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English Society and Its Depiction in Selected Works by Agatha Christie

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Zásady pro vypracování:

Studentka se ve své bakalářské práci zaměří na zobrazení anglické společnosti v dílech Agathy Christie. Literární kontext této práce studentka uvede analýzou detektivního žánru a jeho vývoje, do kterého zařadí Agathu Christie a její vybraná díla. Dále bude následovat historická a kulturní charakteristika období meziválečné Británie. Samotná analytická část bude věnována typologii postav děl A. Christie, do jaké míry odrážejí soudobou společnost a její společenské vrstvy. Celkově bude studentka ve své práci kombinovat kulturně-historickou a literární analýzu založenou na dostatečném množství kvalitních primárních i sekundárních zdrojů.

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Prohlašuji:

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Souhlasím s prezenčním zpřístupněním své práce v Univerzitní knihovně.

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ANNOTATION

The aim of this thesis is to compare selected novels by Agatha Christie and the comprehensive historical studies.
The first part focuses on characterizing crime fiction genre and its development from its beginning, the Golden Age is described in detail. The second part of the work examines the system of English social classes and their stereotypical images in Agatha Christie's fiction of the 1930s which are considered the peak of Christie's writing. The last part deals with the portrayal of Christie's women and their attitudes towards recently acquired equality of rights.
The thesis will conclude by providing information about whether Christie mirrored English society faithfully.

Key words: Agatha Christie, English society, social class, crime fiction, twentieth century

ANOTACE

Cílem této práce je porovnání anglické společnosti ve vybraných dílech Agathy Christie s odbornými historickými studiemi.
První část bakalářské práce se zabývá charakteristikou detektivního žánru a jeho vývoje, hlouběji se zaobírá obdobím jeho největšího rozkvětu. Druhá část zkoumá třídní systém v anglické společnosti a jeho stereotypická zobrazení v dílech Agathy Christie z třicátých let 20. století, které je považováno za vrcholné období v její tvorbě. Poslední část pojednává o ženách v literatuře Agathy Christie a jejich postojem k čerstvě nabyté rovnoprávnosti.
Závěrem, cílem práce je pokus určit, zda Agatha Christie zobrazila anglickou společnost důvěryhodně.

Klíčová slova: Agatha Christie, anglická společnost, společenská třída, detektivní žánr, dvacáté století

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0. Introduction

Agatha Christie did the world a favour when she wrote 84 detective novels and 136 short stories which brilliantly describe England and the English. "In recent years Christie has been elevated to something like a national institution […], as English as Buckingham Palace, the House of Commons and the Tower of London" (Light, 1991, p. 62). Her "Englishness" stemmed from her use of a whole range of stereotypes which she adapted to her own purposes. In compliance with Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan: "Everyone in England in 1930 was familiar with the mild vicar, the brisk nurse, the adenoidal kitchenmaid, the effusive spinster, the gruff colonel, the pampered actress and the reliable doctor" (Craig, Cadogan, 1981, p. 167). This thesis explores the actual situation in English society in the genteel thirties and its reflection in Agatha Christie's works. The aim of this work is to search repeated stereotypes in Christie's fiction and to compare them with reliable sources, especially up-to-date comprehensive historical studies.

The primary sources of the thesis are the 1930s novels and short stories, which are considered the peak of Christie's output. This thesis deals with well-known novels *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *Death on the Nile* (1937), *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas* (1938) and the collection of twelve short-stories *The Listerdale Mystery* (1933).

This work is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides a brief description of the detective genre, which is seen as "characteristically British" (Rubinstein, 2010, online), however, in fact, it is of American origin.

Then, the stereotypes in Agatha Christie's fiction are analysed in three separate chapters. Each chapter discusses one social class – upper, middle and working – which are considered typical for British social stratification. To define the classes, the thesis applies the sociological point of view. The first class this thesis focuses on is the upper class, which is generally associated with the aristocracy and the royal families. In Christie's fiction, readers can hardly find Prince Charming; instead, there are usually old, ill aristocrats living in poverty.

The middle class society is familiar to Agatha Christie and she reflects its interwar social changes in *An Autobiography*. The chapter on the middle-class is divided into three main parts. The first part deals with the introduction of new technologies into the lives of ordinary 1930s people. In addition, the next part points out the importance of new means of transport and travelling. In the conclusion of the chapter, the stereotypical middle-class characters are analysed as well as Christie's famous detective Hercule Poirot.

The last chapter, dealing with social classes, discusses the working class, which is widely represented by servants. Last but not least, this work focus on women characters across the social strata, who epitomize the perception of female emancipation in the 1930s. Additionally, the character of Miss Marple, another famous Christie's detective is discussed.

In conclusion, this thesis provides an image of the 1930s, a period in which English society underwent a great deal of change. The old certainties were shaken by the economical decline after World War I, women gained the right to vote and they were mostly treated equal to the men; new technologies replaced servants and the new riches threatened the position of aristocracy. These and a large number of other changes are mirrored in the detective fiction of Agatha Christie and they are analysed in this work.

1. Crime Fiction

The first chapter deals with the definition of crime fiction and its development. Crime fiction is one of the most popular genres of literature all over the world and "now belongs to the canon of English literature" (Lorenz, 2007, p. 4) However, despite its popularity, it is considered a part of low (or so called popular) literature and at first, it "was seen as trivial" (Lorenz, 2007, p. 4). The search for a definition of crime fiction as a literary genre brought us to well-known theoreticians of the genre like John Scaggs and Martin Priestman, who admit that a simple definition does not exist. In addition, they found out that the titles of the genre varied from E.A. Poe's "tales of ratiocination" to the whodunits in the interwar period to mystery fiction. To unify the terminology, they apply the term "crime fiction" used in the majority of critical studies (Scaggs, 2005, p. 1). Nevertheless, none of them provides their readers with a concrete idea about the genre; instead, they present a number of common features among works in the genre. Frank Lorenz boiled these characteristics down to two main features – a mysterious murder and the justice impersonated by the detective. On the other hand, author Elisabeth Haynes manages with the definition of crime fiction from *The mammoth encyclopedia of modern crime fiction*, that defines crime fiction as that about "the breaking and enforcement of the law." In contrary to Priestman's and Scaggs' approaches, the use of *The mammoth encyclopedia* definition seems very general.

One of the most suitable characterizations of crime fiction is provided by B.D. Logue, who is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Strathclyde.

> "Crime fiction is a narrative centred on a crime (usually, but not always, murder) which seeks to resolve a mystery. The protagonist generally seeks to answer one or more of the following questions:
>
> 1. Who did it?
> 2. Why did they do it?
> 3. How did they do it?
> 4. Who wanted/ordered it done?" (Logue, 2012, online)

These four questions are essential for crime fiction and all its sub-genres deal with them.

The first attempts of crime fiction date back to the late 18th century, however the first detective story in the modern sense of term was written by Edgar Alan Poe in 1841. In his short story *The Murders In The Rue Morgue* he created the first great literary detective, C. Auguste Dupin, who "solves a crime through a process of logical deduction, or ratiocination, from the evidence that is presented to him by others" (Scaggs, 2005, p. 21).

The character of August Dupin became the archetype for all subsequent detectives. According to Elizabeth Haynes, the other significant nineteenth-century detective writers were Charles Dickens (*Bleak House*) and Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White*) as well as first female authors like Katherine Green.

With the turn of the 20th century, the popularity of short stories was approaching its climax and Sherlock Holmes, one of the most famous detectives, came into existence from the pen of Arthur Conan Doyle. Dealing with features typical for Victorian literature, Doyle created such impressive adventures of Sherlock Holmes that they still work on readers and the character of the eccentric detective found his way onto the silver screen.

After the World War I, people tended to prefer less bloody and violent literature. "This graphic depiction of mortality was to lose of its savour for many after 1914" (Light, 1991, p. 70). The Victorian and Edwardian short stories were replaced by crime novels and the era between the 1920s and 1930s was considered the "Golden Age" of crime fiction which featured "the happy innocent point of view and the narrow vision of society. The detectives are two-dimensional and the stories are full of conventions and clichés" (Jalová, 2007, p. 13). The most popular sub-genre of crime fiction at that time was the whodunit, short for "Who done it?" This kind of detective story resembles "the crime puzzle" (Light, 1991, p. 65). It gives its audience a great opportunity to solve the crime alongside the investigator. The reader follows the investigation step by step and he or she can come to a conclusion sooner than the murderer is revealed by detective. The interwar whodunits were considered a literature of convalescence because their effect was "preoccupying, the mental equivalent of pottering. […] Whodunits could be just answer to the lack of capacity for concentrated thinking, which plagued the returned soldiers" (Light, 1991, p. 71).

The Detection Club was established in 1928 by Anthony Berkeley whose

> "members were major authors of Golden Age and they swore to obey rules of Fair Play' that were established first by S.S. Van Dine in 1928 and a year later summarized and reduced by Father Ronald Knox, a Catholic priest and detective story writer" (Jalová, 2007, p. 14).

Beside the members of the Detection Club, American authors like John Dickson Carr, and Rex Stout are included in the Golden Age. The most famous female writers of the Golden Age are considered the four original "Queens of Crime": Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh and Margery Allingham.

Whereas British readers were enjoying the mystery puzzles of the Queens of Crime, Americans were shocked by the Great Depression and the new genre – the hard-boiled fiction. Its heyday lasted until the end of the World War II. The most famous authors Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler applied the character of a private eye and they dealt with actual topics like organized crime, gangsters and violence in the public.

Elizabeth Haynes claims that in the mid-twentieth century, the most popular novels were "police procedural novels focused on the methods used by law enforcement to solve crimes" (Haynes, 2011, p. xii), like, for example, the *87th Precinct* crime series written by Ed McBain. The other famous writers of crime fiction in the form of the traditional mystery puzzles in the 1950s and the 1960s were P.D.James, Dick Francis and Ruth Rendell.

According to Elizabeth Haynes, the era between 1970 and 1989 is considered a second Golden Age of detective fiction. "Reflecting events in society, crime novels began to feature increasing diversity in characters and settings" (Haynes, 2011, p. xiv). The most famous writers were Tony Hillerman and Robert B. Parker. In 1986, the organization Sisters in Crime was established to point out the gender inequality in the field of crime fiction writing. On their official website, their actual mission statement is provided: "The mission of Sisters in Crime is to promote the professional development and advancement of women crime writers to achieve equality in the industry" (Sisters in Crime, 2012, online). The initial members were Charlotte MacLeod, Kate Mattes, Betty Francis, Dorothy Salisbury Davis, Sara Paretsky, Nancy Pickard and Susan Dunlap.

