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**Agatha Christie and the social function of the detective fiction of the Golden
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SECTION 2 - THE CONCRETE APPLICATION

PART 5 Agatha Christie's view of humanity and society.

Section 1 laid the theoretical foundations to the analysis of Christie's detective fiction. We now turn to the linguistic analysis of four of her novels to prove the theoretical claims made in the first section of this paper.

5.1. Identifying Christie's style with regard to realising the subject position.

In Part 2 we noted that a text conveys an ideology and identified some of the ways in which the writer can create a 'readerly' text, by which I mean a text in

which he/she aligns the reader's stance with his/her own worldview. In part 3 we noted the great penetration of the detective genre in the media, especially in Italian television, where it holds a position of "dominance", and set the question as to why this should be so. In part 4, we examined the general features of the detective story and the features specific to the Golden Age as well as the features specific to Christie. We established that in general terms the two basic functions of the detective genre are that of entertainment and of social-psychological reassurance. In other terms, both functions are ideologically conservative, presupposing extant society as being essentially 'good'. The former function provides relief from the stress of daily life through 'light entertainment' and avoids offering an alternative view of life, while the latter bolsters the social order, reinforcing allegiance to that order, thereby preventing the human being from contemplating alternatives to that social order.

Two final issues require treatment. First, the identification of the most basic ideological stance underlying Christie's work, namely why society as it is is deemed to be 'good', and requiring little or no change, and second, the specific linguistic strategies as well as ideational content whereby Christie constructs the subject position and aligns her readership into conformity with her own stance. The answer to the first issue will emerge from the answer to the second question. Furthermore one of the main answers to the second question lies in the attitudes conveyed in Christie's novels.

Attitudes are important for at least two general reasons. First of all, if a character expresses a standpoint which the reader also holds, or thinks he/she holds, then the reader will unconsciously and "automatically" tend to identify with that character. This will also frequently entail a tendency to resist looking critically at the character's personality, ideas, emotions, motivation and behaviour. Indeed, the reader will tend to think as the character thinks, expresses himself or acts. Shared modes of conduct, speech and thought will induce the reader to believe the character belongs to the same human group the reader belongs to. By thinking that 'that character is one of us' the reader will allow him/herself to be influenced by the character even in those cases when this might not be a wise move on the reader's part - solidarity and allegiance being two key traits denoting an intimate human relationship.

Second, the attitudes expressed in the novels may be attributed either to the author herself or to the implied author, the underlying voice, for Christie's novels fall within the tradition of bourgeois realism - even though they are far from realistic - inasmuch as there is no dialogism, no polyphony of voices in her detective fiction. The (implied) author creates and expects alignment with the attitudes expressed by the significant characters, (pride of place being occupied by the detective hero/heroine). The conventional detective story is generally not a site of struggle, otherwise it would fail to perform the conservative function it has been identified as performing above ¹.

In Agatha Christie attitudes emerge on a variety of crucial subjects, including foreigners, ethnicity, gender, class, status, work, the economic structure of society (or rather, and significantly, trading, investments and banking), politics (at least in an indirect fashion), modernity and tradition, the sociocultural and geographic environment, duty and morality, human nature. In addition to being wide-ranging, the reader might also think that the list that has just been drawn up is potentially contradictory to the theses advanced in Part 4 of this essay, especially with regard to the first three features which, I claimed, were the rock on which Christie built her ideological superstructure, and which avoided any form of socio-political discussion. The reader is right to have misgivings, but I hope to quell his/her doubts on the matter by a close examination of the texts.

The second point concerning attitudes is that the majority are stereotypes. This I do not relate to flatness of character, but to the ideological function of the attitudes expressed. Let us now turn to the texts. I will start by examining the opening lines of *The Moving Finger* since this novel offers a case in which Christie begins operations to position the subject in very clear and trenchant terms:

Text 1

When at last I was taken out of the plaster, and the doctors had pulled me about to their hearts' content, and nurses had wheedled me into cautiously using my limbs, and I had been nauseated by their practically using baby talk to me, Marcus Kent told me that I was to go and live in the country. "Good air, quiet life, nothing to do - that's the prescription for you. That sister of yours will look after you. Eat, sleep and imitate the vegetable kingdom as far as possible."

I didn't ask him if I'd ever fly again. There are questions that you don't ask because you are afraid of the answers. In the same way during the last five months I'd never asked if I was going to be condemned to lie on my back all my life ... (TMF: 159).

The most obvious surface point about Text 1 (T1) is that the first person singular form of narration indicates a homodiegetic narrator. As a broad generalisation, it may be stated that the standard effect of deploying homodiegetic narration is to make the reader feel involved both with the narrator and with the narrative. One of the most celebrated cases in literature is *Moby Dick*, which begins with the renowned expression "Call me Ishmael". The deep function of the direct address to the reader in Melville's novel - the order conveyed by the imperative form paradoxically soliciting a(n impossible) perlocutionary effect, for the reader cannot by definition answer since the writer-reader context of situation is a virtual or displaced one compared to "real" communication which is face-to-face with at least two parties in which the second party's minimal response is a perlocutionary act or opting out of the conversation, to deploy Gricean terminology - is to involve the reader in the narrative, creating a relationship classifiable as intimate through the use of the imperative and the form of address invoked by the speaker/narrator, the Christian name "Ishmael".

In *The Moving Finger* a similar effect of creating reader involvement is obtained in a variety of ways, the first of which is the fact that the opening of the novel begins with focaliser (the person who sees) coinciding with narrator (the person who speaks).

Second, while no direct speech act comparable to the opening sentence of *Moby Dick* is deployed to "force" involvement, the *in medias res* opening of *The Moving Finger* serves the same purpose of involving: the character being nameless, contextual information that is mandatory in standard, successful communication, (success being evaluated in Austinian and Gricean terms), has been withheld, thereby taking it for granted that such information is shared by the participants in the speech event (the narrator and the narratee, the latter coinciding with the reader), in turn implying that the relationship between writer and reader is that of one between people who know each other. In other words, intimacy and empathy are linguistically presupposed by the type of opening deployed.

Furthermore, and my third point, what scant information is provided arouses our curiosity, 'Why should the character have been in plaster?' comes as a 'natural' question, thereby deepening our involvement in the narrative.

A fourth linguistic device is the exploitation of the Gricean quantity maxim. While it was stated in the previous paragraph that the information was scant, I will not be contradicting myself by saying that the information which is provided is sufficient to establish the relevant context. Stated differently, the deep function of this fourth device is to provide pertinent information – pertinent to the writer's/narrator's goal. Thus, we are introduced to a pilot who has had a serious injury, as a result of which he almost died, and who must now spend months in the country having a quiet life in order to recover his mental and physical functions². The goal (or Gricean relevance) of such conceptual information is to immediately arouse our sympathy, creating empathy with the character, for a) standard human values induce us to have sympathy for the ill and the conditions they have to endure during illness (infantilization, as language pedagogists describe the psychological state brought about by being in a context of communication where one does not know the language spoken, and which can be paralleled to the experience Jerry describes of his treatment at the hand of the medics and the nurses), and b) the serious illness or injury is an experience which all of us risk. The last paragraph of T1 is eloquent testimony to the problems life sets us all and the fears we experience. Identification with, as well as sympathising with, life experiences are two further techniques for creating involvement

Fifth, there is an even more important factor that channels the reader into identifying with the homodiegetic narrator, modalisation (indicated in the texts quoted by underlining).

