in the reading-room of the public library as soon as you have finished your tea. I shall get you to show me the neighborhood. By half-past seven, you will be free. I will arrange with your headmaster to have your homework excused, unless you think it is particularly important that you do it." (111-112)

She incorporates Simon into her investigation, declaring, "Two sets of ears and two ripe intelligences are always better than one." (118) When Mrs. Cockerton tries to lure them out at the climax of the novel, her invitation is an eerie echo of Mrs. Bradley's:

⁶⁸ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 178.

⁶⁹ Gladys Mitchell, *Death and the Maiden* (London: Michael Joseph, 1947), p. 171.

⁷⁰ Gladys Mitchell, *Tom Brown's Body* (London: Michael Joseph, 1949), p. 23.

“Yet, gentlemen, there is only to-night if you are to have the benefit of my advice and experience. We must lay this Attila by the heels. I know where he works, and we must apprehend him. Gentlemen, I depend upon your co-operation and support. Are you with me?”

“I don’t understand,” said I.

“It is simple. To-night, without benefit of clergy or police, you and I will rid this town of its scourge.” To my amazement, Keith, rallying, and putting my arm away from his neck, said loudly:

“Very well, Mrs. Cockerton. We’re on.” ...

“By moonlight, then,” she added. (208)

Moonlight, of course, bespeaks danger, both physical danger and that of the subconscious mind. The setting of the final scenes “by moonlight” stages the resolution of the detective plot in the same theoretical territory as the murders, and brings the psychological force of the nighttime landscape to the fore. During the scene above, Mrs. Cockerton appears more witch-like than ever, because the boys have just discovered a human body in her copper; her allusion to moonlight recalls again the witch Meg Merrilies, who, according to Keats’ poem, “would stare/Full hard against the Moon.”⁷¹ Mrs. Cockerton declares that, on the night she claims to have walked by the canal, “the moon was beautiful. I could see it shining in the Bregant down by the Boatmen’s Institute, and the spirit moved me to turn aside from my planned walk and take a turn by the water.” (46) Her admission of the moon’s influence suggests, even at this early stage in the novel, her role as the murderer.

The moon is identified with women in many mythologies, and the title *The Rising of the Moon* may actually allude to the criminal herself, though the police constable admits, “We never thought of a woman. It took Mrs. Bradley to do that.” (218) The changeability of the moon, and its influence on the tides, establish it as a symbolic force, which has been used in literature to symbolize various, often conflicting, qualities. Shakespeare employs many lunar metaphors: Juliet famously bids Romeo, “swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon/That monthly changes in her circled orb,”⁷² and the powerless Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III* is “govern’d by the watery

⁷¹ John Keats, “Meg Merrilies”, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176786>> [accessed 3 September 2014]

⁷² William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, scene 2, 109-110.

moon.”⁷³ Othello blames the moon at the same time he blames Desdemona for his crimes:

It is the very error of the moon;
She comes more nearer earth than she was wont,
And makes men mad⁷⁴

The linkage of the moon with the murders gradually becomes evident in *The Rising of the Moon*. As Simon relates, “At what point the people in our town began to dread the full moon I do not know, but the whispers, the rumours and the panic gradually grew.” (104) He asks Mrs. Bradley,

“Do you think there will be another [murder] tonight, ma’am?”
She pointed to the sky, which was clouding over for rain.
“Not if this blots out the moon, child.”
“You think the murderer is a lunatic, then?”
“In a sense, all murderers are lunatics. Killing is not a sane reaction to the circumstances of life.” (125)

Here, “lunatic” appears to have two meanings, first “influenced by the moon”, and second, “a person of unsound mind; a madman.”⁷⁵ This careful parsing of the word’s meanings reestablishes the superstitious relation between insanity and the moon, then re-defines it in a medical sense. Thus the text at once acknowledges the symbolic power of the moon, and dismisses the reality of its influence on the logic of the detective plot.

The title implies an ominous quality in the lunar cycle, amplified throughout the text. On the first occasion when the boys sneak out of the house, before the first murder, Simon observes: “Moonlight to me was always romantic and sinister.” (24) The association of the romantic and sinister allies the night to the temptations of crime, and, again, to those of women. From this early point in the narrative, the impulse toward detection is also linked with the moonlight: the boys spot a man with a knife on the tow

⁷³ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Act II, scene 2, 69. The moon was associated in Elizabethan cosmology with the “wet” phlegmatic humour, but also with femininity.

⁷⁴ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act V, scene 2, 112-114.

⁷⁵ OED, lunatic, adj 2a; lunatic, n a. Definition 1a: “Originally, affected with the kind of insanity that was supposed to have recurring periods dependent on the changes of the moon. In mod. use, synonymous with insane adj.” The word “lunatic” is used several times interchangeably with “maniac” and “madman”, but this exchange associates it explicitly with the full moon.

path of the canal and attempt to follow him. The phases of the moon, of course, do provide the pattern of the crimes. Mrs. Bradley acknowledges the link between the full moon and the murders, but factually rather than suspiciously:

“We have not seen the last of this business, and to-night we have the full moon. Where should you suppose the next attempt will be made?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said I. “Do you think there will be another attempt? Lots of people think so, but I just thought they were scared.”

“There is almost certain to be another attempt,” she said. (111)

Though it may or may not be a stimulus, the moon remains a visible link between the murders. This link, in turn, reinforces that which Keith observes between the murders and the canal. The aforementioned contrast between the benign natural river and the dangerous manmade canal complicates the relationship between the full moon, when the murders take place, and the water.

The dreamlike state that characterizes the boys’ early view of the “lunatic” crimes is counteracted by Mrs. Bradley’s practical approach, which belies her witch-like knowledge and “abnormal” point of view. As Simon guides her, verbally and physically, over the rambling paths that are so familiar to him and Keith, he is initiated into her process and removed from his dream-world. Crime and detection become thematized in the elaborate routes that Simon details, as above. The boys cast themselves primarily as detectives, but also entertain other potential roles in the drama. Simon realizes,

“He might just as easily have murdered *us*,” [...] but Keith did not think so.

“Nobody ever murders boys,” he said. I found this a reassuring thought. (31) (emphasis original)

Later, they worry about being suspected themselves:

“You don’t think, said Keith [...] “that if we were caught with these weapons they might think *we* did the murders?”

It was a solemn thought, and did not appear to us ridiculous. Nor, from a purely physical and material point of view, was it ridiculous, either; two boys of our age and strength, armed with razor-keen knives or my little scimitar, would have been more than a match for the unfortunate girls on whom the murderer had laid his wicked hands. The psychology of the thing was another matter, but one which, at the time, was not within our knowledge. (144) (emphasis original)

The transition from potential victims to potential villains points to the boys' consciousness of their changing physical forms, and suggests another danger of the adult world, that of the self. Additionally, this new perspective reflects their awareness of the adult world, and how the case has changed their perceptions. It is also a wry nod to the "least likely suspect" trope on the part of the author, who has concealed her real culprit under a very visible eccentricity.

This latter exchange hinges on another motif of the novel, that of the boys' weapons, which are the initial reason for their attraction to Mrs. Cockerton's shop: "Keith's specialty was guns and suits of armor; my choice was swords." Simon goes on to describe his passion for these swords, and how he regularly passes time in the antique shop,

[D]isengaging all her swords from their sheaths and lovingly and reverently weighing them in my hand. [...] My chief pleasure, however, was in running my thumb along the edges and in dreaming of how I would polish the blades if the swords belonged to me. (10)

It is Mrs. Cockerton who gives the boys their weapons after Simon particularly admires a sword:

It was less than twenty-three inches, a weapon for a boy or a man, with a cutting edge as sharp as a razor and a swing and a good grip for horseman or foot, or, possibly, an imaginative hunter of murderers.

"Be careful with that, Mr. Innes. I don't like it," Mrs. Cockerton remarked. [...] "No Christian had the forging of that steel. It is unholy, and of the Mohammedans, Mr. Innes."

"I'd give my soul for it," I said.

She did surprise me then.

"Take it then, and welcome, Mr. Innes. There is, I fear, something unlucky about it, although your innocent heart will come to no harm."

(44)

Mrs. Cockerton's welcomes the boys to her shop "because, she said, we loved those things which were of good report." (10) The strange exchange above, however, emphasizes Mrs. Cockerton's witch-like nature. Her suspicious fear of the scimitar is justified in that it foreshadows Simon's discovery of her guilt. The gift, though it is accepted by "an imaginative hunter of murderers," also implicates the boys by tying

them closer to the criminal. They claim that they would use their weapons to defend themselves:

“I could cleave you from neck to knees with a single stroke, Mrs. Cockerton,” said I.

“And I,” said Keith, could stretch you senseless, whether my bullet should find its billet or not.” (205)

However, when she genuinely threatens them, they doubt the etiquette of doing so: “The thing that worries me [...] is whether we ought to set about her with these weapons which, after all, she gave us.” (211) These conflicting feelings betray their divided alliances, but also reflect the duality of Simon’s position between childhood and adulthood.

The sabre and the pistol become the boys’ prize possessions. The weapons, ironically associated with the murderer, give them a sense of security: “We took [Keith’s] horse-pistol and the sabre in case we met the murderer, and tied them round our necks with the cord out of our pyjamas” (64). The association with nighttime outings makes these weapons integral to the boys’ growing sense of independence. Freud famously declares that such weapons are dream symbols of penetration:

the male organ [...] is also symbolized by objects that have the characteristic, in common with it, of penetration into the body and consequent injury, hence pointed *weapons* of every type, *knives, daggers, lances, swords*, and in the same manner *firearms, guns, pistols* and the *revolver*, which is so suitable because of its shape. (emphasis original)⁷⁶

Simon’s fondling of the blades certainly indicates the adolescent boy’s curiosity about his own body. The weapons’ distinct association with masculinity is symbolic of the boys’ maturation, but also it is a clue as to the murderer’s identity and motive. Mrs. Cockerton confides to Simon “that she could not bear girls, but that young men were always assured of her favour and goodwill.” (9) Her hatred of girls seems merely a symptom of her eccentricity, but the novel’s resolution it reveals it as a pathology:

[S]he returned to her theme time and again. Girls were wicked and worthless. [...] Their looks, their clothes, their voices—everything, in

⁷⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Symbolism in the Dream”, in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. by G. Stanley Hall (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), pp. 122-140 (p. 127).

fact, which made girls, to my mind, that made girls the fascinating if slightly terrifying creatures that they are—came under her ban (9-10).

Inspector Seabrook comments, “Whoever killed those girls killed them because he did not like girls.” (53) Thus, it is essential for Mrs. Cockerton to identify her protégés as masculine, and her gifts of weapons reinforce the boys’ masculinity, both in their own minds and in hers.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Mitchell often uses Freudian theory as a structural device in the construction of her narratives, of which the psychoanalytic methods of Mrs. Bradley are only one part. Shoshana Felman proposes a revision of the traditional relationship in which psychoanalysis is used to interpret literature:

The notion of *application* [of psychoanalytic theory to literature] would be replaced by the radically different notion of *implication* [...] the interpreter’s role would here be not to *apply* to the text an acquired science, a pre-conceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to *generate implications* between literature and psychoanalysis. (emphasis original)⁷⁷

This implication, she continues, generates “a spatial relation of *interiority*”. (emphasis original)⁷⁸ Mitchell employs psychoanalytic concepts, but she does so within the directionality of the detective form. She evokes the potential for interplay between the two sometimes seriously, sometimes humorously. In *The Rising of the Moon*, she emphasizes some obvious motifs, such as that of the weapons, but understates other, more powerful ones.

The psychoanalytic construction of place in this novel is less obvious than in those mentioned above, but equally important in the narrative: the relationship of detection and place reflects the psychoanalytic process. As Simon walks with Mrs. Bradley, she begins to explain the process of detection:

“You see, in every case of murder . . . or, indeed, of any crime . . . there are three possible angles of approach: motive, means, and opportunity. Of the three, it seems to me that motive is the most suggestive. Once

⁷⁷ Shoshana Felman, “To Open the Question”, in *The Claims of Literature: A Shoshana Felman Reader*, ed. by Emily Sun, Eyal Peretz, and Ulrich Baer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 213-217 (p. 215).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

you know *why*, you are inclined to be able to say *who*.” (125) (emphasis original)

This walk is ostensibly to assist Mrs. Bradley to understand the physical environment, but it also contributes to Simon’s understanding of his own desires. As they are leaving the scene of the dairymaid’s murder, she introduces a sensitive subject:

“I’ve heard a good deal about Christina. What are our young inspector’s chances, do you suppose? Is the girl really as heartless as he makes out?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure, ma’am,” said I, indescribably agitated by this description of my sweetheart. “I wouldn’t call her heartless at all. Very much the reverse, I would have said. But I only know her at home.”

She cackled, and dropped the subject, greatly, I may say, to my relief. It was my hidden desire . . . hidden until that moment of self-revelation . . . that as neither of us would ever be old enough to have Christina for his wife, that June would die at some conveniently early date, and so leave Jack for Christina. We should, by those means, at any rate keep her in the family. (123)

Immediately following this passage, Simon and Mrs. Bradley turn off the main road. Though he warns her they will be trespassing, she blithely accepts the route. Their physical trespass, though perhaps licensed by Mrs. Bradley’s police permit (“I do not know that it entitles us to trespass, but, if we are accosted, we will see.” (124)), reflects her mental trespass into Simon’s sublimated desires. This exchange, and its physical context, is staged as though to facilitate detection, but again detection and its consequent closure are only a part of the character-construction at the center of the novel. The above discussion on detective process immediately follows their decision to trespass, linking detection with analysis, and both with the illicit crossing of physical landscape.

Christina is the most central woman in Simon’s thoughts, and a figure of femininity in the novel that opposes the dangerous womanhood of Mrs. Cockerton as well as the painful rationality of Mrs. Bradley. Christina is characterized as the ideal woman, desired not only by the men in her immediate circle, but by many outside admirers. Her room is filled with paraphernalia of femininity: the boys “play about with her pots of stuff on the dressing-table, brush [their] hair with her silver-handled brushes, stroke her fur coat and look at her books and pictures.” (20) She often gives them treats, like

their chocolate Easter eggs, which are another Freudian symbol: “*sweets* frequently occur as representatives of sexual delights.” (emphasis original)⁷⁹ It is she, instead of Jack’s wife June, who plays a maternal role for the boys, taking them on outings and coming into their room to say goodnight. She even casts herself in the part:

“What do you pretend, Christina, when we get on the bed with you like this?” asked Keith, as he wriggled because she was tickling his neck.

“That I’m your mother,” she answered seriously. I knew she meant it. She hated that we had not a mother. She wanted to be mother and sister and everything else in the world except what I wanted her to be. I knew I was in love with her, although it was a secret – the only one – that I ever kept from Keith. (80-81)

Christina tries to fulfill the boys’ need for a mother figure, but in doing so she creates the conditions for Simon’s desire to grow. Although he is fully aware that his feelings for her are not filial, he allows her to contextualize their relationship in the way she desires. As noted above, he can achieve a far greater level of intimacy with her in a child’s role than in an adult’s, so this maternal role is valuable to his continued relationship with her.

Despite the Oedipal suggestions of this relationship, the true maternal figures in the novel are Mrs. Cockerton and Mrs. Bradley. As noted above, both take the boys into their thoughts and personal spaces, and consequently assume them as followers. However, the novel’s conclusion reveals Mrs. Cockerton, in terrifying fashion, as a foil for the woman as progenitor: she is the woman as destroyer. The boys look into her copper cooking pot, mentioned several times throughout the story, and find the remains of the rag and bone man, who has been the primary suspect in the case. Freud also associates women with vessels,⁸⁰ but in this case the vessel is a mode of destruction rather than reproduction. By boiling the body, she apparently intends to make the rag and bone man “disappear” and to attribute her guilt to him in his absence. Not only death, but disappearance, is a distinct reversal of birth, and thus a violent inversion of the woman’s traditional role. Simon declares, after he sees the evidence of this last murder: “Even after this considerable lapse of time I cannot bring myself to speak of

⁷⁹ Freud, “Symbolism”, p. 129.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

[it] in detail.” (207) His acknowledgement of this repressed memory reflects the police’s suppression of details about the murders, and justifies the undercurrent of anxiety in the novel’s youthful tone.

In their roles as murderer and detective, Mrs. Cockerton and Mrs. Bradley force the boys to make a moral and ethical choice. Despite the fact that Simon retains enough allegiance to Mrs. Cockerton to warn her of the policemen’s approach and thus facilitate her suicidal escape, he ultimately turns to Mrs. Bradley for protection, telephoning her in secret as the police make their preparations to trap Mrs. Cockerton (218). The conflict between the two old women appears, through the boy’s point of view, to be powerful and primal; it is not merely a question of a solution to a puzzle, but a triumph of logic over superstition. Mrs. Bradley, introduced over a maths problem, is the personification of logic in the narrative and her ultimate vindication in the case enables Simon to approach the idea of adulthood as a positive and comprehensible change, rather than an alien world. Although in the end she is unable to convince the police that Mrs. Cockerton is guilty of all the murders, Simon accepts her conclusions. There is, perhaps, less resolution in this adult world than he hopes, or than the reader of the detective novel might expect, but the novel posits that while reason may not conquer the threatening unknown, it is more reliable than certainty.

Keith points out, with boyish logic, that “All detective work is sneaking. That’s why only gentlemen and cads can do it.” (134) He might also add, in this context, psychoanalysts. Mitchell’s use of psychoanalytic theory to construct her plots and places illustrates the fallacies of the detective format, as well as the shortcomings of popular psychoanalysis itself. Her exploration of abnormality does not attempt to exclude it from society, as some critics insist the detective form must do. Peter Brooks writes, in *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*,

[Psychoanalysis] displays the principles of its own “narratology.” [...] The narrative account given by the patient is riddled with gaps, with memory lapses, with inexplicable contradictions in chronology, with screen memories concealing repressed material. [...] It follows that the work of the analyst must in large measure be a recomposition of the narrative discourse to give a better representation of the patient’s story,

to reorder its events, to foreground its dominant themes, to understand the force of desire that speaks in and through it.⁸¹

Mitchell's novels, too, sometimes reveal apparent "memory lapses" or "inexplicable contradictions". A frequent criticism leveled at them is that they are not plot driven or clued in a strictly "fair-play" manner. However, if they are contextualized by their relationship to psychoanalysis, their apparent shortcomings in fact reveal a new role for the reader-as-detective: that of psychoanalyst. Felman refers to "texts of madness and the madness of texts";⁸² Mitchell's world of the "abnormal" actually allows fuller expression of all desires and fantasies. She does not try to present a closed narrative or re-assert law and sanity in the manner of the traditional detective novel. Instead, she allows that the world is not sane and that, as Mrs. Bradley warns Simon, "Life is inclined to be sordid. Our friends are not always what they seem." (179)

Mitchell uses the detective format, manipulating the strict conventions thereof, to create a narrative more focused on development than solution. Her atypical handling of character comes to the fore in *The Rising of the Moon*, with the casting of the child as knight-errant, and the reconstruction of an eccentric old lady as a dangerously aberrant serial killer; the abnormal and unusual are interwoven into the basic components of the story. Most importantly, in this context, the externalization of Simon's desires and fears creates an individual psychology, as well as a contextualizing environment for the action of the detective plot. Like Poe, Mitchell uses a strictly limited narrative perspective as a vehicle for suggestion, and creates the atmospheric place as a force in itself. Place in *The Rising of the Moon* evokes psychological states, even in its most apparently descriptive. The scene-setting description at the novel's beginning is mirrored at its climax by a descriptive pause that suspends the action. As Simon and Keith set out to meet Mrs. Cockerton, Simon reflects:

Our high street is narrow and long; so long that in the year 1748 the inhabitants at one end of it insisted that the parish church at the other end was too far from their homes, and demanded a Chapel of Ease. From where we were it was a mile and a quarter to walk to the canal,

⁸¹ Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 47.

⁸² Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 251.

and another mile and a half to Dead Man's Bridge. By the time we arrived at the bridge, the moon, I deduced, would be high enough in the gentle summer sky to give an almost daylight visibility. What we could expect to see by its waxing radiance I had not the faintest idea. (212)

Ronen comments that while “the linearity of a text is conventionally interpreted as reflecting the forward movement of narrative, description is conventionally viewed as textual expansion indifferent to the meaning structure of the narrative”.⁸³ This apparent tangent serves not only to set the scene, but to heighten the suspense and, more importantly, to materialize the boys' experience. No place in the novel is exclusive of meaning.

The Rising of the Moon is perhaps the novel in which Mitchell best manages to fuse the detective plot with an unconventional treatment of place, a process largely enabled by the focalization through Simon and the creation of the narrative landscape around him. The following chapters explore Sayers' work, and how she too manipulates generic conventions toward very personal ends. Chapter Five considers further possibilities for the interplay of character and place, and how Sayers pursues an opposite tactic to Mitchell, creating her places through external expression rather than through interiority. The final chapter, on *Gaudy Night*, continues themes of this chapter in its exploration of place as a psychological construct, and how perception and focalization shape its meaning.

⁸³ Ronen, “Description”, p. 282.

Meanings of Milieu: Performance, Conversation, and Place in Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and *Murder Must Advertise*

There are, as has been demonstrated in previous chapters, many ways to imbue the fictional place with meaning. Agatha Christie employs a rich web of allusions and associations, architectural details and conversational asides, to create places that are implied more than described. In Gladys Mitchell's novels, place description takes on a psychological, symbolic element. Dorothy L. Sayers describes locations more than Christie, and less than Mitchell, but more often than not her physical descriptions are pointedly beside the point. Instead, most of the information about place in Sayers' novels comes through her characters, their attitudes, and the implications of their exchanges with one another. Like Mitchell, Sayers uses characters' differing responses as material for place-characterization, but rather than using variable focalization, she articulates these responses through their performances within place. The interdependent exposition of character and place means that place is mutable; because it is continually re-defined, place lacks many of the structural qualities that characterize its role in Christie's work.

Chapter Three examines some of the narrative possibilities that link character and place in Christie's and Mitchell's novels, but Sayers, as demonstrated here, explores another route. As Cresswell observes,

[T]he word *place* turns up in common phrases such as: a place for everything and everything in its place" or "know your place" or "she was put in her place." In these expressions the word *place* clearly refers to something more than a spatial referent. Implied in these terms is a sense of the proper. Something or someone *belongs* in one place and not in another. [...] [Such observations] are *expectations* about behavior that relate a position in a social structure to actions in space. In this

sense “place” combines the spatial with the social—it is “social space.”
(emphasis original)¹

Sayers’ interest in place was largely tied up in the creation of the “social spaces” that define her individual novels. She observed that “[p]eople seem to like books which tell them how other people live – any people, advertisers, bell ringers, women dons, butchers, bakers, or candlestick-makers – so long as the detail is full and accurate”.² Critics make regular reference to the “milieux” of Sayers’ novels, but few have attempted to define the meaning of the term. Generally, it seems to imply a classist attitude: Sayers is frequently accused of snobbery because her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, is an aristocrat who often speaks like Bertie Wooster.³ McManis asserts that “[t]he settings of the Wimsey novels were the milieus in which a person of his status and inclinations would have moved,”⁴ but Wimsey is a far more societally mobile character than that image suggests. Sayers does not restrict his activities to an aristocratic social sphere, but places him into a greater variety of social situations and environments than any of his contemporaries (except, perhaps, the outré Mrs. Bradley). The OED emphasizes the “social surroundings” implied in the word milieu,⁵ and this chapter examines how the social environments of Sayers’ novels are developed as places through the ways in which characters, including the detective, interact within them.

McManis notes that, “[e]lements of setting that in composite formed the milieus for each novel were [...] found on many pages, in passages from a colorful verbal palette.”⁶ Rather than consolidating these elements into extended place descriptions, Sayers builds her milieux through small details, and it is through characters’ interaction, most of all conversation, that the locations of her novels become fully realized as places. Architectural details, physical evidence, and even seasons of the

¹ Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, p. 3.

² Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 218.

³ Though Sayers reportedly conceived of her hero as “a combination of Fred Astaire and Bertie Wooster”, Panek suggests that a truer model is Wodehouse’s Psmith, whose companion Jackson serves as a foil for Sayers’ Inspector Parker. (LeRoy Panek, *Watteau’s Shepherds: The Detective Novel in Britain, 1914-1940* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1979) p. 74.)

⁴ McManis, p. 329.

⁵ 1. “An environment; surroundings, *esp.* social surroundings.”, 2. “A group of people with a shared (cultural) outlook; a social class or set.” OED

⁶ McManis, p. 330.

year emerge in conversation rather than description. Sayers also uses language to build characters, and to demonstrate, through their conversational exchanges, such dynamics as power relationships or identities within a particular environment or social milieu. Conversations “place” people by developing the place and the individuals in concert, establishing a relationship of speech, action, and place. Both the exploratory and analytical aspects of detection are often conversationally-focused in these novels, in addition, talk situates the characters and their actions in place by allowing the reader access to notions of appropriateness, belonging, and place-knowledge.

Sayers’ milieu novels,⁷ defined here as those that concentrate on and develop one particular environment, are particularly significant to the study of place because of the role of these various milieux in the development of her detective. Sayers was the first author in the genre to adopt a hero who aged in real time and exhibited significant character development, reflecting his author’s own priorities and interests.⁸ The representation of the detective is also emblematic of shifts in her view of the genre; over the course of the Lord Peter series, her novels become markedly more complex and consciously literary.⁹ As the detective himself develops and matures as a character, the environments and plots of the series become increasingly conceptual, multilayered, and reflective of the world in which they were created. Some of Sayers’ most memorable environments are derived from her own experience: the bleak fenland of *The Nine Tailors* (1934) depicts the East Anglia of her childhood, the women’s

⁷ In this category I include *Have His Carcase* (1932), *The Nine Tailors* (1934) and *Gaudy Night* as well as *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and *Murder Must Advertise*.

⁸ Christie’s heroes Tommy and Tuppence, who appear approximately once every ten years throughout her career, also age in real time. However, though they accrue life experiences, they do not acquire a fundamentally changed outlook as does Wimsey. Also, though they feature in a long sequence of novels, these typically fall into Christie’s adventure style, with the exception of her only true wartime novel, *N or M?*.

⁹ Sayers published eleven novels featuring Lord Peter between 1923 and 1936, the last of which (*Busman’s Honeymoon*) was first written as a play. Her first two novels were published by T. Fischer Unwin; she subsequently moved to Ernest Benn, and then to Victor Gollancz, who was supportive of her later and more complex work. She also wrote an epistolary crime novel, *The Documents in the Case* (1931) with Robert Eustace. Notes survive for another Lord Peter novel (*Thrones, Dominations*), which was completed and substantially altered by Jill Paton Walsh. Sayers also wrote a number of detective short stories featuring both Lord Peter and the traveling salesman Montague Egg.

From the mid-1930s, Sayers turned her attention to lecturing and religious writing: her works from this period include the theological study *The Mind of the Maker* (1941) and the essay collection *Unpopular Opinions* (1947). She also completed the first two volumes of a well-regarded translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (the last was completed by Barbara Reynolds).

college in *Gaudy Night* is a thinly-disguised version of Somerville, Oxford, where she was an undergraduate, and Pym's Publicity in *Murder Must Advertise* (1933), the Golden Age's most credible rendering of a workplace, recalls the period of the 1920s when she worked in an advertising agency. She treats all of these places with sympathy, but also with an awareness of their flaws and problems. Less sympathetic are her descriptions of artistic and literary milieux in London, which are significant sites of the investigations in *Clouds of Witness* (1926), *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928), and *Strong Poison* (1930).

The sense of place developed in Sayers' novels, however, was not exclusive to her own experiences. The most important setting of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* is the titular military club itself; the personal relationships of men in this novel are as significant as those between women in the later *Gaudy Night*. Sayers recalled,

A man once asked me [...] how I managed in my books to write such natural conversation between men when they were by themselves. [...] "I shouldn't have expected a woman (meaning me) to have been able to make it so convincing." I replied that I had coped with this difficult problem by making my men talk, as far as possible, like ordinary human beings.¹⁰

Sayers re-iterated this point many times in her essays and talks, and even put the sentiment into Lord Peter's mouth: he defends his opinion of Ann Dorland's innocence in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, saying, "I'm an ordinary person, and have met women, and talked to them like ordinary human beings".¹¹ She did not identify herself with feminism, preferring a notion of equality in individualism; she writes,

[A] woman is just as much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences of an individual. What is repugnant to every human being is to be reckoned always as a member of a class and not as an individual person.¹²

¹⁰ Sayers, "Are Women Human?", p. 115.

¹¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), p. 250. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹² Sayers, "Are Women Human?", p. 107.