Since 1990, readers put stress on novels dealing with forensic novels and historical mysteries as stated in Haynes *Crime Writers: A Research Guide*. She appoints some of the contemporary authors like Michael Connelly, Deborah Crombie, Laurie R.King and Kathy Reichs.

In conclusion, despite the fact that crime fiction is a "low" genre, its authors are usually well-known all over the world. In spite of its division into sub-genres and various epochs, the purpose of the genre is to provide its readers with relaxation and an intellectual challenge in solving the crimes and mysteries. The genre also satisfies the human desire for justice, which is often epitomized in the character of investigator. After all, a large number of crime fiction novels and short stories are so well written and timeless, that they are still republished. A brilliant example of such works is the oeuvre of Agatha Christie, discussed in this thesis.

2. Upper Class

From the viewpoint of the British cultural studies, class is the most important category of social identity, its importance was significant mainly before the arrival of immigrants, who came to Britain after the gradual decline of the British Empire.

Famous sociologist Anthony Giddens defines class as a "large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources, which strongly influence the type of lifestyle they are able to lead" (Giddens, 2006, p. 437). Thus, that main characteristic of each class stems from its wealth and occupation. Giddens mentions the three main classes – upper, middle and lower class – which were constituted from the ideas of Karl Marx and Max Weber and further developed by more recent American sociologist Erik Olin Wright. Sociology also deals with the term "underclass" whose members are usually defined as unskilled workers of very poor living standards (Giddens, 2006, p. 432-440). This class is hardly represented in the books of Agatha Christie and it will not be mentioned in the thesis.

The entry of *The SAGE Dictionary of Sociology* defines the upper class "as those who live on earnings from the ownership, control and exploitation of property such as land, capital, large businesses and share-holdings" (Bruce, Yearley, 2006, p. 310). The upper class was always seen as unreachable, almost closed, and the only possibility in Britain to attain upper class status was by being well-born, through marriage or, in some circumstances, by the granting of a title.

After the 19th century industrial revolution, the position of the nobility was shaken by the nouveaux riches - financiers and industrial magnates who earned enough money to compete for power with the aristocracy. Moreover, the aristocracy quickly lost its power after 1918, when all adult males gained the vote by the *Representation of the People Act*. The nouveaux riches and the loss of power caused the decline of the British nobility. The decline of aristocracy can be illustrated by changes in "the distribution of wealth in the Great Britain: in 1900, the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population enjoyed 90 per cent of its total wealth"(Brooke, 2007, p. 43), but in 2000 just 1 percent of the population owned only a quarter of Britain's wealth (Bruce, Yearley, 2006, p. 310). Ellis Wasson even calls the epoch from 1917 to 1945 an "aristocide" (Wasson, 2006, p. 156). However, in terms of social prestige, the nobility remained the most important class. To sum up, after centuries of basking in the glory, the aristocracy started to fade due to the new order in the world.

Agatha Christie's portrayal of the nobility captures its slow decline. In spite of the aristocracy's wealth, Christie's well-born characters are usually out of money, ill or an "unsavoury bunch" (Light, 1991, p. 80). It is necessary to mention that despite her critical view of the aristocracy, she was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the 1956 New Year Honours and promoted Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the 1971 New Year Honours. Due to her husband's knighthood in 1968, Christie could also be styled as Lady Mallowan (Norman, 2009, p. 161).

The First Lady of Crime portrays the decline of a British noble family in the short story *The Listerdale Mystery* (1934). The plot describes a reformed nobleman, Lord Listerdale, who borrows his butler's personality in order to help noble families in need. He justifies it at the end of the story:

> "Let me explain – if I can! […] I've been sorry always for the class that can't beg, that must suffer in silence – poor gentlefolk. I have a lot of house property. I conceived the idea of leasing these houses to people who – well, needed and appreciated them" (*The Listerdale Mystery*, 1971, p.20).

The excerpt shows the solidarity among the nobility and the exclusion of the nouveaux riches, who were seen as people of poor taste, out of the ranks of the upper class. Those facts are also stressed in the beginning of the short story, when Mrs. St Vincent, a genteel lady living in a poor conditions, is visiting the house for rent:

> "He knows. He's sorry for me. He's one of the old lot too. He'd like me to have it - not a labour member, or a button manufacturer! We're dying out, our sort, but we hang together" (*The Listerdale Mystery*, 1971, p. 8).

It follows from the text that even the richest people did not "move in the best society" (*The Listerdale Mystery*, 1971, p. 4) if not of the noble origin. In brief, the aristocracy was portrayed as very closed and private in Agatha Christie's works as well as in historical and sociological studies.

The other important feature of the nobility is the possession of estates. As stated by Ellis Wasson, their landed estates provided them a partial independence from the sovereign and gave them an opportunity to escape from the task of earning a wage, but they devote themselves to public service by becoming warriors or politicians. "Land and family became ineradicably combined. Among old families the name of the estate was often the family name" (Wasson, 2006, p. 34-35).

This feature can be found in *The Listerdale Mystery* as well. Mrs. St. Vincent is recalling their house in Asteneys, "which had belonged to the St. Vincent family for centuries

and which was now in the hands of strangers" (*The Listerdale Mystery*, 1971, p. 3). The family was forced to vacate after her husband's death. However, not all Christie's characters are out of money and property and some of them behave very altruistically. At the end of the story, Lord Listerdale's charitable intentions are revealed by Rupert, the son of Mrs. St. Vincent:

> "Lord Listerdale had a lot of house property. In the last two days I've discovered that practically every one of these houses of his have been let in the last eighteen months to people like ourselves for a merely nominal rent - and with the proviso that the servants should remain" (*The Listerdale Mystery*, 1971, p. 17).

The estate of Lord Listerdale was so extensive that even the meat and flowers were delivered to these leased houses free. The extract supports the view of the aristocracy as a closed class with strong solidarity and it provides an example of the importance of estate ownership.
From the reader's point of view, it seems like Christie did not identify herself with living in the noble houses. As Alison Light mentions, Christie is not interested in a country house evoking ancestry, settled traditions and kinship. In her writings, she preferred the houses no longer inhabited by aristocrats but modernized by the middle class (Light, 1991, p. 80).
Another important feature of Agatha Christie's noble characters is their nationality. It is necessary to mention that beside the Lords, Dames and other British aristocrats, Christie very often portrays the nobility of foreign origin. Her Russian noblewomen are portrayed as extraordinary ladies, however, they are usually cheaters. The brilliant examples are Princess Dragomiroff in the novel *Murder on the Orient-Express* and the Grand Duchess Pauline of Ostrova in *Jane in Search of a Job*. Furthermore, these characters prove Christie's mistrust in aristocrats and her preference of the middle class.

To conclude, the nobility is depicted in Christie's books mainly as a social class who is becoming more and more marginal. Agatha Christie depicted their poor living conditions as well as their charitable intentions, but she very often omitted the description of their houses in favour of the homes of the middle classes. It follows that she did not feel a part of the nobility and even described herself as a typical of "ordinary people in 1932 or 1933" Christie, *An Autobiography*, Kindle paragraph 2.2749) although her social world includes the titled and famous. She stayed loyal to the middle class, which is the concern of the next part of the thesis.

3. Middle Class

The middle class is the most frequently portrayed stratum of society in Agatha Christie's fiction. Her detective stories are influenced by her own experience. Her life provided her with a middle-class upbringing, which included the possibility to travel, try new technologies and meet a range of interesting people. All those aspects are described in her fiction, and they mostly pleased her readers regardless of their origin.

To define the middle class, it is necessary to take into consideration several factors. *The SAGE Dictionary of Sociology* in compliance with Anthony Giddens (2006, p. 451) states that the term "middle class" should be used in the plural to reflect the diversity of social status in terms of prestige of its members and their economic situation. Its members range from the old professions (such as medicine, law, technology) through new professions (accountancy, administration, teaching, health care), to non-manual workers in industry (such as supervisors and managers). Bruce and Yearley also mention that the middle class cannot be simply identified according its wealth but it is necessary to consider a person's social and cultural status. *The SAGE Dictionary of Sociology* provides an example: "A skilled plumber in most industrial societies may well earn more than an infant school teacher but not be middle class" (Bruce, Yearley, 2006, p. 196). It follows that the social and cultural differences from other classes are given rather by middle class education and cultural surroundings than by its earnings.

As a member of the middle class, Agatha Christie knew the middle class atmosphere, environment and members. The atmosphere depicted in Agatha Christie's work is called "conservative modernity." Sean O'Connell provides us with its definition taken from Alison Light's *Forever England*, he describes this "as a form of modernity taken up by the interwar British middle classes, which simultaneously looked forward and backward to accommodate the past within the present" (O'Connell, 2007, p. 113).

At first, the chapter deals with Christie's depiction of the two middle class phenomena – the domestic culture and the travelling and technologies – and then Christie's characters will be analyzed.

It follows from the previous chapter, that Agatha Christie preferred the class of her birth – the middle class. Christie's love to the class of her origin stems from her happy childhood, as described in her autobiography. Due to the fact that she was educated at home, Agatha

seemed very shy in public, and in her life, as well as in her writings, she stressed the importance of family. The concept of the large close-knit family appears often in her novels and short stories. Alison Light specifies that for Christie "real life lies […] inside the homes of the middle class of whatever variety, and in their feelings for each other" (Light, 1991, p.83).

It is no wonder, then, that one of the most common setting in Agatha Christie's works is a country house. The First Lady of the Crime retained a lifelong attachment to her childhood home in Torquay. Beside Torquay, the 12-year-old Agatha fell in love with Abney Hall, a country manor in the "Victorian Gothic" style, where her older sister Madge got married (Christie, 2010, Kindle paragraph 2.839). The choice of the country house as a typical middle-class setting is not accidental. A survey indicated that nearly the half of the middle-class families in 1930s were buying houses on mortgages and a further 18 percent owned their house outright (Scott, 2007, p. 166). Their real estates were usually situated in the countryside or in suburbia.

In spite of Agatha Christie's happy childhood, she brought fear into her fictional country house. At the place where people usually feel safe, she applied the feeling of insecurity. Agatha Christie knew, that people want to be "pleasurably terrified;" she loved this as well when she was a child (Christie, 2010, Kindle paragraph 2.371) and used it in her writings. Due to her "sense of a safe, known world thrown out of kitler," Alison Light reckons Agatha Christie as a modernist writer. She adds the other features that can be traced through both the work of Christie and the modernists:

> "the obsession with unstable identities, the ultimate unknownability of the others, the sense of guilt which accompanies civilization and the concomitant effects which such destabilization has upon the certainties of realist narrative" (Light, 1991, p. 88).

