

**ACCESSORIES TO MURDER:
READING WOMEN'S FASHION OBJECTS IN
AGATHA CHRISTIE'S DETECTIVE FICTION**

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Abstract

This thesis analyses women's fashion accessories in the detective fiction of Agatha Christie, considering how these items invite a particular mode of reading. Christie is widely acknowledged as one of the best-selling authors of all time, yet Christie scholarship is largely informed by her place in 'Golden Age' detective fiction. In considering texts from across Christie's career, I suggest that Christie's later novels are equally as engaged with contemporary fashions as her earlier texts. This thesis considers Christie's texts as both detective fiction and also as part of the feminine middlebrow, drawing on thing theory – particularly the work of Elaine Freedgood and of Bill Brown – in its consideration of women's fashion accessories as 'things'. In so doing, I accord a fuller recognition of the role of these items in the texts. My first chapter focuses on items of jewellery in Christie's texts to argue that they have value in framing discussions of genre. I argue that this is both in relation to the broader canon of middlebrow fiction and also in relation to the specific plot demands of detective fiction. My second chapter then discusses women's hats with a focus on how these items relate to specific identities in the novels. My third chapter analyses cosmetics and makeup in Christie's fiction, considering this through the lens of habit to discuss how this lens renders these items significant in Christie's texts. Throughout this thesis, I argue that Christie's texts invite a feminised mode of reading of these items; this is a form of reading that is aware of and understands the contexts of these items and can thus read them as clues to the resolutions of the mysteries.

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Introduction

‘The thing that caught my attention.’ (Agatha Christie, *The Pale Horse*)

‘[N]othing is more ridiculous than the fashions of yesterday.’ (Agatha Christie, *Mrs McGinty’s Dead*)

Agatha Christie (1890–1976) is the world’s best-selling novelist. Over a billion copies of her books have sold in English, and a further billion have sold in translation.¹ Much scholarly attention paid to Christie’s works as detective fiction tends to focus on the plots and their endings. Once known, these endings can be seen to negate the need to read the texts again, yet her global popularity shows little signs of abating. In 2021, as new editions and collections of her novels continue to be published, there were also a number of television and film adaptations across the world; her works are further being adapted into new mediums and forms.² Over a hundred years have passed since the publication of her first novel, and the context of Christie’s texts has become increasingly distant. This thesis considers the details that are integral to the plots of Christie’s works. The first epigraph, from Christie’s *The Pale Horse* (1961), is uttered by Mrs Ariadne Oliver – a novelist and something of a self-parody of Christie – as she explains what she has remembered in connection to a series of mysterious deaths.³ Her statement is also true of reading Christie’s works in the twenty-first century: they are littered with details of objects and ‘things’ that catch the attention of her readers.

Setting aside the obvious murder “weapons”, Christie’s texts include a range of objects: items associated with food and drink; clothing; books, letters and documents; artworks, ornaments and flower arrangements; watches and clocks; sporting equipment; and cigarettes, to name just a few.⁴ Whilst most of these items remain fairly familiar, this thesis takes as a starting

¹ ‘The Home of Agatha Christie’ (2021), <<https://www.agathachristie.com/en/about-christie>> [accessed 8 December 2021].

² In 2021, some of these adaptations include: France’s ‘Les Petits Meurtres d’Agatha Christie – 70s’ (Escazai Films); Sweden’s ‘Agatha Christie’s Hjerson’ (TV4/C More); and Japan’s ‘Promise with Death’ (FujiTV). Her works have also been adapted for videogaming, such as *Hercule Poirot: The First Cases* and *Mystery Match Village X Death on the Nile*, both released in 2021. In these cases, these are “official” adaptations authorised by Agatha Christie Limited, the company that has managed literary and media rights to Christie’s works since Christie established it in 1955.

³ For a discussion of Ariadne Oliver as a parody of Christie, see J. C. Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 52–62. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁴ Whilst many texts of various genres feature a range of objects and items, there is a particular way in which objects are represented and function within detective fiction narratives; I discuss this in greater detail below.

point that some of these items are perhaps becoming *less* familiar, and somewhat more obscure: notably those associated with fashion. The second epigraph, from Christie's *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952), speaks to some of the issues with reading fashion items in texts published between nearly fifty and one hundred years ago. Fashions change, and what seemed comprehensible then, is not necessarily so now. How can we understand their relevance to the detective fiction plots, if we do not understand what these items are, or how they were worn, and what it meant to wear them in the context of the novels' publication? This thesis answers these questions, and explores how they relate to Christie's plotting, which has cemented her status as the "Queen of Crime" and world's best-selling novelist of all time. In this Introduction, I firstly explore Christie's texts in the context of "Golden Age" detective fiction, before relating this genre to the middlebrow more broadly. I then discuss how fashion is a vital part of the middlebrow, before outlining my methodology which uses thing theory. Finally, I provide a brief summary of the structure of the thesis.

'Not Fair Play, But Fake Play': "Golden Age" Detective Fiction's Clues and Red Herrings, Victims and Murderers

This section outlines how Christie's texts have been considered within detective fiction scholarship. This outline is with a particular focus on key aspects towards which my project is oriented: reassessing the place of Christie's texts within the so-called "Golden Age" of detective fiction; the "clue-puzzle" format; and, the significance of clues and red herrings, victims and murderers. The novels discussed in this thesis are all part of Christie's detective and mystery fiction. In taking this focus, I challenge a number of previous critical approaches that have confined Christie's work within particular parameters.⁵ This is perhaps most notable with respect to those that consider Christie's works as part of a "Golden Age" of detective and mystery fiction that took place within the interwar period in Britain.⁶ As Ernst Mandel describes, '[t]he interwar period was the golden age of the detective story. Granted, some of the best works were written in the forties, and a few precursors of Agatha Christie were publishing before 1914'.⁷ Mandel's comments recognise that the chronological parameters of

⁵ Christie wrote a variety of fiction throughout her career, including adventure-thrillers, such as *The Secret Adversary* (1922) and *Postern of Fate* (1973), and romance, such as those written under her pseudonym "Mary Westmacott". I define "detective" fiction as part of "mystery" fiction, but where there is a clearly established detective character, who acts as a narrative pivot.

⁶ Stephen Knight offers a comprehensive outline of how this term has been used up to the early 2000s in *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 85–86. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ Ernst Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 22. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

the “Golden Age” are difficult to render stable and that the “Golden Age” cannot be defined by the publication of a single specific text that establishes conventions of the genre. Such parameters encourage a way of thinking about these texts that is reliant on very specific definitions of time, style, and format of the detective fiction genre. Such definitions are largely individual to the particular critic – one person’s “Golden Age” is not the same as another’s. They become reductive when attempting to apply these to texts beyond the original scope of the critic’s study.

The “Golden Age” model implies that only texts with particular characteristics can subsequently belong to this designation of detective fiction. It consequently limits consideration of particular forms and styles of detective fiction with a specific period of time. Issues with chronological definitions have been recognised: Stephen Knight, for example, describes how they ‘falsify the complex, overlapping and multiple ways in which sub-genres and their audiences operate’ (p. 86). As within Christie’s own oeuvre which switches between genres and sub-genres, the existence of texts that cross generic boundaries leads to difficulties in affixing specific time periods to the appearance of certain genres.⁸ Labelling texts as belonging to a “Golden Age” of detective fiction not only tends towards a conflation of chronology and genre, but this in itself implies that texts published later are of less significance, unworthy of this designation of a “Golden Age”. Knight’s comment on how this obscures how ‘audiences [of these texts] operate’ is also significant. Consideration of Christie’s texts beyond this “Golden Age” model enables a broader understanding of plotting in her texts. This understanding is premised in modes of reading that are firmly established through the genre and is not confined to a specific era of publication.⁹

Specifically, the issue with assigning Christie’s texts to a “Golden Age” of detective fiction has ramifications in relation to the neglect of her later texts. Even in more recent critical studies, such as J. C. Bernthal’s *Queering Agatha Christie* (2016), Christie’s earlier texts have been privileged over the later (p. 4).¹⁰ Knight has suggested that overall, the end of the “Golden Age” is perhaps connected to the growing popularity of other sub-genres (e.g. the private-eye genre) that meant the dominance of one particular genre came to a natural end (p.

⁸ For example, in 1929–30, Christie published the adventure-thriller *The Seven Dials Mystery*, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (the first full-length novel featuring Miss Marple as detective), and *Giant’s Bread* (published under her pseudonym, Mary Westmacott).

⁹ I discuss and frame this concept of ‘modes of reading’ in relation to the middlebrow – see below.

¹⁰ While Bernthal expands the definition of the “Golden Age” to include Christie’s texts up to 1952, this still neglects her twenty-four later novels.

86). Other critical analyses – particularly of Christie – have tended to focus on this end of the “Golden Age” in relation to an unfavourable assessment of her later works. In their study of Christie, Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick suggest that the peak of her popularity and critical acclaim was reached in the thirties and forties, as ‘critics agreed that her powers were fading and the books of the fifties and sixties reveal a decline in invention, freshness and originality’.¹¹ More recently, Mark Aldridge’s discussion of Poirot has highlighted that ‘[a]part from the mostly exemplary 1930s, her work had always been variable [...] The books in the 1960s were no more mixed than the 1920s or 1950s had been [...]’.¹² Aldridge’s is perhaps a more generous analysis of Christie’s later texts in implying that her earlier texts are as ‘variable’ as her later texts, consistent in their inconsistency. Yet it still places an emphasis on measuring her texts against a barometer of “quality” in the plots; this neglects other aspects, such as characterisation or innovations in the genre.¹³

I advocate for an approach to analysing Christie’s works that does not seek to “rank” them against each other or assess their merits (or lack of) in this way. The full extent of Christie’s writing career should be considered in approaching her novels.¹⁴ There is consistency in Christie’s texts in terms of their meeting the demands of the detective fiction genre. Whilst these do change over time, the essential premise of the plots includes a murder taking place, providing clues to the murderer’s identity. This identity is then revealed as the resolution of the plot. As will be shown below, Christie’s works do not show a severely marked change in narrative style over the later years of her career, yet they do engage with changing socio-historical contexts.¹⁵ But what is this narrative style? I have already discussed some of the challenges of defining Christie’s works within strict chronologies, and of comparing her works on the basis of “quality” of plots. I do, however, analyse Christie’s works within a broad understanding of the detective fiction genre. This understanding is particularly based on how Christie’s works engage with generic aspects; one of the most pertinent to this study is the concept of the “clue-puzzle” format. This term of “clue-puzzle” is often tied to the

¹¹ Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie’s Detective Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982), pp. 1–2. Further references are to this edition and given after quotations in the text.

