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Indice

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify the precise nature of the ideology, (or the social function, to look at the matter in another light), underlying the crime stories of the Golden Age, taking Agatha Christie as the prototypical figure of that School, a position held by much of the criticism on crime fiction. Crime fiction is characterised by two major trends: a majority trend which has dominated the genre since its inception and which has a conservative social function, and a minority trend which is deemed a relatively recent development and whose goal is to use the genre as a tool for social criticism. Agatha Christie typifies the former, conservative stance. In addition to identifying the components of Christie's

ideological stance, the paper will attempt to identify the linguistic means by which Christie gets her ideological message across and covertly positions the reader so that he unconsciously identifies with the ideology on which her novels are founded. The objective is justified by the fact that television in some countries is ‘dominated’ nowadays by detective films and other types of serials whose ideological base is that to be found in prototypical Christie. Thus television may be considered as an instantiation of what Althusser terms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), namely a social institution exerting social control by inculcating and perpetuating ideological practices.

PREAMBLE

For editorial reasons, what was originally a single paper has had to be divided into two papers (sections). This subdivision, however, actually serves to highlight the nature of the paper. This article has had a long gestation. It developed out of a conference on the train in literature, and concentrated on two Christie novels in which the train played a central role. The social function of the crime novel was the central interest of the talk that was given. In developing the theme further for publication, the database had to be extended and the investigation into the role of crime fiction as an Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser: 1971a) came to occupy an even stronger position in the paper. From there it was one simple - and obvious – step to the thesis that crime fiction is only one of the material products employed by the dominant group to achieve hegemony in the field of so-called popular culture, others being soap operas, games, “realia” depicting extreme situations (crimes, serious accidents, etc.), which all have a conservative function. The consequence was that the theoretical foundations expanded to the point of occupying half the paper. Hence, the subdivision into two seemingly ‘separate’ papers highlights just how important an article of this kind should be to those concerned with the nature of society. Indeed, the follow-up to this paper should, in ideal terms, be the examination of the other categories of cultural products performing the same social function to illustrate just how important a role is played by the means of cultural production in creating and perpetuating conservative ideology, a theme which is of especial importance in the country referred to in this

paper given the concentration of television and newspapers in the hands of a single person. For the record, the original title of the paper was “Agatha Christie and the social function of the detective fiction of the Golden Age – a linguistic analysis”.

SECTION 1 – THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

PART 1 Introduction: Aims and methods.

Crime fiction, in print and, above all, on television, is a product of mass consumption in Italy, as Part 3 of this paper will show, though this feature is characteristic of many countries (France, Germany, Spain, UK, USA, as the serials now televised show).

The question I set out to answer (at least in part) is why this phenomenon should be so and what social effects ensue from this phenomenon. The ‘simple’ answer is that it performs an ideological function helping to create hegemony. The explanation of this ‘simple’ answer is in several stages. It centers basically on two crucial aspects: a) explaining how latent ideology is unearthed in a text and b) explaining how the text aligns the reader to obtain the latter’s (covert) consensus – both aspects which are, unbeknown to us, central to all spheres of our daily lives.

Thus, part 2 of the present work draws attention to some of the psycholinguistic processes involved in reading and how the writer gears the writing process to respecting the psycholinguistic processes of comprehension with the aim of achieving his communicative goal[1]. And here is the fundamental point – communication IS goal-oriented. Given this premise, then the goal of any communicative act – be it of sentence length or of book length – must be identified. Since communication is a social phenomenon, then what the specific goal of a given communicative event represents in social terms must also be investigated.

This brings ideology into the forefront of the analytical arena since individual goals are determined by one’s values, by one’s worldview, by one’s ideology.

Essentially, crime fiction may be seen as performing certain basic ideological functions in society, the stylistician’s job being that of identifying the underlying ideology and the linguistic means whereby the writer conveys that ideology.

Next a number of critical strands are briefly introduced to show how readers are

positioned in a text so as to ensure as far as possible their viewpoint comes to coincide with that of the author or narrator so that the former come to wittingly or unwittingly share the viewpoint of the latter.

Part 3 of this paper documents the extent to which crime fiction dominates television in Italy, making it essential for scholars, politicians and those involved in the social field to comprehend the nature of the phenomenon.

Part 4 examines the features of crime fiction in general, and highlights those features specific to the sub-genre of which Agatha Christie is the recognised "Queen", the Golden Age of crime fiction. Here I identify the main characteristics which enable the critic to classify a given work as crime fiction, and categorise it as belonging to a specific sub-genre. This task is engaged in not for the "intellectual thrills" the process of categorisation offers, but because classifying offers the opportunity of uncovering the ideology underlying this genre. Thematic, ideational and contextual factors are the main focus here and an attempt is made to establish how these features are related to the ideological functions played by crime fiction and how the author/narrator manipulates the reader so as to ensure adherence to the ideology underlying the text.

Part 5, (to be found in Section 2 of this paper). consists of a close reading of a number of extracts using the tools of stylistics in order to unveil the ideology conveyed and to show in a detailed manner how linguistic devices are employed to align the reader with the (as we shall see) dominant viewpoint being propounded in the novels scrutinised. The ideational focus is on **attitudes**, since these help to uncover the basic ideology or **worldview** conveyed by the character, the narrator, or the (implied) author, as the case may be.

Part 6 offers a brief conclusion. Since the ideology informing this major variety of crime fiction is conservative, one important social consequence of a significant number of those adhering to that ideology is a demand for the death penalty.

The basic function of this paper may thus be seen as one of deconstruction, of criticism, of laying bare the ideological operations going on "between the lines", the non-literal meanings being conveyed in the text by a writer who produces so-called "lowbrow literature", texts which are seemingly "straightforward" or "empty" or "innocuous", without much "meat" to them, (lacking as they are in in-depth psychological analysis or failing to engage with social issues, for instance, two of

the various features which supposedly distinguishes the genre from “highbrow” literature), but in so doing is lulling the reader into a false sense of security and avoiding the real social and political problems which face us in everyday life and which Christie appears not to give credence to, (“appears” being the operative word, as I shall specify below).

This essay began as an analysis of two of Christie’s “train novels”, *4.50 from Paddington* (4.50 FP) and *Murder on the Orient Express* (MOTOE), because they contain central features of Christie’s work, one crucial feature being that of the closed environment – a classic characterising feature of Golden Age detective “clue stories” - of which the train can constitute a perfect symbol, as it does in the two novels selected. As the paper developed, the objective changed and the realisation came that a wider database was needed on which to base my hypotheses. Hence, I added a further two novels from Volume 1 of the *Miss Marple Omnibus*: *The Moving Finger* (TMF) and *A Murder is Announced* (AMIS). Volume 1 contains the three Miss Marple novels examined here. The fourth novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*, is a Hercule Poirot investigation. The two additions were thus purely fortuitous. However, I have, for my pleasure, read most of Agatha Christie, and I believe a detailed analysis would confirm the argument developed in this paper [2].

