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Agatha Christie's Female Villains

Анотація. Стаття торкається проблематики відтворення боротьби та життя жінок наприкінці 30-х років у Великобританії у творах письменниці кримінального жанру Агати Крісті. Авторка подає аналіз соціальної та економічної боротьби жінок у міжвоєнний період та їхньої адаптації до змін в соціальній стратифікації.

Ключові слова: жінки Великобританії, кримінальний жанр, Агата Крісті, соціальна стратифікація, міжвоєнний період.

Abstract. With the approaching WWII, the tension and struggle women in Britain faced towards the end of the 1930s translated into the works of the English crime-writer, Agatha Christie, who revolutionized the nature of female villains in her novels, making them rounder and more realistic to reflect the lives of women during those times. This transformation particularly impacted her mother-figure and women as carer characters. This article aims to discuss these changes and the notions which stood behind them.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, Christean scholarship, female characters in detective fiction, inter-war period, female villains in crime fiction, working-class women, English fiction

Introduction. While the emergence of female voices after the suffragette movements of the late 1910s was heard throughout Britain, it was not loud enough to suppress the still predominant domestic outlook on the position of women in the society. Quite the contrary, women supporting the feminist movements of the 1920s and 1930s turned to the avocation of conservative spirit and traditions supporting the domestic perception of the female gender. Bingham lists the Great War and the alienation and separation of female masses to those in favour of the old ways and those standing united against the old traditionalism as the main reason for this [1, p. 225].

This paper analyses the social and economic struggles British women faced in the interwar period and how it changed due to factors such as urbanization, emergence of youth culture and political turmoil leading towards WWII. It also

touches on the class system of the British interwar period and how women of different social classes adapted to the changes in the social stratification.

Material and methods. However, the main focus of this work lies in Christie's writing of female characters in her crime novels, and the gradual influence of her personal struggles in the inter-war England depicted as reappearing images in her stories. This paper reflects on the changing portrayal of Christean women which arose from the shadows of Victorian tradition known as modern flappers. It also introduces the importance and appearance of motherhood and nurturing women in her interwar stories, justified by herself facing the challenges of being a mother.

Results and discussion. After World War I, the already wide gap between urban and rural areas seemed to grow even more. Todd claims that the experiences and conditions of women in rural and urban Britain were, thus, very different. The first causal factor was the depopulation of the countryside. Women, especially the younger generation, moved to join the emerging youth culture of the cities – migration which contributed to the decline in farming and agricultural work on the countryside. The second factor was the sexual division of labour. The rural areas discriminated more towards women than urban ones [12, p. 83].

Thus, urbanisation became a common practice as women were, despite their dire conditions, becoming financially more and more independent. The emerging youth culture, the better living and economic conditions as well as higher wages contributed to the migration of young people, mostly women to the cities to seek jobs in private household, as waitresses or shops, cafés, etc.

Todd even highlights that the factor of better working conditions for moving to the great cities paled in comparison to the social advantages of the urban life had to offer – socialisation, youth culture, greater options for leisure and self-improvement [12, p. 97]. These changes of urbanization and the opportunity of greater socialization have led to the birth of the flapper culture. The main opposition to the flapper culture was represented, however, by women in the traditional domestic area. Pugh criticizes this new cultural wave in the following way:

Much contemporary comment was misleading, especially in the aftermath of war when the press amplified concern about young people 'canoodling' in parks and cinemas, about the culture of violence unleashed by war, and about munitions girls indulging in fur coats while shunning the responsibilities of motherhood... encouraged by imported social novelties from America including jazz, new dances, cocktails, films and fashions. American influence was reinforced by commercial investment in luxurious cinemas, plush dance halls, night clubs, greyhound tracks, football pools and improvements at seaside resorts including lidos, winter gardens, concert halls and ballrooms. The spread of cheap travel enabled more people to take advantage of these forms of leisure.

The opposition from the traditional domestic side was a direct result of the World War I casualties. Pugh describes it as a dogma of marriage and domesticity. As a result of World War I, many British men perished on the battlefield and as a consequence, there was a significant drop in marriage rate.

Although not high enough to be considered worrisome, marriage propaganda became one of the most commonly widespread ideologies amongst women. It was one of the main topics advertised in women magazines, not only to strengthen this idea of domesticity and marital life but also to avoid any discourse about or increase in feminist activism or emancipation.

The propaganda of marriage reached as far as to persuade young women to take initiative and propose. This caused a long-lasting trend of marriages lasting up until the 1970s. Despite the economic decline and no promising financial security younger and younger couples ended up tying the knot [9, p. 46].