Furthermore, Christie breaks the feeling of domestic security by providing "a repertoire of everyday things to kill with" (Light, 1991, p. 94) as well as murderer who is not an alien from outside, but the cuckoo in the nest or the wolf in the sheep's clothing.

The great portrayals of family living in the country house can be found in Agatha Christie's novels *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* and *The Murder at the Vicarage.*

The novel *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* describes Christmas at the family home of Simeon Lee, an old millionaire, who invited all his children to spend some time together. Nevertheless, the Christmas atmosphere became tenser after the arrival of Harry, the black sheep of the family, the so-far-unknown granddaughter Pilar, and Stephen Farr, a son

of Simeon Lee's former partner in the diamond mines. Agatha Christie provides minimal of details about the house, but as the story continues, the house gets darker and darker. After the murder of Simeon Lee, the head of the family, everyone seems to have a motive. The feelings of insecurity culminate when suspects give oral evidence to Hercule Poirot and all of them mention dark long corridors and strange statues in the recess.

Generally in all Christie's books, "in the process of a murder inquiry every member of the family can be found guilty in having it in for someone else, of being at heart a potential murderer. Blood is usually thinner than water" (Light, 1991, p. 92). After four days of mutual accusation and uncertainty, Poirot solved the murder and proved that the murderer was in fact a member of the family: "This is a crime of blood – it is in the blood. It is Simeon Lee's own blood that rises up against him…" (Christie, *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, p. 240). In the novel, the murderer is superintendant Sugden, the victim's illegitimate son. Even *The Murder at the Vicarage* is a murder within the family – a wife shot her husband. Light claims that in Christie's fiction, "husbands and wives naturally do not respect the marriage bond" (Light, 1991, p. 67).

It follows, that Christie's had a wide knowledge of her readers and she knew well how to make them "pleasurably terrified" by using quotidian situations and settings.

The next part of the chapter deals with another phenomena of the 1930s; travelling and modern technology.

First of all, it is necessary to mention, that the Great Depression struck when the world was still recovering from the First World War. The areas that were affected the most were those "which had created Britain's industrial revolution, including Clydeside, Belfast, the industrial north of England and southeast Wales" (McDowall, 1989, p. 165). According to McDowall, the economy started to recover at first in the Midlands and the south of England where the light and car industries were situated. These industries did not suffer a lot from the Great Depression, due to their importance for individuals, who "interpreted technology as an indicator of modernity" (Rieger, 2009, p. 21). Peter Scott provides us an explanation for the affordability of new technologies to a wide public, which helped bring an end to the Great Depression after the mid 1930s:

> "Technological change and economies of scale[1] generally produce both substantial price reductions and efficiency improvements in particular consumer

[1] Economies of scale - the reduction in unit cost achieved by manufacturing an item on a large scale (*Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary*, online)

> durables over time which – together with rising living standards – lead to a long-term diffusion process, initiated by 'innovative' (mainly wealthy) consumers and then spreading to middle-income, and eventually low-income, families" (Scott, 2007, p. 171).

Even though technology became easily affordable, not all the households were wired for the electricity. This changed with the passage of "the *Electricity (Supply) Act* of 1926, […] which set up a national electricity supply grid" (Scott, 2007, p. 169). Since then, the wired household was a sign of prestige within the middle class and by the 1938, the figure rose to the 65 per cent of all households.

Thanks to electricity and the increasing expenses of maintaining domestic staff, the middle class was forced to replace the servants with durable goods. In compliance with Scott, by 1938, the most common labour-saving devices were washing machines, vacuum cleaners, electric cookers and fridges. He adds that it is the radio, which exceeded the diffusion of all electrical appliances (Scott, 2007, p. 169).

Almost all of these electrical devices are present in Agatha Christie's works. The appliance that is used most often by the middle class seems to be the telephone. The characters usually call the police, someone to help or to foil the investigation. Sometimes the phone can even solve life-and-death questions like in the short story *Philomel Cottage.* The main character, Alix Martin, is trying to escape from her husband, who is in fact a swindler, bigamist and suspected murderer called LeMaitre and who intends to kill her. Alix is pretending to call the butcher but in fact, she makes a code call to her friend who finally comes and saves her. On the other hand, the novel *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas* provides the opposite example. An old millionaire is pretending to call his lawyer in order to rearrange his last will and he is murdered few minutes later. To sum up, Agatha Christie was very familiar with the phone and its usage. The phone was so widespread that it is present in nearly all of Christie's books.

The other means of communication represented in Agatha Christie's writing is the radio, called the wireless in the first half of the 20th century. However, these electronic devices were not always accepted positively, as can be found in it the short story *Wireless.* The radio even plays a crucial role. The main character of the story is an old lady in her seventies who is recommended by her doctor to avoid exertion and brooding. To keep her cheerful, her nephew Charles acquires a radio, but Mrs Harter is not so keen on it:

> "'I do not know that I care for these new-fangled things,' said Mrs Harter piteously. 'The waves, you know – the electric waves. They might affect me.'

> Charles in a superior and kindly fashion pointed out the futility of this idea. Mrs Harter, whose knowledge of the subject was of the vaguest, but who was tenacious of her own opinion, remained unconvinced.
> 'All that electricity,' she murmured timorously. 'You may say what you like, Charles, but some people are affected by electricity. I always have a terrible headache before a thunderstorm. I know that'" (Christie, 2012, p. 170-172).

It follows from the excerpt that the attitude of the older generation towards modern devices was very circumspect and on the other hand, the younger people received them enthusiastically. Even Bernhard Rieger mentions this ambivalence of feelings about "modern wonders" and he adds that "contemporaries, although they admired recent inventions, simultaneously found them beyond their comprehension and thus a worrying source of uncertainty" (Rieger, 2009, p. 21).

Similarly ambivalent appreciation of recent inventions is evident in Agatha Christie's writings like *Wireless* and in many others. In addition, Bernhard Rieger´s *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany 1890-1945* claims that the public assessment of innovations was highly influenced by public-relations campaigns in the press, film and other facilities (Rieger, 2009, p. 24-25). It follows that even Agatha Christie contributed to the wide-spread use of these electric devices by her portrayal of them in her books.

The other important 1930s phenomenon portrayed in Agatha Christie's books is travelling. With only a brief look through the titles of her novels, there is no doubt that the author's loves were various means of transport as well as exotic countries. *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (written in 1928), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *Death in the Clouds* (1935), *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) and *Death on the Nile* (1937) are titles of novels that show Christie's passion for trains, planes and boats and the Middle East. In addition, Christie did not abandon these interests until the end of her life. Her later novels dealing with travelling are: *They Came to Baghdad, 4.50 from Paddington*, *Passenger to Frankfurt*, *Nemesis* and number of short stories.

Christie's passion for modern means of transport is comparable to her fancy for modern devices and the modern life. Even as a child, Agatha Christie travelled a lot. At the age of five, her family spent a winter in France in order to save some money. A large portion of her novels are situated to the Middle East that Christie visited many times with her second husband Max Mallowan, an archaeologist. Nevertheless, even her first husband, Archibald Christie, provided her with the pleasure from travelling. They visited South Africa, Australia,

New Zealand and Hawaii in order to promote the British Empire Exhibition (Christie, 2010, Kindle paragraph 2.1751).

However, these travels were very expensive and only the wealthiest members of the middle class were able to afford them. It is necessary to mention that Agatha Christie never looked down on her readers who often came from poor conditions and "hardly a line describes a luxury of the Orient Express in the novel which features it" (Light, 1991, p. 80). Furthermore, Christie's readers were given the space for their own imagination. Moreover, it was easier for them to apply their own travel experience while reading, due to the widening opportunities for travel and, in compliance with Light, better accessibility of travel to the majority after the introduction of passports (Light, 1991, p. 89).

During Agatha Christie's childhood, the most often-used means of transport were trains. A train plays an important part in the novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, which reflects Christie's experience with travelling on the Orient Express. In December 1931 while returning from her husband's archaeological dig in Nineveh, the train was trapped for twenty-four hours due to heavy rainfall and consequent flood (Christie, 2010, Kindle paragraph 2.2673). The similar complication helps Hercule Poirot to find a murderer who could not have escaped from the train because no tracks were seen in the fresh snow. However, not only luxury trains are used in Christie's works. Even common trains, journeying through England, are essential for the transport of Christie's characters.

Another means of transport noticed in Christie's works is a boat. As mentioned previously, Christie frequently used settings that were familiar to her. Apart from her nine-month world tour to promote the British Empire Exhibition, Agatha's numerous visits to the Middle East were undertaken by steamboats.

The first time, she spent three months in Cairo, Egypt, with her mother, she participated in a luxury cruise to visit some of the most famous historic monuments (Christie, 2010, Kindle paragraph 2.1001). Later on, Christie used the steamer *Karnak* as a setting for her famous novel *Death on the Nile*. Despite the high price of boarding passes, more and more passengers came from the middle-class. Julie-Marie Strange specifies that the middle class expressed their identity through leisure pursuits. Touring Europe and locations that are more exotic "became not only a sign of wealth, but also represented the cultural aspirations of a class that had made its fortunes in industry and commerce" (Strange, 2007, p. 198).

The members of various social classes can easily be found even on board of the fictional steamer *Karnak*.

> "The *Karnak* was a smaller steamer than the *Papyrus* and the *Lotus*, the First Cataract steamers which are too large to pass through the locks of the Assuan dam.
> The passengers went on board and were shown their accommodation. Since the boat was not full most of the passengers had cabins on the promenade deck. The entire forward part of this deck was occupied by an observation saloon all glass enclosed where the passengers could sit and watch the river unfold before them.
> On the deck below was a smoking-room and small drawing-room and on the deck below that, the dining-saloon" (Christie, *Death on the Nile*, p. 80)

Beside the upper-class passengers, like a wealthy young heiress Linnet Ridgeway and an American celebrity Marie Van Schuyler, using the first-class facilities on the board, the middle-class characters were enjoying the cruise as well – Linnet's American trustee, a young traveller, an archaeologist, an Austrian physician, an American novelists (discussed in the chapter *Women*) and the famous detective Hercule Poirot. As mentioned above, Agatha Christie does not forget the members of all social classes and she assigned an important task to Linnet's personal maid, a member of the working class.

In contrast to ship transport, aviation was still in its infancy and "aviators ranked among the most famous and prominent celebrities of the interwar period" (Rieger, 2009, p. 116). Even Agatha Christie's writings include a 1930s novel dealing with planes called *Death in the Clouds*. Nevertheless, Rieger claims that aviation in the 1930s was a kind of marginal means of transportation seen as dangerous and expensive, and aviators of both genders were praised in the media (Rieger, 2009, p. 116-157).