The individuality on which Sayers placed such high priority is evident in the detailed characterization of her novels. It is evident, from the beginning of the series, that Sayers values her secondary characters; when she describes her process of developing Lord Peter into a more well-rounded character, the fact that he had “a mother and a friend and a sketchy sort of brother and sister” are among the first qualities she mentions.¹³ However, it is in her milieu novels that a population of secondary characters becomes a potent force. Haycraft refers to Sayers’ characterization as “Dickensian”,¹⁴ an adjective she would have taken as a compliment. She lamented the increasing programmatization of the detective novel, writing in 1930 that it,

[H]as come to feel itself free from the necessity of creating living character. The figure of the detective himself is usually presented with a certain amount of elaboration, but the riotous creative fancy that filled the Victorian sensation novel with characters like Fosco and Madeline Vanstone, and the whole immortal crew of Gamps and Sapseas and Pecksniffs, has ceased, or almost ceased, to play about the modern mystery novel. The millionaire dies in the library, but we care little, for we never knew him. The ten members of the house-party are in turn suspected of the crime; but we remain indifferent and puzzled, for we cannot tell them one from the other and are forced to be continually turning back to page five to remind ourselves who they are.¹⁵

By looking back at the work of earlier authors, Sayers anticipated the evolution of the detective novel. She felt strongly that “if the detective story was to live and develop it must get back to where it began in the hands of Collins and Le Fanu, and become once more a novel of manners instead of a pure crossword puzzle.”¹⁶ A significant part of that effort, she felt, was to incorporate locations and characters that seemed authentic and sincere. The secondary characters that she cites as essential to this project are, in fact, the most important way that she constructs environments in her milieu novels.

An integral part of writing “how other people live” is distinctive and convincing dialogue, and behind Sayers’ affront at the comment about realistic dialogue between men is professional pride. Extended conversations are an essential part of her novels,

¹³ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 211.

¹⁴ Haycraft, p. 136.

¹⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Present Status of the Mystery Story”, in *The London Mercury*, ed. by J.C. Squire, Vol. XXIII Nov 1930- Apr 1931 (The London Mercury Ltd, n.d.), p. 47-52 (p. 50).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and serve to create place as well as character. Usually these are an exchange between two characters; these may take place in private, in an implied “private” public space, such as that of a restaurant, or in the company of other characters who do not participate (except to interject a thought at a crucial moment, as Lady Mary does during Wimsey and Inspector Parker’s analysis of the case in *Murder Must Advertise*). Occasionally conversations incorporate many individuals, most evidently in *Murder Must Advertise* and *Gaudy Night*. In all these cases, the environment is crucial to the structure of the conversation, and the conversation constructs the environment. This chapter concentrates on the London milieu of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and *Murder Must Advertise*, both of which prefigure the masterful *Gaudy Night*, the subject of Chapter Six.

Sayers begins her detective series in London, and returns to it repeatedly throughout her career. McManis observes that Sayers “was more generous with descriptions of rural environs than of urban ones”,¹⁷ but it is in novels set in London that she develops the techniques through which she establishes milieu. Williams notes the opposition of the East End and the West End that came to signify class and economic differences in nineteenth-century literature, but Sayers separates the city further, into spheres defined by people living their daily lives: artists, office workers, lawyers, businessmen, and socialites commingle in unexpected ways, but habitual milieu often define both individuals and their interactions. London offers, for Sayers as well as for Christie, the opportunity to locate a story in a circumscribed place, but to hint at, behind the containment of the club or the office, the dangerous slippage possible in the metropolis. While Christie’s London is a city of encounters that enable deceptive performances, Sayers’ London is a city of contrasting places that individuals navigate through everyday choices.

Sayers’ development of her hero is also tellingly situated in the city. Williams identifies the urban detective as “a significant and ratifying figure” of modernity, writing, “The opaque complexity of modern life is represented by crime; the explorer

¹⁷ McManis, p. 331.

of a society is reduced to the discoverer of single causes, the insoluble agent and above all his means, his technique.”¹⁸ Williams refers here to Sherlock Holmes, as Sayers herself frequently does; through regular references to the “Great Detective”, she both situates Wimsey as his heir, and rebuts many of the conventions that surround fictional detection. Both Holmes and Wimsey are “explorers of society”, but the way that they move between social groups is distinctly different, these differences emphasize varying narrative intentions as well as their situation in time. Sayers’ detective is not so able to reduce and simplify, either his cases or his identity. Instead, he moves on a sliding scale of his own personality, becoming a slightly different version of himself in each successive novel. Wimsey thus embodies Scott McCracken’s contention 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 of class, “race”, and gender that normally define the self in a way that other people cannot.¹⁹

Margaret P. Hannay is one of the critics who, following Sayers’ own lead,²⁰ argue that the author uses Harriet’s perspective in *Gaudy Night* to “project [a more complex character] back into the past”.²¹ Gill Plain, however, maintains that, “to situate the entire creation of Wimsey within the pages of *Gaudy Night* is to ignore the evolutionary details that emerge from the eight preceding novels.”²² Many of the details of Wimsey’s personality are developed situationally, through his association with various milieux and with the persona of the city itself. The emphasis on movement and transition in Sayers’ London allies the detective with what Williams identifies as the “social character of the city—its transitoriness, its unexpectedness, its

¹⁸ Williams, p. 227.

¹⁹ Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998), p. 63.

²⁰ In her essay “Gaudy Night”, Sayers recounts her “major operation” (211) to develop Lord Peter into a well-rounded character, which she positions, somewhat disingenuously, after the publication of *Strong Poison* (1930).

²¹ Margaret P. Hannay, “Harriet’s Influence on the Character of Lord Peter Wimsey”, in *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*, ed. by Margaret P. Hannay (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), pp. 36-50 (p. 48).

²² Gill Plain, *Women’s Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power, and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 52.

essential and exciting isolation”,²³ and it is by these qualities that he is primarily defined until *Gaudy Night*.

The city is also established as the meeting point of specific, diverse, and often oppositional places, and the detective must be able to navigate between them. Unlike Hercule Poirot or Mrs. Bradley, who position themselves as outsiders, Lord Peter is always suitable, able to adapt his behavior, speech, and appearance to a variety of places and situations. In *Whose Body?*, he signals a change into his detective persona saying, “enter Sherlock Holmes, disguised as a walking gentleman”,²⁴ but in truth Wimsey always crosses social boundaries as some version of himself; he is variously patronizing, comic, scholarly, foolish, dilettantish, and professional. He does not adopt disguises in the manner of a stereotypical detective, but subtly shifts his manner and vocabulary to transition from serious conversation with Parker or literary sparring with Harriet to “giving a perfect imitation of the silly-ass-about-town,”²⁵ or “appear[ing] in my famous impersonation of the perfect Lounge Lizard.”²⁶ Wimsey is noted for his ability to belong in a variety of situations, transitioning between artists’ studios and dinner at the Savoy, or between the Metropolitan police offices and private clubs. Light suggests that Poirot “is as likely to solve crime in seedy neighborhoods and mews apartments as in rural settings, and his social milieu is far more mixed,”²⁷ but this statement applies far more accurately to Wimsey. The eradication of the city as a “complete” entity is as salient in Sayers’ work as it is in Christie’s, but Sayers makes a more explicit statement about the detective as a unifying figure, by reiterating his ability to cross between places.

In making this character plausible, Sayers is, in her way, as dependent on the series format as Christie. Having established Wimsey’s history and personality across several novels, Sayers was able to develop both character and place by situating him in

²³ Ibid., p. 234.

²⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923), p. 13.

²⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 38.

²⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Have His Carcase* (London: Gollancz, 1932), p. 412.

²⁷ Light, p. 73.

different milieux. Wimsey's subtle shape-shifting appears as an essential part of his method of detection. Parker rebukes him for his attraction to the dramatic:

“You want to be consistent, you want to look pretty, you want to swagger debonairely through a comedy of puppets or else to stalk magnificently through a tragedy of human sorrows and things. But that's childish. If you've any duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders, you must do it in an attitude that comes handy. You want to be elegant and detached? That's all right, if you find out the truth that way, but it hasn't any value in itself, you know.”²⁸

His “poses”, however, *are* nearly always the way that Wimsey “finds out the truth”. Though his aristocratic status marks him as an anachronism, both within the text and to its critics, he moves through various country and city environments, identified more by his mobility than by an allegiance to a particular milieu. It is particularly in London, though, that he demonstrates his characteristic mutability, most evident in the multiple roles and emphasis on movement in *Murder Must Advertise*.

Sayers' work often questions the concept of belonging, not only in space but in action. Her characters may search for, but rarely find, definition within the shifting social landscape of place. Instead, places and characters are continually re-oriented, and as the novels' casts of characters grow larger and more detailed, places are more fully realized. The Communists Wimsey investigates in *Clouds of Witness* are comic and simply drawn, but the veterans of the Bellona Club are complex and problematic from the first page. What place *means*, to different characters and to the reader, evolves throughout the story. The various milieux of London are defined by the characters who populate these particular spheres of activity, and how they do so with varying degrees of success and ease.

²⁸ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, p. 180.

The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club: Place and Out-of-Place-ness

The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club might be called Sayers' first well-defined "milieu" novel; previously she had worked with the country house, the village, and the city of London, but the construction of the social environments of these places appear far less threateningly ambiguous in these novels than they do, for instance, in Christie's early work. Sayers was harsh, however, when she called her own early novels "conventional to the last degree";²⁹ in fact, they all contain innovative details, particularly with respect to character. Her first, *Whose Body?* (1923) casts Lord Peter as a sufferer of shell shock, an affliction that re-occurs throughout the series; this weakness in the hero not only contributes to what Light terms the "retreat from old-fashioned notions of the heroic",³⁰ but allies him with a generation profoundly affected by the war. In form, however, Sayers' first three novels are closer to "chase" novels: the detective pursues a suspect throughout, but the narrative rarely pauses to develop a secondary character or place.³¹ This effect begins to change with *Unnatural Death* (1927), in which the murderer disguises herself using two opposing environments, but neither place stands out as a full environment. With her next novel, Sayers changed perspective on the city, and began to present London as a series of distinct communities, rather than as a place of anonymity and loss of identity.

The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club is Sayers' most direct response to the war's after-effects. It begins as Lord Peter enters the club on Armistice Day and meets George Fentiman, another sufferer of shell shock, who is unemployed and in debt.³² The novel opens, as it will continue, with conversation:

"What in the world, Wimsey, are you doing in this morgue?" demanded Captain Fentiman, flinging aside the "Evening Banner" with the air of a man released from an irksome duty.

²⁹ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p. 208.

³⁰ Light, p. 70.

³¹ An important exception is Wimsey's sidekick Miss Climpson, a clear precursor to Miss Marple, who is introduced in *Unnatural Death*, and much of whose personality is developed in her unconventional (investigative) relationship to "traditional" environments and behaviors.

³² Lord Peter is revealed to be a victim of shell shock at the climax of *Whose Body?*. He often suffers flashbacks and other symptoms of trauma when he solves a case, because it is tantamount to killing the culprit.

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it that, retorted Wimsey, amiably. “Funeral Parlour, at the very least. Look at the marble. Look at the furnishings. Look at the palms and the chaste bronze nude in the corner.”

“Yes, and look at the corpses. Place always reminds me of that old thing in “Punch,” you know—‘Waiter, take away Lord Whatsisname, he’s been dead two days.’ Look at old Ormsby there, snoring like a hippopotamus. Look at my revered grandpa—dodders in here at ten every morning, collects the “Morning Post” and the armchair by the fire, and becomes part of the furniture till the evening. Poor old devil. Suppose I’ll be like that one of these days. I wish to God Jerry had put me out with the rest of ‘em. What’s the good of coming through for this sort of thing? What’ll you have?”

“Dry martini,” said Wimsey. “And you?” (7)

The conversation between the two constitutes the whole first chapter, and effectively introduces the painful contrast that exists in the club between the young veterans of the Great War and the elder, traditional soldiers.³³ While the physical aspect of the club is represented only in the synecdoche of objects, and later in reference to notional places such as the main staircase, the cloakroom, and the library, the emotional resonance of the place is marked from the outset. The traditional establishment, the elder population of the respectable rule-bound club, have established the “expected” place context, which is representative of the world in which many young veterans struggled to adapt: George Fentiman’s discomfiture in the Bellona Club demonstrates his lack of success in post-war life. Nonetheless, Symons, one of Sayers’ fiercest critics, felt that conversations such as the above were unhelpful digressions and poorly executed:

Every book [of Sayers’] contains an enormous amount of padding, in the form of conversations which, although they may have a distant connection with the plot, are spread over a dozen pages where the point could be covered in as many lines. This might be forgivable if what was said had any intrinsic interest, but these dialogues are carried on between stereotyped figures [...] who have only a veiled clue to communicate. These people, like the clubmen of the Bellona Club or

³³ General Fentiman is discovered dead in his chair on Armistice Day, and Lord Peter undertakes to discover whether he died before or after his sister, Lady Dormer, who willed him a large inheritance should he outlive her. The chief suspects are the general’s grandsons, Robert and George Fentiman, who demonstrate opposite responses to their experiences of war, and post-war life. Robert is hearty and jovial, while George suffers from shell-shock and cannot keep a job. Also implicated is Lady Dormer’s ward, Ann Dorland, a prickly intellectual woman. The general, Lord Peter discovers, died the evening before, and Robert Fentiman concealed the body overnight to obscure the time of death, in hope of gaining the inheritance. However, ultimately it is revealed that Dr. Penberthy, the general’s doctor who was secretly engaged to Ann Dorland, poisoned him so that he would die first. Penberthy breaks off his engagement to Ann when the general’s death begins to look suspicious, and her traumatized behavior increases suspicions about her.

the minor upper-class characters in *Clouds of Witness*, are indeed conceived in terms of a sketch for *Punch*.³⁴

Conversation does form the greater part of Sayers' novels; in many ways, it is the pivotal form of action. As Cohn writes of the nineteenth-century novel, Sayers' work "[dwells] on manifest behavior, with the characters' inner selves revealed only indirectly through spoken language and telling gesture."³⁵ Sayers uses third-person objective narration, but the narrative voice is sparsely employed: most characterization, of places as well as people, is presented through conversations such as the one above. Bronwen Thomas observes,

Although it might be thought that foregrounding talk, especially informal conversation, must inevitably result in the action of a novel being halted or pushed to the background, this very much depends on how we define what constitutes "action" in this context. [...] dialogue may play a vital role in ensuring the forward momentum and cohesion of plot, but it may also divert and disrupt.³⁶

The forward momentum of Sayers' novels is almost entirely driven by conversation. Even essential detective activities, such as looking for physical clues, are often discussed between characters rather than described by the narrator.

Sayers declared in 1928 that "the detective-story is part of the literature of escape, and not of expression",³⁷ but her changing opinions about the genre are evident in her criticism, and she later expressed a desire to produce work "less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel."³⁸ The novel, according to Culler, is "the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world",³⁹ and contemporary critics are able to see not only Sayers' work, but the detective genre, in light of that novelistic articulation. David Herman observes that,

[M]odernist writers, departing from the course taken by their nineteenth-century predecessors, shifted their emphasis from the detailed profiling

³⁴ Symons, p 123.

³⁵ Cohn, p. 21.

³⁶ Bronwen Thomas, *Fictional Dialogue: Speech and Conversation in the Modern and Postmodern Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2012), pp. 74-75.

³⁷ Sayers, Introduction to *Omnibus of Crime*, in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), 71-109 (first publ. in *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (London: Gollancz, 1928) 9-47), p. 109.

³⁸ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p. 208.

³⁹ Culler, p. 221.

and authentication of the fictional worlds in which characters' experiences unfold to capturing the mental or psychological texture of those lived experiences themselves. [...] the modernist accent falls less on fictional worlds than on fictional-worlds-as-experienced.⁴⁰

The creation of a place through conversations is, in effect, the opposite of Mitchell's approach in *The Rising of the Moon*, in which the dominance of the physical environment informs the character of the narrator. While Mitchell internalizes the creation of the fictional world, however, Sayers externalizes it. Sayers' use of conversations, which in effect "perform" a place, subordinates the physical place to the "world-as-experienced". Her milieu novels, particularly, situate information, including that relevant to the detective plot, in the interaction of personalities, which are established through conversation and behavior rather than description.

George Fentiman expresses his feelings of unease with respect to the Bellona Club, but quickly extends this sensation to the post-war world in general. He is "out of place" not only in the club, but in his own life. This is painfully illustrated when his grandfather, General Fentiman, is discovered to be dead in his chair:

Fentiman laughed. Peel after hysterical peel shook his throat. All round the room, scandalized Bellonians creaked to their gouty feet, shocked by the unmannerly noise.

"Take him away!" said Fentiman, "take him away. He's been dead two days! So are you! So am I! We're all dead and we never noticed it!"

It is doubtful which occurrence was more disagreeable to the senior members of the Bellona Club—the grotesque death of General Fentiman in their midst or the indecent neurasthenia of his grandson. Only the younger men felt no sense of outrage; they knew too much. (11-12)

Ariela Freedman cites the opening conversation of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* as an instance of the author's cultural awareness. Pointing out the impact of PTSD on post-World War I England, Freedman praises Sayers for taking the disorder seriously and incorporating it into her work. She finds that the novel

[C]ombines detective story, where the shell-shocked character is once again a subject of investigation but is once again absolved, with an

⁴⁰ David Herman, "Re-minding Modernism", in *Emergence of Mind: Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse*, ed. by David Herman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2011), pp. 243-272 (p. 243).

exploration of a society and characters still traumatized by the war. This background repeatedly emerges into the foreground and distracts the reader from the conventional pursuit of the criminal [...] [T]he passages on the effects of shell shock and the divide between the younger generation who fought in World War I and the generation that preceded them provide some of the most powerful material in the novel.⁴¹

Though the theme of shell shock impacts the plot only indirectly, it is an essential part of the overall social context, and the ways that different characters refer to the disorder indicate varying degrees of compassion and comprehension. Phrases employed by Dr. Penberthy, the car showroom manager, the lawyer Mr. Murbles, and even by George Fentiman's wife and brother, reveal the way that they all characterize George as "out of place".

As discussed above, Sayers considered "creating living character" essential to her development of the detective novel. George is one of Sayers' most important, and problematic, secondary characters. Wimsey feels empathetic toward him, and his evident psychological pain arouses pity, but he is also rude, unstable, and difficult. His quarrel with his wife when Wimsey visits their home is realistically awkward: George interprets Sheila's every word as an offense, and Wimsey repeatedly tries to turn his rudeness into a joke, and to make peace between the couple (71-82). George is "suspect" as a man because his behavior does not conform to the expected pattern, and later he is literally suspected of his grandfather's murder because he is a "nervous case" (41). He is demonstrably unsuited to the standards of his society, which are primarily represented through the club, but also appear in his fraught relationship with his wife, and affect his ability to get a job because he "looks a bit nervy. [...] Wants bucking up" (104). Even his brother is willing to believe him "Guilty or insane or both" (230). At every turn, his "contextual" behavior, that which is appropriate within a given milieu, is incorrect. As Cresswell argues,

The place of an act determines (as much as it is determined by) the reaction to the act and the meanings accorded to it. Just as the meaning of an act is associated with a particular place, the meaning of a place is

⁴¹ Ariela Freedman, "Dorothy Sayers and the Case of the Shell-Shocked Detective", in *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 8.2 (2010), pp. 365-387 (p. 376).

associated with appropriate acts (or at least the absence of inappropriate acts).⁴²

Wimsey, on the other hand, admits to “an unconquerable dislike to examining the question of George Fentiman’s opportunities [to murder his grandfather]” (210), because he empathizes with George’s ongoing problems.

The other most likely suspect, Ann Dorland, is equally an outsider. Ann has no real place in the Fentiman family, being only “a distant relative” (24); the Fentiman brothers refer to her as “the Dorland female” (79) and “that awful Dorland woman”(163). George Fentiman, in an attack easily characterized as an attempt to normalize himself, calls her “[o]ne of those modern, Chelsea women. Ugly as sin and hard as nails.” (79) A literary precursor of Harriet Vane, she also struggles to find a place for herself in a creative or intellectual milieu.⁴³ Even Wimsey’s artist friend Marjorie, who defends Ann, says “she really isn’t one of us.” (119) The divide, in this case, seems to be one of personality: “I think really ... that Ann ought to have been something in the City. She has brains, you know. She’d run anything awfully well. But she isn’t creative.” (119-120) Another acquaintance calls her, less charitably, “abnormal” (189). Although she is central to the plot, Ann only appears in the last quarter of the novel, so her out-of-placeness is less thematized than George’s, but it is more important to the resolution of the plot. Lord Peter urges Ann to confide in him, again placing emphasis on the solutions possible through conversation:

“One gets over everything,” repeated Wimsey, firmly. “Particularly if one tells somebody about it.”

“One can’t always tell things.”

“I can’t imagine anything really untellable.”

“Some things are so beastly.”

“Oh, yes—quite a lot of things. Birth is beastly—and death—and digestion, if it comes to that.” (256)

⁴² Cresswell, *In Place*, p. 61.

⁴³ Sayers introduces Harriet in *Strong Poison*, in which she is accused of the murder of her lover. She travels in similar artistic circles to Ann Dorland, though Harriet is a successful writer. She is also “out of place” in that she has no family, and has isolated herself from traditional social norms by living with a man to whom she was not married. Critics have characterized Harriet as a self-portrait of Sayers, but there are perhaps more echoes of Sayers’ own life experience in her depiction of the dissatisfied Ann Dorland.

This exchange implies that the “untellable” is merely the impolite or inappropriate, and that out-of-placeness itself may be exorcised by giving things their proper names.

Throughout the novel, there is an attempt to minimize problems through language: Mr. Murbles expresses his hope that “nothing of an undesirable nature is involved” (18) when he brings Peter into the case, but asks him to resolve it “without creating any—ahem!—public agitation or—er—scandal, or in fact, notoriety (28). Wimsey concedes that the situation is “uncommonly awkward” (28), but becomes quickly frustrated by the linguistic efforts of others to conceal the real difficulties of the situation:

“You see, it suggested, at the first blush, something rather—
“Unpleasant,” said Wimsey. “If you knew how often I’d heard that
word in the last two days! Well, let’s face it.” (40-41)

It is impossible, he reasons, to express murder and fraud in polite language, because they are unacceptable behaviors. It is only through the “untellable” that the detective may find the truth, and that questions of belonging may be, if not resolved, at least reconciled.

Wimsey, who never seems out of place, has an essential sympathy with those who do not belong. His variable performances may be characterized as compensation for a sense of his own “out-of-placeness”. He confesses, in *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1936), “I can enjoy practically everything that comes along—while it’s happening. Only I have to keep on doing things, because, once I stop, it all seems a lot of rot and I don’t care a damn if I go west tomorrow.”⁴⁴ Tellingly, the only way he can be content is in motion, a compulsion which allies him even more strongly to the city. The modern city, in which identities are malleable, is the natural place of disconnection: in previous generations, its milieux may have provided stability and continuity, as the Bellona Club did for General Fentiman, but after the Great War, such dependable entities are disintegrating. As the characters themselves have changed and become less stable, so too have the places.

⁴⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon* (London: Gollancz, 1937), p. 294.

The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club foreshadows *Gaudy Night* in a number of ways, most significantly in its consideration of gender and belonging. For all that the characters seek to avoid “unpleasantness”, the investigation concludes with the confession and suicide of Dr. Penberthy, who chooses “the right course [...] at last” (280). By behaving like a “gentleman”, he re-establishes the club as a sphere of idealized masculinity. That masculinity, though, is still cast as an obsolete notion in the satirical coda: the return to normalcy is indicated by the refrain, “these things never happened before the War” (287). The club, of course, signifies membership and appropriateness, but also illustrates the failure of those concepts in the post-war world. The sidelines and subplots of the novel are also concerned with the question of belonging. Marriage is offered as another way that a person, male or female, may “belong”; however, George and Sheila Fentiman, the only married couple in the book, are unhappy, Dr. Penberthy is engaged to Ann only for her fortune, and Wimsey declines Marjorie’s half-joking proposal. The idea of belonging itself is thus called into question throughout; the novel leaves open the possibility that some of its characters simply do not fit the constraints of the milieu accessible to them. Though George “seem[s] to come out from under a blanket” (283) when he is cleared, there is no indication that he has been, or can be, cured. Robert finds Ann “fine and straightforward,” and is determined to “[bring] a little brightness into that poor girl’s life.” However, despite his interest in her, he may still essentially misunderstand her; her conversation with Wimsey does not necessarily suggest that “she’s really cut out for an ordinary, sensible, feminine life.” (286) The novel thus refuses a closure that integrates these outsiders successfully with their environment; in doing so, it suggests, as in Wimsey’s case, that a sense of stability is a pre-war condition.

The milieu of the city may no longer be stable, but they are still essentially separate communities that have their own senses of “place”. The potential for slippage actually makes the definition of these places more urgent to those who depend on them, such as the older members of the Bellona Club. However, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* suggests that for others these definitions are outmoded and potentially harmful. In this respect, the novel foreshadows the most important question of *Gaudy Night*, that

of self-definition; as Malpas observes, “the search for a sense of self-identity is often presented in terms of a search for place.”⁴⁵ However, in these novels Sayers hints that pre-established categories do not fit everyone, and that some individuals must create a “place” for themselves. Wimsey, with his multiple identities and club memberships, does not need any particular milieu. Williams identifies the condition of the modern city as that of “transitoriness [...] unexpectedness [...] essential and exciting isolation”,⁴⁶ and Sayers embraces this characterization for her detective. Through her creation of co-existing and mutually referential milieux, she establishes London as a network of place-related performances, and an essential environment for the detective.

Murder Must Advertise: Disguises that Reveal

The instability of milieu and identity becomes a central motif in *Murder Must Advertise*; of all Sayers’ novels, it is the one that engages most with the idea of transitory modernity attributed to the city. It places Lord Peter in two very distinct, and distinctly London, milieux: that of a busy advertising agency and of a debauched and drug-fueled nightlife. Neither of these two worlds is his own, but slight changes in his appearance and speech enable him to adopt different personae and join them unquestioned. While the alterations are minor, the detective’s character changes are a recurrent motif in the novel:

In a taxi rolling south-west, Mr. Bredon removed his spectacles, combed out his side-parting, stuck a monocle in his eye, and by the time he reached Piccadilly Circus he was again Lord Peter Wimsey.⁴⁷

That his transformations happen in transit emphasizes once again the association of the detective with the continually moving metropolis. Williams notes that, “[t]his experience of urban movement has been used, at all levels of seriousness and of play,

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 178.

⁴⁶ Williams, p. 234.

⁴⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise*, (London: Gollancz, 1933), p.109-110. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

to express a gamut of feelings from despair to delight.”⁴⁸ While the movement of the city in *Murder Must Advertise* frequently has an element of comedy, it is also integral to Wimsey’s character.

There was a photograph of Mr. Bredon entering the court at Bow Street in a dark lounge suit and soft hat; there was also a photograph of Lord Peter Wimsey returning from his ride in neat breeches and boots and a bowler; there was, needless to say, no photograph of the metamorphosis of the one gentleman into another, behind the drawn blinds of a Daimler saloon while traversing the quiet squares north of Oxford Street. (328-329)

The multiple identities of the detective are linked not only to the movement of the city, but demonstrate the hybrid nature of identity itself within the urban environment. The proximity of the narrative’s various places, and the detective’s multiple roles within them, are only possible in the context of the city, and the anonymity it affords facilitates deception on the part of the criminals as well as the detectives. The question of “the right place” for particular actions is again crucial in *Murder Must Advertise*. Not only are places of work and leisure distinctly separate, places put to the “wrong” use are characterized as criminal.

Sayers declared that her “first real attempt at fusing the [detective novel with the novel of manners] was made in *Murder Must Advertise*, in which [...] the criticism of life was not relegated to incidental observations and character sketches, but was actually part of the plot”. It is immediately clear in the beginning of the novel that the environment is to be a crucial factor: it opens *in medias res* with the introduction of a “new copywriter” to Pym’s Publicity.⁴⁹ Lord Peter is not presented as the detective, or even given his name: he is introduced into the text as he is introduced to the personnel of Pym’s Publicity, as Death Bredon (12). While a reader already familiar with

⁴⁸ Williams, p. 242.

⁴⁹ In *Murder Must Advertise*, Lord Peter goes undercover in an advertising agency to investigate the suspicious death of an employee, Victor Dean. He learns that Dean had discovered the involvement of another, unidentified, employee with a drug-smuggling gang, and was murdered as a consequence. This information leads Wimsey to disguise himself again to attract the attention of Dian de Momerie, a notorious Bright Young Person and a cocaine addict. The sections set in the latter world more obviously evoke the motif of disguise, but both milieux of the novel, according to Sayers, are essentially facades. Wimsey and Chief Inspector Parker ultimately discover that one of the agency’s regular advertisements is being used as a code to direct cocaine suppliers to the major distributor each week.