¹² Mark Aldridge, *Poirot: The Greatest Detective in the World* (London: HarperCollins, 2020), p. 238. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

¹³ I discuss some of these innovations throughout this thesis in my reading of Christie’s texts.

¹⁴ It should be noted that I do not consider those texts that Christie wrote under a pseudonym as “Mary Westmacott” and I am only concerned with those that are traditionally viewed as detective fiction.

¹⁵ This perhaps explains how *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and *Endless Night* (1967) are such different texts – the former focuses on a small country village with a cast of upper-middle-class characters, and the latter is populated by international characters and narrated by a working-class man – whilst employing the same narrative trick.

concept of the “Golden Age” interwar period (Knight, pp. 88–89). However, I argue that the consistency of Christie’s style across her career renders this term equally applicable to texts from the 1960s as to those of the 1930s. In considering Christie’s texts as part of this format, I suggest that clues – and what can be understood as a clue – can be prioritised as a means of resolving the mysteries.

In choosing to label Christie’s texts as “clue-puzzle” in format (as opposed to “whodunit”, as favoured by critics from Tzvetan Todorov to Bernthal), I emphasise the prominence of the ludic elements of Christie’s texts and the significance of clues within those elements.¹⁶ Knight defines the “clue-puzzle” form in terms of the concept that ‘the reader can in fact solve [the plot] ahead of the detective’ and that ‘many people can pick up at least some of the clues in a Christie novel’ (pp. 88–89). This interpretation of the clue-puzzle emphasises the role of the reader in the plot. Clues are presented with the intention that readers will begin to form their own interpretations and seek to find a solution. However, as Mandel notes, ‘the winner is predetermined by the author [...] It is not fair play, but fake play under the guise of fair play’ (p. 48).¹⁷ Whilst Mandel’s ‘winner’ is framed in terms of capitalist ideology as ‘[t]he “best man” never wins; the richest does’, this concept of ‘fake play as fair play’ is also applicable to the clue-puzzle (p. 48). If the reader reads to solve the plot ahead of the detective, then the author is managing the placement of clues to ensure that the reader does not, in fact, manage to do so.¹⁸ This is somewhat problematic for how it presumes a generic reading, that all readers will read the same. In framing Christie’s novels as “clue-puzzles”, I do not emphasise the role of the individual reader as such, but the process of *reading*.¹⁹ As I discuss below, reading is a key concept of both the middlebrow and Christie’s fiction more specifically.

¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’, in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 42–52 (p. 44). Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Mandel takes a Marxist approach to emphasise how ‘[p]rivate property, law and order, must triumph, regardless of the cost in human life and misery’ (p. 48).

¹⁸ As Jesper Gulddal suggests, ‘[r]eaders are asked to conduct their own investigations but they are not meant to succeed’, from ‘Clues’, in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Janice Allan *et al.* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 194–201 (p. 197). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁹ R. A. York identifies other issues with applying a “puzzle” analogy to detective fiction, suggesting that ‘[p]uzzles are not novels: they do not depend on the things that make up normal novels’ and that ‘[t]he textual form of many of [Christie’s] novels constitutes an alternation of an element of game, puzzle, artifice, ingenuity, with an element of moral or social reflection, [...] – though these elements may often seem undernourished or even commonplace because the characters and events which might illustrate them are subject to the reductive force of game’. It is possible to consider Christie’s texts as clue-puzzles without reducing any elements of her work to solely the ‘reductive force of game’. *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 164. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

Centrality of reading has particular significance in relation to clues in Christie's novels. Knight acknowledges that 'many people re-read a clue-puzzle novel knowing who did it: it is not just an enigma with a single solution as its meaning' (p. 89). This concept is equally applicable to specific objects within the narratives.²⁰ Objects-as-clues have multiple contexts and meanings that can be identified in relation to these novels and their plots. This reading of meanings has been perceived by Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker as part of the 'game' elements of Christie's works. This game is 'played by several sets of players in a kind of semiotic hierarchy', with characters in the text at the lowest level who – consciously and unconsciously – lay clues that are often 'misread' by each other; these characters are followed by the reader and detective, with the author at the apex of this 'semiotic hierarchy' for their determining of the progress of each 'game'.²¹ Establishing the whereabouts of 'players' in a 'hierarchy' is not necessarily important. The idea of layers and readings of clues *is* pertinent to understanding how they are rendered significant to the overall narrative plot. The plot is not just centred on the solution, but also the narrative trajectory of the investigation. This investigation seeks to find the "right" reading of particular clues; it involves a necessary reading and re-reading of particular contexts and meanings to identify that which fits with other clues to provide the solution.

This thesis focuses particularly on objects-as-clues, as opposed to clues that take the form of characters' behaviour or particular idiosyncrasies of speech or writing.²² Such types of clues can be understood in relation to these multiple modes of reading and re-reading to find the "right" meaning through understanding their contexts. The possibility of understanding these contexts is much more open than that of characters' behaviour.²³ Gulddal describes this style of detective fiction – once again formulated as an interwar "Golden Age" – as the time in

²⁰ Alternative solutions to Christie's mysteries have been proposed, as in Pierre Bayard's *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* (2000), which provides an alternative culprit to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

²¹ Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 14–15. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. Maida and Spornick make a similar point about the puzzle as a 'complex structure' played between different combinations of players consisting of the reader, murderer, detective, and author (p. 68).

²² Such clues are not uncommon in Christie – the intonation of a dead woman's speech provides a clue in *A Murder is Announced* (1950), as does the inclusion of a word in a letter in *Five Little Pigs* (1942), and the remembered mannerisms of an estranged family member in *After the Funeral* (1953).

²³ Particular instances of characters' actions – such as where the emphasis is placed in the phrase 'She wasn't there' in *A Murder is Announced* – can be viewed as less easily read as clues without further information from within the novel (such as other characters' recollections of the intonation of this phrase), whereas the description of a large beach hat in *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) provides the opportunity to read this in light of multiple contexts (such as its material, its size, its fashionableness) without further indications within the text.

which ‘the interactive clue reaches its mature form and becomes the central device of the genre. The detective story as a result acquires a new, ludic dimension’ exemplified by ‘frequent comparisons of detective fiction to crosswords’ (p. 196). Gulddal frames this ludic dimension of the prominence of clues in terms of ‘players’ and their opportunities to solve the mystery. Yet the emphasis on the importance of clues as devices of the genre in this style of detective fiction can equally be seen as part of the game elements of the narratives beyond this context of ‘players’ and who is able to solve the mystery. It is possible to consider clues and objects-as-clues as significant to the whole narrative without focusing on the opportunities these provide for the reader-detective-author relationship in solving the mystery. The crossword puzzle is a particularly appropriate analogy for this.²⁴ Just as in a crossword where clues have multiple possible answers but only one should fit with the others, the interpretation of objects and their significance has a wider range than has previously been appreciated in discussions of Christie’s works.²⁵

Understanding clues and objects-as-clues enables a new consideration of their significance in Christie’s works. Critical attention has previously identified Christie as particularly skilled in her plotting and misdirection. However, this attention is largely focused without any real consideration as to *how* such plots and misdirection function.²⁶ This lack of critical attention has been acknowledged by Gulddal, who further identifies that ‘the clue is a textual enigma and needs to be solved by the detective by means of interpretation’ (p. 194). Thus, any object-as-clue must have multiple meanings and contexts that have the possibility of ‘interpretation’ to be ‘solved’. Similarly, Shaw and Vanacker have identified it as imperative that clues ‘should not be arbitrary: they can be right or wrong, but they should not be merely random, meaningless, autonomous’ (p. 15). I argue that is not the clue itself that is ‘right or wrong’ but the interpretations – the readings – of that clue that offer this opportunity. Christie’s objects-as-clues incorporate several different readings of meanings and contexts that have the potential to fit with other clues to certain extents, but only one of those readings ultimately

²⁴ Shaw and Vanacker suggest that ‘[a]s in a game of chess, where it is how the pieces move and not what they ‘really’ stand for that is important, so in Christie’s novel the locations and characters bear only a shadowy relation to social conditions and historical events’ (p. 24). I suggest that this ignores the complexities of the contexts evident in details in Christie’s works – the use of particular objects that carry relevant socio-historical information provides a far stronger connection to social conditions and historical events than this comment suggests.

²⁵ I therefore use the term the “right” meaning to suggest this solution that fits with the other clues and interpretation of them. The growth in popularity of the crossword puzzle also took place in the interwar period and the word itself was first entered in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1933 – see ‘Crossword’ (2022) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44952>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

²⁶ For example, Mandel claims that Christie is the ‘queen of deception’ for her ability to ‘surprise without cheating’ (p. 16).

fits with all of them.²⁷ The idea that clues should not be ‘random, meaningless’ foregrounds such objects and items within the text. The emphasis that these texts are *clue*-puzzles ensures that the notion such items are significant is recognised – even if their exact significance within the plot is not always evident until the resolution of the mystery.

Christie’s particular skill in misdirection warrants further examination of her use of red herrings – those clues that are deliberately intended to mislead and misdirect the solution of the mystery. Gulddal suggests that clues and red herrings are ‘indistinguishable until the detective separates them by selecting those pieces of information on which the solution will be based, thereby writing off all other information as either irrelevant or deliberately misleading’ (p. 195).²⁸ I argue that red herrings are not necessarily so easily ‘separated’ from genuine clues. Information that is discarded at the solution of the narrative is not so simply dismissed as this suggests, but it must be accounted for as to *why* it is a red herring and not a clue. Bernthal, following Faye Stewart’s discussion of clues, suggests that

[r]ed herrings are things that do belong in the orderly world of the novel, but do not appear to. They are so strange that they need to be finally labelled as ordinary. The red herring, then, occupies a unique role in the narrative: it advertises its strangeness, which in turn means that it cannot signify the ‘real’ disorder of the narrative – the crime – because clues must be hidden.²⁹ (*Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 13)

Stewart implies that red herrings can be easily identified by the fact that they are so obviously ‘strange’ whereas clues are more deliberately concealed. However, in Christie’s works, the majority of her misdirections are accounted for in some manner in relation to the solution – they are ‘strange’ but *do* signify something about the crime.³⁰ A further distinction should be made between clues and red herrings that accounts for pieces of information (in this instance, specifically objects) that are clues – they do have significance in relation to the solution of the

²⁷ An example of this is the numerous instances of torn labels and papers whereby some only perceive the significance of what is written on such items, instead of the significance of the tearing and the missing information; examples include the beginning of the drug label in *Sad Cypress* (1940) that changes the contents from poison to antidote, and the missing corner of the letter in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) that changes ‘she’ to ‘he’.