One final point, which in part develops out of the previous point. The basic aim of this essay is to identify the dominant ideology conveyed by Christie’s novels, hence their social function, because this social function is performed in society today by the mass media (by adapting written texts to the screen), thus bolstering the ideology propounded in a much more extensive fashion than detective story writers of the time could have imagined, as a lot of work in, for instance, critical discourse analysis shows.

This does not mean that Christie’s novels are necessarily the expression of a single, authoritative voice, a single discourse. Bakhtin (1981) has shown that novels may be polyphonic, and that there may be a dominant voice or there may be a plurality of voices vying for dominance. In this view, the novel is a ‘site of conflict’. Such a conflict derives from the materiality of the novel, the socio-economic conditions of its production (Macherey: 1966) and the materiality of the world itself, for the world is conflict-strewn due to the never-ending struggle for power that characterises it. Thus, as Foucault (1980), among others, has pointed out, “there are no relations of

power without resistances, the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where power relations are exercised".

Frederic Jameson (1981: 287) makes the point in this way:

> If the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are 'managed' and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects, then some preliminary step must also be theorised in which these same impulses – the raw material upon which the process works – are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them.

Pablo Mukherjee (2003: 6) reaches the same conclusion, namely that "if the novel is complicit in the operation of dominant ideology, it is by no means an unambiguous or unproblematic tool". He reaches this conclusion through a consideration of various "postcolonial" texts and critical works on those texts. One of the major works he bases his observation on is Davies (1987) whom he paraphrases and comments in this way (ibid):

> The novel, according to Davies, is a crucial tool of the gigantic process of storytelling that 'makes sense' by offering a complete and evident explanation of the state of affairs of a society. At the vanguard of the cultural forms that rose to prominence under modern capitalism, novels are 'regularising and normalising' agents that helped form a collective political consensus, a willingness to accept the status quo rather than change it [3].

Indeed, "offering a complete and evident explanation of the state of affairs of a society" is one objective that Christie's crime fiction achieves, and thus one reason why her work is so important from a social standpoint.

Mukherjee takes this theoretical point one stage further. One aspect which he highlights is central to the theme of this paper, namely that crime was a central political tool and ideological concern in the development of capitalism and the creation of a hegemonic position, as witnessed also in literature (ibid: 4) [4]:

> The nexus between fiction and crime has been well documented. Jon Thompson has observed that this went right back to the to the originary movements of the English novel, and Christine Marlin has testified that

> there was scarcely a major nineteenth-century work that did not in some way concern itself with legality and deviance. D. A. Miller and John Bender have gone so far as to claim that not only was crime a thematic concern of nineteenth-century novels, but the genre itself was a covert tool of the 'new' policing techniques developed by the British state to enforce the norms of law and order on society.

While not wishing to give the impression that crime was THE central theme of the rise of the English novel, such a critical line shows that it was definitely a central concern, linked as it is to individualism.

Given these historical and critical premises, and following the work of Light (1991) and Makinen (2006), in her article entitled "Agatha Christie and her detective novel as a tool for social criticism", Serena Gatti (in press) argues in favour of a polyphonic reading of Christie's works, with a subterranean critical voice acting in the background and destabilising the conservative ideology expressed by the dominant voice.

The two readings – the reading offered by Gatti of Christie as voicing social criticism and my own as Christie representing the conservative majority – do not necessarily contradict each other. Rather, they are complimentary, showing two different voices at work – the conservative voice and the subversive voice. As has already been argued above, society is replete with contradictions, contradictions reflected in all the material products generated, including discourse.

In this paper, I am concerned with what I believe is the dominant, conservative reading, precisely because it is reflects the majority reading, and this has important social repercussions at the level of the general reading and television-watching public, while the subversive reading is decidedly more subtle and might well escape the general public not versed in linguistic and/or socio-political analysis. The fact that the subversive reading usually does escape the general public is what renders this form of pro-conservative hidden persuasion so effective.

One final objection must also be pre-empted. As we shall see when we go into detail over the socio-economic setting of Christie's crime fiction, (see Part 4 below), her novels tend to be set in the countryside and concern the middle class, especially that part interested in financial investment. Thus one might argue that her specific ideology is historically 'limited' by the social circumstances of its

production and consumption and consequently irrelevant to modern day concerns. At least three arguments go against this possible criticism. First, one of Christie's central concerns – financial capitalism, is a central concern today, as the crisis of the banking system and investment shows. Indeed, what one tends to forget is that banking crises have not been uncommon in unified Italy. Second, and most importantly, while the country house crime scene might not seem so relevant today, what is crucial about the type of production under discussion here is the core values purveyed and which constitute conservative ideology, including the seven commandments (murder, theft, bigamy and so forth). The actual practical application (the country house setting and the middles class concerns) is not only of secondary relevance because a) it does not affect the core ideology that is conveyed and b) that ideology is shared by society today, but also because – my third argument – Christie's novels and their film versions are still immensely popular, as the sales figures show. Indeed, one immensely popular modern police procedural series is also set in the countryside – *Midsomer Murders*, with its hero Inspector Barnaby reminiscent of many "bourgeois" investigators from a variety of countries, of which French protagonist Maigret is only one of many cogent examples.

PART 2 The construction of the readerly text – communication and positioning

If we were to administer the word association test to a representative sample of human beings using the trigger word "train", (which is where this essay originally started out), then we would obtain a wide variety of responses. To railwaymen it would evoke their work, to other people it would call up their journey to work, others still would see it simply as a means of locomotion. Another set of people would associate it with their holidays, and others yet again with escape and freedom – in America, it has symbolised "progress" in the "conquest" of the West, and on the other hand decline for the native Indians. It has also acted as a trope for freedom for African Americans and has been the source of inspiration for jazz motifs and rhythms in which mechanical power is given cultural form. As Leah Garret (2001) points out, the train has also been a significant trope in Yiddish

literature. In referring to Russia in the 1840s when Tsar Nicholas decided to develop the railroad, Garret notes that

> The last thing the Tsar had in mind was that the great Russian train system would become for many Jewish writers something that they had conceived of as Jewish rather than Russian. The third-class train was the place where Jews from the shtetls and the cities of eastern Europe would, typically, meet, conduct business, speak Yiddish, and talk about their families. The car would be full of Jewish merchants, Jews starting their transatlantic passage to America, Jewish horse traders, and even Jewish horse thieves. Like Rudyard Kipling's portrayal of the trains of India in *Kim*, where the train of the great British Empire becomes an Indian train, inhabited by Sikhs, Muslims, Sepoys, Muslims and Hindus speaking their languages and making it *their* train through dialogue and conversation, the Jews of the region made the made the Russian train into Jewish train through their conversations, their fights, their gossip. Yiddish writers utilized this Judaization of the train car to make it an ideal setting for Jewish storytelling.(p. 67)