Modalisation (Douthwaite: 2007d) is one of the principal linguistic devices a language user has at his/her disposal to indicate point of view, since modal expressions evaluate, judge, or comment on in some way the entity they are concurrently describing or referring to. Markers of modality may be codified, that is, their role as evaluators is defined as being such by the code, as is the case with evaluative adjectives such as 'good', 'bad', 'pretty', 'ugly', 'stupid', 'intelligent'. However, as speech act theory and conversational implicature have taught us, any linguistic entity may, in principle, perform any speech act. Hence, linguistic items

defined by the code as value-free, may, in a given text and in given circumstances, take on modal value, that is, express the speaker's opinion, which is, in turn, a function of his/her worldview. ³

T1 is rife with modal (viz. codified) expressions and modalised expressions (viz. expressions not defined as modals by the code but acquiring the value of modals at that specific point in that specific text). "At last" is a modalised adverbial while "cautiously" is a modal adverb. Both serve to underscore the length, hence the seriousness, of Jerry's accident. A second set of expressions ("pulled me about to their hearts' content", "had wheedled me into", "nauseated", "using baby talk to me") all depict the negative situation of infantilization, which arouses our sympathy. Significantly, the negative modaliser "told", (negative, because its illocutionary force is that of issuing an order, thereby executing a face threatening act to Jerry's negative face (Brown and Levinson: 1978/1987) is offset by the (relatively intimate) form of address "Marcus Kent". Since, as we have seen, the type of context created by *in medias res* has linguistic explanatory power, the identity of that person is taken as given (Halliday: 1985) as information shared in context, and the actual form of address employed confirms this by denoting relative intimacy.

The effects of modalisation are enhanced by a series of other foregrounding devices (Douthwaite: 2000). I will indicate only five in T3.

First, in the expression "nurses had wheedled me into cautiously using my limbs" the part is used for the whole (synecdoche) ("limbs" for 'body'), the word "limbs" is highly formal in a context which flaunts intimacy (viz. informality) (a paradox), and the entire expression is a formal alternative for the synonymous informal expression "into cautiously getting me out of bed and walking". The question now arises as to the effect of the marked form employed by Christie. I would venture to suggest that "limbs" gives the impression of an entity which is divided and not of integral, as does the word 'body', thereby reinforcing the seriousness of the accident and the fear Jerry has both of permanent damage having been done and of the pain he expects to experience from bodily movement, seeing that he has been lying flat on his back for some months now.

Second, the effect of modalisation is, in some cases, heightened by transitivity structure (Halliday: 1985). Thus the expressions "the doctors had pulled me about

to their hearts' content" and "nurses had wheedled me", Jerry is always the patient or goal in the grammatical construction, the helpless victim with no will of his own and an inability to act and take decisions for himself, at the 'mercy' of the power system ("doctors" and "nurses"), who act on him ("pulled me about to their hearts' content") as if he were an inanimate object or oblige him to do things as if he were a child ("nurses wheedled ..."). Transitivity structure thus reinforces the negativity expressed by the modal verb phrases (i.e. by evaluative conceptual content) in the same expression ("pulled", "wheedled"). Furthermore, infantilisation of this type is a condition many adults have experienced directly, and consequently have no problem identifying with it.

Third, "vegetable" and "kingdom" in the expression "Eat, sleep and imitate the vegetable kingdom as far as possible" are two metaphors. What is especially interesting here is the combination/collocation of metaphors. "Vegetable" harks back to the conceptual metaphor of the Great Chain of Being (Kovecses: 2002: 126). Plants are lower down the scale in the Great Chain, coming after humans, at the top, and animals, which immediately precede plants. "Vegetable" is thus a symbol of inferior life. "Kingdom", instead, is a metaphor for superiority. We thus have a second paradox (Jakobsonian parallelism - Douthwaite: 2000). The function of this paradox is to invert the negativity implied by the metaphor "vegetable", for what Marcus - a doctor - actually intends through the paradox is that although life will seem (and in one sense be) dull (little movement and activity, as with a plant), this will actually be beneficial to Jerry's recovery. The strenuous activity associated with the 'higher' life of humans would hamper, if not prevent, Jerry's recovery.

Another metaphor, which is concurrently a value judgement, is "condemned", in the expression "during the last five months I'd never asked if I was going to be condemned to lie on my back all my life". "To lie on my back all my life" coming three sentences after the "vegetable kingdom" metaphor clearly refers back to the same semantic field - "inactivity", or lesser activity. "Condemned" alludes to the source domain of legal punishment, that is imprisonment or capital punishment, hence again to inactivity or "lesser" activity because of restricted circumstances. The lexeme also evokes the Christian moral sphere Christie identifies with.

The fourth device, as has been anticipated, is parallelism (Douthwaite: 2000). This foregrounding device is employed to draw attention to the fact that something is

going on in the language which lies below the surface meaning of the language itself - to deploy yet another metaphor - and/or to intensify an effect already produced by reproducing it in a similar fashion. The specific functions of each instantiation is dealt with as the occasion arises.

A fifth, and very roundabout, device is the appeal to status, akin to the type of (improper) logical argumentation known as the appeal to authority. In this case, the appeal to social status as a font of respect constitutes a typical feature of Christie's writing. Here, the appeal is to the high status Jerry can be accorded by dint of being a pilot. Note the adroitness with which the appeal is introduced : "I didn't ask him if I'd ever fly again". In true detective fashion style, Christie distracts the reader's attention from her deep motive - according high status to the character and thereby aligning her readers to the character's stance - in covert fashion by ostensibly concentrating the reader's conscious attention to a speech act conveying a real human problem and the attached emotion - fear that he would never fly again. I will have significantly more to say about status later.

To conclude our analysis of T1, it can be seen that, from the outset, Christie skilfully manipulates a whole series of linguistic devices in order to create a subject position which coincides with that of the narrator, a character who we will gradually discover is a perfect embodiment of the worldview Christie wishes to secretly (indirectly) convey in the allusive, non-literal meanings her linguistic choices create. Modalisation was indicated as constituting one of the most important techniques deployed by Christie to achieve her end. And it is to our central theme, attitudes - and attitudes conveyed first and foremost through modalisation, flanked by other techniques - that we now move on to.

Before doing so, however, it should be noted that the beauty of Christie's writing is that it seems so straightforward, so simple, so "empty", hence so-easy-to-enjoy, second-rate literature, lowbrow literature, literature of distraction, as crime fiction was held to be until relatively recent times, yet hiding unsuspected depth, both linguistically and conceptually.

After having positioned the reader into Jerry's worldview, one page later Jerry's sister, Joanna, is introduced. She is the one who has been entrusted with the task of finding a country house where they can go and live for the next few months while Jerry recovers. Joanna finds Mrs Barton's country house eminently suited to their

needs and reports to her brother who in turn reports his sister's findings to the reader. Jerry's reporting his sister's findings without additional comments of any sort implies that brother and sister have the same opinions and values. In other words, although the focaliser (the sister) is different from the narrator (Jerry), nevertheless the two worldviews are identical. Thus, the second we discover that brother and sister have the same kind of approach to life, having already placed our trust in Jerry and finding that he has placed his trust in his sister, it is natural for the reader to identify with Jerry's sister as well as with Jerry himself and to take Joanna's remarks as serious and reliable. Thus, T1 constitutes essential preparation for T2. With this second text, we come to the heart of our discussion – attitudes.