²⁸ York similarly points to the detective’s role in interpreting information for the solution (p. 22).

²⁹ York also comments on this sense of strangeness and oddity in relation to clues (p. 106).

³⁰ An example in Christie’s works would be details used to keep with a nursery rhyme plotting scheme; for example, in *A Pocketful of Rye* (1953), the grain in Rex Fortescue’s pocket does not directly indicate the solution of who kills him but does indicate details that do have significance such as the childlike and superstitious minds of the culprits. Similarly, in *And Then There Were None* (1939), the adherence to the nursery rhyme scheme to organise the murders suggests a preparedness, and the orderly mind of the killer.

plots – but that misreading causes them to appear as misdirection: what might be termed “read” herrings.

The connection between clues, red herrings, and reading is one that has the potential to enable a broader consideration of Christie’s works and how these elements function within the narratives. In previous scholarship on British detective fiction – both of Christie’s work and more generally – attention has largely been focused on how clues are ‘a manifestation of a longing for the modern social world to be readable’ (Gulddal, p. 194), with the knowledge they represent as ‘accessible, fixable, stable and traceable’.³¹ Clues are not just representative of the possibility of accurate reading – and that sense of knowing and stability in their correct interpretation – but rather the potential for them to be *misread* is of equal importance.³² Robert Barnard suggests that Christie “‘earth[s]” [her stories] by her constant use of commonplace objects from the life around us. The reader feels that the clues relate to his experience’.³³ This emphasises that clues are intended to be understood – what they are, who uses them, *etc.* To “read” clues (specifically objects-as-clues) is to apply this knowledge to the detective fiction narrative. Gulddal makes a similar point, suggesting that ‘[i]nterpreting the clue is [...] a contextual operation that links the isolated detail to suspects, biographies, psychological profiles, alibis, time schedules and, above all, other clues’ (pp. 195–196). Gulddal oversimplifies the process of reading clues – the information within clues is not an isolated detail. It is a complex system of different contexts that have distinct and occasionally differing meanings.

Understanding the contexts related to objects-as-clues is therefore imperative to the process of reading clues with the intention of applying these readings to the resolution of the narrative. Gulddal suggests that the claim of ‘readability’ which clues provide ‘is tied to a Western epistemological horizon and arguably emerges as a compensatory response to the complexity of modern society’ (p. 199). He describes how post-World War One, ‘the clue’s attempt to

³¹ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 136. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

³² York makes a similar point, suggesting that ‘[m]uch of the action of many of the novels is constituted by people who take the wrong angle [...] or who follow red herrings, in the standard terminology; the novels in other words, are largely studies in error’ (p. 24). Whilst I am not focusing on the characters’ detection abilities in this sense, it is important to note that the *possibility* of misreading clues is indeed a significant feature of the genre.

³³ Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (London: William Collins, Sons & Co., 1980), p. 77. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. I read this term ‘earth’ as intended to signify how Christie bases her stories in real-life contexts through this use of ‘commonplace objects from the life around us’.

contain this social complexity is increasingly linked to a loss of realism’ with subsequently ‘the logic of the clue [...] subjected to extensive self-reflexive critique as the crime genre reinvents itself on the basis of new epistemologies better aligned with the modern world’ (p. 199). Whilst Christie’s novels often do demonstrate a self-reflexive critique of clues as a device of detective fiction, the vast majority of the clues and re(a)d herrings that appear in her texts are far from being linked to a loss of realism. They are instead very securely grounded in the socio-historical context of the texts.³⁴ In the early 2000s, Knight suggested of Christie’s works that ‘even the best of the novels have for most people now taken on a primarily period interest’ with adaptations of her works into newer mediums laying ‘heavier stress on period nostalgia than on the mystery itself’ (p. 93).³⁵ This period nostalgia does, however, suggest a reliance on memory and familiarity with the socio-historical contexts of Christie’s texts. In this thesis, I demonstrate that as those contexts move further away in time, dropping out of living memory, understanding them and being able to read them in objects-as-clues becomes increasingly difficult. Therefore, to fully appreciate this period interest in Christie’s works, it becomes necessary to recover – at least as far as possible – those contexts of the everyday world of contemporary readers. In so doing, this enables an understanding of how clues can be read and how they function as misdirection.

In describing this “everyday world” of contemporary readers and the necessity of understanding this world, I am not suggesting that the detective fiction genre is entirely a realist mode. As Malcah Effron has stated, ‘for non-canonical texts – and particularly for popular genres like detective fiction – the generic tropes predetermine the texts, so that critics have generally argued that detective novels are not expected to be realistic’.³⁶ Yet it is possible to perceive that there are varying degrees in the relationship between the genre and realism. York argues that ‘[r]eading a detective story [...] is not a seamless activity; we sense that the novel has different relations to reality at different points’ (p. 6). Whilst York frames this in relation to the trajectory of the plot, I suggest that this is not entirely the case in relation to considering Christie’s texts as clue-puzzles. The emphasis on the “clue” and “puzzle”

³⁴ One example of Christie’s ‘self-reflexive critique’ in relation to clues appears in *The Body in the Library* (1942) in which schoolboy Peter Carmody refers to Christie herself amongst other contemporary detective fiction authors as he hunts for clues and connections to the murder victim.

³⁵ It should be stated that since Knight’s comments, Christie’s works have continued to be adapted and some with less notable ‘nostalgia’ and an increasing engagement with the themes in her work – perhaps most notably in Sarah Phelps’s adaptations for the BBC.

³⁶ Malcah Effron, ‘On the Borders of the Page, on the Borders of Genre: Artificial Paratexts in Golden Age Detective Fiction’, *Narrative*, 18.2 (2010), 199–219 (pp. 202–3). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

highlights the fictional genre, yet relies on an acceptance that those clues can be understood from an understanding of reality. Effron further notes that

the detective genre needs to establish itself as believably realistic. So while the artificial paratexts in detective fiction [such as footnotes] underscore the textuality of the narrative as is done in metafictional artificial paratexts, in general these artificial paratexts emphasize this textuality to establish – rather than to destroy – mimetic reality. (p. 203)

I argue that a similar process occurs in relation to objects-as-clues. Considering Christie's works as clue-puzzles draws attention to the generic demands and so to the fictionality of the texts. Yet these objects, being drawn from the world known to readers, also establish a sense of the 'mimetic reality' that Effron identifies.

The purpose in understanding how clues can be read and how they function as misdirection is of particular significance to considering the identities of victim(s) and murderer(s) in Christie's novels.³⁷ As Merja Makinen observes, work on Christie has privileged the resolution of her mysteries, rather than the progression of the narrative as a whole, and the character of the detective over all other characterisations.³⁸ Foregrounding clues, and specifically objects-as-clues, permits a greater attention on the fuller trajectory of the plot and on the relation between such objects and the characters of victims and murderers. Some attention has been paid to the depiction of death, but this is not necessarily focused on the death of a specific victim. Rather, it is focused on what such depictions of death suggest more generally.³⁹ My emphasis on the clue-puzzle format of Christie's fiction could suggest a synergy with the oft-cited idea that '[g]olden age fiction is a deliberately unbelievable artifice which "solves" death by absorbing it into a story which fully "accounts for" it. Death is disposed of as unnatural, solvable, as a mendable tear in the social fabric' (Rowland, p. 26).⁴⁰

³⁷ I use this term "identities" to describe both the fact of which character(s) are the victim(s) and murderer(s), and also the concept of these identities being intrinsic to the detective fiction genre – the plots necessitate there being a victim and the resolution identifying who is the murderer.

³⁸ Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1–2. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

³⁹ An example is Gill Plain's exploration of detective fiction post-World War One as a ritual of remembrance; see her *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp. 29-55. Alison Light also remarks on Christie's as a 'fiction of convalescence'; see Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 69. Further references are to these editions and are given after quotations in the text.

⁴⁰ Rebecca Mills also points to how '[t]he appreciation of "puzzle" and "purity" inflects criticism of the Golden Age, as early commentators place the purely conventional and structural aspects of the mystery at the centre of their readings, while marginalising the presence and significance of the

However, I do not consider Christie's fiction within the clue-puzzle format in order to "account for" deaths in the narratives or the implication that the resolution is the aim of the game. Instead, focussing more carefully on the "pieces" of the puzzle – on objects-as-clues – enables a fuller consideration of death as applied to specific characters: those who are victims of it, and those who perpetrate it as murderers.

Foregrounding objects in this way allows a more detailed and nuanced understanding of these identities of victims and murderers in Christie's fiction. Such understanding encompasses both the distinctions between these two identities and within such designations themselves. It acknowledges how victims differ from (and are also similar to) murderers within the same text, and vice versa, and the similarities and distinctions between victims and between murderers across different texts. The identities of both victim and murderer should be considered in Christie's texts. Hoffman suggests that the victim's body is a clear indication of a 'disturbance of order' in detective fiction, but that women criminals' bodies are also of importance when considering 'transgressive possibilities'.⁴¹ In focussing on how objects relate to these characters, I suggest that such consideration can be expanded beyond solely the 'transgressive' elements, where 'transgressive' implies a violation of social and moral codes. It can include a broader understanding of such identities in Christie's detective fiction – namely, the instability of such distinctions between victim and murderer in many of the plots. The distinctions between these two identities are more complex and subtle than previous critical analyses have suggested. In place of solely viewing such identities as representative of death or merely roles necessary to the genre, the identities of murderer and victim can instead be considered through the objects with which they are associated. In particular, they can be considered through what these objects reveal about them. In so doing, these identities are shown to be less stable than the parameters of the genre imply. The distinctions between "victim" and "murderer" are less secure than a focus on solely the resolution of the plot would suggest.

victim'; 'Victims' in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Janice Allan *et al.* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 149–58 (p. 150). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁴¹ Megan Hoffman, *Gender and Representation in British 'Golden Age' Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 157–159. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. Barnard has warned that dismissal of Christie's works as 'cosy' often 'sees the murderer, and probably the victim too, as discordant elements in the general harmony which must be expelled in order to restore peace' (pp. 36–37). However, as Hoffman highlights, it is possible to perceive discordant elements without necessarily fixating on the compulsion of their being expelled.