The objective of this seemingly unusual start to this sub-section is to uncover one of the theoretical cornerstones on which this paper is based: our word association test reflects certain fundamental aspects of the psycholinguistic process of comprehension and meaning-making. The word (or picture or sound) triggers our frames, scripts, schemata, mental models – both the "standard" (or encyclopaedic) forms of knowledge and those which bear idiosyncratic (viz. personal) knowledge [5]. Standardly, trains are vehicles which run on rails and which are designed for mass transport. Thus simply seeing the front book cover of two Agatha Christie novels, *The 4.50 from Paddington* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, immediately creates a set of expectations which will be very similar for the majority of readers familiar with crime stories, trains, Britain and the Orient since the information activated in our long term memories is standard for the majority of the population, i.e. such information is culturally shared. Idiosyncratically, since my father was a railwayman, the word "train" evokes certain experiences it will not conjure up to other people, while Auschwitz is not the very first thing that comes to my mind when the subject of trains comes up in conversation. Instead, a deported person and his offspring will make that very association.

In the preceding paragraphs we have touched on the cognitive explication of the process of comprehension. One of the major tenets of this view is that we process incoming signals in line with our encyclopaedic and personal knowledge of the world. If we now examine the process of text production, then the writer of a text selects the information which he/she provides (the verbal signals) with a view to ensuring as far as possible that the kinds of associations (and interpretations) that are triggered in the reader's mind through processing the incoming signals correspond to those associations-interpretations that the writer wishes to evoke in the reader's mind. In terms of the philosophy of language, and, more specifically, in terms of the Gricean Cooperative Principle (1989) and Austinian Speech Act Theory (1962), the writer selects the information he presents to the reader with a view to producing an illocutionary act which in its turn will produce the perlocutionary effect(s) the writer wishes to achieve in producing the utterance by selecting the right quantity of pertinent and true information and presenting that information in the linguistically most suitable (viz. clear, orderly, unambiguous) form possible.

Naturally, the meaning(s) the writer will wish to convey will depend upon the goals he wishes to achieve in the specific speech event (in the written text, in our case). In other words, meaning is goal-related. We do not simply speak. We speak to some end [6]. The means to achieve goals in general in this world are also limited and the world is rife with conflict over the achievement of goals and the possession of certain means to achieve those goals. Hence, all action, including verbal action, is based on our subjective interests. And our interests derive from our values, our worldview, our ideology. In social terms, all our action has an explicit or implicit ideological basis.

Thus, to the theoretical framework of communication scantily sketched out above must be added a final strand, that of positioning. Information and/or messages are not neutral. Every statement about the world, even the simplest, apparently unquestionable assertions about the physical world, is positioned, as the word association test and an application of the Gricean maxims expounded two paragraphs above immediately show. When asked to describe the world, the aspects an Eskimo will choose to include will differ from those selected by a Latin American living in the Amazonian forest, by an American living in New York, by a Chinese living near the Yang-Tse-Kiang river, and by Israelis and Palestinians living

next to each other. One crucial aspect that must be comprehended of any message, therefore, is its ideological underpinnings, for this enables us to comprehend what goals and worldview lie behind a person's goals – what that person ultimately wants and why, and what he will do to get what he wants. This, of course, helps us to decide what kind of response we will provide to the utterance we are responding to. If we believe the person speaking to us has our interest at heart we will react differently from the case in which we suspect the speaker is a cheat.

Since our ideology embodies our worldview, our values, what we believe life is about and how the world "works", Althusser emphasises the fact that ideology represents and presents sets of organised signifying practices (discourses, images, myths, - Belsey: 1980) concerning the real relations in which people live. This does not mean that what is represented is "the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (Althusser: 1971a: 155), for we act on the basis of what we believe to be true [7].

Ideology is acquired in childhood through the process of socialisation. Humans do not have access to raw data – all experience is mediated through our pre-existent schemata and mental models, which are interpretative in nature. Schemata do not simply 'tell' us what entity *x* is, they also 'tell' us what it does, why it exists, what value it has, and so forth. In other words, schemata are explanatory as well as descriptive. Hence they help pre-determine our interpretations of the world [8].

Returning to our discussion of the origins of the English novel above, ideologies may be seen as discursive systems realised semiotically. Texts – multimodal texts being no exception – and discourse are thus social constructs embodying worldviews (Macherey: 1966). Hence an analysis of the means which convey a discourse will reveal the discoursal system at work. As Bucholtz (2003: 57) has argued, language is "a primary force for the production and reproduction of ideology … [Since many texts] encourage the acceptance of unequal arrangements of power as natural and inevitable, perhaps even as right and good … discourse has not merely a symbolic but also a material effect on the lives of human beings". It is this effect which motivated my choice of topic and the way I develop the topic in this paper.

Ideology does not, however, “determine” our behaviour in the strict sense of the term, but it does exert a very strong guiding influence over us (Douthwaite: 2007a, c). Ideology is a mode of social control. Althusser (1971a) argues that ideological practices are inculcated and perpetuated by what he terms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Not by chance, the educational system is the most prominent of these ISAs in the modern world. And education (and more in general, socialisation), comes about primarily through language. The media are another crucially important ISA in society [9].

As stated above, texts by their very nature are designed to have a perlocutionary effect. At the highest level of generalisation, one of the major effects will be to convey the ideology the text embodies in order, on the one hand, to bolster the ideology of those who already adhere to that particular set of beliefs through an act of identity and, on the other hand, to convert the unbelieving to that ideology.

Louis Althusser (1971b) argues that literature [10] is one of the ideological apparatuses which contribute to reproducing the relations of production, namely to reproducing the social relationships which enable the capitalist system to exist and perpetuate itself, (though this generalisation may be applied to any form of social organisation, not simply to capitalism in its various forms). In their own domains, Barthes (1972, 1975) on semiotics and literature, Lacan on psychoanalysis (1977a, b) and Belsey (1980) on literature, all build on this line of argument to develop the relationship between “the subject position” and ideology and the relationship of these two entities to textual practice.

The ideology of capitalism is an individualistic one, which portrays man (and here I use this term in its gendered, historical and socio-political sense) as the subject of his destiny, as an agent capable of acting on the world and achieving his own, independently-set goals.

This ideology is conveyed in texts, hence through language and linguistic strategies aimed at “proving” and reinforcing this belief. Belsey (1980) examines some of these strategies as deployed in novels such as *The Mill On the Floss*, *Jane Eyre*, *Sons and Lovers*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Middlemarch*, *Oliver Twist*, *Emma*, *Bleak House* , and *What Maisie Knew*. One major area she investigates is mode of narration.