While travelling by trains, boats and planes was understood as organized and scheduled, a car became the symbol of freedom in the interwar period and the symbol of the middle class. Sean O'Connell presents the fact that "the interwar car manufacturers concentrated on supplying vehicles for a firmly middle-class clientele" (O'Connell, 2007, p. 113). The growing number of the motor companies influenced the appearance of towns as well as the health of 1930s middle class. According to McDowall, since cars and public transportation became accessible to more people, the middle class moved out even further to a quieter new suburbia or to the countryside, both of which were easy to reach with the use of their own vehicles, by the buses or coaches (McDowall, 1989, p. 165). This movement is comparable to the huge wave of new houses built alongside the railway in the previous century. In addition to healthier housing, automobiles extended the travelling possibilities.

According to O'Connell, while cars were at first a luxury good for a minority of the wealthiest social groups, by the 1938 nearly 2 million cars were registered. He assumed

that "this equated to approximately one car for every five families and established motoring as a middle-class pastime" (O'Connell, 2007, p. 113). It is joydriving, which is often depicted in Agatha Christie's works.

In Agatha Christie's *An Autobiography*, there are three important references of cars. She recalls her stay in France in 1895 when she met "those new vehicles called 'automobiles'" (Christie, 2010, Kindle paragraph 2.560). Christie even comments on the first car she drove in as "a frightening, exciting monster" (Christie, 2010, Kindle paragraph 2.1040), but the car which she made famous was her Morris Cowley, she had disappeared from in 1926.

Christie's fancy for driving is reflected in her 1930s short stories. Due to her experience with driving, she was able to depict difficulties that accompanied a fresh driver as well as joydriving and Sunday trips like in the short stories *The Manhood of Edward Robinson* and *A Fruitful Sunday*. These two texts portray the drivers who bought a car in a very stereotypical way. Both main characters are very proud of having a car and the purchases of their vehicles were very expensive, both cars are nicknamed – "mistress" and "Baby Austin[2]". Additionally, Christie's beginnings as a driver can be found in the description of their attention and concentration on driving connected with the sporadic squeal of brakes:

> "When you have just purchased a Baby Austin, fourth hand, for the sum of twenty pounds, and are taking it out for the second time only, your whole attention is necessarily focused on the difficult task of using both hands and feet as the emergencies of the moment dictate" (Christie, *A Fruitful Sunday*, p. 89).

However, aside for Christie's driving abilities, the short story also gives an example of a middle-class pastime – the Sunday motoring trip. Those trips were so popular, that Christie's character comments: "After all, here we are, in a real car, on Sunday afternoon going out of town the same as everybody else" (Christie, *A Fruitful Sunday*, p. 89). In fact, "a Gallup poll[3], taken in 1949, revealed that one in seven people went motoring on Sunday" (O'Connell, 2007, p. 120). Furthermore, O'Connell specifies that due to the increasing number of motorists, traffic jams were common on popular holiday routes from the 1920s. Even the main characters of *The Fruitful Sunday* are facing the problem of overcrowded roads, especially in London, but finally they are happy to follow "a shady country lane which

[2] Baby Austin – a nickname for Austin 7

[3] Gallup poll - a representative sampling of public opinion or public awareness concerning a certain subject or issue (*Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary*, online)

many an experienced motorist would have given his soul to find" (Christie, *A Fruitful Sunday*, p. 91).

Generally, the motorists affected the whole society. Firstly, they contributed to the development of the countryside, because the country-dwellers profited from them economically and the motorists reintroduced the interest in a "romanticised rural Britain" (O'Connell, 2007, p. 121). Secondly, due to the increasing demand for an individualized means of transport, it was the automobile manufacturers who quickly recovered form the Great Depression. Finally, cars helped middle-class Britons, especially women, to clarify their position in society; a topic is discussed in the chapter *Women*.

Finally yet importantly, the last part of this chapter deals with the Christie's middle class characters. Due to her middle-class origin, Agatha Christie drew inspiration from the people who surrounded her. Her cast list is comprised of doctors, retired officers, vicars, superintendants and many others, including her famous detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple.

The first middle-class character this thesis deals with is a doctor. There is hardly a novel of Christie without a respected and hard-working doctor, who is always ready to pronounce the victim dead and to find out the cause of the death. The typical scene in Christies books starts with the brief description of a doctor and continues with the examination of the corpse like in the novel *The Murder in the Vicarage*:

> "Haydock is a good fellow, a big, fine, strapping man with an honest, rugged face. His eyebrows went up when I pointed silently across the room. But, like a true doctor, he showed no signs of emotion. He bent over the dead man, examining him rapidly. Then he straightened himself and looked across at me.
> 'He's dead right enough — been dead half an hour, I should say'" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 74).

It follows that Christie's doctors are genuine men who do not hesitate to give their witnesses to detectives as well as first aid to an injured person. Nevertheless, they are not always respected by other authorities – for example police officers.

> "'Oh! doctors!' Inspector Slack looked contemptuous. 'If you're going to believe doctors. Take out all your teeth — that's what they do nowadays — and then say they're very sorry, but all the time it was appendicitis. Doctors!'" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 169).

It is obvious that doctors, especially the young ones, were seen with suspicion, although they had completed university education and were acquainted with the newest scientific theories. However, Christie's doctors - Dr. Constantine coming from the Balkans in the *Murder on the Orient Express*, German Dr. Bessner in *Death on the Nile* and Dr. Haydock from St. Mary Mead in *The Murder at the Vicarage* - are held in high esteem by the majority of Christie's characters and even the most skilful detectives appreciate their wide-reaching expertise.

Another of Christie's characters, retired officers, are portrayed as embodiments of authority and discipline. After their police or army service, they usually take part in local administration, but they are seen as newcomers. Thus, they are not popular with other inhabitants. In Agatha Christie's detective stories, these retired officers present in almost every village.

The frequent appearance of retired officers came from the real situation of interwar Britain. Being "the Empire where the sun never sets," it required a large number of soldiers to maintain sovereignty over its colonies. Moreover, in compliance with *Cardwell's Army Reforms*, "the length of service overseas was limited to six years followed by six years in the reserve" (Bloy, 2002, online). This reform led to the fact that some newcomers in the village were retired officer who hoped to find a calm place to live after their service.

A great example of such a character is provided in the novel *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Colonel Portheroe is rich enough to buy the country house called "Old Hall" in St. Mary Mead; however, as a local magistrate, he is very careful with financial matters, especially with the common property and Church accounts. Protheroe is misusing the power of his office to discredit the other citizens. He is so unpopular, that even the vicar says, "Protheroe is the kind of man who enjoys making fuss on every conceivable occasion" (Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage,* p. 11). Moreover, the guests at the vicarage wish him to be dead. It is obvious that his punctuality came from his service in the army; the same sense of accuracy can be traced in the Christie's short story *Accident*.

In *Accident*, the ex-Inspector Evans from the Crime Investigation Department recognizes a local woman to be a murderer who was accused of a murder but acquitted. Evans and his retired friend Captain Haydock from the Royal Navy are re-analysing the case and due to his accuracy, Evans ends up dead from arsenic poisoning in order not to reveal her murderous past.

To conclude, despite their important role in society and the high frequency of their appearance, the retired officers in Christie's works do not abound in good qualities and they are not popular with other citizens.

In contrast to the unpopular retired officers, the respectable person in Christie's work is the vicar. Despite the decreasing number of churchgoers since the turn of the century, the church was considered a place for gathering. Especially in the countryside, the church remained more important then in the town; moreover, David McDowall states that only 19 percent of the population of London considered themselves regular churchgoers by 1900 (McDowall, 1989, p. 152). In addition, the decline in church attendance is noticeable from the survey from 1949. It revealed that church services were attended by 15 percent of the population and that number remains true up to today (O´Connell, 2007, p. 120).

The character of the vicar is a very respectable person because of his duty not to judge and to forgive. Despite the fact that readers expected a vicar to have only good qualities, vicar Leonard Clement in *The Murder at the Vicarage* reveals his weaknesses. Except for an extraordinary love to his young wife Griselda, he is apt to address people in a very inappropriate way and he is unable to hide his feelings. Another weakness can be found in his fancy for reading detective stories. His wife comments: "I was looking everywhere for *The Stain on the Stairs* the other day when you were in here writing a sermon. And at last I came in to ask you if you'd seen it anywhere, and what did I find?" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 12). In the short story, the vicar answers that he had picked it up at random. It is his confession that he did not resist the temptation. Nevertheless, Agatha Christie's vicars seem not to be the stereotypical rigid clergymen but flesh-and-bone men with an understanding of human qualities, both good and bad.

Christie's middle-class characters of doctors, retired officers, and vicars are usually associated with the shade of authority; however, the most powerful figures in her detective stories are the police officers. According to the official website of the Metropolitan Police, the police, in the modern sense of the word, were established in England by the *Metropolitan Police Act of 1829* (*Metropolitan Police: Total Policing*, online). Danielová states, that the idea of non-political policemen without guns was revolutionary at that time and became one of the defining characteristics of the new force (Danielová, 2012, p. 15-16). The image of policemen was quite positive until the general strike in 1926 when

> "many workers, especially the miners, believed that the police, whose job was to keep the law, were actually fighting against them […] These memories

> influenced their opinion of employers, government and the police for half a century" (McDowall, 1989, p. 164).

Due to the fact that police were considered untrustworthy, Agatha Christie could call in her detectives. In her novels, there are hardly any policemen depicted in a favourable way. Starting with Inspector Slack from Much Benham, "no men ever did more determinedly strive to contradict his name" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 81). In spite of his endless effort, he is unable to solve the death of the Colonel Protheroe as well as the *Tape-Measure Murder* a few years later without Miss Marple's deduction. Despite Slack's abominable and most unnecessary rudeness, the citizens of St. Mary Mead believe him. Even the vicar refuses to call Scotland Yard: "Slack's a smart man. He's a very smart man. He's a kind of ferret. He'll nose his way through to the truth. He's done several very good things already, and this case will be his chef d'oeuvre" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 202).

In Christie's opinion, the members of provincial forces were similar to the professionals from Scotland Yard. The official website of the Metropolitan Police states that the name "Scotland Yard" derives from the location of the original Metropolitan Police headquarters at 4 Whitehall Place, which had a rear entrance on a street called Great Scotland Yard. In 1890, Scotland Yard moved to a new location, but the name was so deep-rooted that it remained. The important fact for Agatha Christie's detective stories is that by 1906 Scotland Yard was regularly assisting provincial forces to investigate murders (*Metropolitan Police: Total Policing*, online).