Dismantling these identities – considering the individual details of the plots that the generic labels of “victim” and “murderer” conceal – through the medium of objects engages with the instability of identity throughout Christie’s texts. Lee Horsley points to how numerous texts contemporaneous with Christie’s reveal tensions below the surface of middle-class English society, with the ‘instability of identity’ listed amongst these tensions.⁴² In analysing objects and their association with these identity labels, I demonstrate how – instead of existing ‘below the surface’ – such instability is rooted at the heart of Christie’s detective fiction plots. Instability should be read in relation to the identities of victims and murderers through a consideration of objects. I am not suggesting that identity is in any way a singular concept in Christie’s novels, but that it is ‘a series of social masks that are both genuine and inconsistent’ (Rowland, p. 47).⁴³ Identity is flexible and – in some ways – indefinable in relation to the detective fiction genre. Bernthal highlights how ‘[s]ince a whodunit is structured around identifying a culprit or culprits, and only some information can fit the “solution”, it is possible to conclude from here that no understandings about essential identity are fully conclusive: there will always be potential “clues” to a person’s identity that tell a different story’ (*Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 6).⁴⁴ Therefore, whilst being able to label specific characters as “victim” and “murderer” is essential to the trajectory of the detective fiction narrative, such designations cannot be considered so clearly distinct from each other. Reading the “clues” provided by objects enables the foregrounding of complexity in the relationship between victim and murderer identities, and equally in the detection of which characters can be identified as such.

‘Intellectually Engaged’: The Feminine Middlebrow as Mode of Reading

In her 1924 essay ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’, Virginia Woolf discusses the purpose of ‘character’ in novels of the early twentieth century, comparing her work with those of her contemporaries, particularly Arnold Bennett. She argues that Bennett’s insistence that characters in novels must be real leads him to over-emphasise the importance of details,

⁴² Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 19. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁴³ Concern over identity is not solely limited to detective fiction in this period; this concern runs throughout much mid-twentieth century British fiction – Elizabeth Maslen notes uncertainty about identity as a ‘persistent theme’ of middlebrow women writers of the 1940s and 1950s; see Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women’s Fiction, 1928–1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 48. Nicola Humble perceives this as a middle-class concern in the post-World War One period; see Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 57. Further references are to these editions and are given after quotations in the text.

⁴⁴ I understand ‘essential identity’ to here refer to a sense of one interpretation of who or what a person is.

particularly of objects and things, that make up their reality. Woolf imagines a hypothetical scenario in which Bennett meets ‘Mrs Brown’ on a train and puts the experience in a novel:

He, indeed, would observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements; the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth; the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons; how Mrs. Brown wore a brooch which had cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth’s bazaar; and had mended both gloves – indeed the thumb of the left-hand glove had been replaced.⁴⁵

Woolf concludes that ‘[w]ith all his powers of observation, which are marvellous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner’ (p. 16). Christie’s texts are similarly constructed with a preponderance of details – particularly objects – that may perhaps seem to fall under the same criticism Woolf levels at Bennett. Indeed, Woolf concludes that examples of such description are ‘wrong[...] to use. They have laid enormous stress upon the fabric of things’ (p. 18). Yet ‘the fabric of things’ does not have to be divorced so completely from character. In this section, I advocate a particular mode of reading Christie’s texts as a means of considering the objects within them. This mode of reading is informed by the middlebrow, recognising the implications of gendered critical approaches to this concept.

In foregrounding objects-as-clues in Christie’s texts, I consider her works in relation to concepts of the middlebrow. Framing Christie’s works in terms of the middlebrow – instead of specifically the “Golden Age” of detective fiction – allows for greater flexibility in comparing her texts from across her writing career.⁴⁶ Various scholars have suggested that the middlebrow extends across the mid-twentieth century, and that it continues in various forms of writing today.⁴⁷ The middlebrow is a complex term or framework, and one that has been defined diversely. I consider it as a cultural construct, rather than a ‘formal or generic categor[y]’ (Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 28). This cultural construct is largely defined in relation to other works; both in creating a spectrum of “highbrow” to

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), p. 13. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁴⁶ As Humble notes, female detective fiction writers such as Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, and Dorothy L. Sayers have been served better by critical attention that focuses on their works as indicative of the genre (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 3, footnote). I argue for a means of viewing Christie’s works, not solely as detective fiction, but as part of the broader definition of the middlebrow; however, this is not to neglect to perceive the importance of the demands of the genre.

⁴⁷ See Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 1–28; and Janet Galligani Casey, ‘Middlebrow Reading and Undergraduate Teaching: The Place of the Middlebrow in the Academy’, in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, pp. 25–36 (p. 33). Further references are to these editions and are given after quotations in the text.

“lowbrow”, and also within the concept of the middlebrow itself.⁴⁸ This leads to a certain degree of instability – and flexibility – in the term: ‘[t]he middlebrow is difficult to define [...] because as a product of contested and precarious assertions of cultural authority, it is itself unstable’.⁴⁹ This notion of defining middlebrow texts against other works implies a sense of borders and contamination. Defining works against other works creates a sense of what can and what must be ‘contested’ within the middlebrow; this can be particularly difficult when subsequently using the term in the context of a single-author study.⁵⁰ Rather than attempting to establish a sense of cultural authority and placing Christie’s works within a middlebrow hierarchy, I consider her texts as engaging with concepts of the middlebrow culture of the period in which they were published. They engage with, and are representative of, wider middlebrow culture of the mid-twentieth century.

Defining middlebrow texts against other works foregrounds how the middlebrow itself presents modes of reading. Such modes of reading are relied upon in Christie’s plotting devices. As Malcah Effron, Margarida McMurray and Virginia Pignagnoli describe, ‘an author creates a world that has to be reconstructed by the audience. This reconstruction results from the application of assumptions and judgments on the part of both authors and audience’.⁵¹ Therefore there is an inherent cultural outlook, informed by the realism of the world represented within the texts and familiarity with that world, that enables this mode of reading.⁵² Effron *et al.* further discuss how, in this process of reconstructing the storyworld

⁴⁸ There are controversial aspects of the term “middlebrow”; as emphasised by Elizabeth Maslen and by Kate Macdonald, the use of the physical signifier of the ‘brow’ as a metaphor for quality and taste – suggesting the height of a person’s forehead is an indication of their capacity for cultural appreciation – is highly problematic, as are the pejorative connotations attached to the term since the 1920s. See Macdonald, ‘Introduction: Identifying the Middlebrow, the Masculine and Mr Miniver’, in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880–1950: What Mr Miniver Read*, ed. by Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1–23 (p. 6). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. See also Maslen, pp. 11; 16.

⁴⁹ Erica Brown and Mary Grover, ‘Introduction: Middlebrow Matters’, in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920–1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1–24 (p. 2). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁵⁰ A number of scholars consider Christie as a middlebrow writer, including Alison Light, and Gill Plain.

⁵¹ Malcah Effron, Margarida McMurray, Virginia Pignagnoli, ‘Narrative Co-Construction: A Rhetorical Approach’, *Narrative*, 27.3 (2019), 332–52 (p. 336). Further references are to this edition and given after quotations in the text.

⁵² In discussing the realism of Christie’s texts, I am not suggesting that the murder plots themselves are realistic (although some do have their basis in real-life criminal cases, as discussed by Martin Edwards, *The Golden Age of Murder* [London: HarperCollins, 2015]. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text); by contrast, I am suggesting that the details of the

through reading, this is ‘not merely a reconstruction. The audience will imbue the storyworld with some of its own assumptions and mental representations’ (p. 336). They further emphasise that ‘by applying insight gained from co-constructing the storyworld, the audience also re-constructs the actual world’ (p. 336). However, I am primarily concerned with the first part of this process: namely, the knowledge of contexts and details – this inherent cultural outlook – of the actual world that are necessary to reading the plots of Christie’s storyworlds. Macdonald highlights how authors typically assigned to the middlebrow did not necessarily share in similar thematic material, messages, forms or readerships, but that the middlebrow ‘could be a mode of reading’ (‘Introduction’, p. 11). She suggests that it presented ‘new ideas about how reading related to being male or female, masculine or feminine’ (‘Introduction’, p. 11). Macdonald’s ideas emphasise how the middlebrow informs this outlook that I perceive as integral to reading Christie’s texts. The middlebrow itself is a mode of reading that informs approaches to – readings of – texts.

This mode of reading, characterised by both a noticing and understanding of details of the plots, elevates Christie’s texts beyond merely a form of escapism or entertainment. Such forms typically characterise these texts as in some sense frivolous or, in Humble’s terms, ‘cultural products thought to be too easy, too insular, too smug’ (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 1). As Maslen suggests, the popularity of middlebrow fiction as an entertainment form in this period does not have to imply that ‘entertainment need [...] only function as escapism’ (pp. 2–3). Maslen perceives the realist mode of such novels as a way ‘in which to challenge their readers with political and social issues’ (p. 3). The familiarity with the world of the novels enables an acceptance of perspectives of that world that challenges the status quo and enables the author to overcome any ‘internal censorship’ on the part of the reader (Maslen, p. 3). This middlebrow realist mode is essential to Christie’s plots by presenting a world that is intended to be recognised, and for that recognition to be used. Woolf’s essay makes a similar point that ‘[t]he writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy’ (p. 17). In other words, Christie’s plots presuppose a recognition of the world represented within them, and of the world outside the texts. They necessitate a noticing of the details of those worlds, and an understanding of knowledge associated with those details that can then be applied to the circumstances of the plot. Of course, the world of the novels is contemporaneous with their

worlds of the plots – the objects that characters are surrounded by, the places they live in – do bear strong resemblance to reality.

publication and presupposes a white, Western-centric perspective. Recognition of the details of those worlds further begins to increasingly rely on knowledge of that world to be found beyond lived experience. As this period of time (1920–mid-1970s) moves increasingly beyond the lived experience of readers, such knowledge must be reclaimed through other avenues, which I discuss below.

Understanding Christie's texts as part of the middlebrow – and how they engage with these notions of escapism and entertainment – necessitates an understanding of how this term “middlebrow” has been gendered in critical scholarship thus far. Kate Macdonald's study of the masculine middlebrow defines the “feminine” middlebrow as specifically reacting against the “masculine” middlebrow, implying a sense of clear demarcations along gendered lines in the concept of the middlebrow (‘Introduction’, p. 2). Such demarcations are further extended in relation to Christie's texts and their form as detective fiction. Light describes how ‘writing detective fiction was, and is, for many women writers not only a way of claiming the “unfeminine” qualities of orderliness and control, but also of attempting to avoid the “stigma” of gender altogether (p. 162). Yet studies of middlebrow fiction have tended towards gendered considerations of genre whereby, rather than avoiding the ‘stigma’ of gender, this gendering of the genre has become inherent to how detective fiction writing is considered within the middlebrow. Thus, recognising the details of Christie's ‘storyworlds’ necessitates an understanding of how such details have themselves become tied to this gendering of the form. In order to do so, it is pertinent to this study to examine how the genre of detective fiction has been gendered thus far within the middlebrow.