The conflicts of female voices found their way into the detective literature as well. The representation of these contradictory opinions made an impact on the characterization of the Christean female protagonists and antagonists, especially reflected in her work prior and during the 1930s, which also marks the era of a shift for Christie's characterization of women as carers or mother figures. This portrayal of females is directly influenced by the challenges women of different social classes faced by the end of the 1930s in the social and economic sphere and the lack of opportunities they had.

Vipond offers an intriguing and well summed up and detailed definition of these flapper ladies of Agatha Christie. She describes them as the following:

They smoked, drank, and swore, and were regarded by their elders with a combination of outrage and envy. They were athletic enough to swing up and down the ivy when essential to the plot, skilled and audacious enough to drive bright little sports cars in a fashion which terrified everyone else on the road, brave enough to take more than their fair share of risks—and always they were admired for these qualities.

This article discusses the shift in a woman as carer archetype reflected in villainous governesses, surrogate mothers and mother figures in Christie's work during this time period.

Detective literature is known for mirroring and imitating the time and reality of its conception [6]. This article directly focuses on the representation of gender in the works of Agatha Christie. It is generally acknowledged that masculine presence has been a dominant and defining factor in the detective literature for a very long time. Even in Agatha Christie's earlier works, a character of a male antagonist has been the dominant villain prototype.

According to Makinen, however, as Christie earned her name in the crime genre, she consistently worked out and improved her female characters, making

them not only more realistic, but also a lot bolder, rivalling her male characters, especially male villains [7, p. 118]. That is precisely the reason why Christie's female villains rarely fit into the stereotype of a femme fatale. Christie instead draws the attention on the presence of evil in every corner.

Her female villains come from the working class and upper class alike. They are young and old, conventional or not, reserved or flamboyant. The focus is always on the representation of everyday struggles. Christie creeps into the issues of motherhood, unrequited love, marriage, occupation, identity. She represents traditional and untraditional all the same. Maslin also supports this idea of duality discussing how Christie creates fiery, bold women and calm, domestic ones alike. However, Maslin also notes that Christie strays away from sexualizing her female characters, unless it is pivotal to the plot or it serves as a red-herring [8].

Christie's female characters, protagonists and antagonists alike, are indeed very different from the initial role of female characters in the detective literature. The Victorian angelic purity mocked by the Gothic tradition forced the female presence in the earlier detective literature into the corner. Rowland recounts a strong tradition of the Romantic imaginary of a beautiful, fragile lady enduring all sorts of horrors under the autocracy of a male character in a need for liberation by another male character [10, p. 132]. This concept was taken from the Gothic and soon adapted as a pattern for the Victorian audience of the detective literature.

However, Christie's approach to writing female characters slowly evolved into a significant deviation from this Romantic image. Herself born into an upper middle-class, eventually becoming a mother and a housewife, she diligently observed the situation and struggle of women to survive the rough and changeable social climate of the 20th century. Christie's life was dramatically impacted by her own service in the war as a nurse, witnessing the horrors of the Great War, witnessing the patriotism of men and women alike, while also adapting into her new life of a successful novelist and overcoming the failure of her marriage.

This turbulent period in her life is in depth discussed by Vipond, who offers a detailed outlook on how the Great War shaped Christie's view on domesticity, on societal norms and the real life of British men and women, observing the changes the position of sexes in society, which she reflected in her stories the following years as a writer and which inspired her in the creation of a rounder, better developed and more dimensional characters [13, p. 122].

The leading ladies of Agatha Christie's earlier works, if they can be labelled as such, fit into the Romantic tradition of portraying women. In terms of appearance they undoubtedly serve as a reminder of John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* (1888). The most common descriptions for these female characters are well demonstrated by Makinen: "small frail girl, small mouth, small face, little chin, young goddess, perfect angel, innocent child" [122].

These are just a few notable examples that prove the connection with the Romantic tradition – smallness and fragility, beauty and youth. These were and sometimes still are commonly associated with the notion of femininity. Such an

example can be found in Christie's earliest works *Murder on the Links* (1923), which is considered a typical example of an early detective literature which values "feminine helplessness over masculine competence" [122].

Becoming a mother herself, the "women as carers" or "mother figure" archetype became a constant presence in the works of Agatha Christie. One of the central motifs for crime and murder is also this feminine archetype of a carer. It should not come as a surprise. Christie always considered herself a mother and a wife first and foremost rather than a writer. Sometimes the strong emotional mother-child or female carer and ward relationship erupts into a fanatical behaviour.

Rowland presents *The Hound of Death* (1933) as the main example, since in the story the main character undergoes a séance and engages in occultism to reanimate the connection with her dead child [10, p. 137]. The character of Miss Chadwick in *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959) is deeply obsessed with her boarding school and raising eligible young ladies that she completely neglects her own personal life.