Wimsey as a series character would know his middle names,⁵⁰ and be able to grasp the clues embedded in his speech and in descriptions of his appearance, he is implicitly disguised by the text itself. Lord Peter does not appear in his true identity until Chapter Five, when he reviews the case with Parker. Before this point, he has created two false identities: Death Bredon and the Harlequin. Sayers set out to “symbolically [oppose] two cardboard worlds—that of the advertiser and the drug-taker”,⁵¹ and she repeatedly emphasizes the idea of the “cardboard world”, where authentic identity has disappeared.

While all milieux are to some degree characterized by performance, as above, *Murder Must Advertise* takes this idea to an extreme; despite the frequency and variability of Lord Peter’s performances, this is the first novel in which he truly goes “undercover”. In this, the idea of the threatening anonymity of the city is turned on its head. Multiple identities carried throughout the story are typically the province of the criminal: indeed, *Unnatural Death* uses the city as Christie frequently does, in order to facilitate a deceptive, and deadly, performance. Christie characterizes disguise almost as an addiction, a dangerous habit that can actually lead to crime. *Murder Must Advertise* plays upon a similar idea, insinuating that these false identities are so prevalent that is necessary for the detective to participate in the “cardboard world” in order to penetrate it. Panek calls the novel a “neo-jonsonian comedy of manners”, and Wimsey a “character who moves from group to group pretending to be something that he is not in order to stimulate action in the form of reactions to him.”⁵² The performances of the novel are more explicit than is usual in the series, but they remain rooted in the detective’s pre-existing identity. Indeed, the fact that he *has* an established identity is crucial: Sayers indicates that the potential loss of identity is a problem of the modern world and capitalist society, as she does in later critical pieces such as “Living to

⁵⁰ The first use of Wimsey’s middle names as a pseudonym is in the 1928 story “The Bibulous Business of a Matter of Taste”, in Dorothy L. Sayers, *Lord Peter Views the Body* (London: Gollancz, 1928) pp. 181-196. As in *Murder Must Advertise*, he is introduced under the pseudonym and his real identity is revealed in the course of the story: he proclaims himself, “Peter Death Bredon Wimsey—a bit lengthy and all that, but handy when taken in installments.” (p. 195)

⁵¹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 209-210.

⁵² Panek, *Watteau’s Shepherds*, p. 101.

Work”.⁵³ In her novels, Sayers grants that characters may be affected by milieux, but emphasizes that they cannot rely on them for a sense of self.

The detective’s disguises in *Murder Must Advertise*, like his previous performances of correctness, are meant to be legible to the reader, if not to other characters. Again, Wimsey shifts his personality as much through speech as through appearance. Like Poirot, he often succeeds by letting others think him a fool; his manner as Death Bredon, which appears to be a regression to an earlier, less mature Wimsey, is in fact the most crucial element of his disguise. A line that Symons selects for particular opprobrium, for instance,⁵⁴ is quite obviously “in character”:

“I hope I’m not interrupting you at one of those moments of ecstasy,” bleated Bredon, “but I just wanted to ask you something. I mean to say, it’s just a question of etiquette, don’t you know, and what’s to be done, so to speak. I mean, look here! You see, Hankie-pankie told me to get out a list of names for a shilling tea, and I got out some awful rotten ones, and then Ingleby came in and I said, ‘What would you call this tea?’ just like that, and he said, ‘Call it Domestic Blend,’ and I said, ‘What-ho! that absolutely whangs the nail over the crumpet.’ Because it struck me, really, as being the caterpillar’s boots.” (45)

The absurdity of “Bredon’s” speech above cannot be understood simply as that of the detective. As Thomas observes,

[T]he study of dialogue cannot focus on utterances in isolation, but rather must consider talk as socially situated and grounded in specific social contexts. The unit of analysis is no longer the individual utterance but sequences of utterances in which the characters’ social relations are dynamically enacted by their interactions, rather than merely being illustrated by them.⁵⁵

Between the character of Wimsey and this speech lies not only his disguise as “Bertie Wooster in horn-rims” (10), but the context of place. The question about workplace etiquette is, underneath its silliness, germane to his murder investigation. His facetious guise is as much a part of his detective process as is Hercule Poirot’s foreignness. In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet Vane specifically identifies his “imitation of the silly-ass-about-

⁵³ in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Gollancz, 1946).

⁵⁴ Symons, p. 145. Panek also seems to overlook the novel’s complexity, and its significance in Sayers’ work of the 1930s, largely because of the hero’s speech patterns, p. 99.

⁵⁵ Thomas, p. 4.

town” as a performance to hide the fact that “he was either frightfully bored or detecting something.”⁵⁶

Lord Peter (as Death Bredon) takes a job at Pym’s Publicity in order to inquire into a mysterious death, but when he connects the victim with a notorious group of Bright Young People, he learns that the agency is inadvertently supporting the illegal drugs trade. This “misuse” of the machinery of advertising associates the criminal enterprise with the workaday world, and characterizes advertising itself as suspect, and addictive. The juxtaposition of two contrasting milieux, one workaday and the other glamorous but grotesque, makes this novel Sayers’ most conceptual. The disguises that take Lord Peter into other worlds nearly overwhelm him; his advertising work appeals to his sense of the absurd, but as it becomes increasingly entwined with what Kenney calls “the debasement of modern life and culture,”⁵⁷ it takes on a darker aspect. Disguise and deception come to represent advertising as much as crime:

Among these phantasms [of advertisements], Death Bredon, driving his pen across reams of office foolscap, was a phantasm too, emerging from this nightmare toil to a still more fantastical existence amid people whose aspirations, rivalries and modes of thought were alien, and earnest beyond anything in his waking experience. Nor, when the Greenwich-driven clocks had jerked on to half-past five, had he any world of reality to which to return; for then the illusionary Mr. Bredon dislimned and became the still more illusionary Harlequin of a dope-addict’s dream; an advertising figure more crude and fanciful than any that postured in the columns of the *Morning Star*. (187-188)

The advertising agency has a profound effect on Wimsey’s social perspective. He proclaims his “honest pride” in “pulling down four solid quid a week. Amazin’ sensation. First time I’ve ever earned a cent” (78). However, the foreignness of the experience sometimes makes his work in advertising nearly as hallucinogenic as his more literal masquerade as the Harlequin.

Wimsey’s first “proper” paying job is opposed to the supposedly “improper” work of detection-for-amusement, and the public-facing work of the advertiser by the hidden work of the detective. However, the two jobs also reflect one another. Wimsey’s

⁵⁶ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Kenney, p. 52.

Harlequin disguise, through which he attracts the notorious socialite Dian de Momerie at a masked ball, is “Advertising, chiefly. One must be different.” (154) The association of disguise with the advertising profession explains Wimsey’s affinity for the job. As R.D. Stock and Barbara Stock observe, disguise is a part of Sayers’ re-figuring of detecting and the detective:

As an agent of justice, Lord Peter is not the poetic figure of the earlier books [...] his Woosterism is mightily revived, but it is part of a deliberate deception, as are his escapades as Harlequin. In other words, these “poetic” aspects are *recognized* as guises. [...] the idiocy of evil is embodied, not in some vulpine egotist, but in a deracinated and aimless class; while the romance and poetry of detecting are centered, not in the middle-aged Lord Peter, but in his sometime protégée, the eager and adolescent officeboy, Ginger Joe. (emphasis original)⁵⁸

The role Wimsey plays in the advertising agency is thus an essential part of Sayers’ transformation of detection from a “hobby” in *Whose Body?*⁵⁹ to a “proper job”, with a duty toward the facts, in *Gaudy Night*.⁶⁰ Despite the fact that the detective plot of *Murder Must Advertise* revolves around an international drug-smuggling operation, small-scale personal dramas are Sayers’ true focus. She highlights the mundane nature of the workplace, and by extension of criminal and investigative activity, by contrast with the Sexton Blake adventures avidly consumed by Ginger Joe. Joe’s idea of a real “tec” (109) is far from the actual practice of detection: Wimsey comments when Parker is attacked,

“In the Sexton Blake book that my friend Ginger Joe has just lent me, the great detective, after being stunned with a piece of lead-piping [...] is taken by boat on a stormy night to a remote house on the coast and flung down a flight of stone steps into a stone cellar. Here he contrives to release himself from his bonds after three hours’ work on the edge of a broken wine-bottle. [...] And here is my own brother-in-law—a man I have known for nearly twenty years—giving way to bad temper and bandages because some three-by-four crook has slugged him one on his own staircase.” (114-115)

⁵⁸ R.D. Stock and Barbara Stock, “The Agents of Evil and Justice in the Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers” in Hannay, pp. 12-22 (p. 21).

⁵⁹ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 36-39.

Throughout the novel, both criminality and detection are humorously but distinctly set apart from glamour, and associated with the workaday (and literally in this novel, with the office).

The contrast between Lord Peter's two disguises, and the worlds in which they operate, makes the novel one of Sayers' most divisive. Sayers' biographer James Brabazon calls it a "very artificial story",⁶¹ while Janice Brown characterizes it as a mature work with "an expanded and more coherent world view."⁶² However, the advertising agency is perhaps the most realistically described human environment in all of her work; its authenticity actually facilitates acceptance of the nightlife milieu by anchoring the novel firmly in the "world-as-experienced". Sayers' personal experience as a copy-writer in an advertising agency enabled her to create perhaps her most like-life milieu.⁶³ Again, Sayers uses conversation and interaction to establish the milieu and the relationship of characters with their environment: petty quarrels, fear of unemployment, unexpected generosity, gossip, and humor evoke a lively office culture. Both plot and conversation are fast-paced in *Murder Must Advertise*, with its large cast of characters and dynamic scenes, in which characters come and go, and conversation becomes polyphonic rather than dialogic:

"Oh, *what* is it?" cried Miss Rossiter.
"I've promised not to tell," said Mr. Bredon.
"Shame, shame!"
"At least, I didn't exactly promise. I was asked not to."
"Is it about Mr. Tallboy's money?"
[...]
"Well, if you know that," said Mr. Bredon artlessly, "in justice to Mrs. Crump—"
His tongue wagged busily.
"Well, I think it's too bad of Mr. Tallboy," said Miss Rossiter. "He's always being rude to poor old Copley. It's a shame. And it's rotten to accuse the charwomen."
"Yes, it is," agreed Miss Parton, "but I've no patience with that Copley creature. He's a tiresome old sneak. He went and told Hankie once that he'd seen me at the dog-races with a gentleman friend. As if it

⁶¹ James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (London: Gollancz, 1981), p. 150.

⁶² Janice Brown, *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy Sayers* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998), p. 117. Opinions also vary as to Sayers' own feelings about the book, but although she acknowledged it as "rather uneven" ("Gaudy Night", p. 210), she finds in it an "integral truth" (*The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941; repr. London: Continuum, 1994), p. 62.

⁶³ From 1922 until 1929 Sayers was a copywriter at the London advertising firm Bensons, where she developed, among others, the Guinness "zoo" campaign.

was any business of his what a girl does out of business hours. Just because anybody's a mere typist it doesn't mean one's a heathen slave. Oh! Here's Mr. Ingleby. I say, *have* you heard about old Copley pinching Mr. Tallboy's fifty quid?"

"You don't say so," exclaimed Mr. Ingleby, shooting a miscellaneous collection of oddments out of the waste-paper basket as a preliminary to up-turning it and sitting upon it. "Tell me quickly. Golly! what a day we're having."

"Well," said Miss Rossiter, lusciously taking up the tale, "somebody sent Mr. Tallboy fifty pounds in a registered envelope—"

"What's all this?" interrupted Miss Meteyard. (146-147)

The dramatic style of the conversation conjures an authentic environment, and establishes a milieu that is at once intellectual and gossipy, hardworking and playful. The fact that the fifty pounds in Mr. Tallboy's desk is a clue is almost beside the point, but as Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis point out, "essentially simple humanness [underlies] all the machinations inherent to crime and its solution."⁶⁴ Crime and detection are embedded in their environment, and as always in Sayers' work, its motivations are small, personal, and situational.

The detection plot of *Murder Must Advertise*, which is full of small deceptions, missed opportunities, and distracting possibilities, is echoed by the multiplicity and lack of straightforwardness evident in office conversation. Thomas points out that,

[W]hat characters intend to say or do in uttering their words on a specific occasion only offers us a partial insight into who they are and how they relate to others in their social sphere. Instead, speakers and hearers may willfully misinterpret, manipulate, and distort their words [...] ensuring that our hold on "character" is both fragile and temporary.⁶⁵

The advertisers are clever people, and their conversation is full of wordplay and jocular insults; this stylized banter overlays both important clues and thematic issues.

"They won't let Mr. Bredon out of this department for a bit," said Miss Meteyard. "They're all up in the air about his Whifflets stunt. Everybody always hoped Dean would do better somewhere else. He was like a favorite book—you liked him so well that you were always yearning to lend him to somebody else."

⁶⁴ Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis, *Conundrums for the Long Week-End: England, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Lord Peter Wimsey* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), p. 7.

⁶⁵ Thomas, p. 65.

“What a savage woman you are,” observed Ingleby, coolly amused. “It’s that kind of remark that gets the university woman a bad name.” He glanced at Willis, who said: “It isn’t the savagery. It’s the fact that there’s no animosity behind it. You are all like that.” “You agree with Shaw—whenever you beat your child, be sure that you do it in anger.” “Shaw’s Irish,” said Bredon. “Willis has put his finger on the real offensiveness of the educated Englishman—he will not even trouble to be angry.” “That’s right,” said Willis. “It’s that awful, bleak, blank—” he waved his hands helplessly—“the façade.” “Meaning Bredon’s face?” suggested Ingleby, mischievously. “Icily regular, splendidly null,” said Bredon, squinting into Miss Rossiter’s mirror. “Strange, to think that a whole Whifflets campaign seethes and burgeons behind this solid ivory brow.” “Mixed metaphor,” said Miss Meteyard. “Pots seethe, plants burgeon.” “Of course; it is a flower of rhetoric culled from the kitchen-garden.” “It’s no use, Miss Meteyard,” said Ingleby, “You might as well argue with an eel.” “Talking of eels,” said Miss Meteyard, abandoning the position, “what’s the matter with Miss Hartley?” (286-287)

This conversation touches on a pivotal issue of identity in *Murder Must Advertise*, that of education; the university-educated are seen by others as a distinctly separate population, a point of view that is dismissed by the characters in the text as much as it is validated by their actions. However, more significant stress is placed on education than class, foreshadowing *Gaudy Night*’s proposition that education facilitates class mobility. The play with words characterized here as an essential ability of the advertiser indicates a facility with literature and an awareness of high culture, which are pressed into the service of consumer culture. The simultaneous pull of the high and low is a recurring motif in the advertising milieu, and reproduces the conflicting characterizations of detection as an intellectual pursuit or a mundane job.

Within the detective plot, conversations like the above reiterate the essential role of the detective as “reader”. Throughout all of her novels, Sayers refrains, except for brief comments, from presenting the perspective of any character save that of the detective,

and that is only revealed at intervals.⁶⁶ Access to other characters, for the reader as well as for the detective, is largely based in their speech. Hühn, who characterizes the criminal as the writer of an alternative text designed to prevent an accurate reading, notes that other suspects also “tamper with the text of everyday reality, changing or rearranging signs so as to conceal or transform the appearance of their guilty little secrets.”⁶⁷ Even those who are not suspects may become, in Hühn’s term, authors, so that, “before the detective can read the criminal’s meaning correctly, he has first to disentangle and eliminate the various secondary meanings and stories.”⁶⁸ The conversation-driven text only heightens this problematic multiplicity, since the repetition and reinterpretation inherent in these conversations further obscures meaning.

In the case of *Murder Must Advertise*, the *style* of speech also largely characterizes the place in which it occurs. Conversations such as those above serve to bolster an image of the workplace already established from the very first pages: it is gossipy, fast-paced, competitive, and haphazardly organized. The scant physical details of these scenes serve to magnify this impression, as if the narrator herself were too busy for description. The space of the office is briefly described at the beginning of the novel, but its essential place-based character is more abstract. It is represented through the interaction of colleagues, but defined, particularly in Miss Parton’s complaint above, by the separation between work and leisure. “What a girl does out of business hours,” she implies, is unrelated to her role in the workplace. This implicitly gendered comment is equally applicable to the detective; it is in order to preserve his “business hours” identity that his many transformations are necessary. Miss Parton’s emphasis on the temporal and physical limits of her work identity reinforce the idea of metropolitan multiplicity, as well as that of the advertising agency as a place of role-playing.

⁶⁶ As well as Lord Peter’s point of view, Sayers’ novels also present Miss Climpson’s, Parker’s, and Harriet’s from time to time, but only when they are performing the detective role in the text. Narrative focalization becomes more complicated and significant in the later *Gaudy Night*, as discussed in Chapter Six; in that instance, the novel exclusively adopts Harriet’s point of view. The limits of focalization are one of the primary questions of the novel, but the shifted point of view also offers a previously-unavailable external perspective on Wimsey himself.

⁶⁷ Hühn, p. 456.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

The central role, of course, is that being played by Lord Peter as Death Bredon, an impersonation sustained in the text until Chapter 5, and in terms of the plot until the conclusion, where he tells the rest of the staff (in another deception) that he had come there, “for a bet. A friend of mine laid me ten to one I couldn’t earn my own living for a month.” (348) Wimsey does not embrace the transformations and dramatic revelations of Sherlock Holmes, but his disguises of modulation take on increased urgency in *Murder Must Advertise*. He is disguised throughout the novel, except for when he is with Parker, and at the conclusion. He is even “in disguise” as himself when he meets Dian and her drug dealer Milligan at a party and lays a trap by feigning disapproval of “his cousin Bredon”. Again, he accentuates his own character, giving an impression of over-formality and patrician awkwardness: “‘I suspect [Bredon],’ said Wimsey, in solemn and awful tones, ‘of having to do with—*smug-drugling*—I mean, dash it all—drug-smuggling.’” (200) (emphasis original) According to Bakhtin, “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types...and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.” He notes that language divides itself into “social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions”.⁶⁹ The diversity of social dialects available to the detective means that he can disguise himself, as it were, with his own speech. This facility may be characterized simply as socially expedient, as it is in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. More significantly, though, Wimsey’s access to such diversity within himself may also be an expression of the fractured character of the modern man; as the various roles build upon each other, they lead toward the complex character who appears in *The Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night*.

Throughout the story, his roles threaten to impinge on one another, necessitating multiple quick-changes toward the end of the novel to keep them publicly separate. To Wimsey, though, his roles begin to blend within himself, and the “shadowy simulacrum of himself that signed itself on every morning in the name of Death Bredon” (187)

⁶⁹ Bakhtin, p. 262.

becomes more closely identified with the detective himself. When Parker arrests him (in order to protect him from assault), he protests:

“[T]hat’ll mean I can’t be at the office Monday.”

“Naturally.”

“But that won’t do. I’ve got to get that Whifflets campaign finished. Armstrong wants it particularly; I can’t let him down. And besides, I’ve got interested in the thing.”

Parker gazed at him in astonishment.

“Is it possible, Peter, that you are developing a kind of business morality?”

“Dash it all, Charles! You don’t understand. It’s a really big scheme.” (323-324)

Sayers remarked that in creating her “two cardboard worlds...it was suitable that Peter, who stands for reality, should never appear in either except disguised.”⁷⁰ These disguises, however, have altered his perception of the world in which he lives. He becomes slowly more disillusioned by advertising, and Sayers embeds within her development of his character a sharp criticism of the consumer society on which advertising relies:

He had never realised the enormous commercial importance of the comparatively poor. Not on the wealthy, who buy only what they want when they want it, was the vast superstructure of industry founded and built up, but on those who, aching for a luxury beyond their reach and for a leisure for ever denied them, could be bullied or wheedled into spending their few hardly won shillings on whatever might give them, if only for a moment, a leisured and luxurious illusion. (187)

As she often did, Sayers developed this point further in a 1941 talk, “Why Work?”, urging “a thorough-going revolution in our whole attitude to work”.

Can you remember—it is already getting difficult to remember—what things were like before the war? The stockings we bought cheap and threw away to save the trouble of mending? The cars we scrapped every year to keep up with the latest fashion in engine design and streamlining? [...] The scattered hairpins and smashed crockery, the cheap knickknacks of steel and wood and rubber and glass and tin that we bought to fill in an odd half hour at Woolworth’s and forgot as soon as we had bought them? The advertisements imploring and exhorting and cajoling and menacing and bullying us to glut ourselves with things we did not want, in the name of snobbery and idleness and sex appeal?⁷¹

⁷⁰ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 209-210.

⁷¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Why Work?* (London: Methuen, 1942), p. 3, 4-5.

Brown argues that *Murder Must Advertise* contains a powerful religious moral, that advertisers' "abuse of the consumers involves preying on their frailties by encouraging their tendency to indulge in the Deadly Sins of Pride, Envy, Sloth, Avarice, and Gluttony."⁷² Lord Peter's immersion in another milieu has altered a fundamental "relation between the individual and society",⁷³ and in doing so affected both the depiction of the man and the society itself. He has always been portrayed as a character who successfully communicates with people from other classes, but this is the first novel in which he attains real empathy.

The conclusion of the novel meditates on advertising itself, as Wimsey sees a familiar London street scene with a new gaze:

Wimsey stepped out into Southampton Row. Facing him was a long line of hoardings. Enormous in its midst stretched a kaleidoscopic poster:

NUTRAX FOR NERVES

In the adjoining space, a workman with a broom and a bucket of paste was unfolding a still more vast and emphatic display in blue and yellow:

ARE YOU A WHIFFLER? IF NOT, WHY NOT?

A 'bus passed, bearing a long ribbon display upon its side:

WHIFFLE YOUR WAY ROUND BRITAIN!

The great campaign had begun. He contemplated his work with a kind of amazement. With a few idle words on a sheet of paper he had touched the lives of millions. Two men, passing, stopped to stare at the hoarding.

"What's this Whiffing business, Alf?"

"I dunno. Some advertising stunt or other. Cigarettes, ain't it?"

"Oh, Whifflets?"

"I suppose so."

"Wonderful how they think of it all. What's it about, anyway?"

"Gawd knows. Here, let's get a packet and see." (351-352)

⁷² Brown, p. 129.

⁷³ Culler, p. 221.

The pervasiveness of advertising and its integration into the visual fabric of the city is a repeated motif of the novel, as well as, ultimately, the key to the mystery itself.⁷⁴ If Sayers' characterization is "Dickensian",⁷⁵ the same epithet may be applied to her attention to the details of daily life: as Erin Horakava notes, "Sayers almost writes a historical fiction of the present. [...] [She] insists on detailing structures in flux".⁷⁶ Through such detail, Sayers comments on contemporary culture while, at the same time, focusing attention on the lives of individuals rather than on the abstract romance of detection. The closing street scene of *Murder Must Advertise* evokes a city in motion, and alludes to the engines of commerce that thrive on that movement. The repetition, in this conclusion, of these two particular advertising campaigns re-iterates the duality of Wimsey's character in the novel, as detective and advertising copywriter. As a detective, he discovers that the Nutrax weekly headline is used as a code by the drug smuggling gang. This, in turn, leads to the resolution of the case that introduced him to the Pym's Publicity. As a copywriter, the Whifflets campaign is his brainchild, and represents another application of his talent for communication. The continual presence and recurrence of advertising is presented as an inescapable aspect of the city; its insistent messages, and the possibility of their co-option for alternative purposes, accentuates the overwhelming possibilities of the city's multiplicity. For Brabazon, "because clue-making so often involves the routine and minutiae of ordinary life, the detective novel can tell us more about contemporary society than many a more pretentious literary form."⁷⁷ The modern condition, Sayers implies, incorporates a dangerous enthusiasm for possible alternate identities, even those that are only fantastic and fleeting.

Kenney comments that Sayers' work, her later novels particularly, "*must* take place in the settings used" (emphasis original).⁷⁸ Sayers protested against "stories divorced from

⁷⁴ The headline of the weekly Nutrax advertisement in the *Morning Star* directs the drug distributors and receivers to a different pub each week, and the code word between them is Nutrax. The "inside man" at Pym's has had the role of alerting the distributors to the meeting place ahead of time by letting them know the first letter of the headline.

⁷⁵ Haycraft, p. 136.

⁷⁶ Erin Horakava (erinhorakava@gmail.com), (12/03/2014), email to Brittain Bright and J.C. Bernthal (qoc2014@gmail.com).

⁷⁷ Brabazon, p. xv.

⁷⁸ Kenney, p. 62.

their settings,”⁷⁹ arguing that the integration of plot, setting, and theme was as essential to the detective novel as to any other work of fiction. The potential of “place” to situate social interaction and personal identity is crucial to her agenda. This argument, made after the success of *Gaudy Night*, validates the success of Sayers’ undertaking; the detective, through encounters with various milieux, both matures as a character and expands the possibilities of the detective novel. For Buell, “the concept of place [...] gestures in at least three directions at once—toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond”.⁸⁰ The physical places in *The Unpleasantness of the Bellona Club* and *Murder Must Advertise* are of less interest in the novels than their social roles, and the relations of individuals with them and within them. Sayers’ increasing inclination to shift the focus of her work from evidential description toward social interaction establishes milieu as something both psychologically constituted and externally viable. The roles that characters play, and the establishment of these roles in conversation, create a sense of place and establish distinct milieux. They also participate in the author’s project of turning the detective into “a complete human being”.⁸¹ However, it is in *Gaudy Night*, Sayers’ most place-oriented novel, that place in all its definitions becomes manifest and foundational.

⁷⁹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 217.

⁸⁰ Buell, *Environmental Criticism*, p. 63.

⁸¹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 211.

The “Artistic Unity” of Place: Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Gaudy Night*

Dorothy L. Sayers recounts, in her 1937 essay “Gaudy Night,” how she “set out, fifteen years ago, to write the first ‘Lord Peter’ book [...] with the avowed intention of producing ‘something less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel.’”¹ Though, in hindsight, she pronounces *Whose Body?* “conventional to the last degree,” she acknowledges that “each successive book of mine worked gradually nearer to the sort of thing I had in view.”² As Chapter Five demonstrates, part of this development was her increasing emphasis on “fictional-worlds-as-experienced.”³ The character of Lord Peter Wimsey developed significantly through his ability to participate in various milieux, and the growing humanity of the detective is realized as the social construction of place likewise becomes more multilayered. Sayers’ penultimate novel, *Gaudy Night* (1935), is her crowning achievement in writing “how other people live”,⁴ but it is also perhaps *the* essential place novel of the Golden Age. *Gaudy Night* references, extends, and develops all of the elements that this thesis has developed as manifestations of place: it positions the college as both the center of the story and the scene of the crime; it explores a shifting contemporary understanding of the university; it creates characters through their interaction with place; it has a wealth of symbolic implications about character, psychology, and detection; and it is developed both as a physical and conceptual place through social interaction and conversation. The completely textual construction of the fictional college is noteworthy, as is its reworking of the fictional character of Oxford University.

¹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 208.

² Ibid., p. 209.

³ Herman, p. 243.

⁴ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 218.

“Gaudy Night” is a passionate defense of the detective novel as a work of literature, which in itself demonstrates significant changes in Sayers’ own attitude toward the genre; as her own novels developed, so did her idea of the ideal detective novel. Though she declared in 1928 that “the detective-story is part of the literature of escape, and not of expression”,⁵ she found her own work shifting under the pressure of the novelistic detective story that she desired; the publication that same year of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* indicates that such a change was already underway. As discussed in Chapter Five, she worked from this point to explore ways that characters might expand in tandem with a sense of the contemporary world. *Gaudy Night* concerns the emotional and intellectual re-awakening of Sayers’ heroine, Harriet Vane, and the resolution of her relationship with Lord Peter; as always, the author’s interest lay at least as much in human emotion as in detection, and she explored both, particularly in this novel, through the relationship of character to place.

She expressed her frustration with her contemporaries (of whom she was a voracious reader, as crime critic for the Sunday Times from 1933-1935) because they chose settings for novelty rather than purpose:

It is only of recent years that we have had detective stories composed entirely of plot, without theme, or with the theme a mere incidental embroidery. We have even had stories divorced from their settings; bodies are discovered (for instance) in churches, theatres, railway stations, ships, aeroplanes, and so forth, which might just as well have been discovered anywhere else, the setting being put in only for picturesqueness and forming no *integral* part either of theme or plot. To make an artistic unity it is, I feel, essential that the plot should derive from the setting, and that both should form part of the theme. From this point of view, *Gaudy Night* does, I think, stand reasonably well up to the test; the setting is a women’s college; the plot derives from, and develops through, episodes that could not have occurred in any other place; and the theme is the relation of scholarship to life. (emphasis original)⁶

Gaudy Night is effectively Sayers’ argument for a structurally, logically, and thematically integrated detective novel, and it is clear that an essential aspect of this integration was her choice of place. Her use of spatial relations within that place, of

⁵ Sayers, Introduction to *Omnibus*, p. 109.