In critical studies that take an overview of readers and reading in the early- to mid-twentieth century, Christie's texts have been categorised in terms of the middlebrow as a “feminine” form, with detective fiction acknowledged as a bridge between female and male readerships. It is perhaps important to note that most previous scholarship on the middlebrow in relation to genre has argued that there is an implied hierarchy within the middlebrow. In this hierarchy, detective fiction ‘ranked high as it was the preferred leisure reading of men, particularly intellectual ones’ (Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 13).⁵³ This implies that detective fiction belongs to the masculine middlebrow. However, as Bloom notes, in the early twentieth century women were the main beneficiaries of expanding literacy; there was a

⁵³ Bloom also notes that genre specialisation often led to authorship being divided along gender lines, but that this should not be overestimated, and that detective fiction always had a *cachet* amongst other genres – see p. 14.

corresponding preoccupation with the role of the author and the professionalisation of this role evident amongst women writers (p. 9). The success of such writers' works is attributed by Bloom to the growth in female readership (p. 9). Similarly, Brown and Grover perceive that the feminine middlebrow has a 'particular concentration on feminine aspects of life' ('Introduction', p. 10). Other work on the feminine middlebrow has previously argued that '[t]heir readers were probably mainly women who could find in their novels women characters who did not conform to contemporary stereotypes and who reflected the dilemmas they themselves confronted'.⁵⁴ Hence, whilst the detective fiction genre is associated with 'the preferred leisure reading of men' – and thus with the masculine middlebrow – I argue that Christie's texts equally belong to the feminine middlebrow. Her engagement with the detective fiction genre is itself indicative of how, as an author, Christie does 'not conform to contemporary stereotypes'.⁵⁵ She engages with its demands innovatively, as will be discussed below in my analysis of her texts.

Understanding Christie's texts as part of the feminine middlebrow is closely related to the sense of flexibility – neither entirely reacting against the masculine middlebrow, nor simply adopting its qualities – identified as inherent to the feminine middlebrow. Humble discusses how the feminine middlebrow is ideologically flexible in its means of creating, cementing, and challenging new class and gender identities through its 'paradoxical allegiance' to domesticity and to radical sophistication (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 3).⁵⁶ This implies that the feminine middlebrow is inherently flexible: it encompasses texts that can be both challenges and endorsements of somewhat disparate outlooks such as domesticity and a

⁵⁴ Niamh Baker, *Happily Ever After?: Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945–1960* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989), p. 24. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁵⁵ It is not my intention in this project to discuss the gender roles within Christie's detective fiction, which has already been done by Merja Makinen, Megan Hoffman, and Melissa Schaub (see Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. Rather, similarly to the issue of class, such concepts arise in my discussion of various aspects of Christie's texts, such as the use of lipstick to suggest a distinctly feminine persona by a male character in *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952).

⁵⁶ Many scholars of the feminine middlebrow discuss its ideological formation of middle-class identities; Bloom discusses how the term itself, falling between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' is indicative of the British class system (p. 12). Similarly, Baker describes how such fiction appeals to 'neither the castle nor the hovel, the top drawer not the bottom, but that large class of people in between who would prefer life to go on rather as it always has done' (p. 7). By contrast, Light suggests of Christie's work that 'her prose tries hard not to antagonise the reader and makes few assumptions about their class position' (p. 76). I am less concerned with identifying the class positions of Christie's readers, but the cultural details of the plots – the objects-as-clues – do presume on readers' knowledge of such items.

sophistication that reacts against this. Similarly, Maslen suggests that the middlebrow mode of realism was adopted by women as ‘something more than a vehicle for entertainment [and] cannot be dismissed as a vehicle for cultural conservatism or as a hostage to patriarchal modes of writing’ (p. 36). Following Maslen, I consider that Christie’s texts cannot be dismissed or perceived as hostage to such modes. The detective fiction plots are more than mere entertainment. They are ideologically flexible in their use of cultural and social details and contexts (and knowledge thereof) that can be defined across a spectrum of domesticity and sophistication, rather than understanding these as antithetical to each other.⁵⁷ The plots rely on objects-as-clues that are from the everyday world of contemporary readers; they require knowledge and a mode of reading such objects in order for the plot to be resolved. I describe this as a “feminised mode of reading” throughout this thesis and discuss the three key components of this term in the following paragraphs.

In describing a *feminised* mode of reading, I seek to avoid some of the issues raised by perceiving detective fiction as a genre of the masculine middlebrow. Instead, the importance of reading Christie’s texts as part of the feminine middlebrow is emphasised. In discussing how the detective fiction genre has typically been perceived as ‘the preferred leisure reading of men’, I am not suggesting that Christie’s novels are solely aimed at male readers. Nor do I imply that, in bridging the gap between the masculine and feminine middlebrow, this signifies a gendered approach that privileges the masculine in relation to the process of reading the novels. By contrast, Christie’s plots necessitate a feminised mode of reading that – to use Brown and Grover’s terms – ‘has a particular concentration on feminine aspects of life’. Such terms are perhaps somewhat ambiguous, yet ‘feminine aspects of life’ can be considered to encompass knowledge and understanding of contexts related to objects that can consequently perceive their clue-potential. This suggests why Christie is so often described as a “mistress of plotting”. Emphasis is placed on the construction of the mystery as so intricate that to solve it is to overcome a particular challenge.⁵⁸ However, the knowledge and understanding of such contexts related to objects is not necessarily held by all her readers, and the opportunity afforded by a feminised mode of reading is not shared by all either. This therefore leads to an

⁵⁷ The term “domesticity” has largely been used previously to focus on women’s roles within the home as (house)wives and mothers; however, throughout this thesis, I argue that this should be expanded to incorporate young women, and specifically young women as victims of crime, and not solely the romantic associations and narrative trajectories towards love and marriage. For more on these themes and roles, see Baker’s study, *Happily Ever After?*; Maslen, pp. 145–84; and Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman’s Novel, 1914–1939* (London: Virago, 1983), pp. 173–97.

⁵⁸ This relates to my earlier discussion of the clue-puzzle format, and Mandel’s suggestion of ‘fake play disguised as fair play’ (p. 48).

impression that the resolutions of the mysteries – relying on this feminised mode of reading – are particularly difficult to achieve yet logical once revealed. However, this feminised mode of reading does provide opportunities for reading and understanding the clue-potential of objects, and so for resolving the mystery.

This feminised mode of reading is based on understanding the detective fiction genre as a bridge between the feminine and masculine middlebrow. Christie's works employ a genre and form typically assigned to the "masculine" middlebrow, but with a distinctly "feminine" middlebrow outlook in their reliance on cultural and social details and contexts. The narrative trajectories of the plots are securely rooted in the expectations of the detective fiction genre – they are intended to be read with a view towards the solution of the mystery in mind. Yet the necessities of those plots – namely, the objects-as-clues – are instead rooted in an understanding of the contexts of those objects-as-clues. They rely on knowledge that has been typically defined as feminine. The term 'feminised' is therefore not intended to imply that this mode of reading is only accessible to women, but rather to recognise how this knowledge has typically been assigned to the feminine middlebrow and its importance to reading texts of the genre. The feminised outlook of Christie's works incorporates several middlebrow themes, including class and gender identities, marriage and family, domesticity and home, and – most significantly – reading and writing. To be resolved, the plots rely on more than just the domestic drudge of household details, such as the spills on the mantelpiece in Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). They rely on knowledge that, I argue, underpins this feminised mode of reading.

Description of this as a "mode" of reading acknowledges how Christie's texts can be read diversely: there is not a singular way of reading these texts. Therefore, I use this term to describe one particular way through which to consider objects in Christie's texts. In relating middlebrow modes of reading to this feminised mode of reading, I distinguish this from the emphasis on how the former relate to the gender identities of middlebrow *readers*, noted above, that Macdonald observes ('Introduction', p. 11). In so doing, I consider Christie's texts as requiring a particular mode of reading. Yet this does not necessarily have to signify a transmission of ideas from text to reader, such as these ideas about gender and sexuality. Such a mode of reading can, instead, imply the knowledge and insight required prior to engagement with the text. I therefore propose that these texts presume a pre-existing middlebrow cultural outlook in order for the mystery to be resolved. This outlook acknowledges the gendered implications of detective fiction within the masculine and feminine middlebrow, and thus I

describe it as a feminised mode of reading. This mode of reading is consistent across all her texts, from the early 1920s to the mid-1970s. It advocates engagement with and knowledge of, to use Effron *et al.*'s terms, the actual world and the storyworld – the world represented within the novels. Only by noticing and *understanding* details of these worlds – such as what the uses of paper to score bridge games suggest about the economic circumstances of various characters in *Cards on the Table* (1936), or how many wigs are required by women who wear them every day as in *Elephants Can Remember* (1972) – is it possible to read Christie's plots to the resolutions of the mysteries.

I term this noticing and understanding of details of the texts as “reading”. To engage with these details necessitates knowledge of the world in Christie's texts, contemporaneous with publication. One way this can be reclaimed is through attempting to understand the original readers of these works. As Light argues in relation to the formative role of novels, ‘any critical practice which does not find fellow-feeling with past readers and writers, however distant they seem from our own conscious projects and beliefs, is [...] unable to understand the historical meaning of such writing’ (pp. x–xi).⁵⁹ In relation to Christie, this aim of understanding the texts' historical meaning is perhaps secondary to the primary concern of how closely the plots rely on details of the everyday world of their initial publication in order to be resolved. However, to understand those details, it is necessary to reclaim some degree of fellow-feeling with the texts' first readers. Such reclamation permits understanding of the world presented within the texts, and appreciation of how this is related to the resolution of the plots. Understanding how Christie's texts were initially published is also significant to this – many of her works were serialised in daily newspapers and popular magazines, both in the UK and abroad, particularly in the US.⁶⁰ The everyday world of the texts is therefore also to be found in such publications. There is a shared relationship between the appeal of Christie as an author to attract new consumers to these publications and readers of the publications that discover Christie's texts through their regular buying habits. Both sets of readers have familiarity with the mode of reading of that world upon which her texts rely.