Text 2

Miss Emily Barton was a charming little old lady who matched her house in an incredible way. In a softapologetic voice she explained to Joanna that she had never let her house before, indeed would never have thought of doing so, 'but you see, my dear, things are so different nowadays – taxation, of course, and then my stocks and shares, so safe, as I always imagined, and indeed the bank manager himself recommended some of them, but they seem to be paying nothing at all these days – foreign, of course! And really it makes it all so difficult. One does not (I'm sure you will understand me, my dear, and not take offence, you look so kind) like the idea of letting one's house to strangers – but something must be done, and really, having seen you, I shall be quite glad to think of you being here – it needs, you know, young life (original emphasis in italics) (TMF: 160)

Like T1, T2 also seems very straightforward, conceptually and linguistically, in this second case perhaps downright simplistic, or bordering on the inane, concentrated as it is on a poor old lady having to face financial difficulties in her old age which force her to move out of her home and rent it to make ends meet, and producing what at first appear to be a series of platitudes. Closer scrutiny reveals, however, that behind the veneer of superficiality there is a venomous other side of the coin to T2. This may be unveiled by investigating the attitudes which are expressed, of which there are at least five:

1. Otherness – embodied by an anti-foreigner stereotype, with its counterpart of British (English!) superiority, that is a constant in Christie's works: "foreign, of

course!”.

2. a negative attitude towards the economic system, as shown by the complaints about a) taxation, and b) diminishing income from stocks and shares, with the implication that the past was better. What should also be noted about this is the source of revenue – typical bourgeois revenue from investment in the Stock Exchange and not from either producing goods and services (viz. from entrepreneurship) nor from labour (as an employee or as a self-employed person). This underscores the point made earlier about the social identity of the characters in Christie’s novels and about the novels generally taking place in small country towns or villages [4](#);
3. a negative attitude towards the government is implied by the criticism of the taxation system;
4. an indirect comment about the unreliability and instability of modern society, as symbolised by the bank manager’s performance of his duties: “and indeed the bank manager *himself* recommended some of them, but they seem to be paying *nothing at all* these days” (my emphasis). The implication here is that people are incompetent and/or can no longer be trusted;
5. nostalgia for the past: “things are so different nowadays”; “something must be done”, implying ‘to meet with the difficult changing times’; the comment on the bank manager quoted in the previous point.

The attitudes are all negative, they are strong attitudes when we come down to the bone, clearly expressed (albeit indirectly, from a pragmatic standpoint - nevertheless they appear to be transparent to the reader, who does not fully and consciously realise what messages are actually being conveyed, in part because he ascribes them to the asinine old lady who no longer has her wits about her – if she ever did, being a woman, namely a being whose knowledge of the economic facts of life is stereotypically minimal – implicit racism is rampant in the text), and they call up vital sectors of life: Otherness, economic survival, economic and psychological-emotional security, the honesty and depth of interpersonal relations. Quite a concentration in 154 words!

However, the matter by no means ends there. Two major points must still be made. First, the conglomeration of attitudes is interesting in itself. There seems to be a general slating of life as it is and the feeling that it was better in ‘The Good Old Days’, a mental set generally associated with a conservative stance [5](#).

Second, the fact that this extract appears on the second page of the novel – hence

very early on, in the introductory, scene-setting stage - increases the importance of the concepts/attitudes expressed by the character. Increasing the importance of the concepts even further are two major linguistic devices: a) focalisation; b) modalisation - both indicators of point of view - that is, respectively, of whose point of view the reader is being exposed to and what that point of view (or worldview) is. These major devices (major in the sense that they perform important operations in the text), are flanked by a host of foregrounding devices. In addition, to point "a" must be added narration, as we will instantly see. I take these points in order.

With regard to focalisation, as argued above, since the extract is focalised through Joanna, sister to Jerry, the homodiegetic narrator whose stance we have already been aligned with, then we read this extract benignly disposed towards the sister. (The full import of this narrative fact will emerge when we deal with speech and thought presentation below.)

Turning to modalisation, as the underlined items show, modalisation is heavy in this text too. Let us examine two of the major effects of modalisation.

First, we are positively oriented to Miss Emily Barton through the deployment of a set of evaluative adjectives which are all positively coloured: a) "charming" and "soft" are both defined as positively value-laden by the code; b) "incredible" may convey positive or negative value, depending on context. Given the positive colouring of the previous adjectives, "incredible" is here to be interpreted as conveying positivity; c) "apologetic" generally indicates a negative evaluation, but as with the case of "incredible", this adjective too takes on a positive note thanks to co-text and context.

Second, as defined by the code, the noun "lady" bears positive value or else signals an attitude of respect or deference. In this context, the noun clearly refers to the woman's behaviour, so is positively connoted. Furthermore, the two adjectives "little" and "old" might on occasion be employed in a purely descriptive or referential fashion (e.g. to identify which person is being talked about), without implying any concurrent evaluation. In this case, given the positivity of the adjectives listed in the preceding point and given the collocation of the two adjectives with the noun "lady", which we have already established constitutes a positive evaluation, then the adjectives "little" and "old" also acquire positive value in this text. Furthermore, adjectives such as the two we are scrutinising, when

referred to people are often a signal of respect, since old age is something our society teaches us to we should pay deference to. That this hypothesis is more than viable is supported by the fact that the characters are of a conservative ilk.

Now it is a fact of communication that no utterance or sentence employs one single symbolising device. Any speech act is the result of a complex of features of code and of pragmatics. Hence, we continue our discussion of modalisation by linking it to the variety of other meaning-making devices employed in the text.

We should again note the deployment of forms of address ⁶. As was the case with the expression “Marcus Kent”, referring to the woman as “Miss Emily Barton” is a form of externalising respect, respect which is not simply formal, i.e. structural (that is, Emily is someone whom Joanna has just met, Emily is old, Emily owns a house and so enjoys a certain social status, all social factors which induce the paying of respect), but is real, i.e. Joanna really did feel respect for the lady. In Austinian terms, the speech act counts as felicitous because Joanna had “the requisite thoughts and feelings”, one of the necessary conditions for the production of a felicitous speech act.

We now move to Miss Barton’s turn, which begins with the second sentence of T2. Here the old lady is complaining about her economic difficulties. We also noted that her ideas are stereotypical of the conservative, ageing person, an ‘old maid’, (“Miss Emily Barton” – my emphasis), perhaps a shade senile, we might suspect.

However, what the ideational content of her words shows is that she accepts her station in life (further evidence of the fact that she is conservative by nature) despite the rather unpleasant nature of her difficulties (moving out of one’s home and letting it to strangers!), and does so in an “elegant” fashion, actually praising the people who will be coming to occupy her house: “I shall be quite *glad* to think of you being here – it needs, you know, *young life*”. The old praising the young is not a common spectacle, especially when the young are taking over one’s house! Note also that modalisation is again prevalent: “quite glad”, “needs” and “young life”.

The evaluative degree adverb “so” is deployed four times (parallelism) in the space of 137 words: “so different”, “so safe”, “so difficult”, so kind”. This stylistic marker, (given the repetitiveness of the construction), is a further feature that helps classify Miss Barton as a formal, polite and well-meaning person.