The investigation was usually held by Detective Chief Inspectors or Superintendents, who are characterized in a very realistic, mostly unpleasant way. Examples are easy to find in almost all Christie's works. In the short story *The Mystery of the Spanish Shawl*, the main character portrays the Scotland-Yard Inspector: "An unsympathetic man, Inspector Driver, and not (Anthony reflected) nearly so like a real inspector! Distinctly stagey, in fact. Another striking example of the superiority of Art over Nature" (Christie, *The Mystery of the Spanish Shawl,* p. 211). On contrary, more positive characteristics are attributed to Detective Chief Inspector Japp, who appeared in seven novels featuring Hercule Poirot. In compliance with Zemboy, Japp feels respect for Poirot´s abilities, he is described as a good fellow, quite efficient in crime solving; however, his rudeness puts him on par with any ordinary policeman and he seems to be too quick in judging people (Zemboy, 2008, p. 76).

To conclude, Agatha Christie provides her readers with a stereotypical picture of a policeman, no matter if from Scotland Yard or provincial forces, who is strictly professional despite his

human mistakes like rudeness or quick judgement of people. Despite their actual reliability, Christie's fictional investigators are overshadowed by her brilliant detectives.

Last but definitely not least, the figure necessary to mention is a private detective. The most famous one in Christie's writing is Hercule Poirot who appears in 34 novels and 53 short stories. He achieved fame for his great investigative method. Poirot´s reputation seems to be so well-known that M. Buoc asks him "Lie back and think—use (as I have heard you say so often) the little grey cells of the mind—and you will *know*!" (Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, p. 28). In fact, the crimes are solved simply during the interviews with suspects and all the present characters, when Poirot reveals "a series of hidden relationships and the past connections to which we are given clues in language" (Light, 1991, p. 102). In order to emphasise Hercule Poirot´s achievements, Matthew Bunson states that "Poirot spent the succeeding decades as one of the foremost detectives in the world, solving cases throughout Europe and the Middle East, and enjoying the favour and attention of the highest levels of society and royalty" (Bunson, 2000, p. 314).
Despite Poirot´s successes in investigations, he acts in a completely different way than his police friends. Moreover, his appearance is "from the start parodic" (Light, 1991, p. 73). Whereas all preceding detectives of well-known authors like Conan Doyle were portrayed very favourably, Poirot has an anti-heroic look.

> "Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound" (Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, p. 15).

It follows from Captain's Hastings speech, that Poirot is very punctual. His perfectionism is evident from his custom-tailored suits and his well-kept moustache. The only person who could compete with Poirot´s moustache was Inspector Sugden in *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas*. Poirot´s jealousy can be traced from the following extract.

> "Poirot sighed.
> 'You are favoured by nature.' He caressed his own luxuriant black moustache, then sighed. 'However expensive the preparation,' he murmured, 'to restore the natural colour does somewhat impoverish the quality of the hair.'" (Christie, *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas,* p. 164)

It is obvious that even the famous Hercule Poirot has his flaws. Due to his frequent appearance in Christie's fiction, his character is one of the most elaborated. In spite of such a realistic, almost unpleasant, picture of the little Belgian detective, "Christie stimulates neither class envy nor defence" (Light, 1991, p. 78) and created the universally-known fictional character.

The figure of Hercule Poirot is also significant thanks to his Belgian origin and use of French phrases in his speech. As a Belgian refugee from the World War I, he was not fully integrated into society, which gave him the advantage of impartial observation that helped him to solve cases. According to Barrés – Baker, the problem of 250,000 refugees' admission into English society, which led to the anti-Belgian riots in 1916, stemmed from the question of their housing and jobs. Nevertheless, "with the end of the war the majority of the refugees returned to Belgium, though some remained. Most people only know of Belgian refugees because of a fictitious Belgian who stayed in the UK" (Barrés – Baker, online), like Hercule Poirot. Although Christie's Poirot is a little Belgian refugee, he

> "functions in the stories to point up as well as indulge English prejudices about foreigners – that they are vain, excitable, eat funny food. Poirot frequently mocks, with the reader's implied agreement, the shortsightedness of English insularity" (Light, 1991, p. 84-85).

Christie's portrayal of Poirot brings her reader's attention to the new wave of refugees – the Jews, who were forced to leave their lives in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. However, British society was not ready to accept them. The fear of immigrants stemmed from the unstable economy caused by the Great Depression and, in addition, the majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain still remembered the problems with housing and jobs caused by the Belgians 20 years ago. The website movinghere.org.uk states, the concerns resulted in the internment of the he Jews fleeing from Hitler in ghettos. "Significantly, during the mid-1930s as Nazi anti-Semitism became ever more brutal, sinister Jews disappear from these [detective] novels, often to be replaced by sympathetic Jewish refugees" (Rubinstein, online). Even the attitude of English society softened towards refugees as the World War II broke out and in addition, the United Kingdom became a home for 10,000 children evacuated from the Nazi Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia (movinghere.org.uk, online).

To conclude, the character of Hercule Poirot might help the Englishmen to be more tolerant and less xenophobic. Due to his realistic appearance, without intentions to heroism, Poirot found favour with Christie's readers and he became one of the most famous fictional characters in the world.

In conclusion, Agatha Christie's settings and characters were mostly based on her own experience and it follows that she portrayed mainly the middle class. This chapter discovered that the determining factors for membership in the middle-class members are education and cultural capital rather than earnings. Nevertheless, their high incomes enabled the middle class to acquire large houses in the countryside or in suburbia and benefit from the newest technologies. The popularity of the new technologies was attributed partially by their better accessibility as well as massive advertising and portrayals in movies and literature. Almost all Christie's characters are listening to the radio or driving a car and almost the same amount of them are travelling.

Despite the fact that Agatha Christie depicted mostly the middle class, her writings did not alienate anyone from her wide range of readers. Her middle-class characters always seem very realistic and a touch of parody can be traced in her portrayals of hard-working doctors, accurate retired officers, tempted vicars, eager police officers and rude Scotland-Yard Inspectors. After all, the cosmopolitan figure of Hercule Poirot provides a brilliant example of the 1930s fear of the upcoming war and the inability of British society to stop Hitler from breaking the international treaties and human rights abusing. Poirot also encouraged the English to throw aside their xenophobia in order to help new refugees.

4. Working Class

The well-known definition of the working class is "Karl Marx's proletariat, which sells its labour power" (Bruce, Yearley, 2006, p. 319). Its comprised mainly of manual workers called the "blue collars[4]". According to *The SAGE Dictionary of Sociology,* in the 1930s there were huge differences between the middle and working classes – "[the working classes] smelt and were shabbily dressed" (Bruce, Yearley, 2006, p. 37). However, not all of the "blue collars" were involved in manufacturing or mining - a large percentage of the working class was employed in the domestic service. Despite the fact that the lower classes do not play an important part in Christie's detective stories, the servants are present very often, which means that this chapter will deal exclusively with the employees in the domestic service.

Being born an upper-middle-class member, Agatha Christie grew up in a society where the servants play a significant role. However, as new technologies were introduced and the trade unions were established in the interwar period, even Agatha Christie noticed the decline in the domestic services, and the relations between servants and employers optimized. The housemaids were pushed out by vacuum cleaners, washing machines and other electric devices. The butler was no longer necessary as large houses were sold or demolished and the new, smaller houses were built that were easier to maintain. In addition, despite the decrease of servants "to 24% in 1931, [domestic service] remained the largest single female employment sector, with around 1.6 million servants" (Delap, 2012, online) and the Jewish refugees in the 1930s were commonly admitted under domestic worker visas.

The employment conditions remained very strict, similar to those of the Victorian era, "with very limited time-off and low rates of pay" (Delap, 2012, online). However, since the accommodation and food were for free, the servants were able to save money or support their family. The demands on the domestic servants were quite high. Dr. Delap claims that "employers still insisted upon uniforms that some found stigmatising, and required servants to call them 'sir' and 'ma'am'" (Delap, 2012, online). Despite the high demands, the social status of servants was not always considered high: "their vulnerability was exacerbated by the social and sexual stigmas attached to their 'dirty' work, their youth, their migrant status, and the relatively large numbers who were orphans" (Delap, 2012, online).

[4] Blue collars - Preferred US term for an industrial manual worker and often carries the implication of union membership. (Bruce, Yearley, 2006, p.22)

Another restriction was, that the servants were unable to terminate their job freely, because their masters or mistresses "were not legally compelled to provide a reference" (Delap, 2012, online), which was crucial for their next employment. In other words, the employees in domestic service were provided with a relative security of livelihood, which was redeemed by almost non-stop being on hand.

The portrayals of servants are quite often presented in Agatha Christie's writing, however, they carry little narrative weight and their role is marginal – they are more significant as witnesses and observers than suspects and victims. Alison Light even specifies, "in [Christie's] fictions one cannot predict the murderer by caste, except in being able to assume that it will not be the working-class person" (Light, 1991, p. 83).

Christie's servants are usually residents who serve a family for ages and who are reliable and loyal. On the other hand, when Christie applied a younger or newer servant, he or she is regarded with considerable suspicion. A brilliant example of this ambiguity is provided in the novel *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas.* When the investigation is launched, police officers think there is a professional thief among the servants; however, as they check the length of servants' service for the family, the only suspect left is Sydney Horbury, the valet attendant, who is the newest in the household.

> "It's what I thought myself to begin with. But it's difficult. There are eight servants in the house; six of them are women, and of those six, five have been here for four years and more.
> Then there's the butler[5] and the footman[6]. The butler has been here for close on forty years—bit of a record that, I should say. The footman's local, son of the gardener, and brought up here. Don't see very well how he can be a professional. The only other person is Mr Lee's valet attendant[7]. He's comparatively new, but he was out of the house—still is—went out just before eight o'clock" (Christie, *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas,* p. 88-89).