⁵⁹ I am not suggesting here that this attempt to understand readers is unproblematic, or is even ever entirely possible – following Light, who terms this a need to ‘find fellow-feeling’, I am suggesting a need to reclaim a sense of rapprochement with those readers whose cultural outlooks are perhaps no longer shared with current readerships.

⁶⁰ UK publications include *The Sketch*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Woman's Mirror*; US publications include *The American Magazine*, *Collier's Weekly*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. For more details of serialisation in relation to the middlebrow, see Adrian Bingham, ‘Cultural Hierarchies and the Interwar British Press’, in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, pp. 55–68 (pp. 63–65).

My focus on objects in Christie's texts is centred on a specific type of objects – women's fashion accessories – that I outline in more detail in the following section. However, it is pertinent to my discussion of reading Christie's texts as part of the middlebrow to discuss here how this responds to trends in detective fiction studies that have emphasised the crime aspect of these novels. There is subsequently a tendency to emphasise how the genre responds to technological advances, such as those in forensic science. More attention is thus paid to objects that have a direct and clearly defined role in the crime itself: namely, the murder weapon. This is also related to the emphasis on rationality and the gendering of this as masculine; Rowland notes that 'the feminine has been the dark other to the masculine western tradition of privileging reason, intelligence, order and rationality' (p. 16). Thus, focus on solving the mystery through clues to be gleaned from the crime scene tends towards a privileging of the masculine over the feminine in relation to objects. This is echoed by critics who have noted how Christie's detectives operate against this approach to the genre. They include Knight, who sees both Miss Marple and Poirot as representing 'a heightened version of female domestic knowledge as a weapon against fictional disorder' (p. 91). Similarly, Makinen identifies that Christie's works 'chart [...] social changes' in 'the domestic minutiae of their settings' (p. 6). Therefore, my focus on objects *indirectly* related to the crime – objects that belong to and are worn by women – invites a mode of reading that intends to resolve the mystery by engaging with feminised forms of knowledge. To return to Woolf's essay, this is a mode of reading where the 'fabric of things' – the knowledge they require and provide – has a direct correlation to what they can reveal about character.

Christie's texts demonstrate particular preoccupations with the idea of reading as a means of engaging with concepts of identities. When discussing identities, I refer specifically to the identities inherent to the genre of detective fiction: who is the victim, the murderer. I am not referring by "identities" to the concepts of class and gender discussed in previous scholarship, although these generic identities do intersect with these other formulations.⁶¹ In referring to identities within the feminine middlebrow, I am not concerned with the idea of specifically "feminine" identities and analysing how these are formed and represented in the texts.⁶² By contrast, as Baker suggests from her reading of middlebrow novels of the post-World War

⁶¹ For example, as I will discuss in Chapter Three, in *The Body in the Library* the confusion over the identity of the eponymous body – whether it is the lower-class dancer Ruby Keene or middle-class schoolgirl Pamela Reeves – sets up such a conflict in class identities based on appearances.

⁶² This has been analysed previously – see Makinen's study, subtitled 'Investigating Femininity', and Hoffman's study, *Gender and Representation in British 'Golden Age' Crime Fiction*.

One period, female identity was ‘complex and varied’ (p. 22).⁶³ I seek to instead investigate how modes of reading are used to unpick complex and varied identities within the detective fiction plots. As acknowledged previously, victims and murderers in detective fiction have been dismissed as basic necessities of the plot with little consideration for the complexities of these identities. However, it is possible to perceive that these identities are – to some extent – individualised to the demands of each specific plot and of far more complex significance than merely generic necessities. Describing characters in Christie’s novels as “murderer” or “victim” to some extent conceals the depth to which these identities are both similar and distinguishable from one another, both in different texts and within the same text. It is the mode of reading that is central to understanding these identities: only by considering knowledge and understanding of details within the plots by the reader can the victim’s and murderer’s identities be fully appreciated.

Emphasising the practice of reading is integral to how I understand this feminised mode of reading as a communal activity. It relies on a sense of knowledge and insight into the world of the novels and the real world that is shared across readers of the texts. Communality is significant to how the middlebrow novel envisions its readers – ‘[b]ooks are enjoyed, ridiculed, used as social and more guides, as comfort objects, as symbols of class and status; they form bonds between people, or emphasize their difference’ (Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 46–47).⁶⁴ In terms of Christie’s detective fiction, such bonds and differences between people can further be seen in their ability to read the clues – through this feminised mode – towards the resolution of the plots. Humble notes that

[f]or the feminine middlebrow [...], it is clear that the detective story forms an exception to the usual run of middlebrow novels; its ratiocinative elements offering the illusion of an active, intellectually engaged reading, rather than a passive abandonment, allowing the male reader to indulge in escapist reading without experiencing a feared loss of control. (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 53)

Christie’s work does indeed require an ‘intellectually engaged’ mode of reading – but it is more than an illusion. It is instead a mode that relies on feminised knowledge of the everyday

⁶³ Baker focuses on these novels’ treatment of the relationship between men and women, yet I suggest that this notion of ‘complex and varied’ female identity is equally applicable to how I understand identities within the detective fiction plots.

⁶⁴ This is central to middlebrow modes of reading – in discussing these, I am not suggesting that there is a unified outlook of the middlebrow reader, but that, as Humble here identifies, there are bonds as much as differences. Such communality in the detective fiction genre can equally be seen in the formation of publishing imprints such as Collins Crime Club, an imprint of William Collins, Sons first formed in 1930, which sent newsletters to its members to advertise new books.

world, requiring both a noticing and understanding of that knowledge and world to be applied.⁶⁵ A clear example of such knowledge lies in the vast multiplicity and range of details in Christie's texts associated with women's dress and attire. I focus on women's fashion accessories; the range of these details suggests that fashion is part of the intellectually engaged feminised mode of reading inherent to Christie's detective fiction. Fashion must be considered as a further aspect of the middlebrow – in addition to the themes of class, gender, domesticity and home, reading and writing, that have been emphasised elsewhere, as detailed above. In so doing, it enables an understanding of how this feminised mode of reading is integral to Christie's texts.

'Consider [...] the accessory before all else': Fashion and Identity in the Middlebrow

Fashion should also be considered as an integral part of the middlebrow. Previous discussion of middlebrow fiction has identified that Christie's detective fiction invited readers

to identify with a more inward-looking notion of the English as a nice, decent, essentially private people. This was an idiom more about self-effacement and retreat than bombast and expansion, one which could lie both at the heart of a class formation and reach across classes. (Light, p. 11)

This frames the relation between Christie's texts and the middlebrow not only in terms of (middle-)class preoccupations and aspirations. It also characterises such literature as presenting readers with notions of Englishness that typifies these as introspective and somewhat insular. Fashion in Christie's novels – and understanding the contexts of such items as material products with potentially global connections – suggests that whilst such literature might be representative of middle-class concerns, this is not to say that the novels are entirely focused on an inward-looking middle-class Englishness. The class concerns of middlebrow literature have been securely fixed as upper-middle-class in nature, with the suggestion that such texts 'allow[...] every reader the satisfactions of being upper middle class' (Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 89; 107). Middlebrow literature presumes knowledge of such class codes in order for the process of reading it invites; fashion is a part of this knowledge. Light argues that there are few details of luxury in Christie's texts with readers consequently not invited to perceive themselves as 'society hangers-on' (p. 105). However,

⁶⁵ Humble's use of this term 'intellectually engaged' is intended to form a contrast to the 'passive abandonment' of other genres of the feminine middlebrow, with perhaps a problematic sense of disparagement of the latter. However, I use this term to describe how detective fiction can be read both through attempting to use this knowledge – thus 'intellectually engaged' – to resolve the mystery, and also without attempting this process – perhaps more reflective of this passive abandonment Humble identifies; it is the former I consider in this thesis.

analysis of such fashion items in Christie's texts reveal that fashion is part of this wider picture of aspiration to upper-middle-class culture.⁶⁶

The connection between fashion items and class cultures is an important one to acknowledge. Yet such items provide a wide range of contexts through which to read and understand them, including, but not solely limited to, their relation to class. As Faye Hammill notes,

[m]iddlebrow culture can only be fully understood by bringing together [...] perspectives from social and cultural history with critical analysis of literature, film, music and the media. This is because the tensions surrounding the middlebrow are related to discourses of class and taste which range across the whole area of lifestyle choices and cultural consumption, from interiors, gardens, design and fashion to preferences in entertainment and reading material.⁶⁷

In place of focussing solely on how fashion relates to class cultures, this thesis takes a broader perspective of fashion items and how the contexts related to them incorporate a range of different discourses. To a certain extent, and as discussed above, the author presumes (and relies upon) knowledge of these items to be held by the reader in order for them to be read as clues to the resolution of the mystery. In doing so, I consider fashion items in relation to contemporary contexts, using magazine articles and features detailing such items.⁶⁸ In her study of sophistication, Hammill notes that there is a key difference between literary texts and such cultural texts as magazines and newspapers. The latter 'focus on sophistication in the context of fashion [...rather than] in relation to morality' as in the former.⁶⁹ Fashion items must be considered in terms of a broader range of contexts instead of focusing on one particular aspect, such as class, fashionableness, or materiality, to name a few. Such consideration allows a greater understanding of the similarities between the knowledge presented in such magazines and that relied and presumed upon in the reading of fashion items in Christie's texts.

This research is not the first to consider fashion in literary texts of this period alongside cultural texts such as magazines. Fashion has been considered in relation to modernism, with

⁶⁶ Such aspirations are equally represented in examples from magazines and periodicals of the period that advertise such fashion items; in both cases – the magazines and Christie's texts – such aspirations are not necessarily aligned to a sense of being 'society hangers-on' that Light perceives.

⁶⁷ Faye Hammill, 'Afterword', in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, pp. 231–33 (p. 232).

⁶⁸ I provide a more extensive discussion of my methodology in the following section of my Introduction.