Note how important a role parallelism plays in this text (and in general in Christie).

In addition to the examples we have already seen, metaphor is another constant of her style. Thus, Christie employs “life” in lieu of ‘people’, making the message even more powerful. The use of this metaphor also implies nostalgia, since “life” (concurrently a metaphor for physical and mental energy) is what Miss Barton is running out of. Note that had Christie employed the unmarked form ‘people’ in place of the marked form “life” these implications would have been lost in part, for the adjective “young” by itself is much weaker without its collocation with “life”.

The preceding point has brought up another important linguistic device – lexical selection and the allusions this involves and implicatures it produces. In the second sentence, note the deployment of the verb “explain”, instead of the linguistically simpler and statistically more probable verb ‘said’: “In a soft apologetic voice she explained to Joanna that she had never let her house before, indeed would never have thought of doing so”. The implicature behind this lexical selection is that Miss Barton knows she is complaining about life, knows that she does not like what she is doing, and perhaps suspects that strangers will find it rather unusual for an old person to rent her house out and go and live in lodgings, hence she is foreseeing and pre-empting possible queries and parrying possible attacks ⁷. What the reader may infer from this is that, contrary to expectations of Miss Barton being an old fool, a frustrated maid uttering platitudes and stereotypes, she is instead, in full possession of her wits and is far from stupid. This represents another operation in capturing the reader’s sympathy for her.

Lexical selection naturally brings up the device of alliteration. In many cases, the deployment of one lexeme rather than another is attributable to the desire to employ alliteration in order to foreground a non-literal meaning lying behind the linguistic selection made by the author. One example will suffice here. The insistence on the letter/sound ‘s’ in the following expression “then my stocks and shares, *so safe*, as I always imagined” (my emphasis) draws attention to the stability of the past, preparing us for the contrast with the present, hence the implicit critique of society which immediately follows with the criticism of the Stock Exchange and the bank manager.

This analysis has far from exhausted the linguistic devices and writing techniques deployed by Christie in the short extract under scrutiny. Nevertheless my comments should suffice to demonstrate yet again that although content might

seem inconsequential, banal and humdrum, nevertheless the writing is complex, producing complex effects and important consequences. I will make one final technical observation, for it brings out a macro-point both about the text and about the novel. It concerns the area of speech, thought and writing presentation (Semino and Short: 2004).

If one ignores the first sentence, then T2 represents Miss Barton's turn. The first thing to note is the ease with which the text moves from indirect speech reported by Jerry ("she explained to Joanna that she had never let the house before ...") into direct speech (Miss Barton's words verbatim: "but you see my dear ...") in the same sentence. Even more incredibly adroit is the introduction between indirect speech and direct speech of a clause in free indirect speech representing Miss Barton's words to Joanna ("indeed, would never have thought of doing so"), as marked by "indeed", which typifies spoken language and does not belong to the written medium.

Two global points should be noted. First, moving from indirect speech to direct speech brings the reader into closer, more direct contact with Miss Barton. (Indeed, the insertion of free indirect speech constitutes a transitional stage between indirect speech and direct speech, facilitating that transition.) By decreasing the distance between character and reader in this way, the relationship between these two entities becomes more intimate. If we relate this move to the ideational content and the linguistic devices deployed and described above in presenting Miss Barton's position, we see that the manipulation of speech and thought presentation is yet another device deployed to position the reader into a pro-Barton stance. Taken together, the plethora of devices employed may be seen as mechanisms preventing what might be a negative stance in the reader towards that character that could arise from gaining an impression of being in the presence of an aged person perhaps not in full possession of him/her faculties making the kind of stereotypical comments that are made and which consequently remove veracity and value from the concepts themselves.

The second major point to note is the direction of flow of information in the opening of the novel (the Gricean maxim of manner, sub-maxim: be orderly). First we are presented with Jerry, and a subject position is created in which Jerry's worldview becomes shared by the reader. Next we are introduced to Joanna, Jerry's sister, and

her worldview is identical to Jerry's and linguistically characterised to "invite" the reader to continue to occupy the same subject position taken up with regard to Jerry. Finally, Joanna is the means by which Miss Barton is introduced into the novel. Despite the fact that not all readers might instantly like Miss Barton, the fact that Joanna evaluates her positively and that Miss Barton has a similar worldview to Jerry and Joanna, and since Christie continue to deploy linguistic strategies to align the reader's viewpoint with that of Miss Barton, then we may conclude that Christie has done everything possible to construct a reader response which is in line with the hidden ideology she conveys through her work.

One crucial question raised earlier is that we seem to have come across a general slating of society. This might imply that Christie does deal with politics and social problems, thereby contradicting assertion 3 (part 4) regarding the characteristic features of the Golden Age School. While it is true that Christie does refer indirectly to social and political problems, there is, however, no political or social debate in her work, the key word here being 'debate'. What Christie deals with in T2 is one form of capitalism - financial capitalism. The text also contains a criticism of government and of government policy. The text also makes claims about "poverty", or more correctly, about financial difficulties individual citizens come to find themselves in brought about by the operation of the socio-economic structure of society. But the real point is that such criticisms are indirect, they are assertions made by the characters without one iota of evidence being offered, without a discussion of whether such assertions are correct or represent mere stereotypes or ideological statements taken from the newspapers and general gossip, without any debate about the real nature of the phenomena referred to and, if such phenomena are true, without any discussion of causes and possible solutions to right the problem. Even more fundamentally, a discussion of principles of social justice and social organisation are totally missing from her work; no explicit, open stance is taken on values and political positions: is taxation a good or bad thing? Is taxation at that moment iniquitous? Is capitalism (and financial capitalism in particular) a good thing or a bad thing? Unemployment, government intervention in the economy, a welfare system: are these good things or bad things? Nor does there appear to be an implicit negative political stance. The conservative stance is taken as given and as right. All discussion is avoided. The function of introducing the

attitudes discussed above is not to employ crime fiction as a vehicle for a critical novel, but simply to portray a certain kind of value system which forms the social framework and provides the unstated social justification for the events that take place in the novels under discussion and the way those events are evaluated in those novels.

I have spent considerable time in a close reading of two short extracts in order to demonstrate how Christie goes about constructing reader response, since it is the key to the issue at hand, if Christie is to meet with success in unconsciously making readers accept the ideology lying behind her work. Time does not permit such in-depth analysis for the remaining texts, so I will generally limit my points to identifying the attitudes conveyed.

5.2 Attitudes and worldview

5.2.1. Otherness

We have already seen that the foreigner is an object of stereotypical inferiority. This is a constant in Christie and is a first indicator of Otherness, and as Alterity theorists such as Lacan (1977a, b) argue, of the fear of the Other inside us, (in Lacanian terms, the reflection and projection of what Freud terms the Ego). Otherness, of course, has a wide range of projections in addition to foreigners. Prototypical foils for the projection of Alterity include ethnicity, gender, class, status, as the following texts show.

Text 3

'Oh well, we all know what the *Chinese* are like!'

'It doesn't appeal to you?' I asked.

'Frankly, no. I'm not very interested in art, I'm afraid. Your attitude, Mr Burton, is typical of that of most men. *You dislike the idea of women working* - of their competing -'

I was taken aback, I had come up against *the Feminist*. Aimée was well away, her cheeks flushed.