⁶ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 216-7.

quotation and metatextual references, and of character development integrated into plot development generate a simultaneous experience of several different types of narrative, recalling Roland Barthes' analysis:

[N]arrative is a hierarchy of instances. To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in 'storeys', to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative 'thread' on to an implicitly vertical axis; to read a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next.⁷

Such movement is vital to *Gaudy Night*, in the reading as in its creation. It is a "whodunit", but the simplicity of that designation belies the fact that the novel opens up possibilities for a number of readings, each inscribed within another. Because place itself necessitates a multiplicity of interpretation, it allows the complexity of the novel to emerge. Malpas proposes that

[T]he identity of any particular place is determined, not in terms of a simple set of clearly defined parameters, but rather by means of a complex of factors deriving from the elements encompassed by that place: places are established in relation to a complex of subjective, intersubjective and objective structures that are inseparably conjoined together within the overarching structure of place.⁸

The identity of the narrative place is a central question in *Gaudy Night*, and the complexity of that issue is central to the detective plot as well as to the greater theoretical argument of the novel.

Though it is in many ways atypical of the genre, *Gaudy Night* may be the most place-defined of the Golden Age detective novels. Sayers embraces the limitations and idiosyncrasies of place in all her novels, but in this instance she uses it to draw together a character's personal development, a philosophical argument about women's education, and a consideration of the detective genre itself. While remaining within the literal parameters of the genre, *Gaudy Night* wanders far outside the remit of pure detection. Sayers simultaneously parodies and interrogates the detective story; as her heroine wanders dark hallways and accumulates volumes of information without

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Flamingo, 1984), p. 87.

⁸ Malpas, *Place and Experience*, p. 185.

reaching a solution, the author asks what defines detection: is it about “arrang[ing] the evidence”⁹ and “viewing the question academically and on its merits” (313) or “what the police call routine work” (451)? In Sayers’ earlier, simpler view of the detective novel, it was “the one form of novel today that does not insist that we must lose ourselves in order to find ourselves; the one form of contemporary literature in which our cool impersonality need never fail.”¹⁰ *Gaudy Night*, contrary to this proposition, is about the loss and rediscovery of self, and the failure of the detective to remain impersonal. Its twist is that while the detective plot scrupulously follows the rules of fair play, it asks the reader to adopt an impersonality that is beyond the detective herself. The novel’s deliberations complete a process through which, in the course of the Lord Peter Wimsey series, detection shifts from the “hobby”¹¹ of a dilettante gentleman to a deadly serious calling. In *Gaudy Night*, detection achieves the status of a “proper job” (36), an idea that also plays into the novel’s engagement with the changing position of women. Though Sayers gestured toward this theme in previous novels, *Gaudy Night*’s setting in a women’s college brings it to the fore. Detection and scholarship are intimately tied to the idea of a “proper job” as the right and obligation of every individual, and both are central to the protagonist’s struggle to come to peace with herself.¹² The novel’s repeated emphasis on facts and truth, in both theoretical

⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, (London: Gollancz, 1935), p. 310. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰ Sayers, Introduction, p. 118.

¹¹ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, p. 12.

¹² The detective plot of *Gaudy Night* concerns an outbreak of poison-pen letter writing and destructive incidents at Harriet Vane’s alma mater, the fictional Shrewsbury College, Oxford. After returning for a Gaudy, she is later asked by the Dean to help discover the perpetrator. She compiles a dossier of the letters and clues, and comes close to catching the “poltergeist” several times; however, she is unable to solve the case, and, after events escalate, she consults Lord Peter Wimsey, who sees a pattern in the information that Harriet has, because of personal preoccupations, been unable to identify. Harriet’s personal life is the core of the philosophical and romantic plots of the novel. An author of detective novels, she has become famous after being accused of the murder of her lover; her trial and exoneration are the plot of *Strong Poison*. Sayers declared that her “infanticidal intention” was to marry them off and end the series, but that she “could not marry Peter off to the young woman he had [...] rescued from death and infamy, because I could find no form of words in which she could accept him without loss of self-respect” (“*Gaudy Night*”, pp. 210-211). Harriet fears it would be impossible to marry and retain her intellectual integrity, and believes that her scandalous post life would taint her potential happiness with Peter. She is also afraid that the culprit in the case is one of the dons, and that her academic ideals will be destroyed too. However, in the solution Peter reveals that the scout Annie—whose husband lost his degree and his job when Miss de Vine found a fraudulent claim in his thesis, and subsequently killed himself—has directed the attacks, by extension, at all academic women, and at women who place jobs above family and maternal roles. She is the polar opposite of the dons, and represents the dangers of single-minded love. Peter fears that the solution to the case will turn Harriet against romance, but instead his honesty convinces her that balance between love and intellectual independence is possible.

and practical contexts, re-frames detection as an academic pursuit. In the end, Lord Peter's victory appears as that of a good student, who has utilized available information to reach a logical and well-supported conclusion.

Gaudy Night is a sprawling novel, though that word usually applies to Victorian sagas about multiple generations, and *Gaudy Night* covers less than one year at one Oxford college, and the investigation of one minor criminal. Its dense networks of characters echo those of Collins, who wrote before the strictures of genre began to close down narrative experimentation; it opens out where many detective novels close in. Even more than in Sayers' previous novels, the community and personal relationships are paramount, and integral to the detective plot. There is neither a murder, nor a neat circle of suspects. Instead, the case is one more of menace than crime and the circle of suspects, though technically limited to perhaps a dozen people, closes and re-opens, all the while turning in upon itself in a conflation of names, titles, and new characters introduced at seemingly random points throughout the narrative. This apparent lack of the expected narrative arc is indicative of the problematic openness toward which Sayers gestures throughout the novel. The novel is effectively unified by its intense focus on the college, and Sayers interweaves the academic place with the concept of detection throughout. The ongoing construction within the college is a repeated motif, as is the accessibility of the interior spaces. The association of particular characters to places is essential, though it is sometimes pronounced and sometimes very subtle. Most importantly, perhaps, the question of perspective, in narration and in reading, is essential to the comprehension of place.

Shrewsbury College is essentially a character in the novel; its physicality is a dominant textual element, and it clearly embodies a variety of symbolic functions. Some critics have read the college in ways that foreclose the complexity of the narrative. Anne K. McClellan reads the maternal as the guiding force of the text and the character of the college and university within it: "In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers seems to be arguing for both a retreat from, and a return to the mother through her analysis of women's roles in the novel. Virtually everything within the university assumes displaced maternal

functions.”¹³ Brown presents the university in terms of a quasi-religious intellectual idealism: “The barriers to the mutual affirmation of [Peter and Harriet’s] love for each other are finally removed because, in returning to Oxford, they reaffirm another and higher love.”¹⁴ John Dougill argues that Oxford in literature offers a glimpse of an exclusive society, and appears as a classical ideal.¹⁵ The college and the university act as receptacles for various symbolic qualities throughout the novel, but these meanings also shift and transform in the course of the story. The several “storeys” of the text include, besides the detective and romance plots, meditations on equality, marriage, and work; the place of the inexplicable in detection; and the fiction writer’s obligations to truth. Place, though not the only unity in the novel, supports and informs all of these readings.

The complex construction of place in *Gaudy Night* is embedded in the construction of the novel itself. Sayers thought it her best-planned work, but:

By one of those curious ironies which provide so wholesome a check to the vanity of authors, *Gaudy Night* has been loudly condemned by some critics for its lack of construction. It would be truer to say that it is the only book I have ever written which has any construction at all, beyond a purely artificial plot-construction. Some of the blame is undoubtedly mine for not having made the construction more explicit (though I thought I was laying its articulations bare with an openness verging on indecency). I really think, however, that the construction was obscured by the conviction, still lingering in many people’s minds, that a detective plot cannot bear any relation to a universal theme.¹⁶

Sean Latham, in his defense of Sayers, argues that, “In seeking to create a legitimate aesthetic for her novels, Sayers threatened to cross a jealously policed boundary between high and popular culture, evoking from both camps charges of arrogance, snobbery, and pretension.”¹⁷ Sayers’ examination of the academic world is an intensely personal exercise, but her aim remains, as in her other milieu novels, to tell

¹³ Ann K. McClellan, *How British Women Writers Transformed the Campus Novel* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2012), p. 113.

¹⁴ Brown, p.148.

¹⁵ John Dougill, *Oxford in English Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998)

¹⁶ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 216.

¹⁷ Sean Latham, “*Am I a Snob?*”: *Modernism and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 199.

her readers “how other people live”¹⁸ and to reclaim a “universal theme” for the detective novel. Her efforts to integrate the “two kinds of novel”, though popularly successful, have been criticized both for pretension and for lack of ambition. Raymond Chandler felt that the detective aspect should be left out altogether: “the weakest element in [Sayers’ novels] is the part that makes them detective stories, the strongest the part which could be removed without touching the ‘problem of logic and deduction.’”¹⁹ Haycraft praised Sayers’ efforts, but felt that “the author, in her frank and laudable experimentation intruded unwittingly on the dangerous no-man’s-land which is neither good detection nor good legitimate fiction”.²⁰ Contemporary critics have tended to focus on the social implications of the novel, and ignore the detection aspect. Though the “mystery” element of the novel has been dismissed in many cases, *Gaudy Night* is a meticulously structured detective story, as well as a commentary on and analysis of detection itself.

“It’s quite easy when you know”: Perspective and Architecture at Shrewsbury

Gaudy Night is not a novel that happens to be set in Oxford; it is dependent upon that setting and addresses it directly. Throughout her career, Sayers queried the separation of the literary novel and the novel of detection, and endeavored to meld the two; during the 1930s, she was also searching for a solution to the romance plot she introduced to her series in *Strong Poison* (1930). She was also mulling over ideas for a stand-alone novel about a woman dealing with the choice between marriage and academia, still seen as incompatible at the time. It was when giving an address at Oxford that Sayers “discovered that in Oxford I had the solution to all my three problems at once.”²¹

On the intellectual platform, alone of all others, Harriet could stand free and equal with Peter, since in that sphere she had never been false to her own standards. By choosing a plot that should exhibit intellectual integrity as the one great permanent value in an emotionally unstable

¹⁸ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 218. (See Chapter 5, note 2 for full quotation.)

¹⁹ Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder”, in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992) [1944], pp. 222-237 (p. 232).

²⁰ Haycraft, p.138.

²¹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 213.

world I should be saying the thing that, in a confused way, I had been wanting to say all my life. Finally, I should have found a universal theme which could be made integral both to the detective plot and to the "love-interest" which I had, somehow or other, to unite with it.²²

The fictional college is an outgrowth and a redefinition of a pre-existing Oxford, which is integral to the fictional place and the story. Place in *Gaudy Night*, because it is set within and connected to a factual place, must directly address the thematics of that place. Currie disputes the idea that "fictional works [...] are characterized by their lack of semantic connections with the world":

Surely the reader of the Sherlock Holmes stories is supposed to understand that "London," as it occurs in the stories, refers to London. Someone who did not have the slightest idea what city London was, or who thought that the location of the story was as fictional as the characters in it, would not properly understand the story.²³

The divide between the location as it seems to be and as it is, is a frequent source of disconnection in the novel, but Sayers' choice to set the novel in Oxford introduces a specific agenda. Lennard J. Davis notes that depictions of place in fiction "contain embedded social meaning. No author can actually recreate a place, but [...] the location becomes in effect reshaped through the intersection of the literary imagination and the social mythology."²⁴ Thus, the presence of the known and established idea of the university underlies the fictional world of the novel, even as the fictional place rewrites the university. Catherine Durie describes the redefinition of academic character in terms of a gender shift: "[a]lthough our attention is focused primarily on the college, redefinition radiates out to Oxford itself; this is an Oxford novel, but one in which the experience of university and city is filtered through women's perceptions."²⁵ The novel is controlled by a woman's narrative voice, and focused on women's concerns, hence the Oxford of *Gaudy Night* is a woman's Oxford, in which men are characters but not masters. Even Lord Peter is to some degree a marginal man: though he is in Harriet's thoughts, he does not appear as the detective until over halfway through the novel. When he does, he uses the material of her detective work as the

²² Ibid.

²³ Currie, p. 5.

²⁴ Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York; London: Methuen, 1987), p. 55.

²⁵ Catherine E. Durie. "'Of ladies intellectual...': *Gaudy Night* and Academic Women" in *Women in Higher Education: Past, Present and Future*, ed. by Mary R. Masson and Deborah Simonton (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1996), p. 47.

basis of his own, and thus performs more like a good student, who synthesizes learned information, than like an independent scholar.

Gaudy Night's academic re-definition of the detective novel extends even into its structure, which is markedly different from that of a traditional detective story: if anything the novel's form reflects the structure of the academic year. It begins in the summer holiday, slowly begins to develop in the autumn, and becomes fully absorbing in the winter term, when Harriet returns to Oxford. She gathers information throughout the final two terms, and attempts a synthesis; the structure of her investigation may be construed as an effort to "pass" as a detective. During the shifts and pauses of the case Harriet returns to London, and her separations from the university increasingly reflect the structure of academic terms. As in a real academic year, the breaks feel somewhat halting and arbitrary: only when the end is reached, of the year or of the story, can there be a true break. The formal changes reflect other structural changes to the procedural pattern: the "detective" is a writer of fiction, and the nebulous crime is "just the kind of thing to do the worst possible damage to University women."²⁶ (80) It is documented in a large dossier full of precision but without a conclusion, and the key to the mystery is revealed in a long, theoretical conversation in which two detectives search for motives and suspects.

The seeming imprecision of the novel, however, is itself precise and intentional. While Sayers punctiliously follows the "fair-play" rules, she exposes the writing process in the meta-narrative of Harriet's struggles with her novel. As Peter comments when Harriet shows him her dossier of the case: "I'll say one thing for the writing of detective fiction: you know how to put your story together, how to arrange the evidence." (310) His compliment of her "writerly instincts" is an implicit acknowledgement that the novel itself (being guided, as it must be, by "writerly

²⁶ Sayers notes, "There was one crime which could readily be dealt with by academic authorities, and which they would be particularly anxious to screen from publicity, and that was the crime of disseminating obscene libels, and committing malicious damage. It was the kind of crime which the world in general would be ready enough to connect with a community of celibate women, and which, for that very reason, would automatically place all the members of the college staff under the suspicion both of each other and of the reader." ("Gaudy Night", p. 213.)

instincts”) is similarly organized, were the reader able to see it. Harriet compares the “unnatural [...] incredible symmetry” of her work in progress with her investigation:

Human beings were not like that; human problems were not like that; what you really got was two hundred or so people running like rabbits in and out of a college, doing their work, living their lives, and actuated all the time by motives unfathomable even to themselves, and then, in the midst of it all—not a plain, understandable murder, but an unmeaning and inexplicable lunacy. (223)

The very language of this passage echoes the confusion of the true mystery as opposed to the detective puzzle: clarity of exposition is replaced by generalities, and an overflowing of clauses is brought to a hard stop not by a conclusion but by a contradiction. The end of the passage is also an unsupported assumption: the criminal’s actions may seem lunatic, but they are not without meaning. On the contrary, her goals are clear, her actions pre-meditated, and her motives consistent with her own value system. Harriet is aware that her novel is too neat, but she misleads herself into opposing fiction and fact as she does the mind and the body.

The narrative perspective of *Gaudy Night* is Harriet’s throughout, and this technique misleads the reader as Harriet herself is misled. As the percipient don Miss de Vine warns, “It’s a great mistake to see one’s own subject out of proportion to its background.” (25) The question of perspective and “perspectivization”²⁷ looms large in *Gaudy Night*. The novel’s single-character focalization is unique in Sayers’ work; in departing from her typical third-person objective narration, she also eschews movement between points of view. In Sayers’ other work, the narration offers a measure of detachment, often through a wry comment, even when events are focalized through Peter. As mentioned in Chapter Five,²⁸ Sayers’ narratives also frequently veer into the thoughts and points of view of Inspector Parker, Miss Climpson, Harriet, and others, depending who is performing the detective role; they also offer brief glimpses into the thoughts of secondary characters, usually for the purpose of commentary. Thus, the shift into a single consciousness is a significant choice on the part of the author, and

²⁷ “Perspectivization [in narrative literature] [...] consequently means subjectivization.” Stanzel, pp. 123-124.

²⁸ See note 74, Chapter 5.

indicates a powerful underlying agenda. Though conversation still accounts for much of the exposition in *Gaudy Night*, the absence of another perspective alters the presentation of the place, as well as of the individuals involved. One subtly significant example of the novel's commitment to Harriet's point of view is that Peter is called throughout by his proper name, untitled.²⁹ In earlier novels, though he is called "Peter" in intimate conversations (with women—male friends call him Wimsey), the narration consistently refers to him as "Wimsey". The change of the detective's name may mean a number of things: Sayers is finalizing his transformation into a "complete human being",³⁰ and establishing his equality with Harriet, thus resolving the romance plot. The removal of his title also hints at the removal of his role as the main detective. However, more than any of these possibilities, calling him "Peter" personalizes the narrative, and indicates that he, like every other aspect of the novel, will become known through Harriet's point of view.

While that point of view is revelatory with respect to Peter, it is problematic with respect to the college. Because the depiction of Shrewsbury and Oxford are linked to the mental state of the character, Harriet is, in Buell's words, largely responsible for their "placeness", which is "co-constituted environmentally, socially, and phenomenologically through acts of perception."³¹ For David Mickelsen, "the teeming world of the nineteenth-century narrative is in the twentieth often narrowed to an individual, and the world becomes an adjunct to or function of that character."³² *Gaudy Night* manages to encompass both the teeming world, and the narrowness of an individual's perspective, and to establish a narrative tension between the two. Harriet's character development becomes a structural aspect of the novel, but there are continual hints that there are aspects of the mystery she cannot see. This narrative limitation is structurally different to that in *The Rising of the Moon*: rather than placing limits *outside* the narrative perspective, Sayers positions limitation *within* it.

²⁹ Thus, he is also called Peter throughout this chapter.

³⁰ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p. 211.

³¹ Buell, *Environmental Criticism*, p. 145.

³² David Mickelsen, "Types of Spatial Structure" in *Spatial Form in Narrative*, ed. by Jeffrey R. Smitten and Ann Daghistany (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 63-78 (p. 70).

These narrative limitations are both theoretical and functional. The reader sees the college through Harriet's eyes, and feels both her idealism and her disillusionment; thus Sayers can offer the "psychological red-herring"³³ of Harriet's preoccupation with, and ambivalence toward, intellectualism and celibacy. Additionally, the reader is bound to Harriet's point of view within the textual place and time. Sayers' novels do not often offer place-descriptions to stage "the scene of the crime", but no other is as dependent on movement within place as *Gaudy Night*.

Shrewsbury College is described not from a single, orienting point, but through a constantly moving perspective: isolated parts of the college materialize at different moments in the text, and do not produce a coherent whole. When Harriet returns late one night,

[She] let herself quietly through the grille dividing the Traffic Entrance from the rest of College and began to cross the Old Quad towards Tudor. The weather had turned finer, and there was a pale glimmer of cloudy moonlight. Against that glimmer, Harriet, skirting the corner of Burleigh Building, observed something humped and strange about the outline of the eastern wall, close to where the Principal's private postern led out into St. Cross Road. (141)

Soon after, when she is walking back from the New Quad,

A quick patter of slippers along the passage between the Hall and Queen Elizabeth was approaching rapidly.
On an impulse, Harriet stepped back and pushed open the Chapel door. (148)

The structures within the college walls, as well as the entrances and exits themselves, relate to one another but seem to do so in instances rather than absolutely: unlike in Christie's houses, relative locations do not provide significant information. The various places within Shrewsbury refuse to remain stable, much less to coalesce in a way that would allow the reader to "move" through the fictional college without Harriet. The college is effectively an unmappable place, and despite the fact that Harriet asks for, and receives, a plan of the college (105), a map is not included in the

³³ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p. 217.

novel.³⁴ As mentioned in Chapter One, the importance of maps in the detective genre has been widely overstated, but the omission is particularly notable in this case considering that Sayers “engaged a kindly and competent architect to design me a feasible college, so that I should not tie myself up in my own geography”.³⁵ She did occasionally use maps,³⁶ though, as Bushell points out, they are often deceptive: “maps appear to ground events by presenting an objective, empirical account that will contribute to the search for truth. However, they also partly distract, since the information they provide [...] ultimately proves irrelevant.”³⁷ The refusal of a map seems contrary to the Golden Age rules of detection, but by refusing to provide this distraction, Sayers is actually directing attention toward the structural demands of the detective novel. Her apparent refusal to follow them is, instead, an explicit statement that the relevant evidence is not to be found there.

In creating her fictional college, Sayers reverses established conventions: Michael Innes’ more traditional *Death at the President’s Lodging* (1936), for example, takes place at a fictional college in a fictional Oxbridge-type university, but provides a map of the college on the first page. Sayers’ Shrewsbury is not only located specifically in Oxford, but, with what the author terms “monstrous impertinence”,³⁸ placed in the space actually occupied by the Balliol cricket ground. David Doughan points out that this space is literally more central in Oxford than the real women’s colleges, and reads this location as “a very pointed instance of Sayers claiming an egregiously male space for women”.³⁹ The geographic specificity of the location, which includes a footnote locating the only fictional border of the space, Mansfield Lane (11), places the novel

³⁴ I have, through four readings of this novel, attempted to make a map that takes into account and makes sense of all descriptions and viewpoints. I have concluded that, if not impossible, it requires someone with a much better understanding of college architecture than my own.

³⁵ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 214.

³⁶ Sayers used a county map of Kirkcudbright in her timetable experiment *The Five Red Herrings* (1931), and sketches of country roads and villages in “The Undignified Melodrama of the Bone of Contention” (1928) and *The Nine Tailors* (1934), but these were all extraneous to the story, and none were used to significantly advance a plot. McManis erroneously asserts that “she followed contemporary dictates by including sketches or maps to show settings or aspects of them,” (McManis, p. 329).

³⁷ Bushell, p. 156.

³⁸ Sayers, Author’s Note, *Gaudy Night*, p. 5.

³⁹ David Doughan “Sayers: The Feminist-Not-Quite-Feminist” in *Papers Presented to the Conference: Sayers in the 21st Century*, ed. by David Doughan (Hurstpierpoint: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2003), 31-35 (p. 31).

not only within the conceptual Oxford, but in its factual space. The replacement of the cricket ground with Shrewsbury College is of further importance in that it certainly associates the location with Peter Wimsey, a Balliol alumnus. Though Sayers mentions this association only as an aside, tying Shrewsbury to Balliol further emphasizes the academic equality of the protagonists. Its placement on the cricket ground cannot be insignificant either, given that previous novels establish Peter as a well-known Oxford cricketer; in *Murder Must Advertise*, his skill at cricket betrays his disguise. If cricket is part of what identifies him as Lord Peter Wimsey, then, the appropriation of his college's cricket ground is another removal of his identity, even of his masculinity.

The omission of a map is clearly a part of Sayers' strategy in the re-orientation of the detective novel. Unlike other Oxford detective novels of the period, which are oriented around interiors spaces and locked rooms, and use basically the same place apparatus as in a house,⁴⁰ *Gaudy Night* reaches outward, into the larger college and into Oxford itself. By claiming the college as a part of the factual university, she moves the novel out of the "mystery" designation and instead denotes it a novel of manners and a study of culture. The authentic place informs the fictional place situated within it. Thus, argues Currie, the author "can rely upon a shared background of assumptions, telling us only those things that deviate from or supplement that background, or those things that belong to background and that he feels a need to emphasize."⁴¹ The fore-known background allows the novel to re-frame place within the text and to remind the reader of the relationship between fiction and reality. The reader must read the textual Oxford at least in part through the fictional Shrewsbury, and vice versa. Oxford was already an established fictional character of its own, and the possessor of a powerful typology. For Dougill, the fictional Oxford "came to represent far more than the pursuit of excellence, for in an age of rising materialism and utilitarianism the city was cast as defender of humane and classical ideals."⁴² While Sayers embraces this sentiment, she

⁴⁰ Both J.C. Masterman's *An Oxford Tragedy* (1933) and G.D.H. and Margaret Cole's *Off With Her Head!* (1938) concern a murder within a specific set of rooms, and the possibility of access.

⁴¹ Currie, p. 80.

⁴² Dougill, p. 89.

also uses the specific fictionality of Shrewsbury to question the university's fictional definitions, and to re-contextualize them.

Another reason Sayers rejects the trope of the map is because a map directs the reader toward the investigation of the physical: thus, it would detract from the textual research vital to the academic experience. In other words, the absence of certain specific information means that the reader's "detective work" must be re-framed as research. In a novel so concerned with precision of verbal expression, it is fitting that the college exists solely on a textual level. The absence of the map undermines assumptions about detection, implying that such evidence is fallible, and that Harriet, who insists on absolutes, is misleading herself. That the college is portrayed through action rather than mapped validates the flexibility of thought rather than the certitude of solutions; the resulting place is experiential, and bears out a thematic concern with observation. The indeterminacy of the physical place also interrogates the idea of detection, and the detective's relationship with the reader. As in *The Rising of the Moon*, the reader is simultaneously oriented and dis-oriented by the immediacy and intimacy of the focalization of place. In *Gaudy Night*, the reading experience parallels the experience of the detective, as she patrols the college at night with no warning of what may be around the corner; both the reader and the detective must progress through the case without understanding its boundaries.

A significant portion of *Gaudy Night* is devoted to Harriet's explorations of the college, its entrances and exits, pathways from one building to the next, courtyards and hallways. Place depiction occurs largely in the course of the action. There are few "descriptions" of the college after the first page of *Gaudy Night*, which presents Harriet's idealized memory of the place:

She saw a stone quadrangle, built by a modern architect in a style neither new nor old, but stretching out reconciling hands to past and present. Folded within its walls lay a trim grass plot, with flower-beds splashed at angles and surrounded by a wide stone plinth. Behind the level roofs of Cotswold slate rose the brick chimneys of an older and less formal pile of buildings—a quadrangle also of a kind, but still keeping a domestic remembrance of the original Victorian dwelling-houses that had sheltered the first shy students of Shrewsbury College. (1)

The idealism evoked in this initial passage is quickly sidelined by Harriet's experience of the college, which is far less contemplative, and more problematic. When she takes up the detective role, the college appears constantly in motion, as in the sequence when the fuses are stolen and the college buildings ransacked:

And then, in a shrill cry from someone at the end of the lower corridor [of Tudor]: "There she goes! Look! running across the quad!"

Harriet was carried down the stairs with a rush of twenty or thirty students into the midst of those already milling in the hall. There was a cram in the door-way. She lost Miss Chilperic and was left behind in the struggle. Then, as she thrust her way through on to the terrace, she saw under the dim sky a string of runners stretched across the quad. Voices were calling shrilly. Then, as the first half-dozen or so of the pursuers were outlined against the blazing lower windows of Burleigh, those lights too were blacked out.

She ran, desperately—not to Burleigh, where the uproar was repeating itself, but to Queen Elizabeth, which, she judged, would be the next point of attack. The side-doors would, she knew, be locked. She dashed past the hall stair and through to the portico, where she flung herself upon the main door." (201)

Harriet finds that "[c]rime was too easy in a place like this." (177) As she races around the college, she carries the narrative perspective with her, effectively disabling the reader. This technique generates suspense: the reader, like the detective, does not know what is around the next corner. More importantly, because the place appears only through Harriet's eyes, her interpretation of the events therein takes precedence.

According to Ruth Ronen,

It is in the very nature of narrative texts that information about the world they construct is always mediated by a variety of speakers and positions, that is to say, from a particular perspective on the world and/or by a corresponding narrative stance [...] The elements of the fictional world constructed by spatial expressions should therefore be considered the product of a perspectival filtering.⁴³

Gaudy Night, however, is not mediated by a "variety of speakers," a deviation in the author's practice that should arouse suspicion in the reader. Because the novel is entirely focalized through Harriet, an overall image is never revealed, despite the novel's implicit promise of academic accuracy.

⁴³ Ronen, "Construction of Fictional Space", p. 97.

Of course, the college is not only obscured by the narrative viewpoint; the overall structure is in a continuous state of alteration and upheaval. Changes to the fabric of college form a recurring motif in the novel: continuous construction and renovations potentially indicate instability as well as expansion and modernity. The incessant rebuilding of the college is evidence of the novel's concern with the contemporary world. Daphne Spain describes how early women's colleges "enclosed and secluded" women, while

[M]en's colleges [...] consisted of separate buildings clustered together around common ground. Male students moved from chapel to classroom to their rooms; dormitories had several entrances; rooms were grouped around stairwells instead of on a single corridor; and faculty lived in separate dwellings.⁴⁴

The modernization of women's colleges changes their spatial arrangements, which reflects a shifting notion of educational equality. Shrewsbury College is depicted as a very modern women's college in its continual expansion; significantly, the original "cottage" has been torn down.