⁶⁹ Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 4. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

the suggestion that it is ‘commercial literature’s conceptual obverse’.⁷⁰ This suggests that any representation of fashion items in modernist literature would consequently be akin to the conceptually obverse of such representations in middlebrow literature. It is important to note that this is not to suggest that the middlebrow and modernism are binary oppositions of each other. However, Gasston’s analysis of modernist short stories by women writers notes that the objects analysed within their fiction ‘all connote [...the] realm of the feminine and the domestic – what might be perceived as trivial’ (p. 12). As illustrated above, these realms have consistently been defined as attributes of the middlebrow, with pejorative connotations. Gasston argues that, in contrast to being a submission to the traditional domestic sphere, these works instead demonstrate a ‘reappropriation and subversion’ of it with ‘the possibility for scope, extension and meaning in the things of everyday life’ (p. 13). I argue that it is not necessary to seek to place such works within a framework that is disparaging of the traditional domestic sphere of everyday life by suggesting that they are required to reappropriate or subvert it. By contrast, in considering fashion items in Christie’s texts it is possible to perceive that knowledge of, and reading through, this sphere and everyday life is instead privileged. It is rendered inherent to the demands of the genre: in order for clues to be read correctly, it is necessary to understand these fashion accessories without such an understanding necessarily corresponding to a subversion.

Before outlining this approach to reading in relation to the women’s fashion accessories in Christie’s texts, it is necessary to detail what exactly is encompassed by the term women’s fashion accessories. In focussing on these items in relation to women, I build on the work of Plock, who argues that fashion is ‘aligned very firmly in the popular imagination of the early twentieth century with women on the one hand and with superficiality and capriciousness on the other’ with such negative connotations leading to a corresponding sense of inferiority of women’s writing that details such topics (p. 14). Instead of connoting these negative attributes, women’s fashion in Christie’s texts is part of the intellectually engaged feminised mode of reading required to solve the mystery at the heart of the genre.⁷¹ Fashion is a

⁷⁰ Vike Martina Plock, *Modernism, Fashion and Interwar Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 5. Other works that study fashion in relation to literary modernism include: Aimée Gasston, *Modernist Short Fiction and Things* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Elizabeth M. Sheehan, *Modernism à la Mode: Fashion and the Ends of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); and Celia Marshik, *At the Mercy of their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow and British Garment Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). Further references are to these editions and are given after quotations in the text.

⁷¹ Plock notes that ‘[i]n making fashion an important reference point for their work, [...] these women writers were drawing attention to the gendered logic that continued to affect the professional lives and

complex system in itself. Understanding an item as fashion incorporates this complexity as it is ‘made of things and signs, as well as individual and collective agents, which all coalesce through practices of production, consumption, distribution and representation’.⁷² My understanding of fashion encompasses as many of these elements, and is as representative of its complexity, as possible. However, I largely focus on the material aspects of these items and their consumption by particular characters in the novels. This focus enables an understanding of how such aspects are manipulated in order for them to be read as clues.

Understanding items as fashion (as opposed to dress or garments) is central to how I understand these accessories in Christie’s texts. Fashion is a complex system, yet the term has particular connotations that are worth detailing. Marshik’s study of garments in twentieth-century women’s fiction suggests that whilst clothing is, to a certain extent, subject to changes in designs and taste, the term fashion is applicable to individuals and garments that are representative of ‘styles of the moment’ (p. 4). Similarly, ‘the dynamic of fashion [...] works by relentlessly defining itself against its immediate past, or immediate context’ (Hammill, *Sophistication*, p. 4). Fashion has connotations of linearity in relation to time: what is fashionable must be understood by considering what has come before and the current context. I do not seek to imply that the term has not previously been without negative criticism, particularly in relation to signifying ‘inconsequence, frivolity, and a capitulation to market demand’ (Sheehan, p. 1). Rather than focussing on the capitalist dimensions of the industry in this period that drove demands and changes in fashions, I instead focus on the middlebrow literary demands of the detective fiction genre in which Christie was writing. These demands touch upon how the fashion industry relates to upper-middle-class values and aspirations. In so doing, I argue that far from signifying inconsequence, frivolity or triviality, fashion is a term that represents the capabilities and possibilities of reading items through a complexity of contexts; they have consequence and profound meanings.

Most previous studies of fashion in literature of this period – whether modernist or, less frequently, middlebrow – have analysed dress and garments, as opposed to accessories. Accessories are often perceived in relation to fashion as something subordinate or as

creative pursuits of those women who had chosen careers in the arts in the [interwar...] years’ (p. 16). I argue that Christie uses this gendered logic as central to reading her detective fiction.

⁷² Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, ‘Thinking Through Fashion: An Introduction’, in *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, ed. by Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 1–27 (p. 2).

accompaniment to the main outfit of clothes.⁷³ Many items can be considered as accessories to women's clothing – shoes, handbags, gloves, fans, to name just a few – but my research focuses on three main subcategories. Most prevalent in Christie's texts are hats; jewellery; and, makeup and cosmetics. This definition of accessories as something additional to clothing suggests that it is necessary to consider the apparel to which they are associated in this way. However, I understand accessories to be distinct items in themselves. As Giorcelli highlights, accessorising an outfit provides opportunities to create 'a style that appears unique', and that '[n]either inside nor outside, neither superfluous nor necessary, the accessory is thus almost indispensable, particularly to any investigation into identity through dress' (pp. 3–4). In existing in this indeterminate state between two oppositions, accessories encapsulate the complexities of consideration of identities inherent to the detective fiction genre. It must be determined whether, as items, they are to be read as clues to the identities of victim and murderer. If so, a feminised mode of reading can help to determine their significance in relation to resolving the plots of the novels.

The term accessory, whilst hence suggesting the concept of addition to clothing, is also significant to how Christie's narratives place such items towards a position of centrality. This centrality is particularly in relation to the plots of her fiction. Accessories are positioned in a place where they might be considered as "accessories to murder" for the ways in which they are used and manipulated around the identities of murderer and victim. This centrality of accessories has been highlighted by Giorcelli who describes their place as 'decentred centrality' for the numerous and varied roles that accessories are called on to perform in relation to the wearer (pp. 4–5). Similarly, Gasston's discussion of accessories in Elizabeth Bowen's short stories attempts to 'place the accessory centre-stage' and to 'consider[...] the accessory before all else' (pp. 142; 143). This thesis takes a similar approach: it considers accessories and their contexts in relation to the identities of victim and murderer essential to the detective fiction genre. Gasston's work also makes several important points about how 'the objects explored [...] work as accessories to the processes of reading and to thinking about reading' (p. 14). Whilst Gasston defines this process, particularly in relation to Bowen's work, as reading 'eccentrically' of 'the marginal and the bizarre', this thesis takes a similar

⁷³ Cristina Giorcelli, 'Introduction: Accessorizing the Modern(ist) Body', in *Accessorizing the Body: Habits of Being I*, ed. by Cristina Giorcelli and Paula Rabinowitz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pp. 1-6 (pp. 2–3). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. Giorcelli also points to the sociological development of such items from being the preserve of those with the financial power to buy them to the more affordable – and consequently widespread – items seen today (p. 3).

outlook of accessories as inviting a particular mode of reading (pp. 143; 145). In understanding them as central to the detective fiction plots, I interpret accessories as requiring a mode of reading which requires “accessory” information to be held by the reader. This information permits interpretation of them as clues. Information and understanding of the contexts associated with such items can be applied to the narrative in order to resolve it satisfactorily.

Fashion accessories require a sense of reading, even beyond the generic demands of detective fiction. Sheehan observes that ‘texts draw on discourses and images of dress to address their own capacity to create various effects, including particular ways of knowing and relating’, and highlights the pairing of text and textile deriving from the Latin verb *textere* (meaning ‘to weave’) (pp. 6; 14). I suggest that the complexities woven into both fashion and literary texts – and the potential for meanings these complexities create – provide a circularity between the two in connection to the mode of reading. Contexts related to fashion items inform our ability to read and so to understand such items in literary texts, whilst their literary representation also informs our understanding of such items.⁷⁴ Gasston points to neuroscience research that has identified how reading relies on a capacity for visually identifying objects (p. 199). Such capacity relates to the importance of reading fashion accessories and understanding their contexts, as fashion ‘operates as a contingent, contextual mode of perception that foregrounds how form and meaning shift across space and time’ (Sheehan, p. 2). Consequently, it is imperative to attempt to recover a sense of the context of these items contemporary to the publication of Christie’s novels. In her work on garments in Virginia Woolf’s work, Marshik identifies that ‘garments dynamically engage social history, working with assumptions, tones and trajectories no longer familiar to us’ (p. 2). Such engagement encourages a mode of reading in which the text presumes on the active commitment of the reader to employ their knowledge (if they have such understanding) to the literary representation of fashion accessories. Understanding of fashion accessories in novels of other genres may reveal details about characters, amongst other aspects. In detective fiction, this understanding is strongly related to aspects of the plot that may be revealed, such as who is the victim, or who is the murderer. Understanding contexts of fashion accessories is therefore integral to my discussion of Christie’s texts.

⁷⁴ This relates to the co-construction identified by Effron *et al.* and discussed above.

The concept of the weaving of contexts between fashion and text is expanded to include the reader. This expansion occurs through emphasising an engaged mode of reading in understanding fashion accessories within the texts. Gasston quotes Hermione Lee's statement that '[b]ooks change their readers; they teach you how to read them', and argues that modernist short stories 'instigat[e...] a process of "reading-as-thinking"' (p. 1). Whilst Gasston suggests this process 'affect[s...] the way everyday existence is experienced', I argue that Christie's texts are more centred on the process itself (p. 15). The process is a recognition of the value of that everyday experience, and how that experience informs a feminised mode of reading the detective fiction genre. Her texts require a sense of 'reading-as-thinking' but thinking towards the resolution of the detective fiction plot. In her reading of Bowen's short stories, Gasston argues that the framework of detective fiction is applied with the author using visual clues (p. 169). These are 'not decipherable with ordinary logic' and instead 'lead readers away to the story's edges where they may get stranded, or [...] choose to furnish the story's lacuna with personal solutions', suggesting that '[i]f red herrings refuse to supply meaning in and of themselves, then that must be made elsewhere – within the space of the over-to-you' (pp. 169–70). As Christie's texts are securely located within the detective fiction genre, this possibility of clues without logic – without an interpretation authorised by the author – does not exist as it does for Bowen's stories. Clues and red herrings are thus significant to considering women's fashion accessories within Christie's detective fiction. They authorise a need for reading with knowledge of the contexts of these items. Such reading permits access to an understanding of the identities inherent to the genre – of victims and murderers – and the resolution to the plot.