Even the interview with Mrs Lee, the mistress of the house, deals with her trustworthiness in servants. She replied "They are all thoroughly reliable. They have mostly been with us for many years. Tressilian, the butler, has been here since my husband was a young child" (Christie, *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas,* p. 88-89). Nevertheless, she adds that she know very

[5] Butler- One of the highest ranking male house servants. His duties varied depending on the size of the house. He was in charge of the wine cellar, silver and gold plate, china, and crystal. (Butler School, online)

[6] Footman - the highest ranking indoor liveried servant. Footmen did many jobs around the house - both indoors and outside. Inside, he laid the table, waited at table, served tea, answered the door and assisted the butler. Outside, he opened doors, served as an escort when a lady paid calls, carried letters to and fro. (ibid)

[7] Valet – The highest ranking male house servant, next to the butler. He cared for his employer's clothing, shined his shoes and boots, did the hairdressing and barbering and made sure the gentleman looked good, he helped the gentleman who could not dress or undress themselves without assistance. (ibid)

little about Horbury, Mr Lee's nurse-valet. Although the character of Horbury gets credit from Mr Lee for his hard work, the other family members regard him in a different way:

> "'How I dislike that man! He creeps about the house like a cat! One never hears him going or coming.'
> 'I don't like him very much either. But he knows his job. It's not so easy to get a good male nurse attendant. And Father likes him, that's the main thing'" (Christie, *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas,* p. 21).

It is evident that the question of servants' loyalty and reliability was crucial at the time when both the servants and their masters lived under the same roof.

In Christie's detective stories, a wide range of servants are presented. The most common servants are butlers and housemaids, from the explored books of 1930s. The example quite opposite to the suspicious valet attendant is the character of Lees' butler, Tressilian. "An elderly man, white-haired and slightly bowed" seems to be a family treasure.

> "'Dear old Tressilian. What a standby he is! I can't imagine what we should do without him.'
> Alfred agreed.
> 'He's one of the old school. He's been with us nearly forty years. He's devoted to us all.'
> Lydia nodded.
> 'Yes. He's like the faithful old retainers of fiction. I believe he'd lie himself blue in the face if it was necessary to protect one of the family!'" (Christie, Hercule Poirot´s Christmas, p. 25).

Another example of a butler plays a part in the short story *The Listerdale Mystery*. The butler Quentin had "grey hair and little side whiskers, and the meditative calm of an archbishop, […] perfectly trained. […] One felt safe with these servants, at ease. They were like friends" (Christie, *The Listerdale Mystery*, p. 7). The excerpt illustrates the change in society in early 20th century, when the butler almost vanished with other servants. The official website of *The International Butler Academy* states that despite the overall decline in domestic service, "there were still around 30,000 butlers employed in Britain by World War II. [To compare,] as few as one-hundred butlers were estimated to remain in service by the mid-1980s" (Butler School, online).

Whereas Christie's butlers are mostly depicted very favourably, housemaids are usually depicted as dumb, grumpy and rude girls like Mary in *The Murder at the Vicarage.* Mary never calls employers "sir" and "ma'am", she even cooks horribly and "never tidies anything" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 162-163). Moreover, the characters are described

with such a parody, that they give impression of comic figures. As mentioned above, Agatha Christie's writing was inspired by her own life and her antipathy towards housemaids probably stems from Susan, a the housemaid employed in her home in Ashfield, who "was a great big girl, jerky and awkward in her movements and apt to knock things over" (Christie, An Autobiography, Kindle paragraph 2.182).

To summarize, the major working-class members in Agatha Christie's writings are the servants of a wide range. As Christie's work reflects the society in which she lived, the decline in the domestic service is present even in her detective stories. Despite the important role of Christie's servants giving crucial evidence, they are usually flat marginal characters, devoted to their more or less content masters. Without doubt, Christie describes them in a very stereotypical way in order to lighten the atmosphere.

5. Women

This chapter concentrates on the representation of women in Agatha Christie's works. They act in all kinds of roles – victims, suspects, witnesses, criminals and detectives (Rowland, 2001, p. 157).

All her female characters reflect the changing roles of women in society. Christie grew up at the beginning of the 20th century and began writing at a time when "the image of women in England and North America had been tumbled from its Victorian pedestal, but had not been remodeled." Vipond also states that "the first lady of Crime did reveal that she herself had the somewhat 'traditional' and conservative attitude to sex roles, which was typical of her class and status" (Vipond, 1981, p. 122). However, she could not resist the changes in society.

There existed an ambiguous mixture of qualities that were glorified by society. On the one side there was the image of a loving wife and mother, on the other side, society expected women to be involved in the working process (especially during World War I) and be capable enough to have the right to vote. Vipond mentions:

> "While many of the traditional qualities of maternal love, gentleness, patience, and docility were still given lip-service, at the same time the needs of modern technological society (especially in wartime) demanded a different kind of woman—a capable, efficient, self-confident sort, who could perform a job as typist or nurse skillfully before marriage, and then settle down to being equally competent, self-sufficient, indeed 'businesslike,' as housewife and mother in an increasingly complex and demanding world" (Vipond, 1981, p.121).

As follows from Vipond's text, marriage and family were really important in those times. Rowland says that family life is heavily implicated in criminal passions, so Agatha Christie's typical setting is a country house where the members of a family meet, like in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*. "Unsurprisingly, given focus on the domestic as the location of crime, the nature of marriage, mothering and single woman moves significant sources of passion, conflict and familial drama" (Rowland, 2001, p. 157).

A sharp reader can note that Christie's female characters are not often depicted negatively. Their negative features were often generalized into stereotypes which were commonly accepted in the society. Those stereotypes are often formulated by Christie's characters. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the ladies drinking tea at the vicarage comment on the relation between a young assistant, Miss Cram and an archeologist Dr. Stone. They point out to

the girls' calculation: "The poor man will be caught before he knows where he is. He's as innocent as a babe unborn, you can see that" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, 1930, p. 26).

The other example was provided by Miss Marple who emphasizes the naivety of the vicar's wife, Griselda: "My dear," she said, "you are very young. The young have such innocent minds" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, 1930, p. 27).

Even Griselda broadens the range of stereotypes: "You know very well that an attractive young woman with an elderly husband is a kind of gift from heaven to a young man" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, 1930, p. 36).

In addition, the last example originates in the speech of her husband, the vicar of the Church of England who speaks about the old scandalmongers (including Miss Marple) in his parish: "These women are singularly deficient in humour, remember, and take everything seriously" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, 1930, p. 38).

The chapter explores the female characters in Christie's works. Naturally, it has proved impossible to bring in every female character, so a representative sample is provided. The analyzed characters include young (almost independent) women, caring mothers and wives in traditional role in the family, scandalous middle-aged women and the characters of widows and spinsters, who are represented by Christie's famous "sleuth" Miss Marple.

Agatha Christie in her works often introduced women of the modern type. They are usually young, "not afraid to take action, confident and unsentimental in contrast to the romantic women of the past" (Liebnerová, 2007, p. 43). The appearance of the modern-girl characters relates to the situation in the United Kingdom after World War I. It was a breaking point in the question of women's rights, because the country "would be unable to continue the war without women who took up men's places in the factories and by the end of the war 29% of the working class was female"(McDowall, 1989, p. 163). After the war, it was natural for women to work and their incomes gave them the possibility to be independent.

In Agatha Christie's short story *Jane in Search of a Job*, Jane shows the ideal of the self-confident young woman who overcomes all obstacles. She evaluates herself: "I'm intelligent and good-looking and well-educated. What more does anyone want?" (Christie, *Jane in Search of a Job,* 1971, p. 64) That perfectly illustrates the self-confidence of women in the 1920s. Further in the story, Jane complains about the lack of working positions for girls of her age and education and limited experience:

> "According to the *Daily Leader*, they seemed to want shorthand typists of vast experience, managers for business houses with a little capital to invest, ladies to share in the profits of poultry fanning (here again a little capital was required), and innumerable cooks, housemaids and parlourmaids - particularly parlourmaids" (Christie, *Jane in Search of a Job,* 1971, p. 65).

The extract shows that the female labour force was still regarded as a means of labour in times of necessity and the available positions were very limited. In compliance with Robson, the only offered occupations were the traditional – teachers and nurses. Slowly, women penetrated the labour market as workers in the light industry (Robson, 1983, p. 172).

One of the most important aspects of the changing role of women in society appeared in 1918 when they gained the limited right to vote. "*The Representation of the People Act 1928* extended the voting franchise to all women over the age of 21, granting women the vote on the same terms as men" (Stearns, 2008, p. 160).

The liberation of women took many forms depicted in Christie's works: the effort to become equal to man became evident in the fashion of boyish clothing (wearing trousers, shorter haircuts), as well as in typical male interests like smoking, gambling or car driving. The change in women's position in society was so significant, that "the women's magazines, fearful that emancipation and feminism were distracting women from their true vocation, eagerly promoted marriage as 'The Best Job Of All'" (Pugh, 2008, online).

All those features of young modern independent women are fulfilled by Noreen Eliot in *The Manhood of Edward Robinson* and Mary Montresor in *The Golden Ball.* They use their looks to manipulate people and to achieve what they want at any cost. They are financially secured and in the French society they would be called "femmes fatales" (Blažková, 2006, p. 13).

Noreen is sportive enough to jump into a moving car, Mary to escape from captivity. They are daring enough to drive sports cars in a fashion that terrified everyone else on the road and they are audacious enough to plot a burglary or a kidnapping.

Due to Christie's conservatism, most of her modern "young women are part of the romantic subplots of the novels in which they appear, and they are paired off at the end, married, and presumably live happily ever after" (Vipond, 1981, p. 120).

"However, we cannot deny the fact that, in spite of her pleasure in writing about modern women, Christie also portrayed several girls that correspond to the Edwardian type" (Liebnerová, 2007, p. 43). Their roles are always supporting, they are beautiful, but vulnerable and extremely shy.

Although Christie presented a wide range of types of young women, she had the prevailing tendency to provide her female readers with independent, self-sufficient, courageous and modern women who inspire her readers to identify with them.

The next group of female characters in Christie's works is middle-age women who are mostly represented by the caring mothers and wives as well as divorced, rebellious women of all classes.

It is no surprise that the most common appearance is the character of a wife. That corresponds with Christie's private life, where she "regarded her writing as very much secondary to her identity as a wife" (Rowland, 2001, p. 7).

> "In her works, Christie presented marriages of partnership and companionship—'Joint Ventures'—in a positive light; the ones she showed more unfavorably were those in which either partner was weak or cowed by the other, although even in those cases she made it clear that she understood the human needs which led men and women into such relationships" (Vipond, 1981, p. 121).

The settings of many Christie's novels often take place in a large country house and provide readers with the image of the large close-knit family. There are mothers who are very devoted to their husbands and whose first loyalties are to hearth and home. The example of such a family can be found in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*. There, the character of the mother and wife, Adelaide Lee, is very present even though she died many years ago. She was treated very badly by her husband and her death (more or less caused by him) divided the Lee family. Even her husband, Simeon Lee, the head of the clan, admits:

> "'I made Adelaide unhappy,' he said. He spoke almost under his breath, to himself. 'Lord, what a woman! Pink and white and pretty as they make 'em when I married her! And afterwards? Always wailing and weeping. It rouses the devil in a man when his wife is always crying…She'd no guts, that's what was the matter with Adelaide. If she'd stood up to me! But she never did—not once. I believed when I married her that I was going to be able to settle down, raise a family—cut loose from the old life…'" (Christie, *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas*, 1967, p. 50-51).