The processes of modernization are evident from Shrewsbury's first appearance: on Harriet's visit to the Gaudy, "the new Library wing, now almost complete, showed its bare rafters in a forest of scaffolding" (14). The opening of the Library is a significant event in the novel, but it is made clear that it is only a part of a much greater picture. The Dean tells Harriet,

"I am getting fed up with Openings. We've opened the New Quad, the Chapel (with choral service), the S.C.R. Dining-Room (with lunch to Former Tutors and Fellows), the Tudor Annexe (with Old Students' Tea), the Kitchens and Scouts' Wing (with Royalty), the Sanatorium (with address by the Lister Professor of Medicine), the Council-Chamber and the Warden's Lodgings, and we've unveiled the late Warden's Portrait, the Willett Memorial Sundial and the New Clock. And now it's the Library." (112)

Shrewsbury's metaphorical expansion is based on fact: architectural historian Geoffrey Tyack remarks that, "[s]ome of the largest building schemes of the 1930s were carried out by women's colleges, which expanded after 1920 when women were allowed to

⁴⁴ Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 4.

read for Oxford degrees”.⁴⁵ The novel’s motif of construction illustrates that educational possibilities for women, like the college, are still developing. Though they have been taken into the university, the women’s colleges have not yet achieved the status of their male counterparts, indicated in part by their much older and more established premises; if buildings are physical manifestations of the institutions’ histories, the age and wealth of the men’s colleges clearly privileges male education. However, the continued growth of Shrewsbury exhibits a tenacity on the part of the women’s college, and its determination to achieve an equal place, both literally and metaphorically.

The alteration of the college is also a crucial referent for the process of detection. When Harriet arrives at Shrewsbury to consult with the dons about their mystery, Padgett, the porter, gives her directions to her room: these directions, comic in themselves, prefigure her difficulties with the case.

“Well, it’s on the New Bridge, miss, between Tudor Building and the North Annexe where the Cottage used to be, miss, only of course that’s all done away now and you has to go up by the main staircase past the West Lecture-Room, miss, what used to be the Junior Common Room, miss, before they made the new entrance and moved the stairs, and then turn right and it’s half-way along the corridor.” (86)

The upheaval of continual change is established as a regular feature of the college; its situation as a place in flux allies detection with academia, particularly with its feminine aspect. The construction that is re-forming Shrewsbury College becomes increasingly important as Harriet undertakes her investigation. Signs that no longer exist indicate the path to new places, and specialized knowledge is necessary for successful navigation. Padgett comments, “Oh, it’s quite easy when you know,” (86) which is certainly true of the detective plot: the signs pointing to the culprit are clear, but, in detection as in architecture, they are obscured. In this first instance, Harriet “had, in fact, no difficulty in finding the mysterious Guest Room by the shifting stair and the non-existent Cottage.” (86) She has access to this coded place because she is an initiate, a member of the College. However, though she passes the first tests and finds her way

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Tyack, *Oxford: An Architectural Guide* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1998), p. 289.

swiftly to the right place and into the case, she becomes lost in the overwhelming information following. As is illustrated by Padgett's speech above, simple paths may become tortuous when incorrectly, or overly, signposted.

Gaudy Night uses academic structures to re-contextualize detective activity, but she seeks to complicate both detection and academia rather than to establish a neat duality.

Auden writes,

It is a sound instinct that has made so many detective-story writers choose a college as a setting. The ruling passion of the ideal professor is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake so that he is related to other human beings only indirectly through their common relation to the truth; and those passions, like lust and avarice and envy, which relate individuals directly and may lead to murder are, in his case, ideally excluded. If a murder occurs in a college, therefore, it is a sign that some colleague is not only a bad man but also a bad professor. Further, as the basic premise of academic life is that truth is universal and to be shared with all, the gnosis of a concrete crime and the gnosis of abstract ideas nicely parallel and parody each other.⁴⁶

Sayers insists on the value of truth, but she frankly discounts the possibility that anyone, whether it is a don, a student, or a detective, can exclude human passions. Instead, she argues that the only way to succeed in academia, detection, or love, is to establish a balance of reason and passion. An excess of passion has unbalanced Annie Wilson to the extent that she seeks to disgrace and destroy the woman who discredited her husband, but an excess of reason threatens to unbalance Harriet, who seeks in the university a symbolic place of refuge from her conflicted emotions. During the *Gaudy*, she muses, “[t]o be true to one’s calling, whatever follies one might commit in one’s emotional life, that was the way to spiritual peace.” (34) For Harriet, her work is the thing “that had stood firm in the midst of her indecisions [...] though she was perhaps beginning to feel that she might perhaps do this thing better, she had no doubt that the thing itself was the right thing for her.” (42). However, when she considers her novels,

The books were all right, as far as they went; as intellectual exercises, they were even brilliant. But there was something lacking about them; they read now to her as though they had been written with a mental reservation, a determination to keep her own opinions and personality out of view. [...] What hampered her was this sense of being in the middle of things, pressed upon and bullied by reality. If she could

⁴⁶ Auden, p. 408.

succeed in standing aside from herself she would achieve self-confidence and a better control. That was the great possession in which—with all his limitations—the scholar could count himself blessed: the single eye, directed to the object, not dimmed nor distracted by private motes and beams. (70)

The disjuncture between reason and emotion, also characterized in the story as that between brain and heart or mind and body, seems essential to Harriet's peace of mind. She realizes the failings of the "intellectual exercise" in her fiction, but still idealizes the "single eye" of the scholar.

Sayers' rejection of her genre's pattern suggests that the detective process is not only about logic and rationality, but about "unmeaning": letting go of preconceived responses and divisions and freeing the thought process from a preconceived logical structure. Though Harriet believes she is approaching the case from an academic angle, she fears that reason will fail her as emotion has, so she jumps to unfounded conclusions. Peter observes that, "having more or less made up your mind to a spot of celibacy you are eagerly peopling the cloister with bogies" (312). He is able to see the pattern in the clues because he sees the value of "precarious balance" (382), and can apply reason even in an emotional situation. The novel presents its evidence fairly: its red herring lies in Harriet herself, and in her interpretations. For Peter, the case

"[C]an be solved by a little straight and unprejudiced reasoning."

"Peter. I seem to be behaving very stupidly. But the reason why I want to—to get clear of people and feelings and go back to the intellectual side is that that is the only side of life I haven't betrayed and made a mess of."

"I know that," he said, more gently. "And it's upsetting to think that it may betray you in its turn." (313)

Harriet fails because she cannot "read" the situation as the detective must. Hühn writes that the "textual indeterminacy" of the crime is

[O]nly a temporary illusion caused by the lack of pertinent information on the detective's part. His task consists in delimitating the text by separating the relevant signs from the mass of nonrelevant facts around it, until he is finally able to reduce the polyvalence to the one true meaning, the true story of the crime.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Hühn, p. 455.

The detective novel, for Hühn, “thematizes narrativity itself as a problem, a procedure, and an achievement.”⁴⁸ Nowhere is this more true than in *Gaudy Night*. Harriet has all the “pertinent information” to decipher meaning, but she cannot see the “true story of the crime”; nor can the reader, because it is obscured by her conflicted narrative perspective.

In both its detective and academic functions, *Gaudy Night* continually points out its own misdirection. Sayers’ real innovation in the novel was to embrace a breakdown of genre restrictions while still playing the “game” of detective fiction: the solution, in which Annie is revealed as the malefactor, exemplifies the ideal response of the reader: “Oh, of course! What a fool I was not to see it! Right under my nose all the time!”⁴⁹ The red herrings in this instance, though, are not trailed by suspects who “tamper with the text,”⁵⁰ but by the emotional conflicts of the focalizing character. Sayers worried earlier in her career that “allowing real human beings into a detective-story” would be impossible: “At some point or other either their emotions make hay of the detective interest, or the detective interest gets hold of them and makes their emotions look like pasteboard.”⁵¹ In *Gaudy Night*, however, emotions are vitally important to the “detective interest.”

Harriet, as a writer of detective novels, recognizes the flaws in her fiction that she overlooks in reality. Peter urges her to “abandon the jig-saw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change” (321), and her effort to humanize her character Wilfrid reflects her better understanding of Peter himself. Though she fears, like Sayers, that “[a] too violent emotion flung into the glittering mechanism of the detective-story jars the movement by destroying its delicate balance,”⁵² she assures Peter that she is “really *working* at Wilfrid.” He recognizes that her effort to break free of genre restrictions is significant in the development of their relationship:

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 451.

⁴⁹ Sayers, Introduction to *Omnibus*, p. 84.

⁵⁰ Hühn, p. 456.

⁵¹ Sayers, Introduction to *Omnibus*, p. 105.

⁵² Ibid., p. 102.

My dear—if anything I have said . . . If you have let me come as far as your work and your life . . . Here! I think I'd better remove myself before I do anything foolish. . . . I shall be honoured to go down in posterity in the turn-up of Wilfrid's trouser. . . . (480)

Wilfrid is in some respects a satirical comment on the writing of detective fiction, but at the same time he is part of Harriet's development throughout the story. His increasing complexity reflects that which she discovers in Peter: “[s]he had fought him for five years, and found out nothing but his strength; now, within half an hour, he had exposed all his weaknesses, one after the other.” (299)

Wilfred was becoming like one of those coveted ivory chessmen. You probed into his interior and discovered an intricate and delicate carved sphere of sensibilities, and, as you turned it in your fingers, you found another inside that, and within that, another again. (394)

This scene also allies Peter with the chessmen; as Harriet stares, musing, into the window, she sees his reflection over them as he approaches behind her (394). The chess set is the first proper gift she allows him to give her (402), a sign that she is getting over her “inferiority complex” (33). Also, essentially, it stands in for Peter as an object of desire “for which she had conceived an unreasonable affection” (286). The destruction of the chess set is not only a vicarious attack on Harriet, but on her work, her relationship, and most importantly her effort to balance the two. Her increasingly nuanced understanding of self makes her, in Annie's eyes, “the dirtiest hypocrite of the lot,” (470) because she no longer polarizes intellect and emotion.

The problems of the “game” itself are also an issue: Harriet cannot play effectively when Miss de Vine challenges her to a game “because the anguish of parting at one fell swoop with a fully-armed warrior, a prancing steed and a complete nest of ivory balls was such that she could scarcely bear to place to much as a pawn in jeopardy.” (412) As with the case, her attention is directed toward appearances, and toward complicated individuals, rather than the overall picture, so she cannot grasp the game as a whole. However, she is becoming increasingly able at detection, and in addition she has brought Peter into the case. The destruction of the game is thus legible as the desperate attempt of the criminal to distort the evidence. In a final twist, the game may equally be seen as the generic game, and Sayers' merciless destruction of it her assault on a

comfortable conceptual framework: its structures, though represented by beautifully crafted figures, are still too restrictive. The chess set is then not only *a* game, a symbol of romance or of detection, but *the* game, the one Sayers herself has played with the reader and found wanting.

“Proper Jobs”: The Feminization of the University

As the spaces and symbols of academia shift and alter throughout the novel, so do the meanings of the college and the university, as seen through Harriet’s eyes. The imagery surrounding the college is idealistic at the beginning: “one was a citizen of no mean city. [...] her foundations were set upon the holy hills and her spires touched heaven.” (34) Soon, though, it becomes far more ambiguous, as Harriet and Miss de Vine cross the Old Quad in “a dappled and changing shadow-pattern that was more confusing than darkness” (42); as the confusion and danger increases, it appears increasingly threatening, so that “in the clear light of morning [...] [Harriet] knew the ancient dread of Artemis, moon-goddess, virgin-huntress, whose arrows are plagues and death.” (276) The classical allusion allies the detective with her university setting, but it reinforces a historical fear of women that both undermines her authority in the narrative, and misleads her in her investigation. In the conclusion, this questionable, potentially dangerous community has been neutralized and normalized. The dons are no longer holy warriors, but “as understandable and pleasant as daily bread” (475).

Sayers has been accused of idealizing the academic community, perhaps most famously by Q.D. Leavis, who wrote scathingly, “[*Gaudy Night*] is popular and romantic while pretending to realism. Miss Sayers produces for our admiration an academic world which is the antithesis of the great world of bustle and Big Business that her readers know.”⁵³ However, Leavis, like many other critics, insists on the novel’s *apparent* meaning, a reading that is dominated and distorted by the narrative perspective. The

⁵³ Q.D. Leavis, “The Case of Miss Dorothy Sayers”, *Scrutiny* 6.3 (1937) pp. 334-340 (p. 337).

author's refusal of idealism is clear, as it is revealed to be her heroine's main intellectual failing. It is clear from the beginning that the idealistic characterization of the academic community is that of the focalizing character, and the novel gradually dissects her glorification of the university and forms a more realistic picture. In the conclusion, the criminal is outside the academic circle, but it is impossible to say that *Gaudy Night* preserves an idealized presentation of the dons. The female academics are exonerated, but Sayers spends the better part of 500 pages deconstructing them, essentially to demonstrate their very normality. Leavis scoffs, "People in the academic world who earn their livings by scholarly specialities are not as a general thing wiser, better, finer, decenter or in any way more estimable than those of the same social class outside."⁵⁴ Ironically, this point is almost exactly Sayers', except for its assumptions about class; in many of her novels, not least *Gaudy Night*, Sayers explores class differences and social mobility. In terms of work, the academic community of *Gaudy Night* is easily comparable to the advertising office in *Murder Must Advertise*: both explore the culture and conflicts of a community defined through work, and both strip the glamour of the mysterious from a little-known profession. Both also associate detection with a workaday world, and characterize it as a job. The crucial result of *Gaudy Night*'s interrogation of the academic lifestyle is an assertion of its normalcy: the investigation serves not to idealize these academic women, but to defend the viability of an academic career, or indeed any career, as a choice for women.

During a break between terms, Harriet goes to London, and observes, "Town seemed remarkably empty and uninteresting." (222) This impression emphasizes Harriet's sense that she is out of place in London as well as Oxford, but it also, of course, reflects her misleading idealism. It prefaces a highly satirical section about the rivalries and politics of the literary world;⁵⁵ though in Harriet's eyes the literary cocktail party seems a contrast to the rarified atmosphere of the university, Sayers emphasizes the similarities as much as the differences. The world of academia is a similarly problematic and egoistic gathering of personalities. As Jasmine Simeone points out, "It

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 253-258.

does not necessarily follow that because [the dons'] work concerns integrity, they must also be truthful and compassionate people—indeed as Sayers reinforces by the events in the story, they can be wonderful scholars without being perfect human beings.”⁵⁶ Astonishingly, some critics still read the resolution of the novel, in which Harriet makes a personal choice of marriage over academia, to mean that remaining “an unmarried female [is] a thoroughly bad idea, which will at the very least make a woman unbalanced by pedantry and obsessed by the details of the past.”⁵⁷ The dons are, in reality, as variously balanced as any of Sayers’ populations. Her defense of their choice is successful because it does not exempt them from the concerns and conflicts of the world outside academia, but makes clear that academia is not an exception after all. This was the revolutionary point she was making when she wrote the novel: academic women were not heroes, or harpies, but simply human.

As much as a story of detection, *Gaudy Night* is an exploration of the growing choices available to women in the 1930s, and an examination of the potential for romance in that world. Published in 1935, it is a defense of women’s higher education as well as a dismissal of the idea that such things must be “exceptional”. Particularly because of the way the novel characterizes and considers women, it seems to come out of a later (post-feminist) part of the twentieth century. However, it is a crucially contemporary work; Sayers, like Christie, was commenting on social phenomena of which she herself was a witness. As Chapter Five shows, Sayers often used fiction as a forum for serious ideas. Many of the theoretical conversations in *Gaudy Night* develop plot and theme, but at the same time offer social commentary:

“I quite agree with you,” said Miss de Vine, “about the difficulty of combining intellectual and emotional interests. I don’t think it affects women only; it affects men as well. But when men put their public lives before their private lives, it causes less outcry than when a woman does the same thing, because women put up with neglect better than men, having been brought up to expect it.”

⁵⁶ Jasmine Simeone, “The Single People in *Gaudy Night*”, in *Papers Presented to the Conference: Sayers in the 21st Century*, ed. by David Doughan (Hurstpierpoint: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2003), pp. 36-40 (p. 38).

⁵⁷ Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World* (New York; London: Continuum, 2009), p. 71.

“But suppose one doesn’t quite know which one wants to put first. Suppose,” said Harriet, falling back on words which were not her own, “suppose one is cursed with both a heart and a brain?” (186-187)

The conflict of the emotional and intellectual on which Harriet fixates is resolved for her in the novel’s conclusion, but Sayers continued passionate discussion of the question:

Once lay down the rule that the job comes first and you throw that job open to every individual, man or woman, fat or thin, tall or short, ugly or beautiful, who is able to do that job better than the rest of the world. [...]What woman really prefers a job to home and family? Very few, I admit. It is unfortunate that they should so often have to make the choice. [...] Nevertheless, there have been women, such as Queen Elizabeth and Florence Nightingale, who had the choice, chose the job, and made a success of it.⁵⁸

Sayers refused to identify herself as a feminist, instead arguing for an essential human equality:

In reaction against the age-old slogan, “woman is the weaker vessel,” or the still more offensive, “woman is a divine creature,” we have, I think, allowed ourselves to drift into asserting that ‘a woman is as good as a man,’ without always pausing to think what exactly we mean by that. What, I feel, we ought to mean is something so obvious that it is apt to escape attention altogether, viz: not that every woman is, in virtue of her sex, as strong, clever, artistic, level-headed, industrious and so forth as any man that can be mentioned; but that a woman is just as much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences of an individual. What is repugnant to every human being is to be reckoned always as a member of a class and not an individual person.⁵⁹

One of the central concerns of *Gaudy Night* is that of the woman as an individual person, and how she may participate in the re-framing of society.

Work is, for Sayers, a central part of that question; the idea of the suitability of an individual to a job is a theme developed throughout her work. The first important female character in her novels, Miss Climpson, is introduced in terms of her appropriateness for detective work. *Unnatural Death* (1927) introduces Miss Climpson as Peter’s “inquiry agent”; though Sayers wrote in 1928 that “the really brilliant woman

⁵⁸ Sayers, “Are Women Human?” (Address given to a Women’s Society, 1938), in *Unpopular Opinions*, p. 110.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.107.

detective has yet to be created”,⁶⁰ she had already created a natural detective in a middle-aged spinster who is a clear precursor to Christie’s Miss Marple. As Peter explains to Parker:

“Just think. People want questions asked. Whom do they send? A man with large flat feet and a note-book—the sort of man whose private life is conducted in a series of inarticulate grunts. I send a lady with a long, wooly jumper on knitting-needles and jingly things round her neck. Of course she asks questions—everyone expects it. Nobody is surprised. Nobody is alarmed. And so-called superfluity is agreeably and usefully disposed of.”⁶¹

Peter is thus positioned as someone for whom “the job comes first”, and Miss Climpson is the individual who can contribute in a specific way to detection.⁶² As such, she is both a crucial part of Sayers’ inquiry into the ever-changing roles of women, and an indicator of a shift in the hero’s attitude toward detection. As noted in Chapter Five, detection shifts in the course of the Lord Peter series from a hobby to a professional pursuit; in *Gaudy Night*, detection is classed among the things people may do as their “proper job”. Indeed, Peter’s (and Harriet’s) intellectual interest in detection is re-cast as a duty toward the facts and “every citizen’s obligation” (37). Harriet defends his occupation, saying, “Catching murderers isn’t a soft job, or a sheltered job. It takes a lot of time and energy, and you may very easily get injured or killed. I dare say he does it for fun, but at any rate, he does do it.” (39)

The question of professionalism is at this point subjugated to the idea that work and life ought to be one integral experience, as Sayers later argued in “Why Work?”,

[W]ork is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but a thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker’s faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction.⁶³

In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet asks,

“[B]etween one desire and another, how is one to know which things are really of overmastering importance?”

⁶⁰ Sayers, Introduction to *Omnibus*, p. 79.

⁶¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), p. 35.

⁶² Miss Climpson also contributes literally to the life of the detectives: she is on the jury at Harriet’s murder trial, and refuses to agree with the majority, who want to pronounce her guilty.

⁶³ Sayers, *Why Work?*, p. 12.

“We can only know that,” said Miss de Vine, “when they have overmastered us.” (42)

One’s “proper job” should be of overmastering importance, no matter what it is: the novel defends the desire to be a cook or a secretary as much as to be a writer or an academic. Harriet argues, “I’m sure one should do one’s own job, however trivial, and not persuade one’s self into doing someone else’s, however noble.” (53) Sayers offers multiple possibilities of work, but insists that even domestic life should be a purposeful choice. Annie’s fundamental opposition to the academic world is also couched in terms of a woman’s “proper job”: “you don’t want to cook his meals and mend his clothes and bear his children like a decent woman. [...] you haven’t the guts to do your proper job in the world.” (470) Her reasoning is flawed in the context of Sayers’ work, however, because she defines suitability for a job based on sex rather than aptitude and inclination.

A “proper job” is often defined by its relationship to a community or a way of life, which also necessitates a consideration of place. Miss Climpson’s role as Peter’s sidekick, for instance, is dependent on place; the job of detection is best undertaken by the person suited to a particular environment. Peter’s ability to transform himself is, excepting *Gaudy Night*, largely limited to the city; Miss Climpson, on the other hand, acts principally in villages. Like Miss Marple, whose essential identification with the village setting is, as Shaw and Vanacker put it, that she “belongs to the criminal society, which in her case is pared down to the microcosm of a village.”⁶⁴ The idea of *belonging* is, as discussed in Chapter Five, often a question of appropriate performance. Miss Climpson is one of Sayers’ first important characters from a feminist perspective, but she is also important because she is, like Wimsey, able to manipulate her own image. Like him, she plays a “role” that is an extension of herself. When Wimsey sends her on an investigation in *Strong Poison*, he says, “I think you had better go just as your ordinary self”,⁶⁵ implying that she is equally adaptable to other circumstances. Much of Harriet’s difficulty in *Gaudy Night* arises from the fact that she refuses this

⁶⁴ Shaw and Vanacker, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: Gollancz, 1930), p. 188

flexibility and attempts to assign definite and disconnecting meanings to places, and to herself.

Though Miss Lydgate remarks that “I always think it’s a very great pity [Miss Hillyard] never married,” (244) the Shrewsbury dons are depicted primarily as fortunate women who have found their proper jobs, and are endeavoring to extend the same privilege to others. Sayers’ characterization of the dons and her representation of the women’s college has not, however, been read in unequivocally liberatory terms: Jasmine Hall remarks, “[p]rofessionalism seems to eradicate the inequalities of gender at the same time that it maintains a ‘suitable’ and ‘proper’ inequality of class.”⁶⁶ She argues that the deductions that narrow down the circle of suspects err because of a prejudice against the uneducated. Harriet does misinterpret several of the clues to indicate an educated culprit. However, misinterpretation is part of Sayers’ novelistic sleight of hand; the detective novel must point its reader in the wrong direction while presenting evidence, and in this instance the misdirection is philosophical. The revelation of Annie as the Poltergeist is part of Sayers’ “artistic unity”:

[I]t was necessary for my theme that the malice should be the product, not of intellect starved by emotion, but of emotion uncontrolled by intellect. And to knit the plot tight it must be more than this: it must be emotion revenging itself upon the intellect for some injury wrought by the intellect upon the emotions.⁶⁷

Annie is the philosophical opposite of the academic women, a person of “fundamental passion” (237). The simplicity, even primitivism, of her outlook, does not in itself make her a villain. Her role in the text is to provide a foil for the dons, particularly Miss de Vine, who have chosen intellect over emotion, and thus to illustrate the choice Harriet feels compelled to make. Annie provides symmetry to the text, and represents traditional values against the challenge posed by the modern values of the academics.

⁶⁶ Jasmine Y. Hall, “A Suitable Job for a Woman: Sexuality, Motherhood, and Professionalism in *Gaudy Night*”, in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. by Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 169-178 (p. 175).

⁶⁷ Sayers, “*Gaudy Night*”, p. 214.

The criminal is revealed as an inverted reflection of the detective: both are guilty of seeing the college too subjectively. If “places are established in relation to a complex of subjective, intersubjective and objective structures,”⁶⁸ these other relations cannot be overlooked. Miss de Vine praises Harriet’s “detachment” (41), but her own serene objectivity is held up to question. Extremes of rationality are deemed as dangerous as those of emotion. Peter remarks that “the first thing a principle does [...] is to kill somebody,” asserting, possibly from a detective’s point of view, that, “principles have become more dangerous than passions.” (350) Annie’s culpability is not a displacement of responsibility onto the lower classes, or onto weak women. Her version of a “woman’s job” is in many ways more stable than the choices available to educated women, even if it is not necessarily more desirable. She is not inconsistent, or ignorant: her attacks, until she becomes very unbalanced, are focused on intellectual, rather than physical life, and gestures such as the destruction of the library, the mutilation of *The Search* (1934),⁶⁹ and the burning of Miss Barton’s book attacking the Nazi doctrine of *Kinder, Kirke, Kuche* are clearly translatable into academic terms. Kungl observes that “in nearly all of [Sayers’] novels, the culprit is someone who, in the course of whatever other crime, has been false to his [or her] job, the great sin in Sayers’ eyes.”⁷⁰ Ironically, with all its discussion of jobs and honor, *Gaudy Night* inverts this formula. Annie is not a “a spiteful or mentally deficient servant,” (105), or a scapegoat for the upper classes; instead, she is a woman who is certain of her place in the world, or at least of the place she ought to occupy.

In this case, it is the detective who resists her “proper job.” Harriet realizes that though she has “stuck to her work” (42), she has not done it to the best of her ability. In her solipsistic attempt to find “her own place” (236), she continues to refuse possible places. Lutwack points out,

There is a moral principle involved in the choice a character makes between alternative places; the implication is that if Emma [Bovary] and

⁶⁸ Malpas, p. 185.

⁶⁹ C.P. Snow, 1934. The plot of the book, published the year before *Gaudy Night*, concerns accidental and deliberate falsification of scientific results, and its destruction is an important clue to Annie’s motivations.

⁷⁰ Carla T. Kungl, *Creating the Fictional Female Detective: The Sleuth Heroines of British Women Writers, 1890-1940* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, 2006), p. 158.

Aschenbach had accepted the right places [...] they would not have turned out so badly. Realistic though their authors are, they put an allegorical construction on place as a “landscape of difficulty” of the sort found in *Pilgrim’s Progress*.⁷¹

Harriet certainly senses a moral principle in her choice between places; unlike *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *Death in Venice* (1912), though, *Gaudy Night* constructs the “landscape of difficulty” as the necessity of rejecting such polarities. Harriet’s greatest fear is desire, but her limited definition of (physical) desire only tells part of the story; she also fears her desire for intellectual fulfillment. In fact, her response to the possibility of an academic career is very similar to her response to the possibility of marriage. She “people[s] the cloister with bogies” (312), creating reasons for herself to refuse a commitment to academia as she refuses commitment to a life with Peter; as Susan J. Leonardi points out, Sayers “exploits Oxford’s fears of the educated woman in order to question the widespread assumption that the romantic plot is the good and true story of a woman’s life.”⁷² In her desire for academic life as in her desire for Peter, Harriet again struggles with her fear of “overmastery”(42). She overlooks Annie as a suspect not because she is beneath suspicion, but because she represents a different fear.

As usual in Sayers’ novels, the question of class is not overlooked, but more complex than usually acknowledged. Class in *Gaudy Night* is an examination of relative values, but it also questions established power dynamics, and ways of subverting them. Annie claims to work in a women’s college because she “was glad to take what [she] could get” (127), but her characterization of herself as subordinate is disingenuous; she purposefully sought the post in order to persecute Miss de Vine. She takes advantage of the dons, knowing that “as an unfortunate widow with two small children, she would receive kindly consideration” (464). She is a servant, but she is distinctly in control of her own position. The solution apparently breaks one of Van Dine’s rules: “[a] servant must not be chosen by the author as the culprit. [...] It is a too easy solution. The culprit must be a decidedly worth-while person – one that wouldn't ordinarily come

⁷¹ Lutwack, p. 70.

⁷² Susan J. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 64.

under suspicion.”⁷³ However, in the context of the detective’s preoccupations, the scouts are in fact the “least likely suspects.” While conclusion may initially resemble the clichéd escape route of “the butler did it”, *Gaudy Night*’s revelation is that the culprit is hidden in plain sight. Peter sees the greater pattern of the attacks and their implications, increasingly allying his detective role in the novel with that of the successful student, who effectively synthesizes and convincingly interprets available evidence.