She claims that in modern fiction, or rather, “the classic realist text”, mimesis (showing, “history” [11]) is preferred to diegesis (telling, “discourse”) for this creates

an aura of objectivity by eliminating the subjectivity of authorial intrusion. However, she points out that

> … as we read or as we watch, we know the author is present as a shadowy authority and as source of the fiction … the form of the classic realist text acts …with ideology by interpellating the reader as subject. The reader is invited to perceive and judge the "truth" of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world as it is perceived by the author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation. This model of intersubjective communication, of shared understanding of a text which re-presents the world, is the guarantee not only of the truth of the text but of the reader's existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of knowing subjects. (1980: 68-9)

Belsey examines a number of texts using a variety of methodological tools employed by literary critics, including the difference between dialogue and authorial exposition as used, for example, in *The Mill on the Floss*. It would go beyond the confines of this paper to outline her methodology, both for reasons of space, and because the tools I wish to employ are those of the stylistician. In any case, her arguments are worth reading in full. I thus turn to the third part of the paper, the phenomenon of crime fiction consumption in modern society, with particular reference to Italian society.

PART 3. The attraction of crime fiction.

While reading may not be such a frequent activity in the modern world, especially in certain countries such as Italy, sales of printed crime fiction in this country together with the number of native Italian writers in the field, some of which may be considered serious literature indeed, such as Camilleri's police detective Montalbano [12] (Douthwaite: 2004), testify to the social importance of crime fiction in society.

Watching television is an even more important social phenomenon in this country, drawing, as it does, a wide audience every day. A brief glance at what is televised is highly illuminating. Here are the TV programmes on Italian television for the week (September, 2006) in which I began writing this paper [13]:

MONDAY		TUESDAY		WEDNESDAY		THURSDAY		FRIDAY		SATURDAY	
Raiuno	REX	Raiuno	REX	Raiuno	REX	Raiuno	REX	Raiuno	REX		
Raidue	NCIS SQUADRA SPECIALE COBRA 11	Raidue	SQUADRA SPECIALE COBRA 11	Raidue	SQUADRA SPECIALE COBRA 11	Raidue	SQUADRA SPECIALE COBRA 11		SQUADRA SPECIALE COBRA 11	Raidue	LO
				Raitre	LA SQUADRA						
La 7	MATLOCK JAG	La 7	MATLOCK JAG BARNABY	La 7	MATLOCK JAG	La 7	MATLOCK JAG	La 7	MATLOCK JAG	La 7	LA OR
Rete 4	QUINCY CHARLIE'S ANGELS WALKER TEXAS RANGER LAW AND ORDER -UNITA SPECIALE	Rete 4	QUINCY CHARLIE'S ANGELS IL GIUDICE E IL COMMISSARIO WALKER TEXAS RANGER 24	Rete 4	QUINCY CHARLIE'S ANGELS WALKER TEXAS RANGER	Rete 4	QUINCY CHARLIE'S ANGELS WALKER TEXAS RANGER	Rete 4	QUINCY CHARLIE'S ANGELS WALKER TEXAS RANGER	Rete 4	WA TE RA I CO
Canale 5	DETECTIVE IN CORSIA DISTRETTO DI POLIZIA	Canale 5	DETECTIVE IN CORSIA DISTRETTO DI POLIZIA	Canale 5	Raidue	Canale 5	DETECTIVE IN CORSIA	Canale 5	DETECTIVE IN CORSIA X-FILES		
						Italia 1	C.S.I. MIAMI				

Not only do detective films [14] occupy prime time spots, but they are so astonishingly numerous as to guarantee almost round the (normal waking) clock viewing of crime films for those who so desire, frequently with alternatives to choose from at one and the same time. Once they have recovered from this statistical shock, those who are more inclined to think "ill" of society and of their fellow brethren, tend to account for the "abnormal" trend of a decrease in crime films at the weekend as an indication of the cultural climate dominating Italy: football holds sway on Saturdays and Sundays, on television and elsewhere, irrespective of gender (!), age, ethnicity and any other social variable one would care to include in the social analysis.

If one were to examine the situation today (2012), several points would have to be added. First, the number of detective films or serials has increased. Second, pay TV has now gained a firm foothold and the supply of detective fiction on television has increased (entire channels, such as Fox Crime, being devoted to the crime genre). Third, the production of serials has intensified and broadened, with France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, for example, contributing a significant number of serials in addition to the American film and television industry. Saturday night now finds more than one channel offering exclusively detective material during prime time.

More importantly, the crime sector should form part of a wider project which includes the scrutiny of soap operas, “war” films (eg “The Unit”) and “prize shows”, all of which operate together to project a conservative ideology – a massive onslaught, as a variety of studies carried out by critical discourse analysts has shown.

Clearly, a phenomenon of such importance must have a social (hence an ideological) function, and not simply an economic and entertainment value, if such forms of fiction are well to the fore in television programming. In order to account for this ideological function we turn to a short account of the features of the genre, concentrating on the so-called Golden Age (1920-45)of crime writing, which embodies a conservative ideology and of which Christie is a, if not the, prime exponent [15].

PART 4. Agatha Christie and the Golden Age.

Several features have been advanced by the critics as characterising the prototypical detective story in general. Douthwaite (1995: ix-x) summarises these features as follows:

i) a crime, most often a murder, which is an apparently insoluble mystery;

ii) the "manner of working back from *effect to cause*, from solution to problem" (the quotation is from Symons [1972], who is in turn quoting Conan Doyle in the words I have italicised); the effect is the crime and the narrative action consists in working back from the crime to identify the cause of the crime; stated differently, there must be a formal process of detection consisting of investigation, deduction and revelation;

iii) a detective, often an amateur ("amateur" in the sense of not being a member of the official police force - indeed, he is generally extremely "professional" in his handling of the case), sometimes an official policeman (though in this case he is in some way a special investigator, e.g. a policeman called in from the central body and not a member of the "local regulars") who solves the mystery;

iv) the possession on the part of the detective of a vast knowledge base, an acute capacity for observation and stringent deductive and inferential logic, and hence

exceptional mental powers; often he is eccentric in some way; he is thus highly distinguishable from the "ordinary mortal", he is a man apart;
v) an official police force which is often uncooperative and incompetent, if not downright stupid;
vi) the detective's confidant, who "helps" the detective in some way to solve the puzzle;
vii) a suspect who appears to be guilty from the circumstantial evidence or a variety of credible suspects;
viii) a significant quantity of irrelevant information, skilfully deployed throughout the text to put the reader off the scent;
ix) a resolution, which is often startling and unexpected; the resolution often involves or implies the bringing of the culprit to justice.