This extract illustrates that despite the existence of young independent women, there still appeared women who had been brought up in compliance with Victorian values that expect women to obey their husbands and to be devoted to the family. During Simeon's speech to his granddaughter, Pilar, he entreates her: "Pilar—remember—nothing is so boring as devotion" (Christie, *Hercule Poirot´s Christmas*, p. 51).

The opposite kind of middle-age woman is the character of Anne Protheroe. In the public, she seems "a quiet, self-contained woman whom one would not suspect of any great depths of feeling" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage,* 1930, p. 38), but when she falls in love with a young painter, Lawrence Redding, she changes. She does not want to be a submissive wife any more and in the end, she kills her husband. It is clear from the notes of many village characters that her life with Colonel Protheroe was uneasy. Even his daughter, Lettice Protheroe and the vicar, the narrator of the story, would rather he were dead.

> "'Oh! dear,'" said Lettice, sighing. 'How tiresome every one is. I feel shattered. Definitely. If only I had some money I'd go away, but without it I can't. If only father would be decent and die, I should be all right'" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage,* 1930, p. 38).

However, female characters are not always the wives who suffer under the strict rules and whims of their husbands and the perfect mothers trying to find good matches for their daughters. There are also females who seem to rebel against society. Agatha Christie's popular book *Death on the Nile* provides an example.

The scandalous character of Salome Otterbourne, who is a dipsomaniac, resembles to a fallen angel. She is vulgar in public and provokes a violent climax. As an author of sex stories, she is described by her daughter Rosalie as "there is no God but Sex, and Salome Otterbourne is its prophet" (Christie, *Death on the Nile*, p. 65). That can be seen not only as "a parody of Islam and its basic principles" (Rowland, 2001, p. 73), but also as a criticism of the puritan and snobbish Anglo-American society on the boat.

Even though the female middle-age characters can seem very boring and uninteresting to discuss, Agatha Christie shows that her heroines provide her readers with a number of different attitudes to life. Despite their age and marital status, they usually long for love.

The last but not least analyzed group of female characters are husbandless older women. Those could be widows, who lost their husbands in World War I because "by 1918 over 750,000 of men had died, or divorced women could be included. Their number rose from a yearly average of 800 in 1910 to 8,000 in 1939" (McDowall, 1989, p. 163).

This part of thesis focuses mainly on Agatha Christie's famous detective Miss Marple who is a complete mystery for Christie's readers. The twelve novels and twelve short stories, where Miss Marple appears, provide hardly any clue about the life of this fabulous detective and readers do not know why she has never married. Throughout the stories, the character

of Miss Marple provides readers with hardly any fact about her previous life. It seems to readers as if Miss Marple spent the major part of her life in St Mary Mead.

Despite the limitations of her lifetime experience, she is able to use the methods of deduction and analogy to detect the murderer from a stopped overturned clock (*Murder at the Vicar*age) or a pin (*Tape-Measure Murder*). In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, she admits that "her hobby is Human Nature" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage,* 1930, p. 34). Other Miss Marple's weapons are female intuition and a sharp eye. She notices almost everything. Her sharp eye makes her the most feared person in the village of St. Marry Mead, where she lives. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Miss Marple's first case, the vicar comments on her:

> „Miss Marple always sees everything. Gardening is as good as a smoke screen, and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses can always be turned to account" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage,* 1930, p. 31).

Even his wife, Griselda is aware of her:

> "'She's the worst cat in the village,' said Griselda. 'And she always knows every single thing that happens — and draws the worst inferences from it'" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage,* 1930, p. 468).

As follows from selected extracts, Miss Marple does not seem to be very popular among the citizens of the village and among superintendents, but she helped to solve "sixteen murders as well as four attempted murders" (Bunson, 2000, p. 287) in St. Mary Mead.

Beside the enhancement of the "feminine intuition" (Craig, Cadogan, 1981, p. 166) into the investigative methods, the cases of the spinster lady were groundbreaking in public viewing of gossips. Craig and Cadogan in their *Lady Investigates* prove that Agatha Christie "transmuted the unappealing habit of gossip into a socially useful activity" (Craig, Cadogan, 1981, p. 165).

Although the character of old women does not seem attractive to most of people, Agatha Christie was so perfect in her writing that all her readers fell in love with the nosy old little lady who can easily compete with the professional Sherlock Holmes. What is more, Miss Marple portray the changing role of women in society as well as other Christie female characters. At first sight she reminds Christies chaste "Victorian grandmother who was continually surprised by human gullibility" (Craig, Cadogan, 1981, p. 166), but in the end she too emancipated to interfere in - typically male - investigation.

To conclude, Agatha Christie's works represent various types of women. They are usually interesting characters who are able to face up to every situation. Marriage is a very frequent topic and the majority of her female characters are paired off at the end. Thanks to Christie's wide knowledge of all social classes (especially of middle and upper class), she introduced female characters of various social status, education and personalities who became inspiration for thousands of women all over the world.

6. Conclusion

This thesis deals with the reflection of English 1930´s society in Agatha Christie's detective fiction. The main aim of the paper was to prove that the large changes in society are mirrored in Christie's novels and short stories.

The first chapter analyses the detective genre and its development since the first true detective fiction *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* written by Edgar Alan Poe in 1841. This work revels that Agatha Christie is considered a part of the Golden Age of the Detective fiction and beside Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh and Margery Allingham, Christie is one of the four "Queens of Crimes."

Three following chapters reflect the three main social classes in the English society. This thesis shows that Christie's upper class plays only a marginal role in her fiction and as it did in inter war Britain. It is evident that Christie aptly described the decline of the nobility in spite of its attempts of solidarity within the aristocracy, who were threatened by the nouveaux riches originating from the middle class.

The next chapter deals with the class of Agatha Christie's origin, the middle class. Due to its frequent appearance in Christie's detective stories, this part is the most extensive. At first, the domestic culture of the middle class is analysed. Christie depicts the middle-class society in a very conservative way. Her middle class is inward-looking and she often provides her readers with an image of "a large, close-knit family" living in a country house or suburbia, which was considered an ideal in the 1930s.

Next, the introduction of the new technologies into the households of the middle class is discussed. The wide spread of electric devices after the Great Depression helped to restart the British economy, to re-employ the factory workers and to enjoy new opportunities like listening to the radio or communicating via telephone. After the *Electricity (Supply) Act* of 1926, the electric devices were accessible to the majority of the middle class. As well as Christie's readers, her characters, especially the younger ones, were very modern in terms of taking advantage of the newest conveniences.

Nevertheless, whereas the majority of middle-class members benefited from vacuum cleaners, fridges and wireless, only the wealthiest were able to acquire a car. Without regard to a fictional or a real car, its owner appreciated that the car provided him or her with a high level of independence and it even raised one's social prestige. Other means of transport in Christie's fiction are often associated with faraway places. These dreamlands were often

connected with travelling that was not so safe and easily accessible as nowadays. Thanks to her adventurous nature, Christie had wide experiences with travelling and she mirrored them in her books, which broadened her readership with these who could not afford an expensive travel. Moreover, Christie utilized the fact that after the terror of World War I people preferred to be "pleasurably terrified" in the security of their own homes rather than undergoing dangerous travels.

Discussing Christie's middle-class characters, it is evident that she appointed the figures so brilliantly and stereotypically that even today, everyone can name their counterparts from his neighbourhood – a reliable doctor, a punctual retired officer, a humane vicar, a diligent police officer, an unsympathetic inspector. There are only two characters who stand out above all – her detectives.

Apart from his irreplaceable role in crime solving in Christie's crime, the character of Hercule Poirot reflects the obstacles which all refuges, regardless their origin, had to overcome. From a philosophical point of view, famous Belgian detective can be understood as a parody on British policy of appeasement[8] in 1930s. Like the United Kingdom, he is well received by the notables, he is mocked for his French expressions, custom-tailored suits and he is unable to act in order to capture a runaway murderer. With his inability to act, he resembled England and France, who were unable to avoid war despite their long-term effort.

The lowest social class is mostly represented by servants in Agatha Christie fiction. As well as the aristocracy, their role is marginal and they carry little narrative weight. Thanks to the modern electric devices and spread of trade unions, domestic service became slowly faded away. However, Christie's fictional servants are still employed to maintain the middle- and upper-class households.

The last chapter deals with women and their new position in the society, which they reached after years of struggles for the emancipation. It follows from Christie's writings that each generation of women coped with their new status differently. Widows, spinsters and mothers are always depicted in a conservative way; on the other hand Christie's young women are very modern and they enjoy all the available pleasures. In the end their stories end in marriage, which Agatha Christie considered the happiest time of life.

To conclude, Agatha Christie is entitled to be treated as part of the "English heritage" (Light, 1991, p. 62), as she succeeded very well in reflecting her contemporary society, and even

[8] Appeasement – "the policy of settling international quarrels by admitting and satisfying grievances through rational negotiation and compromise, thereby avoiding the resort to an armed conflict which would be expensive, bloody, and possibly dangerous" (Kennedy, 1983).

though the depiction of her characters were not always favourable, she never offended her readers neither her characters. That makes her fiction a suitable illustration of the atmosphere in 1930s England.

7. Resumé

Centrem zájmu bakalářské práce je zobrazení anglické společnosti třicátých let dvacátého století v dílech Agathy Christie a jeho porovnání s tehdejší realitou. Agatha Christie je všeobecně uznávanou autorkou detektivní literatury a společně s Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh and Margery Allingham bývá řazena mezi takzvané „Královny zločinu." Přestože detektivní žánr patří do kategorie nižší, neboli populární literatury, díla Agathy Christie jsou v poslední době kladně hodnocena pro jejich detailní zachycení dobové atmosféry ve společnosti, ať už se jedná o autorčiny prvotiny, nebo její tvorbu poloviny 20.století.

Tato práce se zabývá detektivními romány a povídkami Agathy Christie z období 30. let minulého století, která jsou považována za vrchol její tvorby a zároveň spadají do „Zlatého věku" detektivní literatury. Cílem bylo prokázat, že spisovatelka opravdu věrně zachytila stav společnosti ve své detektivní próze a že je právem označována za součást „britského kulturního dědictví" (Light, 1991, s.62).