'It is incredible to you that women should want a career. It was incredible to my parents. I was anxious to study for a doctor. They would not hear of paying the fees. But they paid them readily for Owen. Yet I should have made a better doctor than my brother.'

'I'm sorry about that,' I said. 'It was tough on you. If one wants to do a thing -

'Oh, I've got over it now. I've plenty of will-power. My life is busy and active. I'm one of the happiest people in Lymstock. Plenty to do. But I do go up in arms against *the silly old-fashioned prejudice that women's place is always the home*' (TMF: 215)

T3 moves us to a different type of foreigner, for here ethnicity is to the fore: "Oh well, we all know what the Chinese are like!" Note again a) the stereotype, b) that white superiority (hence racism) is presupposed, is 'natural', an obvious truth. Significantly, the very same extract brings out a racist attitude towards another social group - women. Equally significantly, the text is silent precisely where it should speak. Having brought up the problem of Otherness through her criticism of the unequal treatment of the sexes, and even gone so far as to provide a meritocratic justification to defend equality of the sexes which few would probably care to object to ("Yet I should have made a better doctor than my brother"), Aimée, the female speaker, a feminist as she is classified by the narrator, then avoids the issue completely - "I've got over it now". And pointedly so, since the final paragraph of T3 openly violates the Gricean quantity and manner maxims by providing insufficient information and being obscure and so why the issue is no longer an issue. Why is her life "busy and active"? What is it exactly that she does? Why is she "one of the happiest people in Lymstock"? What are these activities that fulfil her as a female and as a human being and so crush accusations of female subordination to the male? The explanation is begun but then reticence takes over and no real explanation is ever given. And the reason is quite simple, as Aimée herself admits unwittingly: "Oh, I've got over it now. I've plenty of will-power". Interpreting her woman's role in that society, she had no alternative but to accept her station in life, and having a strong personality that is exactly what she did, trying to cut the psychological and emotional costs down to a minimum by busying herself with socially legitimate female activities in the village (by implicature). Hence, the final sentence in the quotation - "But I do go up in arms against the silly old-fashioned prejudice that women's place is always the home" is simply a face-saver, a smoke-screen, tagged on to cover the conceptual, pragmatic and graphological fact that the issue has NOT been solved.

Note that the sentence “Plenty to do”, graphologically foregrounded by its brevity, constitutes a second violation of the quantity maxim in T3 since it is totally redundant, being a mere repetition of the preceding sentence bar one: “My life is busy and active”: It is also ironic, for while the ideational concept is one of plenitude, the graphological form (3 words) is one of scarcity! The point is bolstered by the fact that the sentence is an elliptical one, and grammatically incorrect to boot, for subject and verb – standardly obligatory constituents in an English sentence – have been omitted (‘I have plenty to do’ would be the acceptable form). Ellipsis suggests scarcity is deliberate. The form thus contradicts the content. As happened earlier with the topic of the economic structure of society, Christie has brought up a real social problem, but immediately and pointedly avoids discussing it. Characteristically, the character accepts the *status quo* despite the fact that she criticises it!

The attacks levelled at foreigners include the Poles and the Americans (AMIA: 354), the “furriners” (AMIA: 372), where the “communists” also come in for flack, “weaselly-looking foreigner[s] (AMIA: 382), which again has recourse to the conceptual metaphor of The Great Chain of Being by referring to the lower level of animals to classify Alterity, and the Latin peoples in T4:

Text 4

‘Murder takes a little more getting used to by some people than it may in your case,’ said Harold acidly. *‘I dare say murders are two a penny in Majorca and –’*

‘Ibiza, not Majorca.’

‘It’s the same thing.’

‘Not at all – it’s quite a different island.’

Harold went on talking:

‘My point is that though murder may be an everyday commonplace to you, living amongst hot-blooded Latin people, nevertheless in England we take such things seriously.’ He added with increasing irritation, *‘And really, Cedric, to appear at a public inquest in those clothes –’* (4.50 FP: 583-4)

Although ethnicity is to the fore here, the importance of T4 for present purposes is that it illustrates the stereotypical attitude that the English are superior, the other side of the coin to ‘foreign inferiority’: murder is taken “seriously” in England, implying that is it is accepted standard practice amongst the “hot-blooded Latin

people”, hence not a “serious” issue.

Text 5

The Colonel sat down [in the restaurant car of the train].

‘Boy’, he called *in peremptory fashion*.

He gave an order for eggs and coffee.

His eyes rested for a moment on Hercule Poirot, but they passed on indifferently. Poirot, reading the English mind correctly, knew that he had said to himself, ‘*Only some damned foreigner.*’

True to their nationality, the two English people were not chatty. They exchanged a few brief remarks, and presently the girl rose and went back to her compartment (MOTOE: 18-19).

Here, too, it might appear that the text is critical of the English. I would argue that this misses the point. This extract contains one of the very rare references to Colonialism - albeit extremely indirectly. The fact that it is a Colonel who speaks and the form of address he employs - “Boy” - are witness to a colonial attitude. Graphology, syntax, speech and thought presentation (reported speech) and Gricean quantity reinforce the point: “He gave an order for eggs and coffee.”. This sentence occupies a paragraph to itself. One’s breakfast order is generally not a topic warranting the importance of having an entire paragraph bestowed to it (of whatever length it may be)! Furthermore, the paragraph consists of only one sentence realised by 8 words. Third, the choice of “he gave an order”, in place of the standard “he ordered” emphasises the act of imparting the order - that is, the syntactic form underscores the “proper” relationship between colonial master (a Colonel) and slave (a servant) *in lieu* of the ‘semantically equivalent’ alternative “asking a waiter for food”. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the receiver of the order is suppressed, viz., not mentioned in the sentence, for he is only a ‘slave’. The use of reported speech has a cold, distancing effect. This small episode is followed by a stereotypical comment on English taciturnity. Apart from the fact that it is a stereotype, there is also the textual fact, which the reader will discover later, that the two people are silent because they know who Poirot is and because they are two of the murderers-avengers and thus have no intention of wittingly giving any clues away to the detective.

With regard to the political topic of colonialism, brilliantly depicted in three lines,

the text is yet again silent. For having evoked the topic, the text fails to openly engage with it and take up a position on the matter. As with Miss Barton's economic views in *The Moving Finger*, the oblique reference to colonialism in this extract from *Murder on the Orient Express* is merely a scene setter, establishing the social context ⁸.

This "mini-colonial" scene also serves a second function - that of establishing Poirot's exceptional powers, powers which make him the great detective he is. He can "read minds". This is simply another strategy to align the reader's sympathy with the detective, an important point since the detective will condone the murder at the end of the novel, a fact the reader will have to come to terms with. Preparing the reader by aligning his sympathies renders final acceptance easier. Furthermore, it is powers such as this that 'scientifically legitimate', or normalise, the crucial ideological observations of the type to be seen in Texts 13-15 below and make them so powerful in the context of Christie's novels.