Although these features, for the most [16], clearly apply to Christie's detective novels, they constitute the background against which may be highlighted those major features which are specific to the Golden Age and which represent the foundations on which the ideology of that sub-genre is founded. Hence the above general characteristics will be dealt with indirectly in Part 5, as the need arises. We therefore now turn now to the specific features of the Golden Age.
Agatha Christie is considered to be the major exponent the so-called "Golden Age" of the detective story (Knight: 2003: 77; 81), which in its turn is deemed to constitute the apotheosis of the crime story, (notwithstanding the fact that Sherlock Holmes is reputed to be the prototype of the detective). The emblematic story type produced by Golden Age writers has been dubbed the "clue puzzle", for reasons which will emerge from the composite picture offered below of that school [17]:
Symons (1972: 92), erroneously, I will argue, (though it should be noted that he was writing in other times, in a different intellectual climate and with other concerns), contends that Christie's work is original "in the sense that it is a puzzle story and only that". I would argue that this implicitly negative value judgement is analytically (rather than aesthetically) inaccurate, in that the clue puzzle being one of the essential features, if not THE essential feature, of the Golden Age detective story, does not exclusively indicate that the Golden Age detective story merely has "escape value". Quite the contrary: it is precisely this feature that enables the

Golden Age story to play the ideological role it does play, a role we will gradually uncover as this paper progresses.

The main characteristics of the sub-genre may be identified as follows below.

1) The crime takes place a in closed, hence limited and clearly delimited, confined and constricted physical setting, most often a secluded country house, with the most extreme case being that of the “closed-room” murder, where the dead body is found in a roomed locked from the inside with no apparent other exit to it, bar the locked door. This immediately sets the scene for a puzzling intellectual case precisely because the “rules of the game”, that is the possible clues and solutions, are clearly circumscribed, as in a game properly speaking, and throw down the intellectual gauntlet to the reader.

It is significant in our own case that intwo of the four novels I will refer to the murder takes place on a train, with the added touch that in *Murder on the Orient Express* the murder takes place after the train has left the station of Istanbul and before reaching any other station. Since the train is then blocked in the countryside (sic!) in a snowstorm, it is perfectly isolated, and no-one could have got off or got on the train at any point between the train leaving Istanbul and the murder being committed and discovered and the train stopped.

With regard to this feature, Knight (2003: 77) draws attention to the fact that Raymond Williams [18] “sees the detective novel as an evolution of the country-house literary tradition, though a house based on capital riches, not on landed wealth”. This point is, I contend, ideologically crucial, as the second point will indicate.

2) Not only is the physical setting highly circumscribed, but the social setting is even more stringently delimited, generally to the “southern English high bourgeois world … and not, as many Americans think, an upper class world” (Knight: 2003: 82). It may perhaps be claimed that a study of the evolution of the detective story (see, for instance, Douthwaite: 1995: XXX-LVIII) sees the emergence of the detective story genre in its entirety as a function of the emergence of the bourgeoisie *tout court*. Sherlock Holmes, who is the epitome of the detective,

> has a new professional role. No longer the police detective, nor the

> professional or amateur private detective, he is, as he himself states, the consulting detective. He symbolises the middle class, market-oriented professional striving to create and maintain socio-economic status in the congested modern urban environment. He does not represent the assault of the middle class [against the aristocracy] in its attempt to gain acceptance but the living token that the middle class has conquered its place in society. In point of fact, royalty, nobility and the bourgeoisie are not infrequent in their recourse to his services, nor do they exhibit any disdain for Holmes's status or compunction in revealing their most intimate domestic secrets to him. In this he may be contrasted to Lecoq, who still has to prove to the ruling class that he does not represent a threat, that he can be accepted without qualms [19]

The class nature of the setting is underscored by the type of crime committed and by the social identity of both the victim and the perpetrator of the crime. The crimes centre on murder, and Priestman's (1990) analysis of ten of Christie's major novels show the motives as being "money, fear of exposure and sexual jealousy". Knight (2003: 78) contends that "the victim will be a man or (quite often) a woman of some importance and wealth, though that position is rarely of long standing or antique respectability". Knight thus comes to the important conclusion that "instability is constant" in Christie's detective fiction. The nature of such crimes and the identity of the victims (the bourgeois class being recounted in the stories) means that rarely do the criminals come from the lower classes (the servants in the first instance are to be automatically excluded and petty thieves breaking and entering the country house for the family jewels are also excluded from the subject matter, though they may be introduced as red herrings – general feature viii above). The perpetrators of the types of crime described are members of the victims' own social class. The enemy is internal, not external [20].
"Instability", the nature of the crime, the victim and the perpetrator all point to the ideological stance taken by the Golden Age writers, (wittingly or unwittingly), a point indirectly made by Knight (2003: 82):

> As Robert Barnard (1980) has shown, there is recurrent conflict in this world, and Alison Light (1991) sees uncertainty as a basic pattern. Styles is a nest of jealousy and unease; Roger Ackroyd's house is full of impostures

> and anxiety. Christie's criminals are traitors to the class and world which is so calmly described, and their identification … is a process of exorcising the threats that this society nervously anticipates within its own membership: the multiple suspect structure has special meaning in a competitive individualist world. [21]

Before commenting on this extract, I must make a short, but important detour. We have already noted that Golden Age stories are generally located in a severely limited environment, both geographically and socially: archetypically, the bourgeois country house. What should be noted is that this is a step back from Sherlock Holmes, rather than forward. Industrialisation and urbanisation have taken place, and life – physical, economic, social and political life - is concentrated in the towns, and especially in the cities with regard to power, whether it be political, financial or industrial. As we saw earlier, Sherlock has clients from all walks of life. Though a significant number of the Sherlock stories do take place in the country, many do not. And the range of crimes and criminals Sherlock deals with is vaster. Hence Golden Age may be seen as taking a step back in the sense of being anachronistic, divorced from reality. There is, as we shall see, a strong note of nostalgia in Christie, with a longing for the past and a different socio-economic system which supposedly guaranteed stability [22]. This, I would argue, is another cornerstone in the ideology of the school.