První kapitola bakalářské práce definuje detektivní žánr, jako epické vyprávění v jehož centru stojí zločin, jenž se hlavní protagonista snaží objasnit odpovědí na čtyři základní otázky: Kdo, proč, jak a pro koho spáchal zločin?

Samotný detektivního žánr je starý jako lidstvo samo, nalézáme jej již v egyptských papyrech, či v biblických příbězích, ovšem za opravdu první detektivní prózu je považována povídka *Vraždy v ulici Morgue* z roku 1841, její autor Edgar Alan Poe je nazýván „otcem detektivky." Za jeden z vrcholů detektivní tvorby se považuje zrození detektiva Sherlocka Holmese z pera Arthura Conana Doylea, „Zlatý věk" ale přichází po první světové válce. Ten je spojen s konceptem tzv. whodunit (zkráceno z anglického „Who has done it?", Kdo to udělal?), tedy detektivním příběhem, kdy čtenář sleduje vyšetřování krok za krokem a díky veškerým indiciím může odhalit vraha a jeho motiv dříve než fiktivní detektiv. Obliba právě tohoto žánru je vysvětlována tím, že napomáhala vojákům vracejícím se z první světové války s překonáním obtíží při začlenění do společnosti, jako byly různé psychologické poruchy, včetně nedostatečné koncentrace a narušených vzorců chování. „Zlatý věk" detektivní literatury je také spojován s desaterem doporučení pátera Knoxe, kterých by se měli autoři detektivek držet, aby hráli poctivou hru se čtenářem a ten měl možnost zápletku rozřešit. Tohoto desatera se ve své tvorbě držela i Agatha Christie, jejíž tvorba ve 30. letech minulého století je předmětem této bakalářské práce.

Ve stejné době, kdy jsou na vrcholu své tvorby britské „královny zločinu“, američtí autoři šokují své čtenáře novou odnoží detektivního žánru – tzv. hard-boiled fiction, česky překládána jako tvorba „americké drsné školy,“ která zachycuje tehdejší aktuální témata jako prohibice nebo organizovaný zločin. Období po druhé světové válce dává nahlédnout pod pokličku policejního vyšetřování v dílech Eda McBaina, ale i nadále zůstávají v oblibě klasické detektivní příběhy ve stylu whodunit. V 70. letech nastává tzv. Druhý zlatý věk reprezentovaný autory jako Tony Hillerman a Robert B. Parker. Nicméně v poslední době patří mezi nejoblíbenější odnože detektivní literatury romány a povídky založené na soudním (vědeckém) dokazování zločinu a řešení zločinů v minulosti.

Druhá část bakalářské práce je změřena na analýzu zobrazení společnosti v dílech Agathy Christie. Kapitoly jsou rozděleny podle sociální stratifikace typické pro britskou společnost, tedy na vyšší, střední a dělnickou třídu. Spisovatelka vyrostla v rodině vyšší střední třídy a proto její hrdinové pocházejí většinou právě z této třídy. Zobrazení vyšší třídy je v próze Agathy Christie velmi okrajové a zachycuje většinou pouze aristokracii, která je po první světové válce v úpadku. Ten byl způsoben zmenšením jejich politické moci přijetím zákona o všeobecném volebním právu a také velkými ztrátami mladých mužů z řad šlechty na bojištích první světové války, kteří často nasazovali životy pro čest jejich rodiny. V dílech Agathy Christie lze vysledovat jistou solidaritu mezi šlechtou, která se snažila najít svou novou roli ve společnosti a zároveň byla vytlačována ze sféry podnikání průmyslníky a bankéři pocházejícími ze střední třídy.

Střední třída se stala hnacím motorem britské společnosti. Třicátá léta dvacátého století jsou spojována s Velkou hospodářskou krizí způsobenou pádem newyorské burzy a právě střední třída výrazně napomohla ekonomické obnově, díky své velké kupní síle. Následkem ekonomické krize, bylo výrazné zlevnění nákladů na výrobu a tak si střední třída mohla dovolit nákup elektrospotřebičů, automobilů či pořídit si vlastní bydlení. Stejná situace je popisována i v dílech Agathy Christie, která se odehrávají v domech na venkově či na předměstí, kde se usadili noví obyvatelé. Velká část domácností byla již ve 30. letech elektrifikována, což usnadnilo práci ženám v domácnosti, ale zároveň připravilo o práci tisíce sloužících po celé Británii, na jejichž službách byly dosud domácnosti střední a vyšší třídy závislé. Elektrifikace dále usnadnila mezilidskou komunikaci a to zavedením telefonu a rádia. Také automobily ve třicátých letech už nejsou jen doménou vyšší třídy, ale stále častěji si je pořizují zástupci střední třídy a autorka ve svých románech a povídkách zobrazuje jejich zkušenosti s řízením vozidla a tradici nedělních výletů za město.

Dalším důležitým aspektem života střední třídy ve třicátých letech je možnost cestovat, která se otevírá širším společenským vrstvám zejména po zavedení cestovních dokladů pro cesty do ciziny. Agatha Christie ve své oficiální autobiografii přiznává rozsáhlé zkušenosti s cestováním, které si užívala již od svých dětských let, kdy s rodiči trávila zimu ve Francii. Mimo Evropu se podívala poprvé se svou matkou, s níž odjela do Egypta kvůli rekonvalescenci po matčině nemoci, ovšem skutečnou vášeň pro Blízký východ v Agatě Christie probudil až její druhý manžel, archeolog Maxem Mallowanem, který v oblasti Sýrie organizoval archeologický výzkum. Právě zkušenosti z cestování po této oblasti zachytila v několika svých románech a povídkách, které mezi čtenáři patří dodnes k nejoblíbenějším.

Z autorčina životopisu i z názvů jejích děl je patrné, že vyzkoušela prakticky všechny tehdy dostupné dopravní prostředky a využila je ve své tvorbě, příkladem mohou být díla jako *Death in the Clouds (Smrt v oblacích), Murder on the Orient Express (Vražda v Orent-Expresu)* nebo *Death on the Nile (Smrt na Nilu*). Ať už se jedná o letadlo, parník nebo vlak, ve všech luxusních dopravních prostředcích se Agatha Christie vyhýbá jejich detailnějšímu popisu a schválně nechává své fiktivní postavy využívat i vlaky nižší tříd, aby dokázala svým čtenářům, že se na ně i přes svůj původ nepovyšuje.

Kapitola o střední třídě také analyzuje některé stereotypicky vykreslené postavy v autorčiných dílech. Její lékaři jsou vždy spolehliví, akurátní, vysoce profesionální a připravení konstatovat smrt a nelézt příčinu smrti. Starší lékaři s dlouholetou praxí jsou vždy velmi uznáváni ve společnosti, zatímco mladší z nich jsou ostatními postavami přijímáni nedůvěřivě, přestože jsou vybaveni nejnovějšími poznatky z univerzit, které právě dokončili.

Další zajímavou postavou je vikář, neboli farář anglikánské církve. Přestože se počet věřících po první světové válce značně snížil, Agatha Christie zobrazuje kostel jako místo, kde se lidé setkávají za účelem navázání společenských kontaktů. Vikář je dokonce vypravěčem jednoho z jejích románů, příznačně pojmenovaného *Vražda na faře (The Murder on the Vicarage).* Ten zobrazuje vikáře jako člověka, na kterého se ostatní mohou vždy spolehnout a který je vždy vyslechne bez předsudků a pohrdání, přesto i on má své slabosti a to bezhlavou oddanost své mladé manželce a čtení detektivních románů namísto přípravy nedělních kázání.

Významnou roli v detektivní literatuře hraje policie, autorčina detektivní próza zachycuje celou řadu policistů, od řadových, kteří slouží na venkovských okrscích, až po vrchní vyšetřovatele z řad Scotland Yardu, většina z nich však sdílí stejné vlastnosti - přísnost, nevrlost, malá představivost, ale také snaživost. Přesto jsou většinou zastíněni genialitou detektivů, kterými jsou malý Belgičan s pěstěným knírem Hercule Poirot a starší dáma ze St. Mary Mead, slečna Jane Marple.

Poslední společenskou třídou zachycenou v dílech první dámy zločinu je dělnická třída. Stejně jako aristokracie, i dělnická třída je zastoupena pouze minimálně a to převážně sloužícími. Přestože byli sloužící ve společnosti částečně nahrazeni elektrospotřebiči, téměř ve všech dílech Agathy Christie ze 30. let minulého století se postavy majordomů, zahradníků, hospodyní objevují poměrně často. I oni jsou však často obětí stereotypů z pera Agathy Christie. Zatímco její majordomové jsou víceméně popisováni jako starší pánové, velmi loajální k rodině svého zaměstnavatele a všichni je pokládají za „rodinný poklad," kuchařky a hospodyně jsou většinou nerudné dívky a ženy, které na nikom nenechají nit suchou, práskají dveřmi a talíři a neobtěžují se s oslovováním svých zaměstnavatelů „pane" nebo „madam." Přestože služebnictvo v autorčiných dílech často bydlelo ve stejném domě jako jejich zaměstnavatel, historické studie dokazují, že se od tohoto trendu značně ustupovalo.

Poslední kapitola se zaměřuje na postavení žen ve společnosti. Po první světové válce získaly ženy rovnoprávnost a každá generace si s ní poradila po svém. Nejmladší generace dívek, kterou zachycuje Agatha Christie, využívá emancipaci plnými doušky. Autorčiny hrdinky jsou mladé, akční, nebojí se dobrodružství, řídí automobily, kouří cigarety, nosí kalhoty a pracují. I přesto pro ně spisovatelka přichystala šťastný konec v podobě manželství, které ona sama považovala „za nejlepší období života." Stejně jako v reálném životě, i literatuře se dívky po svatbě vzdávají svého dosavadního zaměstnání, aby mohly pečovat o manžela a děti. Ženy středního věku jsou v dílech zobrazovány jako vzorné manželky, matky snažící se zajistit svým dcerám výhodný sňatek, ale také excentrické spisovatelky. Poslední skupinou žen jsou starší dámy, které Agatha Christie vykresluje jako klepny, které do všeho strkají nos. Reprezentuje je zejména slečna Jane Marple, která v St. Mary Mead vyřeší celkem šestnáct vražd a to zejména díky vynikající dedukci a ženské intuici.

Bakalářská práce prokázala, že autorčina tvorba je skutečně inspirována dobovou situací ve společnosti. V jejích dílech lze nalézt některé opakující se motivy, jejichž porovnání s historickými studiemi o meziválečné Velké Británii dokazuje, že vedle napínavých a záhadných detektivní příběhů, tvorba Agathy Christie poskytuje věrné svědectví o době svého vzniku a tehdejší atmosféře ve společnosti.

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