Similarly, the fact that even the English are capable of uttering inanities, as in T4, is not to be interpreted as Christie manifesting a critical voice beneath the folds of the text and creating Bakhtinian polyphony, but forms part of the general canvass of (English) life ⁹. Rather, the string of stereotypes conveying a conservative stance are included to make the reader identify with the characters. It should not be forgotten that the novels under scrutiny were written between 1934 and 1957, when such stereotypes were common (and still are, in some quarters). Nor should it be forgotten that the First World War was perhaps the first real major world event to shake a country which ardently believed that 'British is best', warning notes such as the Boer Wars (1880-81 and 1899-1902) having been blissfully ignored.

It should further be noted that the 'gossip' as a form of talk that characterises a significant number of the conversations in Christie's novels serves a similar purpose. Readers identify themselves with the format and so align themselves to the ideational content and consequently to the subterranean ideological system that is purveyed in such conversations.

Class, socio-economic status and occupational status are also important contextual factors which lie at the root of 'difference'.

Writers (T6) and artists (T7) are seen as people who do not "work" to earn their living, a sign of immorality, and whose conduct in their private lives is

characterised by other forms of immorality, since they fail to respect the norms of social behaviour (dress included, as the criticism levelled in T4 above at the way Cedric appeared at the inquest shows). Instead, businessmen, especially City men, are accorded high status (T7). Pilots are also accorded high status, especially Battle of Britain pilots!

Text 6

'And it isn't,' pursued Mrs Swettenham, 'as though you *were* a worker. You don't do any work at all.'

'That's not in the least true,' said Edmund indignantly. 'I'm writing a book.'

'I mean *real* work,' said Mrs Swettenham. (MIA: 325)

Text 7

'Harold Crackenthorpe, he's something in the City- quite an important figure, I understand. Alfred - don't quite know what he does. Cedric - that's the one who lives abroad. Paints!' The inspector invested the word with its full quota of sinister significance. The Chief Constable smiled into his moustache (4.50 FP: 580)

Text 8

'he[Brian]'s a bit of an ass in some ways,' said Brian's son; 'but he was a jolly good fighter pilot. He's awfully brave. And he's awfully good-natured.'

The accordance of high status is tantamount to paying deference to such characters, even when they are "a bit of an ass". This indicates acceptance of the *status quo*.

5.2.2. The environment, tradition and stability

We have seen that the small country town or village is the preferred Christie setting. The choice is not fortuitous.

Text 9

To begin with, Lymstock has its roots in the past. Somewhere about the time of the Norman Conquest, Lymstock was a place of importance. That importance was chiefly ecclesiastical (TMF: 164)

Text 10

She went on:

'Because that's what's worrying you, isn't it? And that really the particular way the world has changed since the war. Take this place, Chipping Cleghorn, for instance. It's very much like St Mary Mead where I live. Fifteen years ago one *knew* who everybody was. The Bantrys in the big house - and the Hartnells and the Price Ridleys and the Weatherbys... They were people whose fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers, or whose aunts and uncles, had lived there before them. If somebody new came to live there, they brought letters of introduction, or they'd been in the same regiment or served on the same ship as someone there already. If anybody new - really new - really a stranger - came, well, they stuck out - everybody wondered about them and didn't rest till they found out.'

She nodded her head gently.

'But it's not like that any more. Every village and small country place is full of people who've just come and settled there without any ties to bring them. The big houses have been sold, and the cottages have been converted and changed. And people just come - and all you know about them is what they say of themselves. They've come, you see, from all over the world. People from India and Hong Kong and China, and people who used to live in France and Italy in little cheap places and odd islands. And people who've made a little money and can afford to retire. But nobody *knows* any more who anyone is. You can have Benares brassware in your house and talk about *tiffin* and *chota Hazri* - and you can have pictures of Taormina and talk about the English church and the library - like Miss Hinchliffe and Miss Murgatroyd, You can come from the South of France, or have spent your life in the East. People take you at your own valuation. They don't wait to call until they've had a letter from a friend saying that the So-and-So's are delightful people and she's known them all their lives.'

... (MIA: 410-11)

Stability is of the essence for survival, a general point which psychologists, sociologists, biologists and other scholars would unquestionably endorse. Tradition - viz. continuity, viz. the minimum change possible - is seen by many as a guarantee of stability. Hence the concern with roots, history, place, continuity that is found in Christie's novels and exemplified in T9. Thus when Jerry and Joanna

have to choose a country village for Jerry's recovery, Lymstock has one of the fundamental traits which make it suitable not to their immediate need - that of physical recovery, for any country location offering peace and quiet would realise that function - but to their deep-seated need - a place which offers a type of environment reflecting their ideological makeup, thereby offering psychological security.

T10 is a crucial extract with regard to the village as a social institution. Miss Marple is talking to Inspector Craddock, an intelligent police officer and not the stupid officer found in many classic crime stories. Several ideological points emerge. The first is that "Fifteen years ago one knew who everybody was." Knowledge is the essence of social control. Note the appeal to what would now be a quaint reference to "letters of introduction", another staid but effective form of social control through ensuring knowledge. Smallness (hence a village community) helps to make for the acquisition of sufficient knowledge to maintain social control viable.

The second point is that change - especially in the form of geographical and social mobility - endangers that small, tightly-knit, Durkheimian community where everyone knew everybody else and therefore any inherent dangers were known to all and measures could be taken to protect oneself and the community from those dangers. "The big houses have been sold" and "the cottages have been converted and changed" imply a change in both economic and social structure. It is no coincidence that the novel was published in 1950 and that it refers to "the way the world has changed since the war" and that "fifteen years ago [viz. between the two wars] everyone knew each other".

Third, the colonial background to England again emerges forcefully (albeit indirectly). Significantly, in the paragraph talking about letters of introduction, only two modes of acquisition of knowledge about other people are talked about. The first is direct, personal knowledge - everyone in the village has lived there for decades, if not centuries. The second mode is through indirect knowledge. Finally, letters of introduction are flanked by indirect acquaintance, generally through army and navy, namely through the armed forces maintaining colonial power intact.

However, what we are witnessing here is the collapse of the British Empire. Ironically for the conservative population, this is accompanied by greater individual

geographic and socio-economic mobility so that (many) unknown people now come to live in the village, bringing with them change because they have the ready cash to do so (convert the cottages). Here the attack is launched against the *nouveau riches*, or those who have made a little money heavens only knows how (in Miss Marple's opinion, of course): "people who've made a little money and can afford to retire ... You can have Benares brassware in your house and talk about *tiffin* and *chota Hazri* - and you can have pictures of Taormina and talk about the English church and the library - like Miss Hinchliffe and Miss Murgatroyd, You can come from the South of France, or have spent your life in the East". Here Miss Marple is criticising 'false culture', but in so doing she betrays what really irks her - the unknown upstarts whose roots are unknown and cannot be checked. What is implied, is that money might have been made illicitly, or at any rate, it was not made by investing in stocks and shares or acquired through inheritance. And with them, these people bring a different culture. England is undergoing "Orientalisation", to borrow Edward Said's term.

The fourth, and most disturbing, point, is that although the text is 'nicely written', as *per* Agatha Christie, (no overt violence, no open mental manipulation or manipulation through state apparatuses such as newspapers, schools and prisons), what is actually being suggested is a state akin to *1984*, out for social control at any cost: "If anybody new - really new - really a stranger - came, well, they stuck out - everybody wondered about them and didn't rest till they found out" and "People take you at your own valuation. They don't wait to call until they've had a letter from a friend saying that the So-and-So's are delightful people and she's known them all their lives".