Her maternal instincts for the girls at school overcome a need for having her own children and drive her into madness and eventually crime [7, p. 128]. In the *Crooked House* (1949), the little, ugly Josephine out of rejection by her actress mother become mad and commits murders despite her young age just so she can prove herself as a detective [7, p. 129]. Bess Sedgwick from *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965) sacrifices her own life to protect her daughter from prison [7, p. 119]. In *The Big Four* (1927), the character of the Countess is only willing to cooperate with Poirot to save her son from harm [7, p. 120]. From these examples one cannot oversee that Christie played with various notions of motherhood setting in context of a wide range of plot variations and showed both the negative and positive aspect of it. However, Christie had always preferred to show off the warm and loving nature of it. Vipond offers the readers a proof for it in her research.

In several of her books, moreover, Christie implied that maternal love was one of the strongest possible motives for murder; if five characters all had motive and opportunity, but one is suspected of committing the crime for the sake of "her children," you can be fairly certain that she is the guilty party. As Poirot himself put it, "Mothers . . . are particularly ruthless when their children are in danger."

Christie's approach to motherhood and the women as carer archetype had a constant presence in her novels and had a huge impact on them. Christie was largely inspired by the two things she liked the most - cats and babies. Christie thus created a fusion of the two things to define the caring nature of women based on her own taste. Thompson wrote about Christie's very notion of motherhood ideal being based on that of a cat. "An honest mother would treat her offspring as a cat does – take satisfaction in giving birth, nurture for a little, then move back into her

life” [11]. Christie’s situation as a single mother in the 1920s inspired several of her novels and after giving birth and experiencing motherhood, it became the central motif in her work, influencing her female heroines and villains alike.

The turmoil from the approaching inter-War period had an enormous impact on the construction of her female villains in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and *And Then There Were None* (1939). When the two stories are analysed in a synchronic point of view it becomes obvious, that the sympathetic aspects of female criminals ceased in Christie’s fiction harmoniously with the rise of anxiety and tense mood from the upcoming World War II. Therefore, it can also be concluded that Agatha Christie in these two novels of hers - *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and *And Then There Were None* (1939) - introduces a change from one dimensional to multidimensional female villains.

When focusing on her female antagonists related to children – governesses and surrogate mothers- they became much more vile and sinister in her *And Then There Were None* (1939), resulting in giving them a much greater agency as criminals, rather than just being mere symbols for metaphysical justice, as she had previously done in her *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). Therefore, while female villains in these stories occupy the position of main antagonists, there is a visible shift in making them more developed and realistic than other Christean female villains before them, subverting the Victorian “angel of the house” prototype and the “woman as carer” archetype.

These two novels are not only a point of shift in her representation of female villains, but they are also Christie’s single representatives of collective culprit stories and are heavily influenced by the position of Christie herself experiencing motherhood at the time, playing around with the theme of it in almost all the stories she penned during this time of her life. This shift she introduces in her female characters offered not only a realistic portrayal of the challenges women from different social classes faced by the end of the 1930s due to social and economic changes at the time, but also a undeniable impact on the later characterization of women in the crime genres in general.

All in all, this paper analysed Christie’s writing of female characters in her crime novels, and how her personal struggles experienced in the interwar England influenced the writing of her female characters and became a reappearing theme in her stories. This paper also demonstrated the portrayal of Christean women from those minor characters whom were the remnants of the Victorian Era to those fiery flappers, Christie became famous for. It also introduced the rising importance and appearance of motherhood, carer figures and nurturing women in her interwar stories, justified by herself being a mother and influence by the changing political climate due to the upcoming World War II.

Conclusions. To conclude the research conducted in this paper, the turmoil from the approaching the inter-War period had a significant impact on the construction of female characters in the Works of Agatha Christie. When Christie’s stories are analysed in a diachronic point of view it becomes obvious, that the

sympathetic aspects of female criminals ceased in Christie's fiction harmoniously with the rise of anxiety and tense mood of the upcoming World War II. Therefore, the aim of this paper, which was to prove that Agatha Christie in her Works, most considerably reflected in her *Murder on the Orient Express* and *And Then There Were None* introduces a change from one dimensional to multidimensional female villains, was achieved.

When focusing on her female antagonists related to children – governesses and surrogate mothers- became much more vile and sinister in her *And Then There Were None*, resulting in giving them a much greater agency as criminals, rather than just symbols for metaphysical justice, as she had done previously in her *Murder on the Orient Express*. Therefore, while female villains in these stories occupied the position of main antagonists, there was an observable shift in making them more developed and realistic than other, much earlier Christean female villains before them, subverting the Victorian “angel of the house” prototype and the “woman as carer” archetype.

These stories were heavily influenced by Christie herself experiencing motherhood at the time, playing around with the theme of it in almost all the stories she penned during this time of her life. She also introduced a shift in her female characters and offered a realistic portrayal of the challenges women of different social classes faced by the end of the 1930s due to social and economic changes at the time.

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