The separation between the scouts and the dons is not the only evidence of class divisions in the novel, though it is the most obvious. Education was one of the ways that class was becoming ever more fluid following World War I. Harold Perkin observes that, “the inter-war period saw the beginnings of an institutionalized machinery of state-sponsored social mobility via the educational system that reversed the Victorian belief in education as a buttress of class society.”⁷⁴ In the inter-war period, class mobility was an even newer proposition than women’s education, and at least as worrisome to conservative thinkers. *Gaudy Night*’s emphasis on sexual equality implies that women can also participate in these changes. For Perkin, “Professional society is the first society in history to offer women a (limited) degree of equality, based on higher education and the replacement of manual labor by mental, though at the expense of a dual burden of work.”⁷⁵ Harriet herself (as well as Sayers) is an example of the class mobility possible for an educated woman. Most of the students’ antecedents are not mentioned, though their educational attainments are, implying that the latter are of greater importance in the novel’s milieu than the former. The opportunities of mobility, though, are problematized in the characters of Miss Newland and Miss Cattermole, both of whom are at Oxford chiefly because their parents feel it will advance their daughters in the world. The first is a brilliant scholar, but exhausts herself, fearing that she will be a disappointment. When she attempts

⁷³ S.S. Van Dine, “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Fiction”, in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), 189-193 (first publ.in *American Magazine*, September 1928), p. 191.

⁷⁴ Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 248.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

suicide after receiving poison pen letters, the Dean tells Harriet that the Newlands' "daughter's career means everything to them. Quite apart from the personal side of it, it'll be a frightful blow if this ruins her Schools." (274) The second "sacrificial victim," Miss Cattermole, is an indifferent student, whose unhappy love affair initially makes her a suspect. She tells Harriet:

"I don't want to be here; I never did. Only my parents were so keen. My mother's one of those people who work to get things open to women—you know—professions and things. And father's a lecturer in a small provincial University. And they've made a lot of sacrifices and things." (187)

The two students' situations are different in that one wants to be a scholar and one does not, but both are, in a sense, victims of their parents' aspirations. These students, Miss Cattermole in particular, are significant exceptions because their educational aspirations are not properly their own. Miss Cattermole reveals,

"I should have liked to be a cook. Or possibly a hospital nurse, but I think I should have been better at cooking. Only, you see, those are two of the things Mother's always trying to get people out of the way of thinking women's sphere ought to be restricted to."

"There's a lot of money in good cooking," said Harriet.

"Yes—but it's not an educational advance. Besides, there's no school of Cookery at Oxford, and it had to be Oxford, you see, or Cambridge, because of the opportunity of making the right kind of friends." (166-167)

While not an "educational advance", her desire to be a cook is not presented as "service." Harriet advises her, "If you've learnt how to tackle one subject—any subject—you've learnt how to tackle all subjects." (167) Cooking is not only given the status of a proper job, it is rendered as intellectually valid as any chosen profession.

The students' attitudes, and their parents' ambitions, are indicative of the shifting role of education in society. The Newlands and the Cattermoles, and presumably the parents of other students, see women's education as desirable and socially advantageous, Harriet is an example from an earlier time, but her professional success certainly bears the stamp of education. In pre-war society, Harriet would not have been Peter's social equal in any way (as she still is not according to his snobbish sister-in-law), but post-war, at least in the intellectual circles in which they travel, education and

professionalism have a status of their own.⁷⁶ In *Gaudy Night*, intellectual equality is certainly established as of far greater importance than social class. Peter visits Shrewsbury soon after his arrival in Oxford and, in a telling incident, mixes up his own gown with Harriet's as he hurries away:

He snatched up cap and gown and was gone before she had time even to think of seeing him down to the Lodge.

“But it's just as well,” she thought, watching him run across the quad like an undergraduate, “he hasn't too much time as it is. Bless the man, if he hasn't taken my gown instead of his own! Oh, well, it doesn't matter. We're much of a height and mine's pretty wide on the shoulders, so it's exactly the same thing.”

And then it struck her as strange that it should be the same thing.
(300-301)

Of course, the similarity of their gowns is not only an indication of the similarity of their physiques: it indicates equality between male and female scholars, and, essentially for the romance plot, between the two of them as individuals. Elizabeth Trembly argues that the Wimsey/Vane novels are “androgynous, not feminist”,⁷⁷ referencing Carolyn Heilbrun's definition: “[i]n androgynous novels the reader identifies with male and female characters equally; in feminist novels, only with the female hero”.⁷⁸ While the reader's sympathy in *Gaudy Night* is certainly with Harriet, to the extent that her point of view de-centers the detective plot, much of the novel's interest is in her detection of Peter himself. Harriet's substitution for, then cooperation with, Peter establishes them as equals, but it also “bring[s] the love-problem in line with the detective-problem, so the same key should unlock both at once.”⁷⁹ The solution of the detection plot, because it is so tied to individual desire, also brings about a resolution of the romance plot.

The “strange” similarity of the scholars' gowns begs the question of whether academia, if it masculinizes women, feminizes men. As mentioned above, the placement of the fictional Shrewsbury on the Balliol cricket ground both allies Peter with the college and

⁷⁶ Peter, if anything, has shifted his class down; he socializes mainly with professional people rather than aristocrats. His work has also altered the social milieu of other members of the Wimsey family: his sister Mary marries his best friend Inspector Parker.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth A. Trembly, “‘Collaring the Other Fellow's Property’: Feminism Reads Dorothy L. Sayers” in Kathleen Gregory Klein, ed. *Women Times Three: Writers, Detectives, Readers* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1995), pp. 81-100 (p. 96).

⁷⁸ Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York; London: Norton, 1982), p. 58.

⁷⁹ Sayers, “*Gaudy Night*”, p. 215.

erases that symbol of masculinity, his sporting prowess. Peter is “altered and mellowed”⁸⁰ in *Gaudy Night*, despite the fact that in his first appearance he has cracked ribs after “[falling] off a wall in the most inartistic manner. I was in a bit of a hurry; there was a very plain-looking bloke on the other side with a gun.” (73) From his first appearance, Peter’s ratiocinative ability is tempered by humor and self-mockery, and the masculinity of his profession is undermined by his method of detecting while “giving a perfect imitation of the silly-ass-about-town” (38). He also undercuts the implied heroism of his secondary job, which sends him to Europe as a diplomat-cum-spy, by calling himself the “professional funny man of the Foreign Office” (295), who depends on “eternal childishness” (296). However, Peter still retains enough physical masculinity to account for his sex appeal: when Mr. Pomfret calls him an “effeminate bounder”, he refuses to rise to the bait.

“Why can’t you stand up for yourself?”

“First,” replied Peter, mildly, “because I’m twenty years older than you are. Secondly, because you’re six inches taller than I am. And thirdly, because I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then,” said Mr. Pomfret, “take that, you sitting rabbit!”

He launched an impetuous blow at Peter’s head, and found himself held by the wrist in an iron grip. (407)

Indeed, though the novel further establishes his intellectualism, it also, through Harriet’s eyes, re-vision him as a sexual entity. She realizes, very near the end of the novel, that she had never “considered him primarily as a male animal, or calculated the promise implicit in the veiled eyes, the long, flexible mouth, the curiously vital hands.” (432) She acknowledges her physical desire for him earlier, during the scene on the river (310), when, as Kenney points out, “Wimsey, the hyper-intellectual detective, is studied by his equally intellectual lover from the neck up.”⁸¹ Harriet sees Peter anew throughout the novel: intellectually, then emotionally, then physically. That the revelation of her desire begins with his head further establishes the explicit linkage of the mind and body that Harriet believes impossible.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁸¹ Kenney, p. 92.

When Peter appears in academic dress, he reveals an entirely new side to his personality. His entrance into the story proper is a shock to Harriet, who has not previously connected him with Oxford:

Standing at the corner of Cat Street was a group of gowns, chatting with animation among them. [...] Beside [the Master of Balliol] was another M.A. who, as Harriet and the Dean went by, conversing of counterpoint, turned and lifted his mortar-board.

For a long moment, Harriet simply could not believe her eyes. Peter Wimsey. Peter, of all people. Peter, who was supposed to be in Warsaw, planted placidly in the High as if he had grown there from the beginning. Peter, wearing cap and gown like any orthodox Master of Arts. (291-292)

He has only appeared once in the novel before this point in the novel, and Harriet has identified him unambiguously with another part of her life, and another place: “he, at any rate, had no niche in the grey stones of Oxford. He stood for London, for the swift, rattling, chattering, excitable and devilishly upsetting world of strain and uproar.” (239) Peter’s appearance in Oxford interrupts the division Harriet attempts to make between her two worlds, and upsets the apparent starkness of her choice between them. In fact, Peter’s association with Oxford is not new. Scholarship is directly associated with detection in *Whose Body?* when Peter arranges his thoughts on the case “following the methods inculcated at the University of which I have the honour to be a member”.⁸² London and Oxford, like the mind and the body, are proven through Peter not to be the diametric opposites that Harriet supposes, but two aspects of one fully-developed personality.

When Peter comes to Shrewsbury for the first time, Harriet fears the repercussions of inviting him into that place and into the case. Her fear is personal—she fears that he may jeopardize her redefinition of herself—but it is also institutional. For Gayle Wald, “[w]ithin the female world that Sayers creates [...] Lord Peter’s arrival represents the intrusion of a foreign (male) element, the destruction of tranquility, rather than a return

⁸² Sayers, *Whose Body?*, p. 73.

to stability.”⁸³ This is certainly Harriet’s initial reaction; however, she instantly senses that he belongs in this place, and even that her experience is stabilized by his presence.

When she said “Come in!” the commonplace formula seemed to take on a startling significance. For good or evil, she had called in something explosive from the outside world to break up the ordered tranquility of the place; she had sold the breach to an alien force; she had sided with London against Oxford and with the world against the cloister.

But when he entered she knew that the image had been a false one. He came into the quiet room as if he belonged there, and had never belonged any other place. (295)

His appropriate appearance and behavior in an Oxford-defined place rapidly changes her perceptions of him; he also presents himself differently, revealing new emotion to Harriet. He too seeks peace in the stability of Oxford, but significantly it is a peace that he associates *with* her: “It’s a relief to get back and find you here—and all this going on as it used to do.” (296) Plain comments, “[t]he normalisation of Peter represents a neutralizing of his potentially dangerous otherness, and there is also in the text a parallel normalisation of Harriet.”⁸⁴ Harriet senses a change in her own orientation by the time Peter officially enters the case, thinking, “He and I belong to the same world, and all these others are the aliens.” (352) The world of detection is rooted in that of academia, but Harriet and Peter are the experts at its particular discipline.

When Harriet aligns herself with Peter, however, she acknowledges that he *belongs*, again emphasizing an opposition of “insiders” and “outsiders”. However, as demonstrated in the next section, these designations continue to be unreliable. Peter calls himself an “outsider” when he explains his solution to the case, and implies that that is why he is able to solve it. This explanation, though technically accurate in the women’s college, is also misleading, since he has by this time shown himself, crucially, an insider: “[t]his, thought Harriet, is suiting your style to your company with a vengeance”. (451) Again, however, this presentation of himself facilitates communication. As noted in Chapter Five, an essential facet of the successful detective is the ability to communicate through potential barriers such as class, or in this case,

⁸³ Gayle F. Wald, “Strong Poison: Love and the Novelistic in Dorothy Sayers” in *The Cunning Craft*, ed. by Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 1990), pp. 98-108 (p. 106).

⁸⁴ Plain, p. 57.

sex.⁸⁵ In this case, he uses a shared background of academia to present his analysis of the case formally, as if were an exam, saying, “I will first set out the salient points...to show you the basis on which I founded my working theory. I will then formulate that theory, and adduce the supporting evidence which I hope and think you will consider conclusive.” (451) In truth, his working method has not changed; he simply couches it in academic parlance. The intellectual rigor of detection is the same in Oxford as in London, or any other place. Peter’s equitable “investigative methodology,” according to Sean Latham, “dismantles the idealized autonomy of the university”.⁸⁶ Harriet aspires to such equanimity, but her feelings about the university ironically prevent her from attaining it. It is only after Peter’s “dismantling” of her ideal that Harriet is able to at last “see [...] in a truer proportion” (23). Peter’s greatest intellectual strength in *Gaudy Night* is to be able to understand and even feel acutely the impact of a case, yet to approach it as though “[a] case is a case.” (306) He performs the role of the perfect student, who has absorbed the essential lesson of the university: “If you’ve learnt how to tackle one subject—any subject—you’ve learnt how to tackle all subjects” (167). He is at once both an insider and an outsider: detection and scholarship are to him as inseparable as the mind and the body.

“I could almost put a name to you”: Naming and Belonging

The autonomy of the university, of course, is not only apparent in the reasoning processes of the characters, it is a fundamental (and flawed) aspect of their collective and individual self-conception. Peter’s surprising appearance in cap and gown, and his confusing Harriet’s gown with his own, exemplify how dress can alter the reading of a character. Academic dress is one of the uniforms used in the novel to denote position, to re-position individuals, and to change perspectives. Changes of dress are, like Peter’s academic manner, context-appropriate performances. Individuals, without

⁸⁵ The same skill at communication, however, is also disruptive in *Gaudy Night*, as he repeatedly departs on Foreign Office commissions to Europe.

⁸⁶ Latham, p. 209.

proper context, seem to be different people: Harriet, coming down the hill from Headington, meets “a woman whose face at first seemed vaguely familiar. Then, as they came close, she realised that it was Annie, looking strange without her cap and apron” (237). When Saint-George recognizes Annie as the “Shrewsbury ghost”, she is again out of uniform; he tells Harriet that she was wearing “one of those sort of dark-blue frocks with spriggy bits on it and a hat with a brim. Sort of thing most of your dons wear in the afternoon. Neat, not gaudy. Not smart. Just ordinary.” (438) The problem of “ordinary” appearance allows the continuance of the assumption that the ghost is one of the dons: in college, the characters are separated into dons and students, masters and servants, “unfeminine” and “womanly” women, but outside that context, they are all surprisingly similar. The repetition of the word “gaudy” is crucial, as it at once associates her with the violent nighttime attacks, and opposes her outward appearance to them. Sayers again insists on the essential normality of the female academic, while complicating the search for the guilty party.

The structures and mores that govern college life cannot be discounted in the detective plot; Harriet proves that the culprit is a college insider, though the Dean asks, “can’t we find some handy outsider with a cast-iron alibi ready for busting?” (98). As discussed in Chapter One, the closed circle of suspects is often place-bound, but in *Gaudy Night*, the fluidity of place-definition and identification proves to be another coded clue. The novel’s distinction between insiders and outsiders is more fluid than it seems to Harriet; this ambiguity becomes unmistakable when Peter appears in Oxford, and signals that she may be “misplacing” other characters as well. The culprit is a member of the institution, but the idea of membership itself is open to question. The colleges obviously include dons and students, but there are also scouts, fellows, and occasional senior members. Appearances are one aspect of a context-appropriate performance, but university language, another badge of “membership”, is also used to mystify. Detective novels often have a large number of characters, for the practical reason that it creates confusion; *Gaudy Night* takes this over-population further by addressing the Dean, the Warden, the Bursar, and the Treasurer (otherwise, Miss Martin, Dr. Baring, Miss Edwards, and Miss Stephens) by their college titles interchangeably with their

names. The interchangeability of titles and names is also a reminder that while titles may be an indicator of status, profession, or class, names, like clothes, are changeable. Changing one's name is associated with loss of identity the marriage debate: "I never *can* remember all their married names," says the Dean (16). A change of name may, of course, serve to conceal identity in a more purposeful way, as it does when Charlotte Anne Robinson becomes Annie Wilson.

The confusion of names and titles enters into the romance plot as well. As noted above, "Wimsey" becomes "Peter" in the intimate eyes of the narrative, a significant alteration that anticipates the change in his relationship with Harriet. Miss Hillyard sees this name change as almost indecently personal: "you must try to conduct yourself with a little more decency. [...] You pretend to be the merest acquaintance of his and call him by his title in public and his Christian name in private." (427) The re-negotiation of their relationship in the university context takes place within a network of additional names and titles: when Harriet is upset after her altercation with Miss Hillyard, Peter asks her,

"What is it, domina?"

Though his tone was half-jesting, nothing could have reassured her like that grave, academic title. (433)

His proposal in the end is also couched in formal academic terminology; when he asks, "Placetne, magistra?"(482), he characterizes their relationship in terms of their intellectual equality. His adaptation of the graduation ceremony phraseology represents their alternate identities within the university; as Dougill observes, "[w]hen Lord Peter proposes and Harriet accepts, the pair are not pictured as two amateur detectives, but as Wimsey of Balliol and Vane of Shrewsbury in full academic dress."⁸⁷ His proposal places the romance plot specifically in the university context, its formal construction providing "the word that should carry her over the last difficult breach." (482) Referring back, again, to the interrelationship of theme and plot with place, the names given by the university override not only the social designations of aristocrat and commoner, but Peter and Harriet's earlier roles as detective and accused.

⁸⁷ Dougill, p. 217.

A great difficulty of the investigation is to put the proper names not only to people, but to ideas. Harriet's writing process, invoked several times in the text, emphasizes the importance of accuracy:

“Wilkie Collins,” wrote Harriet, “was always handicapped in his treatment of the supernatural by the fatal itch” (could one be handicapped by an itch? Yes, why not? Let it go, anyway, for the moment) “the fatal itch to explain everything. His legal training—”
Bother! Too long. “. . . was handicapped by the lawyer's fatal habit of explaining everything. His ghaisties and ghoulies” —No; worn-out humour— (200)

For the writer, finding the right word is essential, but for the detective, it may be necessary to leave things unnamed, at least until it is possible to put the right name to them. Peter begins his presentation of the case to the dons by saying that he will “refer to the perpetrator in the time-honoured way as X” (452). The romance plot, as well as the detective plot, questions the act of naming, and what a name may signify. Harriet thinks “if Peter thinks I'm going to ‘accept the protection of his name’ and be grateful, he's damn well mistaken” (380); in this instance she willfully reads the idea of re-naming as indicative of Peter's dominance. Peter, despite his modern outlook, admits to “a cursed hankering after musty old values, which I'm coward enough to deny, like my namesake of the Gospels.” (299) His ambivalence about his own name echoes Harriet's worry that “six centuries of possessive blood would not be dictated to by a bare forty-five years of over-sensitised intellect” (441). She is wary of the “arrogant Wimsey motto” (368) “As my Whimsy takes me”, lest it take her as well. The novel asks whether changing names changes a person, and if it is possible to resist naming.

Gaudy Night's most misleading name is not that of a person, but of the Senior Common Room, “that Holy of Holies” (60). The SCR is at the center of suspicion, but the dual nature of the name, which denotes both a group of people and an actual room, allows it to circumscribe both a false pool of suspects and a true one. Annie is an SCR scout, so even though she is not a member of the SCR (the academic body), she enters the room as part of her job, thus becoming part of its physical aspect. Her presence there, though signposted at crucial points within the narrative, is markedly

unremarkable. Because she is a servant she does not, and cannot, participate in the conversations held in the SCR, but she overhears them and they influence her actions and feelings, including her opinion of Harriet. While not invisible in the flesh or in the text, she is invisible as a suspect because she is erroneously considered outside the SCR's "closed circle". This dualism is at the center of the mystery, whose technical simplicity is obscured by overly academic theory. Latham notes that in the conclusion, "the massive bulk of the novel unravels as [Peter] speaks, efficiently reduced to a simple mystery plot that had become needlessly enmeshed in [...] psychological speculation."⁸⁸ The Senior Common Room, like the detective plot itself, is in the end reduced to its simplest and least academic definition.

A more conflicted definition, which is not simplified in the course of the story, is that of the title. Ostensibly, the "gaudy" of *Gaudy Night* refers to the college reunion weekend that re-introduces Harriet to Shrewsbury and Oxford, but its meaning is extended and altered each time it is repeated in the text. Eco reflects that the novel is "a machine for generating interpretations," but "a title, unfortunately, is in itself a key to interpretation."⁸⁹ "A title must muddle the reader's ideas," he writes, "not regiment them". The title *The Name of the Rose* (1980) "disoriented the reader, who was unable to choose just one interpretation."⁹⁰ Likewise, "*Gaudy Night*" sustains many interpretations, which augment and contradict one another. According to the OED, "gaudy" as "an annual dinner in commemoration of some event in the history of a college" is one of the oldest still-received meanings of the word.⁹¹ Dougill asserts that Sayers' title "can be read more as a declaration of intent than a description of the contents":

As the heroine of [Renée] Haynes's *Neapolitan Ice* (1929) notes, "words seemed to be badges of admission, badges that she 'belonged'", and the titular use of 'gaudy' functions in the same way to signify the inclusion of women in the Oxford tradition.⁹²

⁸⁸ Latham, p. 209.

⁸⁹ Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of the Rose* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), p. 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹¹ gaudy, n, 5: OED <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77114>> [accessed 27 July 2014]

⁹² Dougill, p. 217.

Indeed, the implicit university associations of the “gaudy” do claim a part of that place for women, though possibly not for Harriet herself; she feels distinctly out of place on her arrival, and worries about her reception and her place in this company:

What would these women say to her, to Harriet Vane, who had taken her First in English and gone to London to write mystery fiction, to live with a man who was not married to her, and to be tried for his murder amid a roar of notoriety? That was not the kind of career that Shrewsbury expected of its old students. (8)

Even before the Gaudy, the idea of the event introduces the themes of contextually-appropriate behavior and insider versus outsider.

After the attempted suicide of Miss Newland, the idea of the “gaudy night” re-appears in an unexpected context:⁹³ “‘What a night,’ said Harriet, as she rolled, dog-weary, between the sheets, ‘What a gaudy night!’” (272) This use of the word does not relate to definitions about festivities and rejoicing or those about luxury or finery, or even to the obsolete usage “full of trickery”.⁹⁴ Instead, the implication is of something overdone, exhausting, and disconcerting. The search for the suicidal student follows the comedic scene of Mr. Pomfret’s marriage proposal; the “gaudy” collision of unexpected circumstances, the absurd and the desperate, signifies the excessive, unrestrained nature of both infatuation and despair. The phrase is also used, sarcastically, after Annie’s murderous attack on Harriet; though this attack is intended for Miss de Vine, it signifies both Harriet’s claim to the position of the “hero” in the text, and the end of her debt to Peter. When she recovers, the Dean tells her about the aftermath of the attack:

“[A]nd we rang up the doctor, and Miss de Vine’s groggy heart went back on her, what with the shock and running about, and she went all blue on us—we had a lovely time.”

“You must have. One other gaudy night! I suppose you haven’t found who did it?” (455)

This use also evokes excess, though it certainly alludes to the poltergeist’s “trickery”. Additionally, the word has been used as a superlative “said of immaterial things”,⁹⁵

⁹³ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 299-311.

⁹⁴ OED, gaudy, adj 2, 2: <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77116>> [accessed 27 July 2014]

⁹⁵ OED, gaudy, adj 2, 3b.

which alludes to the apparent intangibility of the case. As Peter points out, much of the poltergeist's early activity is merely "good publicity value" (455), lacking any serious harmful intent. The repetition of the word "gaudy" in relation to two attempted murders both aligns the incidents with the previous attacks on the college, and marks the shift of the threat from disgrace to danger.

All of the novel's criminal events, as well as many of the romantic ones, occur at night. The repetition of the phrase "gaudy night", and its shifting meaning, evokes the idea of something at once outstanding and concealed: in this way it may refer to the outrage of the attacks on the college, the identity of the attacker, or even to Harriet's feelings for Peter. The last "gaudy night" is markedly different than all of the previous ones. It returns to the phrase the idea of celebration; however, when Peter says "We'll have one other gaudy night" (479), he hints at a closure for the case, and a possible end to his relationship with Harriet. His final proposal, of course, leads instead to their engagement, reclaiming the word's celebratory connotation. There is, however, another allusion within the title, which is in itself a clue. The phrase "gaudy night" comes from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Let's have one other gaudy night: call to me
All my sad captains; fill our bowls once more
Let's mock the midnight bell."⁹⁶

This speech, which follows Antony's loss at Actium, is a resigned farewell; Peter's quotation of Antony anticipates such a farewell, as he prepares for his final proposal to Harriet, but his love is far more rational. Harriet asks,

"Will it make you desperately unhappy if I say No?"
"Desperately? . . . My dear, I will not insult either you or myself
with a word like that. I can only tell you that if you will marry me it
will give me very great happiness." (482)

Antony is undone by the kind of obsessive love that drives Annie to her crimes. The title's allusion is a sly reference to the destructive possibilities that arise when personal considerations override professional responsibilities, providing another clue to the

⁹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act III, scene 11, 182. Though the title apparently references this particular speech, it is not printed in the novel, unlike the poem from which *Strong Poison* takes its title ("Lord Randall").

criminal's motives. The "gaudy nights" that recur throughout the novel explore the tipping points between emotion and intellect and mark crucial points in Harriet's development: her re-introduction to the college; her recognition of herself as a desirable woman; her emergence as a heroine, displacing the detective hero; and her acceptance of a union with Peter.

The layered meaning of the novel's title serves as a warning of Sayers' frequent use of multiple meanings. The example of the SCR, mentioned above, is one instance in which the narrative manipulates university idiom. As always in Sayers' novels, the text is scattered with quotations, many of which might pass unmarked. *Gaudy Night*, in addition, includes epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter. These usually direct attention to a particular narrative element, though close reading frequently complicates their meanings. As Kermode observes, the detective novel contains "significant concentrations of interpretable material that has nothing to do with clues and solutions and that can, if we choose, be read rather than simply discarded, though propriety recommends the latter course."⁹⁷ However, Kermode refers to the traditional detective novel, which *Gaudy Night* refuses to be; all its interpretable material is integral. Though the epigraphs seem ponderously literary, nearly all are satirical. John Lennard finds that Sayers' "structural epigraphy",⁹⁸ "crucially help[s] to make real, by grounding them in articulate history, the landed and ideological inheritances" of her characters."⁹⁹ Sayers is indeed rooting the text in Oxford history by quoting Oxford writers, and building her novel into an intellectual tradition through her references to the Renaissance. However, her sense of the ridiculous is also at play. Many of the quotations' meanings are altered or obscured by their lack of context; also, most seem to apply to a specific portion of the novel or a particular issue in one way, but can apply to the text as a whole in an entirely different way.

⁹⁷ Kermode, p. 83.

⁹⁸ John Lennard, *Of Modern Dragons and Other Essays on Genre Fiction* (Humanities-Ebooks, 2007) <books.google.co.uk/books?id=PuBlqzKuZYwC>, p. 26 [accessed 6 September 2014].

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

The most frequently-quoted text is Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621); Sayers manipulates Burton's quotations so that they seem to apply directly to the narrative, but they also function meta-textually to highlight the faults in Harriet's reasoning. The epigraphs' divergent meanings are another way that the narrative reminds the reader to look askance at Harriet's viewpoint. Burton's emphasis on psychology parallels Harriet's distracting preoccupation with it, and his rhetorical arguments, constructed largely from quotation, emphasize the problems facing the detective who allows "mass-mediated stereotypes"¹⁰⁰ to overshadow material evidence. Sayers toys with *The Anatomy of Melancholy*'s dependence on quotation, referencing Spenser, Shakespeare, Sidney, Drayton, and Donne, as well as a textbook¹⁰¹ and an account of a poltergeist haunting. All are from the English Renaissance, which seemingly reinforces the glorification of scholarship, but through selective quotation, the novel questions academic "truth". Alternative readings, or extended readings, give entirely different meaning to these references, indicating that texts may obscure, rather than elucidate.

The tone of the epigraphs is established at the beginning of the novel with a quotation from Donne:

The University is a Paradise, Rivers of Knowledge are there, Arts and Sciences flow from thence. Counsell Tables are *Horti conclusi*, (as it is said in the Canticles) *Gardens that are walled in*, and they are *Fontes signati*, *Wells that are sealed up*; bottomless depths of unsearchable Counsels there.

This selection implies that the university is an infinite source of knowledge, a repository of value and wisdom; in taking these words out of context, however, Sayers has altered their meaning. In his sermon, Donne continues:

But those *Aquae quietudinum*, which the Prophet speaks of, *The waters of rest*, they flow *a magistro bono*, from this good master, and flow into him again; all knowledge that begins not, and ends not with his glory, is

¹⁰⁰ Latham, p. 209.

¹⁰¹ Pierre Erondell's *The French Garden* (1605) was a book of French instruction written for women. The reference to this text points to the historical separation of "appropriate" women's education.

but a giddy, but a vertiginous circle, but an elaborate and exquisite ignorance.¹⁰²

The first half of the quotation establishes the idealized image of the university in the beginning of the novel. However, the remainder of the quotation undermines that idea; not only is the university's knowledge meaningless, but any knowledge without the proper foundation (of faith or facts) is doomed to turn upon itself in "elaborate ignorance". Harriet's struggle to separate her own desires, and the misleading conclusions that result from her personal quandaries, may indeed be characterized as a "vertiginous circle". Sayers, as a devout and scholarly Christian, would have known not only the conclusion of this quotation, but probably selected it because of its quotation of the Song of Solomon. The "*Horti conclusi [...] Fontes signati*" are metaphorical praise of a woman: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits [...] A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon."¹⁰³ The Biblical quotation praises the woman's subservience toward the man, and Donne's reference indicates the subservience of the university, or of any worldly knowledge, toward Christ. Sayers' provocative recontextualization of the quotation, in which the university is represented in terms of an ideal (and sexualized) woman, begins the feminization of the university within the text, and signals that its definition of "the woman's place" has been altered.