The other side of the coin to the critique of 'modernity' is, of course, nostalgia for the past, which is the direct link to tradition and stability.

5.2.3. Morality - a metaphysical gift

Tradition, stability and morality are closely linked in Christie's work.

Text 11

'I'm sorry about that,' said Miss Marple; 'but I couldn't do anything else.

Someone, you see, may be killed at any moment. Oh, I know they're all on

their guard and the police are taking all the precautions they can, but there's always the outside chance that the murderer might be too clever for them. So you see, Elspeth, it was your duty to come back. After all, you and I were brought up to do our duty, weren't we?

'We certainly were,' said Mrs McGillicuddy, 'no laxness in our young days.'
(4.50 FP: 709)

Text 12

'It was very dangerous for her,'

'Yes, it was dangerous, but we are not put into this world, Mr Burton, to avoid danger when an innocent fellow-creature's life is at stake. You understand me?'

I understood. (AMF: 318).

Duty is a moral obligation in Christie's essentially Christian world, an unavoidable, almost religiously-imposed moral duty that must be carried out in all circumstances, such as temporarily returning from a distant foreign country where one is enjoying oneself, as in T11, or even when it entails risking one's life to defend a fellow human being, as in T12.

What is significant about this type of stance is that it is unquestioning. One does not ask why one should obey, if it is right to obey, if there are alternatives. One simply obeys, because it is right to obey. "We are put into this world" to obey, as T12 implies. T11 might seem more "permissive", since Miss Marple offers a justification, "I couldn't do anything else. Someone, you see, may be killed at any moment". However, her stance presupposes she is right, which of course she is, in terms of her ideology as expressed in the novel. But the reality of life and the reality of the novel need not coincide. One might disagree in real life. But by positioning the reader in line with her own ideology, it is almost as if Christie is attempting to make the real world and the fictional world coincide.

5.2.4. Human nature

We have finally reached the crux of the matter. In the real world, problems exist, these problems are discussed, people have different opinions, people offer different solutions. In Christie's world, problems exist, but they are not discussed, different solutions are not contemplated. Only one course of action is undertaken,

unquestioningly, because it is part of the moral order, an order that is never interrogated, but simply accepted. And such a moral order is based on one essential “fact”, which is not a fact at all, but a (‘political’ or ‘metaphysical’) presupposition: man is by nature evil, or has a great innate, biological potential for evil. Indeed the issue is couched in terms which are virtually metaphysical.

Text 13

[Poirot] “Assuredly they are Americans. I meant what did you think of their personalities?”

[M Bouc] “The young man seemed quite agreeable.”

“And the other?”

“To tell you the truth my friend. I did not care for him. He produced on me an unpleasant impression. And you?”

Hercule Poirot was a moment before replying.

“When he passed me in the restaurant”, he said at last, “I had a curious impression. It was as though a wild animal – an animal savage, but savage! you understand – had passed me by.”

“And yet he looked together of the most respectable – but through the bars, the wild animal looks out.”

“You are fanciful, *mon vieux*,” said M. Bouc.

“It may be so. But I could not rid myself of the impression that evil had passed me by very close.”

“That respectable American gentleman?”

“That respectable American gentleman.”

“Well,” said M Bouc cheerfully. “It may be so. There is so much evil in the world” (MOTOE: 29)

In this scene, in the second chapter of MOTOE, Poirot sees the American and his intuition tells him he is evil. Poirot is, of course, quite right, for this is Cassetti, the mafia villain of the story. But the key point is that everything is a given a biological bent, as if features are inborn, hard-wired, hence predetermined and inevitable. Just as Poirot’s powers are ‘inevitable’, ‘inscrutable’ almost, because inborn, which explains how he can tell a villain at a glance, despite outer appearances (“That respectable American gentleman”)!

The second point I wish to make about this extract that it reflects the constant recourse Christie has to the Great Chain of Being conceptual metaphor, another significant ideological cultural construct. Cassetti’s inferiority is conveyed by

referring to him as an animal, an inferiority which is emphasised by the use of the evaluative adjective “wild” premodifying the noun “animal” and the evaluative adjective “savage” postmodifying a further realisation of the noun “animal”. “Wild” connotes uncontrollable, hence a danger for society, in the terms of Christie’s novels. “Savage” connotes the danger to society represented by a being that has no inner controls over his own existence.

Text 14

Where do one’s fears come from? Where do they shape themselves?

Where do they hide before coming out into the open?

Just one short phrase. Heard and noted and never quite put aside:

‘Take me away – it’s so awful being here – feeling so wicked...’

Why had Megan said that? What had she to feel wicked about? (TMF: 306)

“Wicked” is the term Christie generally employs to signal her ideological stance that man is inherently evil when the referent is human (contrast T13 above where “evil” is a noun) [10](#). In this she steers away from words such as ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ which have more obvious moral and religious connotations, thus making her appeal more generic and not directed at groups which have, for instance, a religious view of life. For one need not be of a religious persuasion to condemn acts such as murder, rape and theft. Without having recourse to psychoanalytic literature, the first paragraph of T14 is significant because it suggests that feelings are something deep down inside human beings, something covert, something ‘instinctual’, unknowable, uncontrollable, supporting the reading given of T13.

Text 15

‘He’d never do *that*. No father would ever do that just – just to get the money.’

Miss Marple sighed. ‘People do, my dear. It’s very sad and very terrible, but they do.’

‘People do very terrible things,’ went on Miss Marple. ‘I know a woman who poisoned three of her children just for a little bit of insurance money. And then there was an old woman, quite a nice old woman apparently, who poisoned her son when he came home on leave. Then there was that old Mrs Stanwich. That case was in the papers. I dare say you read about it. Her daughter died and her son, and then she said she was poisoned

herself. There was poison in the gruel, but it came out, you know, that she'd put it there herself. She was just planning to poison the last daughter. That wasn't exactly for money. She was jealous of them for being younger than she was and alive, and she was afraid – it's a terrible thing to say but it's true – they would enjoy themselves after she was gone. She's always kept a very tight hold on the purse strings. Yes, of course she was a little peculiar, as they say, but I never see myself that *that's* any real excuse. I mean you can be a little peculiar in so many different ways. Sometimes you just go about giving all your possessions away and writing cheques on bank accounts that don't exist, just so as to benefit people. It shows, you see, that behind being peculiar you have quite a nice disposition. . But of course if you're peculiar and behind it you have a bad disposition – well, there you are.

Here the term “wicked” gives way to a blander term “terrible”. Significant is the opening generalisation: “It's very sad and very terrible, but they do. People do very terrible things”, followed by a long list. Clearly, the long list of examples flouts the quantity maxim. It is striking that all the examples refer to women, old women, in other words her own category. Since criminals are, in the first instance, men, statistically speaking, it is as if Christie is saying “anyone can be a criminal”! However, the main objective of flouting the maxim in such a blatant manner is to underscore just how “terrible” people can be, namely to underline the human potential for evil.

What is striking is the fact that no possible explanation is offered as to why such “terrible” things happen. They simply happen. In other words, the origin of evil, its causes, are not investigated because biological determinism cannot be investigated. The converse of this line of argument is, of course, that possible social causes of crime, are totally ignored, for this would challenge the view of biological determinism.