We may now return to the extract quoted above from Knight. Several observations may be made about his analysis. First of all, exorcising the threats and fears produced by a social structure may be posited as a general function of detective fiction, and not merely restricted to the Golden Age period [23] (Douthwaite: 1995; Douthwaite: 2007c, from which the following quotation is taken):

> With regard to [the development of the detective story], the analysis yielded two main results a) Sherlock Holmes emerged as the prototypical detective, the figure against which all other figures are defined and measured, and b) two main trends were identified in the development of crime fiction. The major, and more traditional, *lowbrow* trend performs a conservative ideological function: it consists of a closed story with a *happy* ending that makes good reading and provides reassuring security to the reader that society will continue in the form the reader knows and likes, for

> the detective hero is always there to protect society from the subversive attacks perpetrated by evil-doers of every possible kind. The main developmental pathway of this tradition moves from Poe through Doyle to the Golden Age, and still constitutes the majority trend today. The second, and minor movement is the *critical* trend which emerged with the American hardboiled school, which in turn is partly a product of American literary realism, and which performs functions antithetical to mainstream crime writing, varying from a critique of society, to a debunking of the classic detective genre, and to innovation in the novel (Kafka, Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Gadda, feminist writing, Black writing, etc [24].).

Secondly, the type of analysis offered above has its roots in a Durkheimian and Weberian analysis of socio-economic structure which, ironically, can produce theories of social deviance which even Marxists or sociologists and other scholars taking their inspiration from Marxism would have no objections to [25].

Thirdly, and the main point of my argumentation which I am gradually leading up to, Durkheimian and Weberian stances are tendentially conservative in nature, and in many crime writers there is an even more conservative ideology underlying any scientific theory that may be put forward to explain human behaviour, be it psychological, sociological, anthropological or whatever.

Turning to our two “train” novels, the protagonists of *Murder on the Orient Express* are all bourgeois, with the exception of the servants. Significantly, this social “anomaly” serves only to underline the ideology underlying Christie’s detective fiction, for the murderers are avenging a terrible crime perpetrated by the worst type of criminal: they are avenging the murder of a child as a consequence of kidnapping and the subsequent suicide of the child’s parents. The twelve “murderers” who kill the mafia boss whom the police were unable to bring to justice are all friends or relations of the victims. More than an act of vengeance, this murder is an act of justice, justice carried out by citizens taking the law into their own hands. The victims were highly respected people loved by all around them, including the servants and the servants of the victim’s friends. The murder thus represents the re-establishment of a violated social order - thereby presupposing the legitimacy of that order - and protecting the most fundamental institution of society, the family. The underlying ideological tenet that is revealed by the nature of the murder and by Poirot’s condoning of the act by failing to tell

the official police the truth about the murder is that society has a right to defend itself in all circumstances and by all means, whether legitimate or illegitimate. While all our hearts naturally go out to the vindication of such a heinous crime, it is questionable, at least in a democratic society, whether the individual as an individual has the right to take the law into his own hands.

The 4.50 from Paddington also concerns a bourgeois family and its entourage. The motive for murder is the inheritance of a property which will make the inheritor rich. The class bias is confirmed, and the danger as being of an inner nature is also confirmed. The novel may be analysed in classic Durkheimian terms of "delinquency and opportunity", *à la* Cloward and Ohlin (1960), applied not only to gangs, but at a macro-social level. Society has set a value - that of money. It has also established what means are considered legitimate for achieving that value – inheritance, investment or work. Those who do not possess the legitimate means to achieve that value may, at their own risk, turn to illegitimate means in order to satisfy their socially-induced aspirations (for which they therefore have no fault, in Durkheimian terms). The laws of inheritance being what they were at the time, those in a rich family who would not inherit had either to accept a lesser station in life or find alternative means for achieving new riches. Other means could and did include illegitimate ones, murder not excluded. Hence, the need for "policing" society. However, the most fundamental tenet of the type of ideology we are discussing is still to emerge. The reader must bear with me until the argument on the nature of the detective story has been completed and we move on to Part 5.

Fourth, although Ernest Mandel (1985), a member of the Fourth International and not a literary critic, has written on crime fiction from a Marxist standpoint, no matter what their political views are, all critics from Symons (1972) on concur that politics as a topic is banned from detective fiction in general, and in the Golden Age strand in particular [26]. This is another fundamental building block in constructing the ideology lying behind Christie's work.

Agatha Christie was born in 1890 and died in 1976. Her life spanned most of the major events influencing the development of the world as we know it today: the First World War, the Russian revolution, the General Strike of 1926, the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the rise of Nazism and Fascism, the Second World War, the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the Six Day War in 1967, to name but a

few. Yet not only are historical events totally missing from her novels, but even references to politics and to related domains such as justice and social problems are never to be found, or else cleverly hidden in extremely indirect references to event types and states rather than to specific events and conditions (a point to be developed in part 5). Without wishing to drive a point too far, 1926 saw the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, 1929 the publication of *The Seven Dials Mystery*, 1939 *Ten Little Niggers* and *Murder is Easy*, 1945 *Sparkling Cyanide*, 1956 *Dead Man's Folly*, 1967 *Endless Night*. All the critical world events quoted above were accompanied by the publication of a Christie novel. While this is no surprise, given the fact she wrote 66 detective novels, numerous plays and other works, what is astonishing is the seemingly total disregard for world events. Her writing is concentrated on the narrow social confines described in points 1 and 2 above [27].

In conclusion, the preceding four points represent the four core features of Golden Age detective fiction, constituting the basis of the ideological foundations of the school. The following two points, while no less important as features characterising the genre, are less central to the ideological question which lies at the heart of this paper. What is important about these two points in relation to the aims of the present paper is that these features may be regarded as deriving from the foregoing four key characteristics just discussed of the detective story as a clue puzzle, thereby bringing grist to the mill of my argument.

Fifth, emotion is not a factor which enters the explanation of the committing of the crime, the makeup of the protagonists and the method of telling the story. While this factor derives from feature iv of the main list of features charactering the detective story in general listed at the beginning of this section, the lack of emotion both in the conduct of the characters, especially in the criminal, and in the manner of telling the tale, goes well beyond the mere rationality of the detective's approach to solving the crime.

Sixth, similarly, there is a lack of any deep psychological analysis. What semblance of psychological insight there is, is indeed superficial, or mere lip service to what should be an integral part of human life. Often, "psychologising" is restricted to the identification of motive. Stated in Fosterian terms, the characters are flat, since personality and emotion are irrelevant to the ideological function of the genre.

All this points to the crime story as an ideological vehicle rather, say, than an in-depth psychological analysis of human behaviour or other sub-genre.

The four novels under scrutiny are quite clear on the previous two points, as well as on the nature of the crime and of the criminal (point 2 above). In *Murder on the Orient Express*, given the nature of the crime – vengeance – the emotion one would expect is almost totally missing. This is because the expression of emotion is irrelevant to the unfolding of the plot, as is the psychology of the participants. The social scene is one of the execution of a premeditated act of vengeance. In *The 4.50 from Paddington*, Miss Marple soon discards her first hypothesis of a quarrel which ends in murder after the criminal has lost control when she takes into consideration the circumstances of the crime which make it impossible for the murder to have been a coincidence. And in the end we discover it was a cold, calculated crime committed by a medical man for economic gain. Financial gain, one of Christie's main themes, is at the core of the novel. And financial gain by such means is condemned as immoral. This is not to say I justify murder, but simply to point out that Christie's underlying ideology is the conservative Christian and capitalist one of sin, and especially the deadly sins, the repression of which are presupposed as being at the root of the 'good society'.