The layered and contra-distinct meanings of the Donne epigraph begin to indicate the layered nature of the text. For Kenney, the novel's distinction between narration and focalization "is nowhere more evident than in the subtle distinction between what Harriet chooses to see in the college, and what the novel presents to us."¹⁰⁴ Various possible readings of all the novel's quotations indicate the instability of interpretation as a practice, and often hint at subversions of their own use. One divergence of an epigraph's meaning from its source appears when Harriet takes up residence at Shrewsbury (Chapter 7). The epigraph, an excerpt from Drayton's "The Muses

¹⁰² John Donne, Sermon 11, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) VI, p. 227.

¹⁰³ Song 4. 12-15.

¹⁰⁴ Kenney, pp. 163-164.

Elizium”, seems to preface Harriet’s anticipation of opposition there: as she tells the Warden, “one or two of the Senior Members do not approve of me.” (132)

O my deare *Cloris* be not sad,
Nor with these furies daunted,
But let these female fooles be mad,
With Hellish pride enchanted;
Let not thy noble thoughts descend
So low as their affections,
Whom neither counsel can amend,
Nor yet the Gods corrections. (133)

The sour Miss Hillyard might be characterized as a daunting fury, and the quotation an encouragement to Harriet. However, in “The Fourth Nimphall” this consoling speech is directed to Cloris after she has ventured out of Elizium into “Felicia” (Drayton’s re-named England) and seen its ugliness. For William A. Oram, “the threat of the actual”¹⁰⁵ is disruptive, but Elizium is too perfect, “to be entirely satisfying as imaginative experience: the mind must nourish itself on other meats.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, underneath its apparent application, this epigraph is another suggestion that Harriet must confront the world, and that her problematic idealization of the university will not satisfy her.

Other epigraphs are geared toward the love plot, and again used to satirize the limited narrative perspective. Bacon’s “[t]hey do best who, if they cannot but admit love, yet make it keep quarter” has a surface simplicity that belies his specific separation of types of love. The essay finishes, “[n]uptial love maketh mankind; friendly love perfecteth it; but wanton love corrupteth and embaseth it”,¹⁰⁷ a sentiment echoed in Peter’s caution to Harriet that “of all the devils loose in the world there [is] no devil like devoted love” (417). The two Burton quotations that begin Chapter 12 refer back to Harriet’s opposition of emotion and intellect: the first doubts the constancy of the lover, and the second the stability of the mind. *Gaudy Night* has been variously criticized for being pretentious, for being overly laudatory, and for caricaturing the university, but throughout the novel, Sayers’ liberal use of irony undermines such

¹⁰⁵ William A. Oram, “‘The Muses Elizium’: A Late Golden World”, *Studies in Philology* 75.1 (1978), 10-31 (p. 21).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Francis Bacon, *Essays* (Teddington: Echo Library, 2009), p. 20.

assumptions. The theme of mis-attribution of meaning continues even within Sayers' original writing, such as when Harriet writes of the "still centre" in her sonnet. The moment of its composition is a turning point: "she began to write again, knowing with a deep inner certainty that somehow, after a long and bitter wandering, she was once more in her own place." (236) While she is truly beginning to find "her own place" in her work she misinterprets the feeling. Instead of internalizing her sense of development and increased security, accomplished partly through facing her past at Oxford, she attributes the sensation externally, to the place: she sits "looking over the spires of the city, deep-down, fathom-drowned, striking from the round bowl of the river-basin, improbably remote and lovely as the towers of Tir-nan-Og beneath the green sea-rollers." (235) Harriet's poetic frame of mind creates an image of Oxford, but she sees this process in reverse, and attributes her creative impulse to the place.

The sonnet, though its subject is the calm of intellect (until Peter's sestet turns it into an image of precarious balance), is written in the notebook detailing Harriet's investigation; the juxtaposition of the two clearly signifies how her pre-conceived ideas about the university still hamper her investigation. The irony of the situation is that while Harriet feels immersed in an atmosphere of intellectualism, it is her ambivalence about that intellectual focus that prevents her from properly exercising her own deductive powers. Marianne Thormälen remarks, "*Gaudy Night*, a book intensely concerned with cognitive matters, certainly reinforces the ever-pertinent insight that no knowledge is more valuable than the knowledge of one's own limitations."¹⁰⁸ As Sayers points out repeatedly, one must see one's own subject in perspective. Even Harriet's private thoughts, if applied to her own investigation, would suggest a different approach. When speaking with admiring undergraduates, she muses, "[t]he fashion for psychoanalysis had, she decided, rather gone out since her day; she was instinctively aware that a yearning for action and the concrete was taking its place." (174) In a similar vein, Miss Edwards says, "In your novels, you deal more in material facts than in psychology, don't you?" (391) The detective novelist, however, fails to

¹⁰⁸ Marianne Thormälen, "The Idea of Academe in *Gaudy Night*", in *Studies in Sayers*, ed. by Christopher Dean (Hurstpierpoint: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1994), pp. 21-27 (p. 24).

realize that the fact-based model of detective fiction is more dependable than the apparent “reality” of psychology. Sayers at once mocks the one-dimensionality of detective fiction, and reminds the reader that this is still a detective story: if Harriet were to apply the “fashion” of fiction, she would be able to cut through the morass of psychology. Peter comforts her by reiterating that “a fact is a fact, and your state of mind won’t alter it by a hair’s breadth” (433-434), but of course her state of mind does obscure the facts, for herself and for the reader.

Gaudy Night is one of Sayers’ only novels to follow the “whodunnit” model; her usual concerns are means and/or motive. The mystery surrounding the culprit in this case is, of course, a direct extension of the misunderstood motive. Though Sayers commented that “our interest, like the detective’s, is less in the discovery than the establishment of guilt”,¹⁰⁹ the process of criminal detection is embedded in Harriet’s discovery of herself as well. Peter praises her novelist’s instinct in arranging the evidence, but he admonishes her for her inability to process it: “For God’s sake, put your prejudices aside and think it out. What’s happened to you that you can’t put two and two together?” (416) This is one of the overriding questions of the novel; something has happened to Harriet, but it is her inability to understand it that disables her as an investigator. When she begins the sonnet, she attributes the change in herself to her environment, and this misattribution of credit devalues her own contribution, both to the detective plot and to her own reconstruction of herself. It is only when she can put a name to the criminal, and the crime, that she can “[face] the facts about that man” (473), and about her own emotions.

¹⁰⁹ Sayers, Introduction to *Omnibus*, p. 117.

“Private ground”: Internal and External Barriers

Harriet is the center of *Gaudy Night*; her internal struggle defines the place of the novel as much as its theoretical concerns. As indicated previously, the focalization of the fictional place is problematic, and essential: the narrative construction of the college is restricted to her embodied viewpoint. Instead of defining relationships between rooms, buildings, and passages, the novel depicts the college as Harriet moves through it, as discussed above, reinforcing the sense that it is a fluid entity, dependent on perception. Many crucial sequences are presented in specific scenes, often framed as a view. Philip Walker points out the connection in Zola’s work between the eye, and the narrative perspectivization implied therein, and the window or mirror. It is essential to remain aware of the influence of perspective on the view: “[n]o doubt we must distinguish between those objects which let images pass through freely, with little or no distortion, and those which subject them to more or less radical modifications.”¹¹⁰ The window, which offers a limited view, and the eye, which can only take in what it sees, both modify the larger narrative view. The emphasis in the text on windows, and their limitations, is another reminder of the questionable value of Harriet’s perspective on the mystery.

Harriet’s personal space is often defined by windows: aside from the satirical description of the ornaments in the fresher’s room she occupies briefly at the Gaudy, all of the rooms she occupies are principally described by the view from the window. The novel in fact begins, “Harriet Vane sat at her writing-table and stared out into Mecklenburg Square.” (7)¹¹¹ Kestner observes, as mentioned in Chapter Two, that

[T]here seems to be a ‘grammar’ of locations throughout the history of the novel, such as the house, the window, the staircase, the prison, the room; these locations recur, one may argue, not only because human beings inhabit them (setting) but because certain actions occur there (dramatized moment, scene).¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Philip Walker, “The Mirror, The Window, and The Eye in Zola’s Fiction”, *Yale French Studies* 42 (1969), pp. 52-67 (p. 57).

¹¹¹ Further views from windows: Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 14, 86, 200, 295.

¹¹² Kestner, p. 70.

The window, as a more permeable part of architectural space than a wall, allows a perception of place that extends beyond immediate surroundings. It allows for views out, or in. What can, and cannot, be seen from a particular window is an issue in *Gaudy Night*; the role of views in defining the college, and Harriet's experience of it, is established in the sequence describing her discovery of the attack on the Library.¹¹³

She was out of bed now and pulling the window-curtains aside. There was no moon, and nothing at all to be seen. Not even a late essay-writer seemed to be burning the midnight lamp.

Anybody could go anywhere on a dark night like this, she thought to herself. She could scarcely see even the outline of the roofs of Tudor on her right, or the dark bulk of the New Library jutting out on her left from behind the Annexe.

The Library; with not a soul in it. (114)

She first looks out of her own window, then the window at the end of the passage, “hygienically open at top and bottom” (115), then the window in Miss Barton's room. She knows that someone is in the Library because

The New Library should have been quite dark. It was not. One of the long windows was split from top to bottom by a narrow band of light.

Harriet thought rapidly. If this was Miss Burrows, carrying on legitimately (though at an unreasonable and sacrificial hour) with her preparations, why had she troubled to draw the curtains? [...] College authorities were not so secretive as all that. Something was up. (115)

Windows may help or hinder in the gathering of information, because of their inherent limitations of view. Later in this sequence, a window becomes an access point, as Harriet and Miss Barton must break into the locked Library. The breaking of the window at this point might represent challenge to the confinement of the view, but it does not; instead, it is a counter-attack. The destruction of the library is acknowledged in the text as an attack on women's education in general, and Miss Barton's ingress via the window extends the Poltergeist's metaphor, emphasizing the resourcefulness of academic women: if this attack were successful, they would find another entrance point to education and professions.

Windows offer defined viewpoints throughout the novel, but they are also used as entrances and exits several times, transforming the view into a performative aspect of

¹¹³ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 114-117.

the text. In the Library sequence, as well as during the theft of the fuses and the Poltergeist's appearance in the Science Lecture-Room, windows become more than simple frames. Particularly in the latter incident, in which Harriet breaks another glass pane to get into the room (326), the window's meaning seems to shift.¹¹⁴ A window is both the actual and staged escape route of the Poltergeist, indicating that Annie too understands the shifting power of the view. Indeed, she creates a scene in this event that almost passes for a view: she brings another scout to "witness" the Poltergeist at work, though of course, she is the only one who "sees" the culprit through the glass pane in the door. This attempt to create an alibi emphasizes both the performative aspect of any view and the inherent unreliability of the limited view.

Before they indicate crime, lighted windows represent friendly reunions; as Harriet walks through the quad with Miss de Vine at the Gaudy, "[t]he moon was up, painting the buildings with cold washes of black and silver whose austerity rebuked the yellow gleam of lighted windows behind which old friends reunited still made merry with talk and laughter" (41). Lights may indicate virtuous intellectual pursuits as well as conviviality: "[f]rom time to time, she looked up from her paper, hesitating for a word, and saw through the window the lights of Burleigh and Queen Elizabeth burning back across the quad, counterparts of her own" (200). The community of the college is strengthened through these lights, which represent the effort of each person in her own discipline. However, lighted windows are also unreliable, and can signal deception and even danger. The light that should not be on in the Library alerts Harriet to the destruction there, but Peter reminds her that "You can't establish an alibi on the strength of a reading-lamp" (335). Harriet is forewarned before she is attacked in Miss de Vine's room because "it suddenly struck her as odd that the curtains should be drawn and no light on" (442). As Thomas Sebeok and Harriet Margolis point out, in their study of windows in Sherlock Holmes, "[t]he villain [...] is usually the one to shut a window, or to draw a curtain, in an effort to conceal his secrets or carry out his nefarious activities," whereas "windows are most often opened to clear the air."¹¹⁵ Of

¹¹⁴ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 372-385.

¹¹⁵ Thomas A. Sebeok and Harriet Margolis, "Captain Nemo's Porthole: Semiotics of Windows in Sherlock Holmes", *Poetics Today* 3.1 (1982), pp. 110-139 (p. 125).

course, this clearing of the air is usually the role of the detective, a part of the role Harriet is attempting to play in the Library incident above.

The window also represents those who may be watching. Harriet is worried about being seen when she brings Mr. Pomfret into college, and when Saint George mischievously kisses her “bang under the windows of the SCR” (378). It is only in the conclusion, after both the mystery and the love story are resolved, that the window is no longer an object of attention. It is only at this moment that Peter and Harriet finally become engaged that the narrative focalization leaves her:¹¹⁶ “[i]f Senior Members of the University chose to stand—in their gowns, too!—closely and passionately embracing in New College Lane right under the Warden’s windows, [the proctor] was powerless to prevent it.” (482-483) She is no longer afraid of who may be watching, and the watcher has no power over her.

Windows allow certain views, but prohibit others, and as such they form part of a larger motif, that of inhibited vision. *Gaudy Night* contains numerous warnings about sight and blindness, in both the epigraphs and the text itself. The idea of blindness as a hindrance to the detective is introduced on the first page of the novel. The epigraph of Chapter 1 is from Sidney:

Thou blind man's mark, thou fool's self-chosen snare,
Fond fancy's scum, and dregs of scattered thought,
Band of all evils, cradle of causeless care;
Thou web of will, whose end is never wrought:
Desire, desire ! I have too dearly bought
With price of mangled mind, thy worthless ware. (7)

The poem apparently reflects Harriet’s regret of her previous relationship, which she believes prevents her from making desired connections, not only with Peter: at the beginning of the novel, she is thinking of Shrewsbury. She is introduced

[S]tar[ing] out into Mecklenberg Square. [...] But Harriet saw neither tulips nor tennis-players. A letter lay open on the blotting-pad before

¹¹⁶ There is one other brief scene that is focalized from Peter’s point of view, when he receives Harriet’s letter in Italy (230-231); this glimpse into his perspective shows how carefully he attends to the minutiae that illustrate their relationship. Also, it demonstrates Harriet’s lack of awareness of him, as it is only in the following scene that she learns of his Foreign Office work.

her, but its image had faded from her mind to make way for another picture. (7)

Brown interprets the epigraph as an indication of the novel's insistence that "those who are clear-sighted will eschew the entrapment of the will, and the deterioration of the mind, that result from wrong love."¹¹⁷ However, it is equally an indication of Harriet's self-deception: she is the blind man, unable to see what is before her eyes. She is blinded by an idealized memory that is evident in her characterization of the physical place, with modern buildings "stretching out reconciling hands to past and present" and older ones "still keeping a domestic remembrance of...the first shy students of Shrewsbury College." Her fantasy peoples the quad with romanticized and stereotyped figures, including "[a] grizzled woman don [...] her thoughts riveted upon aspects of sixteenth-century philosophy" (8). Leonardi maintains that these descriptions imply, "not only [...] enormous influence but [...] a kind of moral purity."¹¹⁸ As Harriet becomes more and more enchanted with the academic ideal, her blindness actually increases; toward the end of the novel, she is aware that she is deeply in love with Peter, but still echoes Sidney's poem in "[d]esiring nought but how to kill desire."¹¹⁹

Harriet's introductory fantasy is paralleled later by what Peter calls her inclination toward "peopling the cloister with bogies" (312). She is blinded first by her own idealism, and later by her fears of the hazards of intellectual life; the latter, as shown above, is yet another manifestation of her fear of *any* desire. Mental blindness is echoed in the text by darkness that makes it literally difficult to see. During the Gaudy, Harriet crosses the Old Quad at night with Miss de Vine; this is the crucial conversation in which the don praises Harriet's "detachment". Harriet admits her own insecurity about her choices while "ancient beeches, most venerable of all Shrewsbury institutions, cast over them a dappled and changing shadow-pattern that was more confusing than darkness." (42) This shadow, its confusing combination of dark and

¹¹⁷ Brown, p. 149.

¹¹⁸ Leonardi, p. 84.

¹¹⁹ Sir Philip Sidney, "Thou blind man's mark...", in *English Renaissance Poetry: A Collection of Shorter Poems from Skelton to Jonson*, ed. by John Williams (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 1990), p. 202.

light, may represent Harriet's feelings for Peter or her relationship with her writing; however, it is most importantly bound to place, to her interpretation of the college. The trees, oddly characterized as "venerable institutions", literally spring from the soil of the college, and thus represent the young minds it nurtures, as well as its institutional ideals. The interplay of the idealized light and the demonized darkness in Harriet's idea of the college makes it impossible to progress, as a detective must, from darkness into light. Fittingly, another passage from darkness into light concludes the novel. When Peter proposes, he is walking with Harriet through changing shadows, but before she finally accepts, "[t]hey passed beneath the arch of the bridge and out into the pale light once more." (482)

The confusion of light and darkness also marks the Poltergeist's attacks, most markedly in her theft of the fuses in the college halls, during which she creates chaos by literally stealing the light.¹²⁰ Darkness often makes pursuit physically impossible, but it is also, in this instance, the catalyst for pursuit. From the first active attack, the bonfire of gowns, all of the major instances of malicious damage in the novel occur at night, and are activated through a contrast of dark and light. As mentioned above, the destruction of the library is discovered because Harriet sees light where it should not be, and the staged "discovery" of the Poltergeist in the lecture room is presented in the same way (Annie's story is that she "saw a light" when she woke). The juxtaposition of light and dark demonstrates the difficulty for the detective of illuminating the situation: while light may be very close, it is continually snatched away. During the Library incident, Harriet "cursed herself for not having a torch; she was delayed by fumbling with the switches." (115) She is hampered in her detective function because she does not carry her own light, which may be interpreted as yet another indicator of her lack of investigative independence. The light/dark motif of the attacks establishes set of barriers for the detective that echoes that network of rivers and canals in *The Rising of the Moon*. As detection in Mitchell's novel is characterized by topographical boundaries and obstacles, it is characterized in *Gaudy Night* by the contrast of light and dark, as well as an emphasis on blindness, which, of course, may be a result of moving

¹²⁰ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 227-231.

too quickly from one into the other. When the dons first present the case, Miss Burrows suggests that the culprit is one of the scouts; Miss Barton responds, "I feel strongly that we ought not to allow ourselves to be blinded by any sort of class prejudice." (91) The subsequent conversation, in which the scouts are almost completely dismissed, makes it quite clear that in fact they, and Harriet, remain blinded. As Peter later complains, "The biggest crime of these blasted psychologists is to have obscured the obvious." (312) Sayers' misdirection also makes the reader blind to the obvious solution.

Blindness is illustrated as a personal failure as well as a collective one. Two descriptions of Harriet looking into a mirror bookend the bulk of the text. In the first, when she is readying herself to attend the first event of the Gaudy, she has difficulty seeing herself in the "inadequate looking glass" (13). She must stoop to see herself at all, and her vision is more psychological than literal:

Her own eyes looked back at her—rather tired, rather defiant—eyes that had looked upon fear and were still wary, The mouth was the mouth of one who has been generous and repented of generosity.... With the thick, waving hair folded beneath the black cloth, the face seemed somehow stripped for action. (13-14)

This description, of course, illustrates her mindset at the beginning of the story, but it also indicates the power of her self-image: the way Harriet reads her own physical appearance indicates the inwardness of her focus. She considers her reflection again very near the end of the novel, as she puts on the dog collar that Peter asks her to wear for safety. In doing so, she is accepting not only his gift, "the only thing you've ever let me give you" (402), but his advice and his right to an interest in her welfare. She finds the gesture of putting on the collar almost humorous, but

Her own face, in the drowned evening light, surprised her—softened and startled and drained of colour, with eyes that looked unnaturally large under the heavy black brows, and lips a little parted. It was like the head of someone who had been guillotined; the dark band cut it off from the body like the stroke of the headsman's steel. (440)

This description is more visual, but additionally it betrays a fundamental change in Harriet's view of herself. Her lips, "a little parted", are unquestionably sensuous. The

stark image of the severed head illustrates that by this point in the narrative, she has come to the realization that she cannot live with a separation of the mind and body.

The overall quality of vision changes toward the end of the novel. After the solution to the case is revealed and the “distorting-glass of suspicion was removed”, the dons resume their appearance as “kindly, intelligent human beings—not seeing, perhaps, very much further beyond their own interests than an ordinary man beyond his job” (475). Though they may be short-sighted, they are no longer blinded, and can continue with their jobs and their lives. When Harriet joins Peter on the roof of the Radcliffe Camera, they look out over the university as though seeing it anew, “spire and tower and quadrangle, all Oxford springing underfoot in living leaf and enduring stone, ringed far off by her bulwark of blue hills.” (476) Oxford is again set apart, idealized, but for different, and more reliable, reasons.

During the investigation, the college seems to turn continually inward. From the beginning of the case, the dons insist on keeping the investigation within the college’s purview; they prefer Harriet’s assistance because she is already a part of the institution. Their interiority is part of their strength: Peter acknowledges in the end that

Nothing but the very great loyalty of the Senior Common Room to the College, and the respect of the students for the Senior Common Room stood between you and a most unpleasant publicity [...] this particular kind of loyalty forms at once the psychological excuse for the attack and the only possible defence against it. (523)

The college is physically defined by its walls, which enclose, protect, and defend; these qualities are also attributable to the people within. For Lennard,

The pressure on Harriet’s investigation from would-be hermetics, Fellows closeting themselves with their work or desiring to protect the college’s name, in tandem with the mechanics of living within walls and portered gates, subject the impossibility and misguided ethics of such self-isolation (in fiction or life) to relentless examination—a process itself summoning one major purpose of the university.¹²¹

¹²¹ Lennard, p. 36.

This analysis is problematic because *Gaudy Night*'s examination of the scholastic life does not judge it to be impossible or misguided, and the dons, to varying degrees, acknowledge their own hermeticism. The novel leads away from idealism, but in doing so functions to normalize the dons rather than to isolate them. The revolutionary aspect of this strategy is that it attempts to surmount boundaries of comprehension and empathy between the university and the world at large.

The walls of the college both protect and imprison: as Kenney writes,

The structure of *Gaudy Night* forces its characters inward, into territory that proves ever more challenging and frightening—inside the university, inside the college walls, inside the quad, inside the room, finally inside the lonely spaces of their minds.¹²²

The interiority of the college is also a central physical metaphor. Lutwack attributes particular meaning to the enclosed place:

Enclosure automatically bestows special value on places and things, and the island, valley, and garden are readily conceived as earthly paradises. But there is a price to pay for their worth: because of their concentrated richness and exclusiveness, paradisaical places require constant protection and create feelings of guilt and fear of loss.¹²³

The college seems a refuge, a paradise of learning, but it depends on its enclosure: it has to maintain a sense of dignity and propriety in order to justify the membership of women. Lutwack also points out the centuries-old association between the woman and the garden: he also alludes to the Song of Solomon. Miss Hillyard is the character most associated with the Fellows' Garden,¹²⁴ and the first to suggest that the walls of the college may be penetrable: "What is to prevent a man from concealing himself about the grounds before the gates are locked and escaping again when they are opened in the morning? Or climbing the walls, if it comes to that?" (108) Harriet thinks this is "evidence of the speaker's prejudice, which amounted almost to obsession", but of course men do surmount the walls during the course of the story.

¹²² Kenney, p. 82.

¹²³ Lutwack, p. 95.

¹²⁴ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 279, 373, 388, 421.

The introduction of Reggie Pomfret contributes to the re-figuring of the college as an impenetrable place, as well as to Harriet's re-evaluation of herself. When Harriet catches him scaling the walls of Shrewsbury, the gesture of the fairy-tale hero is swiftly punctured. He is not a knight in shining armor, but a well-meaning fool, and Harriet, as a senior member of the university, easily dominates him.¹²⁵ Pomfret is established as a comic anti-hero, an image later reinforced when he proposes to Harriet: "[t]o offer a lady one's chivalrous protection against the world in general and to be compelled instead to accept her senior standing as a protection for one's self against the just indignation of the Proctor is, and remains, farcical." (260) The shattered image of the courtly hero is a break from the male/female dynamic of traditional narratives, and alludes to Sayers's reconsideration of the detective genre. However, Mr. Pomfret also represents, in his breach of the feminine defenses of the college, first breach of Harriet's defenses. Ronen theorizes that,

Spatial elements, like elements indicating time, have the grammatical status of *modifiers of actions and of states* (in which characters and objects are engaged) which reflect the fact that it is through their interaction with elements of plot or character that the significance of the specific organization of spatial elements is revealed.¹²⁶

That the walls of the college prove to be penetrable potentially alters the plot of the novel, but actually contributes more to the alteration of the central character. Harriet also hides Mr. Pomfret in the chapel, which reinforces the idea that he has helped her "get to the church" with Peter. The other student who admits to having climbed the walls of Shrewsbury is Saint George, Peter's nephew; while his entrance to the college provides evidence in the case, he also more directly stands in for Peter. He is also integrated in the church metaphor when Harriet first encounters him outside the Cathedral, and momentarily mistakes him for his uncle (178).

The protected and isolated lady in the garden is a figure of courtly mythology, who, like the chivalrous knight, is deemed obsolete in *Gaudy Night*. The comparative openness of the college, through which both men and women pass during the modern

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 141-150.

¹²⁶ Ronen, "Construction of Fictional Space", p. 14.

day if not during the primitive night, transforms the romanticized boundaries between the sexes. Personal boundaries, however, are still very much an issue between Harriet and Peter. As Harriet becomes aware of the dangers presented by the interiority of the college, she becomes increasingly aware that she knows little of him because she has been so preoccupied with herself. While he can “roll himself into an armadillo-like ball, presenting a smooth, defensive surface of ironical quotation” (227), she sees him “strip off his protections, layer by layer, till there was uncommonly little left but the naked truth.” (382) The wording of the text repeatedly references the “defences” and “private ground” (319) that impede their relationship, but as Harriet also develops an awareness of the value of going “inward”, in her own work, she realizes Peter is allowing her in as well. He acknowledges this change in the conclusion, saying, “I have had to pull down, brick by brick, the barriers I had built up by my own selfishness and folly.” (478) After Sayers’ “major operation on him”, Peter has “a past and a future” as well as “a complicated psychology”.¹²⁷ What she characterizes in “Gaudy Night” as an operation is presented in the language of the novel as a physical, bricks-and-mortar transformation; this relates his mental progress strongly to that of Harriet, whose barriers and walls dominate the novel's psychological space. The personal “barriers” also recall again the enclosure of the place in which the mystery plot is defined, and within which the relationship of the detectives is re-defined.

Sayers creates complex structures of interdependent physical and psychological place. Some she develops by proxy as above, and others through association. The river, though it is mentioned many times in the text, is the setting for only two important events, Miss Newland’s attempted suicide¹²⁸ and Peter and Harriet’s punt.¹²⁹ The first sequence establishes the river as a locus of danger and instability, where one may lose one’s life, whether in self-destruction or rescue efforts. The scenes on the punt, which include comic interactions with other characters, a recap of the case, and discussion of motives, means, and suspects, climax in Harriet’s realization that she desires Peter. Through all of these runs the theme of the river’s dangers. After a conversation with

¹²⁷ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 211.

¹²⁸ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 265-272.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 303-322..

one of Peter's former classmates, he and Harriet both recognize the "great drawback" of living in Oxford: "It keeps you young. Too young." (305) The danger Harriet fears more, of course, is that of personal relationships. As he examines her dossier, she examines him, reflecting his intellectual exercise but transforming it into a sensual one. His glance at her activates a response of fear: "[t]hrough the confusion of her darkened eyes and her drumming ears some enormous bulk seemed to stoop over her." (310) Desire is actively dangerous, and Harriet's instinctive response is magnified by the setting and its textual associations. Particularly because the question of marriage is so central in the novel, this association emphasizes its inherent hazards: the loss of life may not be only literal.

The sexually symbolic scene in which Peter teaches Harriet how to defend herself carries another subtext of dangerous desire. They must "step aside [...] into this convenient field" where there is "a high hedge to screen us from the road" (398); though literally they need to conceal themselves lest Peter be "run in by the local bobby for assault", their physical concealment also echoes the necessity, for both parties, of hiding their feelings. Harriet recognizes the sexual implications of the scene, but, as she takes an implicitly post-coital cigarette, she "mentally turn[s] the incidents of the last hour into a scene in a book (as is the novelist's unpleasant habit)" (399), thereby de-personalizing any subtext for herself. The multiple levels of concealment in this scene (concealment of the literal action, one action standing in for another, and self-deceit about that substitution) act in concert to integrate a foreshadowing scene into a revelatory romantic incident. Also, it introduces another possibility to the "head and heart" dichotomy. Harriet has been searching for "overmastery" when Peter wants "precarious balance" (382); he will never "[ride] rough-shod" (474) over her, but since they have come together through detective activity, it is through detection-related role-play that he can begin to contextualize her desire.