The exception is the final example given, Mrs Stanwich, who is classified as “peculiar”. The only explanation advanced, and advanced only in one case, is insanity. However, it is implied rather than stated openly, as if insanity were not really something that can be proved, a strange stance for a detective whose job it is to find evidence and convincing logical explanations to account for the facts of the case.

But the point that sews the argument up is that insanity is viewed, in any case, as an 'insufficient' explanation or justification for "terrible" behaviour: "Yes, of course she was a little peculiar, as they say, but I never see myself that *that's* any real excuse". The refusal to accept insanity as an explanation is backed up by an explanation which has no foundations in logic whatsoever - yet another contradiction for a detective who should supposedly have logic as a mainstay: "I mean you can be a little peculiar in so many different ways. Sometimes you just go about giving all your possessions away and writing cheques on bank accounts that don't exist, just so as to benefit people". There is no psychological analysis of any scientific kind in these statements. They are folk explanations, stereotypes which a certain category of people will accept unquestioningly.

And of course, the conclusion to this argumentative chain is devastating: "It shows, you see, that behind being peculiar you have quite a nice disposition. But of course if you're peculiar and behind it you have a bad disposition - well, there you are". In simple terms, the implicature seems to be that you are either born bad or born good. Your social environment, access to social means of improvement, opportunity, luck, historical and socio-economic circumstances and events have nothing at all to do with whether one is good or bad because a) they are not discussed, hence dismissed as irrelevant, b) they cannot influence "disposition", (by implicature). If you were born bad, that is just your bad luck.

And the fact that a bad disposition is merely a sign of bad luck makes the final step in the argument even more devastating: the death penalty.

PART 6. The logical conclusion of conservatism: the death penalty.

In this article I have attempted to show that what lies behind mainstream crime fiction, employing Agatha Christie as a prototypical case, is a conservative ideology which sees human nature as bad, that is, evil is presupposed as being a state of nature, inborn in mankind, and unaffected and unaffected by experience and by social structure.

Such an ideology is pervasive in society, shared by people of different political opinions. The social function of the detective story, especially the Golden Age detective story, (since this is what we have examined in this article), is to bolster this ideology through form and content. In particular, with regard to form, I have tried to uncover a series of strategies employed by Christie in order to make the reader identify with those characters that convey the ideology her text is built on in order to bolster social consensus. The fact that no other possible interpretations of “evil”, viz, deviant behaviour, are discussed in her novels provides further evidence in favour of my thesis. The fact that such an ideology is pervasive in modern society together with the fact that the detective story also functions as ‘light entertainment’ accounts in great part, I believe, for the phenomenon of the dominance of crime fiction in many markets, Italian television included. In the masses of crime series that are televised, the ideological view outlined above is prevalent. In one episode of *Law and Order* I saw by chance one evening, a young Latino committed a very serious crime. One detective tried arguing with his superior that the young man came from a deprived background, with a history of violence and drunkenness in the family, all to no avail, for his superior merely stated that man is evil. If we return to print again, then a cogent example, poetically updated to the modern language variety of the LAPD, (and not only the LAPD and not only the police), may be found in Joseph Wambaugh’s *The Choirboys* (1975/2002: 144):

Text 16

“Listen, partner, Spermwhale said ... Nineteen plus years a workin these streets has taught me that people are shit. They’re scum. Only

reason I don't treat em like Roscoe Rules or some a those black glove hotdogs is what's that do for you? Gets you fired for brutality or an ulcer or somethin. For what? The human race is no fuckin good but workin with these rotten bastards is all we got, right? It's the only game in town so you gotta play like you're still *in* the game. If you don't, if you drop out, you take your fuckin six inch Colt and see can you pull the trigger twice while you're eatin it.

Returning to Christie, the additional fact that she is such an able writer, skilfully deploying language to gain her ends, helps account for why her novels and plays continue to be bestsellers today. And the language and events of her staid novels is far more 'consoling and becalming' than the content and manner of expression to be found in the work of writers of critical crime fiction such as Joseph Wambaugh, Chester Himes and, Elmore Leonard, in the second half of the twentieth century.

At a social level, conservative crime fiction has a serious consequence – by presupposing 'the good society' there is a noticeable failure to face the economic and social problems that lie at the root of deviance – as sociologists and psychologists have tried to explain for some decades now. Consequently issues of social justice are not contemplated. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) have shown, in many Western countries, the rich are growing richer and the poor poorer, with negative consequences on education, physical and mental health, crime, and so forth. As Althusser has pointed out, ISAs play a central role in maintaining hegemony and avoiding change. The type of programmes televised and the way television is structured is no secondary factor here.

Worse still, in the sense that ideology is taken to its 'logical' conclusion, the ideology propounded by Christie has an extreme social consequence – the demand in many quarters for the death penalty. For if evil is inborn, then, the conservative argument runs, what else can society do to protect itself?

Text 17

Then, of course, It was quite easy for him, in his role of medical attendant, to poison off Alfred Crackenthorpe and also to send the tablets to Harold in London, having safeguarded himself by telling Harold that he wouldn't need any more tablets. Everything he did was

bold and audacious and cruel and greedy, and I am really very, very sorry,' finished Miss Marple, looking as fierce as a fluffy old lady can look, 'that they have abolished capital punishment because I do feel that if there is anyone who ought to hang, it's Dr Quimper.' 'Hear, hear,' said Inspector Craddock. (4.50 FP: 717). Reformers would certainly not second that motion.

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Note

[↑ 1](#) I say "generally" because the production being vast, there are always exceptions. For instance, as Douthwaite (2007) argues, *Three is a Lucky Number* by Margery Allingham is a precursor of the modern feminist detective story, though I have found no other traces of this stance in the (relatively small) amount of work I have done on Allingham. Furthermore, we have seen, the hypothesis has been advanced that the dual voice does operate in Christie (see Part 1 above), though this in no way detracts from my hypothesis of the media acting as ISAs through the use of genres such as the detective story, Christie included, whether or not the dual voice does operate in her work.

[↑ 2](#) Note, in passing, how the pilot's accident is functional to establishing the typical Golden Age environment – the bourgeois country house.

[↑ 3](#) On the entire question of modalisation as an indicator of point of view, see Douthwaite (2005; 2007d) .

[↑ 4](#) This strand is taken up in analysing Text 9 below.

[↑ 5](#) Or with “old age”, which gives leeway for a dual voice to operate.

[↑ 6](#) As I have argued elsewhere, although what follows is strictly, speaking, reference and not a form of address, the two may perform the same type of function, namely showing the degree of deference (or lack of deference) towards the addressee/referent through the linguistic choice of form of address/reference.

[↑ 7](#) Now it might be objected that “explained” is the reporting verb, hence selected by the narrator and not by Miss Barton. However, the narrator is interpreting Miss Barton's words, he is reporting her speech act, and the illocutionary force of her words was taken as an explanation and not merely a set of assertions.

[↑ 8](#) However, supporters of the “subversive voice” view might counter-argue that bringing the matter up might be sufficient to trigger critical reflection in the reader.

[↑ 9](#) Though of course the dual voice supporters will (rightfully) argue differently.

[↑ 10](#) With regard to this specific point regarding the lexeme “wicked” I have only analysed the four novels referred to. Nor did I have computerised text available as a means of analysis. This is therefore a tentative hypothesis.