Finally, the critics have identified two features which are claimed to be specific to Agatha Christie, and which are of interest to us here inasmuch as they help confirm the ideological stance identified in her work.

Seventh, Knight (2003: 82), referring back to Knight (1980: 109-110), argues that the model for Christie's detectives is a feminine one, with important repercussions with regard to the main features of the genre, including rationality and the scientific method:

> From the start Christie's less than heroic detective Hercule Poirot relies on his "little grey cells", but in fact his method and focus area primarily domestic; a central question is why the spills on the mantelpiece were rearranged. Because the crucial information comes from knowledge associated with a female sphere, the detective model is significantly feminised, though it was not until 1930 in *Murder at the Vicarage* that Christie created her own woman investigator, Miss Marple.

Several points emerge from this observation. I will restrict myself to two comments. First, while some detectives of the Golden Age are decidedly unaggressive, non-dominant, non- God-like, (that is, unlike the classic male Sherlock Holmes prototype), many other detectives are to be found in the Golden Age who are the products of a male writer but who do not exude the prominent macho-like qualities of a 'real he-man', (the full prototype in this particular domain being Marlowe). Without having recourse to Father Brown, for obvious reasons, two names immediately spring to mind: Austin Freeman's J.G Reeder, who can and who does use violence, but only in the strict call of duty when no other option is available, and limited to neutralising the criminal and not catering to the subliminal sadistic penchant of the readers, and H.C Bailey's Mr. Fortune, who works constantly in his lab. Then, of course, we have university professors, and an extreme case such as the female writer Baroness D'Orczy's "Old Man in the Corner", who solves cases merely by sitting in a tea shop and talking to an audience, basing his case on facts gleaned from the newspapers, namely, without direct investigation carried out by himself!

A second comment concerns the type of investigation. While Miss Marple does sometimes undertake field work, often her investigations are arm-chair affairs, (like "The Old Man in the Corner", who pre-dates Christie's works by three decades), and the cold rationality and stringent deduction of the Sherlock variety, (which is, of course, induction, and not deduction as Sherlock - or rather Doyle - claims), is at times not as dominant as in other crime writers.

Eighth, Christie has been accused of creating over-elaborate and unrealistic plots, thereby violating the Van Dine rules of so-called fair play against the reader [28], with the writer having heavily stacked the cards in his/her favour. While the whole intellectual puzzle is a sham, with the cards inevitably always being stacked against the reader, [29] nevertheless the over-intricate as well as unrealistic plots Christie often conjures up make the "clue puzzle" even more of an ideology than a reality.

In *The 4.50 from Paddington*, the murder is committed on a train and seen by pure chance by another person sitting in another train going in the same direction. The murderer has pulled the blinds down, but commits the murder while the train is going round a bend and the blinds jump up. The witness sees the murderer only from behind, (so never sees the murderer's face), and only for two or three seconds

while the miracle happens of the two trains running parallel for precisely those few seconds on that specific bends in the tracks in which the blinds jump up and the man is throttling the woman. What stretches the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief even further is the fact that having 'guessed' who the murderer is, Miss Marple sets a trap for him. The witness is instructed to take exactly the same train as she did on the day of the murder and Miss Marple invents an excuse so that she and the suspected murderer, (together with a police officer, unknown to the murderer), take the same train that the murderer took when he carried out the crime. Both trains are obviously travelling in the same direction. Miss Marple pulls the blinds down, and invents an excuse for the suspect to take up a position almost identical to the one when he strangled his victim at the precise moment when the train enters the bend on the track where (when) the murder was committed, the bend again forces the blinds up (!), and the relevant carriage of the other train carrying the witness is perfectly parallel to the carriage the suspect is in, and the witness recognises the back of the murderer! Coincidence is very, very low in the case of the murder, to put the matter mildly, but just beyond belief in the trap.

Christie implicitly recognises the weakness of her plot in *Murder on the Orient Express*, since she goes to great lengths in an attempt to justify how twelve people who all know each other from far back and who have probably not met in recent times all come to occupy the entire first class sleeper on the train in a season when the train is generally empty! This is not the sole incongruence in the plot, but it suffices to illustrate my argument. The real point is not the stretching of the reader's credence, since an avid reader of detective fiction is necessarily most willing to 'suspend disbelief', but the fact that, as we shall see in the next section, her plots are designed to bring out a number of attitudes which constitute the backbone of the social humus she belongs to and loves, and which she ideologises. Her love of that conservative, traditional society helps account for the fact that *Murder on the Orient Express* justifies the taking of the law into one's own hands when the legal system is incapable of combating the threat to society.

We now turn to the concrete application of the theory to the novels selected.

Note

↑ 1 Clearly, this analysis applies equally to audio-visual material, though in the latter case, there are extra devices provided by the visual domain which the director/producer/script writer can manipulate to gain his ends. Note in passing that I am assuming that the televised version of a Christie novel or of detective fiction in general will maintain the same ideological stance (or the conservative stance, if there is also a subversive voice in Christie's works), a point I have no time here to elucidate.

↑ 2 See note 26 below.

↑ 3 Hegemony, in Gramscian terms.

↑ 4 This point is developed in one specific direction in part 4, point 2, page 10 ff..

↑ 5 For a description of this process, see Douthwaite (1990: chapter 3).

↑ 6 Thus a communicant's goal may be that of deliberately deceiving his addressee, hence he might not respect the Gricean maxim of quality. Stated differently, Gricean maxims are relative and not absolute.

↑ 7 Quite simply a worker might believe that the surplus produced by the owner of the factory where he works constitutes exploitation, while the owner believes the surplus is necessary for the survival of the factory, which is what keeps both his worker ad himself alive. Similarly, the teacher believes teaching a student mathematics is providing him with essential life skills, while the student believes the teacher is sadistically boring the ants off him! Yet the external reality described (the work situation, the classroom) is "objectively" the same.

↑ 8 This is one line of argument stemming from theorists such as Saussure, Lacan and Althusser which leads to the conclusion of the primacy of language and that subjectivity is created in and through language. This is not the place to enter into a debate on this subject. Readers interested in this highly-debated topic can begin by consulting Belsey (1980), for instance.

↑ 9 This is not to say that all newspapers and television channels purvey the same ideology. They do not. However, the majority, and generally the most influential tend to conservatism. On the media see, for instance the work of Wodak and of Fairclough (e.g. Fairclough 1985a, b).