What multiple critics have seen as Harriet's "capitulation",¹³⁰ Sayers envisioned as the balanced union of "the two moods of the artistic spirit".¹³¹ One revelation for Harriet is that, though he wants to marry her, Peter "seemed willing to let her run back behind the barriers of the mind, provided [...] she would make her own way of escape through her work." (383) This flight reflects Lutwack's description of the traditional heroine's flight into increasingly interior spaces in the face of male intrusion:

Like the garden of earlier literature, the house is both the symbol of the woman's body, which male villainy plots to violate by penetrating, as well as the place where the horrible event may occur. The heroine's fear of being raped is expressed by her fear of an intruder breaking into a building; the flight through corridors and stairways to more concealed rooms is a suspenseful analogy with the male's destruction of one defense after another until the ultimate seat of chastity is reached.¹³²

In *Gaudy Night*, of course, the heroine's chastity is not at stake; instead, it is her intellectual honor that she so desperately defends. In this sense the novel again upsets a traditional structure; Peter will let her go, rather than force himself upon her mind. His acknowledgement of her autonomy in her investigation, "'Disagreeableness and danger will not turn you back, and God forbid they should.' [...] was an admission of equality, and she had not expected it of him." (230) She further revises her understanding of their relationship when he advises her to

"abandon the jig-saw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change."

"I'm afraid to try that, Peter. It might go too near the bone."

"It might be the wisest thing you could do."

[...]

"I'll think about that. It would hurt like hell."

"What would that matter, if it made a good book?"

She was taken aback, not by what he said, but by his saying it. She had never imagined that he regarded her work very seriously, and she had certainly not expected him to take this ruthless attitude about it. The protective male? He was being about as protective as a can-opener. (321)

¹³⁰ Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 188; Margot Peters and Agate Nesaule Krouse, "Women and Crime: Sexism in Allingham, Sayers, and Christie", *Southwest Review* 59 (1974), pp. 144-152 (p. 148).

¹³¹ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p. 219.

¹³² Lutwack, p. 110.

Peter firmly rejects the idea of “chivalrous protection”; as Miss de Vine says, “You needn’t be afraid of losing your independence; he will always force it back on you.” (474) As discussed above, when Peter comes to Oxford, Harriet feels that “she had sold the breach to an alien force; she had sided with London against Oxford and with the world against the cloister” (295), but she immediately realizes such oppositions are false.

As discussed above, London and Oxford are proven, through Peter’s ease with both, not to be the diametric opposites that Harriet supposes, but two aspects of one fully-developed personality. However, she continues to dichotomize places, experiences, and priorities throughout the novel, even near the climax:

Could there ever be any alliance between the intellect and the flesh? ... Experience, perhaps, had a formula to get over the difficulty; one kept the bitter, tormenting brain on one side of the wall and the languorous sweet body on the other, and never let them meet. So that if you were made that way you could argue loyalties in an Oxford common-room and refresh yourself elsewhere with—say—Viennese singers, presenting an unruffled surface on both sides of yourself. Easy for a man, and possible even for a woman, if one avoided foolish accidents like being tried for murder. (440-441)

Insisting on separation, Harriet ignores not only her own feelings, betrayed in the phraseology opposing “bitter, tormenting brain” and “languorous, sweet body”, but the complexity of the places in which she stages the opposition. The university is, obviously, not all brain, any more than the cosmopolitan city is all body. Isolation is one aspect of the college, but the personal relationships therein are equally essential to its nature. As Simeone comments, “[o]ne of Sayers’ achievements in *Gaudy Night* is that she gives us relationships in which we become interested, without the conventional ‘love’ aspect. [...] There are good friendships among the dons at Shrewsbury College.”¹³³ The community spirit is one of the most essential aspects in Sayers’ presentation of the university as an identifiable workplace. Kenney emphasizes its femininity, contrasting the detective’s environment in *Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night*: in the former, (and in the latter as well) Peter ratiocinates on his own, whereas Harriet

¹³³ Simeone, p. 36.

[I]s surrounded by a college full of people, people from whom she cannot escape. Her world is essentially the tightly bound world of human relationships and quarrels; her task, the heroine's traditional lot of working within such social groups and boundaries. In both spatial and psychological terms, therefore, *The Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night* suggest, respectively, masculine and feminine experience, or at least what has been regarded traditionally as such.¹³⁴

Durie notes that the novel largely “omits men. They may be assumed in some of the activities mentioned, but in this perpetual liveliness they are redundant. [...] Men are implied, but what is seen foregrounds women.”¹³⁵ There is a strong suggestion in *Gaudy Night* that women, far from being unnaturally situated in academia, are eminently suited to it.

Sayers manipulates the meanings of “masculine” and “feminine” experience in the novel, co-opting a traditional concept of academia. The academic environment is performed in an extremely feminine way, from the beginning when Harriet dresses for the Gaudy: she and the Dean talk about the appropriateness of academic dress as though gossiping about fashion (16). When Harriet meets Miss de Vine, the character most identified with intellectual prowess and single-minded focus on academic work, the don's vigorous questioning is associated with housekeeping:

Miss de Vine ruthlessly turned her victim's brain inside out, shook the facts out of it like a vigorous housemaid shaking dust from a carpet, beat it, refreshed it, rubbed up the surface of it, relaid it in a new position and tacked it into place with a firm hand. (25-26)

Scholarship and housekeeping appear in another analogy at the end of the novel, when Peter says,

“I set out in a lordly manner to offer you Heaven and Earth, and I find that all I have to give you is Oxford—which was yours already. ... It has been my humble privilege to clean and polish your property and present her for your inspection on a silver salver.” (479)

His “cleaning and polishing” has removed the threat to the college; thus it is not only academia, but detection and solution, that are characterized by their relation to “feminine” activity. The inversion of class roles as Lord Peter adopts the role of a

¹³⁴ Kenney, pp. 81-82.

¹³⁵ Durie, p. 48.

servant recalls the parody of courtly love traditions scattered throughout the novel. However, his tongue-in-cheek performance of courtly subservience to his lady also refers to his role as an amateur detective; as Harriet points out to Miss Stevens at the beginning, while his detective work is not a job, he still acts as a public servant (37). Detection and romance are once again allied, so that Peter's "presentation" of the resolved case, and the rehabilitated place, demonstrates his faithfulness to his "proper job", and facilitates the conclusion of the romance plot. Durie writes:

If we have to apply a single description to [*Gaudy Night*], it is best described by a label Sayers liked, as a mystery story. The word mystery suggests the inexplicable, the supernatural, the puzzle guessed through uncovering of what is concealed; but also the revelation of that which could not otherwise have been known.¹³⁶

In the conclusion, Harriet, remains emotionally tied to her surroundings, but the detection process has altered the implications of her allegiance. She manages to see the university and its ideals not only subjectively, but inter-subjectively, which transforms her vision of herself.

The symbolic properties of the university are still essential in the conclusion, but they have been re-contextualized for the new relationship formed therein. When Peter leaves her on the roof of the Radcliffe Camera,

Harriet was left to survey the kingdom of the mind, glittering from Merton to Bodley, from Carfax to Magdalen Tower. But her eyes were on one slight figure that crossed the cobbled Square, walking lightly under the shadow of St. Mary's into the High. All the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. (480)

Oxford is subsumed into the person of the beloved, which is possible only because it is no longer an impossible ideal, but a real place. Harriet is still able to love the place, but it, like Peter, has become humanized. In declaring Harriet's love for Peter through an architectural metaphor, Sayers ties the couple firmly to intellectual equality, to "a delicate balance of opposing forces", and to the place itself. For Leonardi, Harriet and Peter's union is "a creative act, not a real or social one, and the object of that creativity

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 42

is marriage itself.”¹³⁷ The relationship that they create is defined neither by the university nor the city, but the re-negotiation of personal place throughout the novel is continually grounded in physical place. Kenney notes that Sayers admired Dante’s architectural writing: “Sayers’s own best novels [...] display this architectonic sense of form.”¹³⁸ Place in *Gaudy Night* is a literal container for action, a structural device, and a matrix of pre-existing and internally-established symbolism. This hybrid nature allows place a number of superimposed functions: as a psychological metaphor, a reconsideration of the detective genre, a re-negotiation of gender roles, and an argument in favor of women’s higher education. Latham also argues that the union of the detective and the author is, for Sayers herself, “a potential site of mediation between the claims of the intellect and the demands of the cultural marketplace.”¹³⁹ The many interpretations of the novel overlap and intersect, and the college exists both in the text itself and in its readings as a set of possibilities.

Oxford is more than the appropriate setting for *Gaudy Night*; it is a fundamental element of the novel’s construction, not only because of Sayers’ personal familiarity to it, but because of its own multilayered cultural implications. Its complex structure and intertextual references make it a significant novel not only in the history of detective fiction, but in that of place-centric fiction. Sayers acknowledged,

It is not always wise to take one's puppets to pieces and display the mechanism, because, with the present vogue for the sub-conscious, it is often supposed that anything done consciously must be done insincerely. But that is a blasphemy against the intellect. A character will not stand square on its legs without conscious carpentry any more than a table will; I would not put anything I valued on a table that had dreamily evolved itself from the sub-conscious. I know quite well how Peter was put together, and how his love-affair was put together; but the fact of my knowledge does not make the construction in the wrong sense artificial.

¹⁴⁰

Her defense of the novel’s construction suits its premise of purposeful consideration, of life as well as of detection. Sayers deconstructs an intellectual ideal in order to reconsider her genre, and positions her detective protagonists to defend the idea that

¹³⁷ Leonardi, p. 87.

¹³⁸ Kenney, p. 116.

¹³⁹ Latham, p. 213.

¹⁴⁰ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p. 218.

everyone, with careful attention, may find his or her own place. The “artistic unity” of *Gaudy Night* allows place to speak to each one of its many concerns, and to develop as a crucial component of the detective genre.

Conclusion: The Golden Age's Legacy of Place

Detective fiction is far more than a guilty pleasure or a sociological phenomenon. Though it apparently affirms the triumph of rationality, it continually re-asserts the presence of the unexplained. Though it is presumed to be oriented around closure, its greater appeal lies in its manipulation of assumptions. Lee Horsley points out that, even within the restrictions of “classic” detective fiction, “the reader’s experience contains more questions than answers, and it is arguable that this process of disruption is what readers of the genre find most compelling.”¹ This thesis demonstrates that many of detective fiction’s questions and answers exist outside its limited plot structure, in aspects such as place. Place is revelatory: it contains information leading to the detective’s revelations, but also, on a basic level, it reveals details about characters’ personalities, status, relationships, desires, and motivations. Many of the conclusions I have drawn about the role of place in detective fiction could equally be applied to novels outside the genre. However, they are particularly valuable within the genre, especially with regard to the easily-stereotyped Golden Age. Agatha Christie, Gladys Mitchell, and Dorothy L. Sayers use place in entirely different ways, but I believe it is useful to discuss these authors in relationship to each other; they, and other Golden Age novelists, read each others’ work, and adopted, manipulated, and commented on the ideas therein. An attempt to extract these novelists from their “genre” overlooks the interaction essential to the period, and fails to demonstrate the detective novel’s essential adaptability, its diversity of form and style. Considering place enables a reader to see not only the novel’s environment, but the entire text, anew, and reveals far greater complexity than a plot-oriented reading.

¹ Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005), p. 19.

A reference to the Golden Age is often used to connote the “cosy” type: a conservative, rule-bound, and predictable narrative, limited in scope, distinctly (and derogatorily) “feminine”. The actual variety of the genre is obscured by these assumptions, which, as particularly noted in the sections on Christie’s houses and villages, establish a set of expectations that generate drastic misreadings of the text. In addition, adaptations for film and television have significantly changed the subtexts of these stories, often by revising the places therein; Light points out that an adaptation of Christie’s *Nemesis* creates an impression of the author as “the high priestess of nostalgia rather than the ‘Queen of Crime’.”² Equally, critical prejudice long defined the “classic story of ratiocination” as the “English, country-house school”.³ Such narrow visions of what, exactly, the Golden Age meant and accomplished have led to a reductive view of its role within the genre, but it is plain that these works are far from homogeneous or conventional. The playful codifications of Knox and Van Dine led to a misunderstanding of the detective novel as a proscriptive form, but Sayers argued that “[t]he more closely the plan and scope of a detective story approach to the mathematical abstraction of a chess problem, the narrower is its appeal and the smaller its chance of surviving”.⁴ In response to such proscriptive readings, this thesis places emphasis on the esotericism and individuality of the Golden Age. Even authors who are often considered programmatic, like Christie, participated in the transformation of the detective story into the crime genre as we know it today.

Place is an unnoticed but significant instrument of this innovation; rather than merely a contextualizing device, it is a complicated and evolving mechanism that operates between reader and text, character and environment. Many authors refer to similar touchstones of place: the “country house” and “the village”, for instance, carry significant cultural freight. However, the ways that these places manifest themselves in the narrative varies enormously in the hands of different authors. As explored in Chapter Two, Christie demonstrates how the use of a place with such cultural currency can actually facilitate the novelist’s subversion of its meaning, as well as how it can be

² Light, p. 62.

³ Bartell, p. 182.

⁴ Sayers, “The Present Status of the Mystery Story”, p. 48.

re-oriented to serve a new set of narrative ends. Mitchell's novels often begin in similar settings, and thus presume upon the same norms, as Christie's, but Mitchell evokes a world that looks at the same time familiar and strangely grotesque. Christie's villages emphasize the contrast between the known and the unknown, but Mitchell's also touch on the incomprehensible.

Very little of the argument in this thesis concerns crime; despite being the necessary mainspring of the plot, the crimes in these works are only the means through which more complicated concerns than "whodunit?" are addressed. The crime plot is, in many ways, a means to an end, both for the novelists concerned and for this analysis. Christie, Mitchell, and Sayers, despite their distinct authorial philosophies, concur that crime is a common impulse rather than an aberration. The story of a crime can facilitate the telling of other stories, and it is in these other stories that place becomes visible as more than an evidential container. The value attributed to places can reveal individual attachments, and notions of "belonging" in a place or of being "out of place" interrogate societal structures of place meaning. The investigative process itself may be shaped by the detective's interaction with place, as exemplified in Chapter One by the profound shift from the hyper-active Holmes to the meditative Poirot. Place is a location for action, but it is also a narrative "structure of feeling",⁵ a "[schematization of] intuition",⁶ that enables a more abstract consideration of human nature.

Crime in these novels is only a side effect of a greater instability, whether it be psychological, interpersonal, or societal. The places of Christie's novels usually reflect, as do the crimes therein, societal changes and call attention to transformation of class norms, the futility of idealizing the past, or the re-direction of focus from the communal to the personal. Sayers was also "interested in social background, in manners and morals, in the depiction and interplay of character [...] a three-dimensional extension in time and space", and increasingly directed her novels toward

⁵ Agnew, "Representing Space", p. 263.

⁶ Tygstrup, pp. 259-260.

what she called a “criticism of life.”⁷ Sayers’ efforts to engage with significant philosophical issues take her work into less typical detective milieux. All of these issues, however, are vitally connected with social and personal concerns; her novels are always driven, and her places delineated, by her characters’ perspectives. Much of her contribution to the future of the detective novel lies in her development of the hero through the course of the series, much of which is accomplished by his encounters with various social environments. Sayers’ historicizing of the contemporary world creates a detailed series of places to which Lord Peter can respond, and through doing so, create different aspects of his character. For Sayers, “[t]o make the transition from the detached to the human point of view is one of the writer’s hardest tasks”,⁸ but her novels regularly evoke a sense of “out-of-placeness” and a need for adaptability that personalizes major conflicts of the interwar era.

In the work of all of these authors, place expresses meaning outside, and alongside, plot. Social and economic subtexts, for instance, are largely expressed through place. Small details are often a significant part of a larger agenda of place: for instance, Christie’s plots frequently depend on domestic minutiae such as the fact that the vicar’s clocks are fifteen minutes fast in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, or the invariability of the breakfast routine in *A Pocketful of Rye*. These details may act as clues to a detective’s instinct or a murderer’s method, as in these novels, but they are, more importantly, part of Christie’s refiguring of crime and detection as part of the everyday. Sayers also includes numerous domestic details in her novels: she examines the contrast between several households and their living standards in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and details the careful management of college expenses in *Gaudy Night*. For her, however, they are a means to protest against misplaced social priorities and the uneven distribution of resources, as she does most explicitly in *Murder Must Advertise*. For Mitchell, detail sometimes provides verisimilitude, but she equally uses it as a means to facilitate acceptance of the fantastic, as in *The Devil at Saxon Wall*.

⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, Introduction to *Great Tales of Detection* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1936) pp. vii-xiv (p. ix).

⁸ Sayers, Introduction to *Omnibus*, p. 102.

Mitchell is an unjustly overlooked author, but the most significant reason for including her in this thesis is her profound engagement with place throughout her career. Place is far more likely to be described in Mitchell's work than in that of Christie or Sayers, but her descriptions, far from being simply "travelogue",⁹ are often indicative of powerful symbolic forces. One of the best examples of this strategy is that of the house in *When Last I Died*; its additions and restructurings conceal its original foundations, and reflect the novel's plot as well as its multi-layered unreliable narration. On the whole, Mitchell is more concerned with the process of investigation than with neat solutions. Though it is debatable that "the happy and orderly end"¹⁰ is a necessary or typical feature of detective novel, a nominal restoration of order is understood as the norm. Mitchell, however, openly rejects the idea of closure because it implies that the solution is the goal, whereas her primary interest is in the process of inquiry. *St Peter's Finger* concludes with a telling exchange between Mrs. Bradley and her chauffeur:

"So all's well that ends well, madam."

"A Jesuitical statement, George, that I did not look for from you."¹¹

Her rebuttal does not apply only to this particular dictum, but to the idea of "ending" as a concept. Many of her novels end with a cryptic pronouncement relating vaguely to the crime, but few with a sense of finality. More often than not, the culprit is allowed to escape the law as well as its consequences; at the conclusion of *Brazen Tongue* (1940), her barrister son protests,

"But, Mother, you can't behave like God and decide that Burt shall be arrested and Pat get off scot-free."

"How do you know how God behaves?" asked his mother.¹²

The primary interest of Mitchell's novels lies not in resolution but in the endless process of detection, the sifting through of illuminating details. Her interest in psychoanalysis and the ongoing nature of therapy makes the emphasis on gradual progress, often based in conversation, a natural focus of her narratives. Mitchell's

⁹ Symons, p. 134.

¹⁰ Grella, p. 44.

¹¹ Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 351.

¹² Gladys Mitchell, *Brazen Tongue* (London: Michael Joseph, 1940), p. 318.

places, too, are linked with her inquiry into the abnormal, and her work often links crimes to the particular nature of a place.

Cresswell observes that, “Places are duplicitous in that they cannot be reduced to the concrete or the ‘merely ideological’; rather they display an uneasy and fluid tension between them.”¹³ Various representations of place may be at play within a narrative, competing for the reader’s attention and interpretation. Competing versions of a place often furnish material for characterization, or facilitate the process of detection. Perceptions about a place may indeed become more important than the place itself: Sayers bases the entire mystery of *Gaudy Night* around place-perception. The many variants of place reflect these authors’ differing styles as well as their agendas. Mitchell’s use of symbolic and metaphorical places demonstrates her interest in psychoanalysis and superstition, whereas Christie’s characterizations of places are often accomplished by the shorthand reference or synecdoche, integrated into a social setting. Chapter Two illustrates how the house in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* emerges through the implications of words and phrases. Christie’s places are often structured in the same way as, and in conjunction with, the detection plot: they become increasingly visible through the presentation of a series of clues. The exact appearance of any place is not so important as the implications it contains, implications that readers as well as characters understand intuitively, though often incompletely. Sayers’ places also appear largely through apparently casual indicators in narration and conversation; even when physical place is an explicit point of reference, the ways that place is performed and understood are far more important. Throughout *Gaudy Night*, for example, the structure of the college is presented as though it will provide information, whereas in truth the spatial place distracts from the real clues to be found in the perceptual place.

Brecht writes of the detective novel: “it has a formula and displays its strength in variation thereof”.¹⁴ The same might be said for the role of place. It first performs a

¹³ Cresswell, *In Place*, p. 13.

¹⁴ Brecht, p. 167.

primary role of setting, evidence, and character development, but beyond that the notion of place expands enormously to serve authors' different agendas. This thesis has highlighted a number of possible variations on the formula, emphasizing the individuality of each author's choices and how profoundly place is linked to other aspects of style, technique, and narrative priorities. Christie, Mitchell, and Sayers, though only two of their names are regularly cited, have all influenced the development of the contemporary crime genre, and one of the ways that is most evident is through their multifaceted employ of narrative place. A "sense of place" is now considered a crucial part of a successful crime novel. According to P.D. James: "My own detective novels, with rare exceptions, have been inspired by the place rather than by a method of murder or a character."¹⁵ Place, as much as plot, and in some ways even more than character, has become a defining feature of the genre.

Despite its contemporary importance, the centrality of place in Golden Age fiction is overlooked in analyses of the genre's development. The close relationship of place to character, detection, and psychology, and the increasingly complex roles it played during this period have scarcely been noted. Stuart Evers writes in the *Guardian's* books blog, "A sense of place is important in most novels, but in modern crime fiction, I believe, it's practically an imperative." However, he suggests that while it is "hinted at in the smog-soaked London of Holmes's cases, and in the country houses of Allingham and Christie," place only becomes truly important later, as writers become "more interested in character and development than crafting simple whodunits."¹⁶ Evers credits Chandler as the first crime novelist to put establish place as a central part of his work, and he is not the first to praise the hard-boiled at the expense of the Golden Age. However, Christie, Mitchell, and Sayers, among other Golden Age writers, were influential in bringing place to prominence by using it to develop complex relationships, convey messages to the reader, and create depth beyond the obvious question of "whodunit". Place is far more than setting. It exists at the heart of a story,

¹⁵ P.D. James, p. 119.

¹⁶ Stuart Evers, "Why scene is as crucial as crime in detective fiction", in *Guardian Books Blog*, 3 March 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/feb/25/crime-fiction-setting-padura>> [accessed 9 September 2014].

and suggests history and personality. That this topic has turned out to be so rich and heterogeneous, particularly within a genre typically understood in terms of its limitations, reinforces the claim of place to a central role in literary thought.

Attention to place also reveals a far more complex image of the detective novel, without attempting to remove or mitigate its generic framework. While it is possible to argue that the strictures of genre are themselves outdated, genre can be used as a tool rather than dismissed as a limitation: the study of place might easily focus on any type of novel, but to confine such a study within generic limits poses many of the same challenges embraced by the Golden Age detective novelists themselves. The expansion of place into plot, social commentary, and personal relations demonstrates not only its fluidity as a narrative element, but reveals a complex and unheralded facet of detective fiction. When it is read as merely “setting”, place recedes into the background, and the story is diminished. However, when place is restored to narrative prominence, it alerts the reader at every turn to textual clues that may be superfluous to plot, but are enormously important to fiction.

Appendix: Agatha Christie's Place-Types

House

1. *Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) P
2. *Murder on the Links* (1922) P
3. *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925)
4. *Peril at End House* (1932) P *
5. *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* (1934)
6. *Dumb Witness* (1937) P
7. *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938) P
8. *Sad Cypress* (1940) P
9. *Five Little Pigs* (1942) P
10. *Towards Zero* (1944)
11. *Death Comes as the End* (1944) (set in Ancient Egypt but structurally house)
12. *The Hollow* (1946) P
13. *Taken at the Flood* (1948) P *
14. *Crooked House* (1949)
15. *They do it with Mirrors* (1952) M
16. *After the Funeral* (1953) P
17. *A Pocketful of Rye* (1953) M
18. *Dead Man's Folly* (1956) P
19. *The 4:50 from Paddington* (1957) M
20. *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958)
21. *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959) P
22. *Elephants Can Remember* (1972) P
23. *Postern of Fate* (1973) T
24. *Curtain* (1975) P *
25. *Sleeping Murder* (1976) M

Village

1. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) P
2. *The Murder in the Vicarage* (1930) M
3. *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931)
4. *Murder is Easy* (1939)
5. *The Moving Finger* (1942) M
6. *A Murder is Announced* (1950) M

7. *Mrs. McGinty's Dead* (1952) P

8. *The Mirror Crack'd* (1962) M
9. *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968) T
10. *Hallowe'en Party* (1969) P

London/City

1. *The Secret Adversary* (1922) T
2. *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) P
3. *Three Act Tragedy* (1935) P
4. *Cards on the Table* (1936) P
5. *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936) P
6. *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe* (1940) P
7. *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945)
8. *Taken at the Flood* (1948) P *
9. *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955) P
10. *The Pale Horse* (1961)
11. *The Clocks* (1963) P
12. *Third Girl* (1966) P

Holiday

1. *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924)
2. *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928) P
3. *Peril at End House* (1932) P *
4. *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) P
5. *Death in the Clouds* (1935) P
6. *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) P
7. *Death on the Nile* (1937) P
8. *Appointment with Death* (1938) P
9. *And Then There Were None* (1939)
10. *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) P
11. *N or M?* (1941) T
12. *The Body in the Library* (1942) M
13. *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964) M
14. *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965) M
15. *Nemesis* (1971) M

* is listed more than once, demonstrating that the work has features of more than one type.
P Hercule Poirot
M Miss Marple
T Tommy and Tuppence

This list omits Christie's adventure and thriller novels. Some of these may be easily identifiable with a similar location type, but

this analysis is concerned specifically with detective novels. Thus, not included above are:

The Big Four (1927)
The Seven Dials Mystery (1929)
They Came to Baghdad (1951)
Destination Unknown (1954)
Endless Night (1966)
Passenger to Frankfurt (1970)

Selected Stories:

House

The Tragedy at Marsdon Manor: 1923 P
The Mystery of Hunter's Lodge: 1923 P
The Adventure of Johnnie Waverly: 1923 P
The Submarine Plans: 1923 P
The Case of the Missing Will: 1923 P
Christmas Adventure: 1923 P
The Under Dog: 1926 P
The Idol House of Astarte: 1928 M
The Blue Geranium: 1929
The Second Gong: 1932 P
The Incredible Theft: 1937 P
Dead Man's Mirror: 1937 P
The Dream: 1938 P
Strange Jest: 1944 (The Case of the Buried Treasure) M
Greenshaw's Folly: 1960 M

Village

The Cornish Mystery: 1923 P
The Market Basing Mystery: 1923 P
The Case of the Caretaker: 1941 M
The Case of the Perfect Maid: 1942 M
The Tape-Measure Murder: 1942 (The Case of the Retired Jeweller) M
Sanctuary: 1954 M
The Market Basing Mystery: 1966

London

The Adventure of "The Western Star": 1923 P
The Adventure of the Cheap Flat: 1923 P
The Adventure of the Italian Nobleman: 1923 P
The Affair at the Victory Ball: 1923 P
The Adventure of the Clapham Cook: 1923 P
The Double Clue: 1923 P
The King of Clubs: 1923 P
The Lost Mine: 1923 P
The Veiled Lady: 1923 P
Jane in Search of a Job: 1924
The Third Floor Flat: 1929 P

The Mystery of the Baghdad Chest: 1932 P
How Does Your Garden Grow? 1935 P
Problem at Sea: 1935 P
Problem at Pollensa Bay: 1935
The Regatta Mystery: 1936 P
Murder in the Mews 1936 P
Yellow Iris: 1937 P
The Nemean Lion: 1939 P
The Mystery of the Spanish Chest: 1960

Holiday

The Million Dollar Bond Robbery: 1923 P
The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb: 1923 P
The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan: 1923 P
The Plymouth Express: 1923 P
Double Sin: 1928 P
The Blood-Stained Pavement: 1928 M
A Christmas Tragedy: 1930 M
Manx Gold: 1930
Triangle at Rhodes: 1936 P

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 - , *The Murder at the Vicarage* (London: Collins, 1930)
 - , *Peril At End House* (London: Collins, 1932)
 - , *Lord Edgware Dies* (London: Collins, 1933)
 - , *Sad Cypress* (London: Collins, 1933)
 - , *Three Act Tragedy* (London: Collins, 1935)
 - , *The ABC Murders* (London: Collins, 1936)
 - , *Cards on the Table* (London: Collins, 1936)
 - , *Death on the Nile* (London: Pan, 1950) [1937]
 - , "Triangle at Rhodes" in *Murder in the Mews* (London: Collins, 1937)
 - , *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (London: Collins, 1940)
 - , *Evil Under the Sun* (London: Collins, 1941)
 - , *The Body in the Library*, 1942
 - , *The Hollow* (London: Collins, 1946)
 - , *Crooked House* (London: Collins, 1949)
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