↑ 10 By literature I intend here all forms of what is socially defined by that label. This includes “low brow” as well as “high brow” literary products. The detective story thus comes within the definition.

↑ 11 *Histoire* v *discours*, in French Structuralist terms (e.g. Barthes). See also Chatman (1978)

↑ 12 The Montalbano crime novels may be classified as belonging to the secondary, critical strand of crime fiction.

↑ 13 Note that the analysis is confined to the first two national channels, two of Berlusconi’s three private channels, and another important private channel not owned by Berlusconi.

↑ 14 ‘Detective films’ in the widest sense of the term, since they also include, as of yore, a wide variety of “detective figures”, including private investigators, lawyers, doctors etc.

↑ 15 The outline here will be of the barest. Those interested in the topic may delve further into the matter by consulting the works cited in note 17 below.

↑ 16 Miss Marple does not have a “steady confidant”, as is Watson for Sherlock Holmes, for instance, but in most novels one specific character does tend to take on this role, either a police inspector or one of Miss Marple’s friends, who approached Miss Marple on the particular crime I question.

↑ 17 This picture is based on Symons (1972), Knight (1980), Mandel (1985), Kayman (1992), Douthwaite (1995), Knight (2003), Reddy (2003). Knight’s recent 2003 publication is perhaps the most comprehensive short work on the subject.

↑ 18 Williams: 1973: 298-9.

↑ 19 Douthwaite (1995: XLI). On the social and ideological functions of Sherlock Holmes, see also Mandel (1985) and Kayman (1992), among others.

↑ 20 While it would be “natural” for such a statement to induce us to contemplate

the hypothesis of Otherness, interestingly this is not an analytical framework which critics frequently have recourse to in dealing with detective fiction, bar certain novelists who employ the detective story to produce feminist and ethnic social criticism, though these latter strands emerge after the 1960s in the wake of feminism, civil rights movements in the USA and postcolonialism.

↑ 21 Here we are given a glimpse of the internal contradictions of society and the consequent possibility of a subversive reading.

↑ 22 Part 5 below will develop these themes.

↑ 23 This is not intended as a criticism of Knight, since Knight's paper in the collection of essays in which it appears is devoted to the Golden Age! Secondly, the quote from my own paper has a second function – that of introducing the distinction between conservative crime fiction and critical crime fiction, a distinction which will shortly become relevant to my argument.

↑ 24 In that paper, I classify Montalbano as belonging to the second, critical trend, thereby exerting a counter-ideological function.

↑ 25 A classic case is Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) study of delinquent gangs. The tensions and contradictions produced by social structure are seen to be at the root of delinquent behaviour. While not a Marxist study, since it derives from Merton's "strain theory", its socio-economic determinism reads like Marxist theory.

↑ 26 This is of course a gross, albeit tenable, generalisation if we make the distinction drawn in Douthwaite (2007), from which I quoted above. Here, the reference is obviously to the majority, and conservative, strand in the genre. Furthermore, it should be noted that there are (infrequent, but present) references to politics in Christie's, to "things" getting worse in society. In other words, there are indirect references to the political situation, though generally limited to voicing criticisms and fears, 'gossip-type' talk, almost, such as the instability of the financial markets which threatens the stability of the middle class small investor. Politics is usually not debated openly and directly.

↑ 27 Thankfully, my friend and colleague Roberto De Pol read this article critically and pointed out that not all Christie's writing is 'concentrated on narrow social confines', as argued in this essay. Some of her work shows an inclination to represent modern times and their concerns. Roberto provided two examples. First, *N or M*, (1941), a thriller set during the Second World War, in which the

protagonists, Tommy and Tuppence, are out to catch a German spy in Southern England. Second, *They came to Baghdad*, (1951), another thriller and spy story, which, as Roberto points out, is permeated by the climate of the Cold War. Roberto's point is well-taken and has helped me clarify my own writing. His stance may be answered, (whether successfully or nor, the reader must judge), in several ways. First of all, an author's work is not necessarily 'monolithic' To give one example, I have written on Margery Allingham's brilliant story *Three is a Lucky Number*, (posthumously published in 1969 but referring to the 1950s), which I claim is a forerunner of feminist detective fiction. During the writing of that paper I hunted for other work by Allingham showing traces of feminism, but was bitterly disappointed to find that none of the few novels, (about a dozen), I managed to lay my hands on held any race of feminist discourse. *Three is a Lucky number* seems a flash in the pan. I would thus argue that the picture I have painted of Christie's production is the broad one which includes the majority of her works. Second, and bolstering the first point, is that such works as referred to by Roberto belong to a minority sub-genre in Christie's enormous production. Christie wrote 5 Tommy and Tuppence novels, and like *The Moving Finger*, these are classified as thrillers rather than detective stories, though the mechanisms are very similar. Third, "Passenger to Frankfurt" is another spy story, hence in the same category as the two works quoted previously. It is Christie's eightieth book and her last spy story, published in Great Britain in1970, and has as its background the resurgence of Nazism, another topical theme. However, as Frances Iles wrote in a review in the Guardian, (15-10-1970) "the book is largely a discursus on a favourite old theme of Mrs Christie's, the present state of the world and its future outlook, on both of which she takes a somewhat dim view". The central issue remains of how much those novels really do investigate the socio-political climate of the times they describe and how much, instead, those climates simply constitute background material (i.e. context and/or broad theme) enabling Christie to produce a thriller. Finally, all these works tend to appear in Christie's later production. This in itself raises a series of questions, only one of which I will mention. Was Christie searching for new ideas, new material, new settings? Interestingly, *Passenger to Frankfurt* has an introduction in which Christie actually seeks to answer the question often put to her of where her ideas come from. She divides her answer into three parts – themes, characters and setting. In discussing the third aspect she clearly refers to current events: "But only one thing applies – they [settings] must be there – in existence. Real people, real places. If here and now – how shall you get full information – apart from the evidence of your own eyes and ears? The answer is frighteningly simple. It is what

the press brings to you every day". Christie then draws up a long list of frightening events occurring daily – including killing, drugs, assaults, violence, rioting, then asks the question: "What does it all mean?" The answer she provides is a famous quote from Shakespeare: "it is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". She then counterbalances this nihilistic stance with a more promising: "And yet one knows – of one's own knowledge – how much goodness there is in this world of ours …". Stated simply, Iles appears to be right in stating that Christie is back to her old theme, the present world and its bleak outlook, even in this spy story/thriller, and is not analysing the modern world from a social or sociological standpoint.

↑ 28 On this point and Van Dine, see Douthwaite (1995).

↑ 29 (see points vii and viii of the general features of detective stories; note also how even Conan Doyle always suppresses information possessed by the detective, thereby (and necessarily) creating an extremely uneven balance between detective and reader – see Douthwaite (1996),