This thesis places women's fashion accessories at the centre of analysis of Christie's texts. To understand these accessories, it is important to understand their connection to the women characters with whom they are associated in the texts. This connection enables a consideration of how the identities inherent to the detective fiction genre are formed and manipulated. Fashion has long been understood as an important means of identity formation within literature. Marshik points to how garments provide ways of framing 'the difficulty of becoming a person – a singular self' in the early twentieth century (pp. 3–4). This concept of identity formation of the singular self has been characterised in terms of the distinctions between the individual and group collectives.⁷⁵ Plock discusses how fashion in relation to identity provides for a 'dialectic between assimilation and differentiation, between conformity

⁷⁵ Previous work has explored how identity is formed for the individual in a process of belonging to, and distinguishing from, group identities. See Marshik, p. 17; Plock, p. 1.

and rebellion’ and so ‘facilitates discussions about identity politics’ (p. 2). I take a broader perspective of individual and group identities than this focus on cultural contexts of group identities and the place of fashion accessories in terms of these tensions between belonging and distinction. I consider how particular items form and structure the individual identities of victim and murderer against the collective group of characters – the suspects and community – in the plots of the novels.

Much as fashion and accessories are difficult to define – the complexity of the concepts associated with them challenging any notion of narrowing definitions – identity is equally challenging. Identity subsequently lends itself to being considered in relation to such a complex system as fashion with its many different lenses and perspectives from which to analyse. Giorcelli discusses how ‘[d]ress [...] can be used as a mask to deceive others as well as a way to protect one’s inner freedom’ and that

[a]s clothing is a means of communication, such communication produces information that, by definition, must partake in the general condition of illusion, allusion, and simulation: the self dresses and disguises itself on the great stage of the world, a fiction reflecting other (and perhaps more disquieting) fictions. (p. 2)

Christie’s detective fiction speaks to this notion that fashion accessories can be used as a means of deception in relation to identity, and as a means of reading that identity in relation to the resolution of the mystery. Such items can create deception about the victim and the murderer. They also – through reading these items as clues and applying an understanding of pertinent contexts to that reading – provide the means of eventually securing the truth about these identities in relation to the detective fiction plot. Identities in this sense – of who is the victim, and who is the murderer – are communicated through the use of fashion accessories. Giorcelli’s sense of fictions enabled through such sartorial uses is particularly relevant to how Christie’s detective fiction relies and presumes upon such fashion accessories being read and understood on several different layers. Reading fashion accessories provides a sense of reading clues and re(a)d herrings to the detective fiction plot. Such items function across this spectrum of interpretable information within the narratives.

In discussing the information relevant to the narratives that is held by fashion accessories, I recover a sense of these objects; namely, their histories and contexts contemporary to the publication of Christie’s texts. This is similar to the project undertaken by Marshik in relation to garment culture and interwar texts. She argues that texts often use garments to place characters in the role of things; the assumptions and preconceptions associated with such

garments overtake the significance of an individual's speech and subjectivity (p. 8).⁷⁶ Marshik's work aims to uncover such assumptions and details related to these garments in order to recover contemporary readers' understanding of them. She considers how they render humans as objects, and how such understandings are employed by writers for posing anxieties about individuation and the self (p. 9). I do not perceive such uses of items as posing solely anxieties about selfhood and individuality. Fashion accessories in Christie's texts – and their connection to generic identities of victims and murderers – do carry assumptions and details that are important to be understood in order to uncover their role as clues and re(a)d herrings to the resolution of the plot. The emphasis placed on these items – and their centrality to the plots – enables them to assume a status between subject and object, and occasionally with a corresponding effect for the characters related to them. In the following section, I discuss this status between subject and object in relation to thing theory. This theory provides a methodology and framework through which to read women's fashion accessories in Christie's texts.

'The Female Subject's Rematerialization of Experience': Thing Theory and Detective Fiction

Centralising accessories to this study – considering them before all else – enables a perception of how such items acquire a sense of agency. It requires placing them between the spectrum of subjects and objects as things.⁷⁷ Bill Brown discusses how '[t]aken literally, the belief that there are ideas in things amounts to granting them an interiority and, thus, something like the structure of subjectivity'.⁷⁸ This sense of agency that these items acquire can be seen as 'an interiority' – as an inner character, an innate sense peculiar to each specific item. It renders them closer to subjects than labelling them as objects or items might suggest. Elaine Freedgood's work on things in nineteenth-century realist novels suggests that a Victorian 'thing culture' predated commodity culture.⁷⁹ She defines this as 'a more extravagant form of object relations [...], one in which systems of value were not quarantined from one another and ideas of interest and meaning were perhaps far less restricted' (p. 8). My understanding of

⁷⁶ I discuss this term 'things' in greater detail below in relation to thing theory.

⁷⁷ I return to the definition of 'subject', 'object', and – more importantly – 'things' in the following paragraph.

⁷⁸ Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 7–8. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁷⁹ Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 8. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

items – things – as having an innate character peculiar to that particular thing incorporates this ‘extravagant form of object relations’. The multiplicity of ideas and potential meanings that Freedgood identifies, and the complex and various relations between these ideas and meanings, form a part of understanding these items and their significance to the detective fiction plot.

Complexity and variety in the ‘ideas in things’ perhaps suggests that it is difficult to provide a definition of “things” that embraces the wide-ranging potential of those ideas. For the purposes of my discussion, however, I follow Brown’s definition of thing as naming a subject-object relation; one in which the item in question therefore becomes more than merely an object, but not quite a subject.⁸⁰ Brown discusses how ‘[t]he story of objects asserting themselves as things [...] is the story of a changed relation to the human subject’ (‘Thing Theory’, p. 4). I suggest that detective fiction *is* that story. Objects in detective fiction are rendered significant by the very expectations that the genre creates: that there will be clues, and that – in many cases – those clues will be objects. Uncovering the ideas in things – the ideas in clues – is imperative for the resolution of the detective fiction plot. The detection of crime is also significant for how these things denote a ‘changed relation to the human subject’. Previous studies employing thing theory have focused on the negative aspects of that changed relation, such as Marshik’s study of garments in modernist and middlebrow fiction, and Maurizia Boscagli’s discussion of things as ‘stuff’ which has ‘negative potential from its ungovernable nature, its unruliness’.⁸¹ Characterising the subject-object relation as negative is somewhat reductive in connection to the fictional detecting of crime – and the significance of objects and clues as things. By contrast, the potential provided by their changed relation to the human subject – whether victim or murderer – is an integral part of the detective fiction plot.

Indeed, thing theory is a particularly apposite method of analysing objects in detective fiction. It uncovers how they function to mask, reveal, and relate to the identities of victims and murderers in the plot. Brown suggests of his work on thing theory that it

⁸⁰ Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 292. Brown provides further definitions of ‘subject’ as naming both an individual or group, with group identity strengthened by the ‘thingness’ of objects (*Other Things*, p. 22). Similarly, he defines how looking through objects for what they disclose about history, culture, and ourselves only provides a glimpse of ‘things’; ‘things’ ‘hardly function as a window’ and that we instead confront ‘the thingness of objects’ when ‘they stop working for us’ – see Bill Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (2001), 1–22 (p. 4). Further references are to these editions and are given after quotations in the text. I discuss this concept of ‘interrupted habit’ in greater detail below.

⁸¹ Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 13. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

concerns the slippage between *having* (possessing a particular object) and *being* (the identification of one's self with that object). It is [...] about the indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like [...] [T]his is [...] about humans and things that tracks the metamorphosis of the one into the other. (*A Sense of Things*, p. 13; emphases in original)

With relation to Christie's detective fiction, this slippage between having and being is of particular pertinence in relation to the narrative trajectory towards solving the crime of murder. The victim is often reduced to their 'identification' with particular objects. Those objects are in turn revealed to have been possessed by the murderer in the perpetration of the crime against the victim. In attempting to make sense of the crime – to read for the resolution of the plot – the detective (and to some extent, the reader) must be able to identify this slippage, and to make sense of it. In other words, to be able to identify the things of the crime and read them appositely. I do not imply that Brown's definition of such an ontology as indeterminate is incorrect. Rather, reading for the resolution of the plot involves a process of understanding that the indeterminate and – I argue – shifting relationship between human subjects and non-human things is enacted upon as part of the crime and its resolution. Identifying the thing-like humans and human-like things is central to being able to read the resolution of the plot as an identification of who is the victim and who the murderer.

Reading for the identities of victim and murderer should not entail that the focus becomes centred on 'thing-like humans', on privileging the subject above all else. By contrast, detective fiction involves a process of reading with the purpose in mind of acquiring information to enable that identification. It is largely in objects and things that such information resides.⁸² As Freedgood identifies, '[t]hing culture survives now in those marginal or debased cultural forms and practices in which apparently mundane or meaningless objects can suddenly take on or be assigned value and meaning', and includes the detective story amongst these forms and practices (p. 8).⁸³ In detective fiction, this process by which mundane or meaningless objects acquire value and meaning is intricately connected to the process of reading for clues and red herrings. From the outset of the narrative, reading detective fiction involves being alert to the potential for objects to become things as they

⁸² As Victoria Stewart identifies, clues may also 'take verbal, aural or other forms' beyond solely that of objects – see Stewart, 'Objects, Things and Clues in Early Twentieth-Century Fiction', *Modernist Cultures*, 14.2 (2019), 172–92 (p. 174). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. My interest, however, focuses on physical and material clues and the behaviour associated with these – namely, the objects and things of women's fashion accessories.

⁸³ I do not consider detective fiction – or indeed, middlebrow literature more generally – as 'marginal or debased cultural forms', and the popularity of such texts suggests otherwise.

reveal the truth of the events of the crime. Freedgood, quoting D. A. Miller, describes how in the Sherlock Holmes stories, Holmes reads things, with '[t]he enjoyment of the Holmes story [...] [residing in] such "revelations", when we are humbled by a display of interpretative power in which a "trifling" detail is "suddenly invested with immense significance"' (p. 151). In the case of Christie's novels, this display of interpretative power is instead available to reader and detective alike. The enjoyment lies in this possibility of reading to distinguish between clues and red herrings to solve the mystery.

Focussing on objects and clues and re(a)d herrings in terms of thing theory permits an understanding of them as distinct entities in themselves. They are not solely to be understood in terms of their associations to particular subjects as evidence planted and controlled by them. Joanna Soćko's narratological analysis of things in detective fiction highlights how 'the veracity of testimonies and potential witness accounts' is doubted in favour of 'bestow[ing...] confidence on objects'.⁸⁴ Soćko's analysis suggests that objects – when read as things that encompass the subject-object relation, as discussed above – are reliably understood within the genre as signifiers of information pertinent to the resolution of the mystery. Most notably, they do not carry the same degree of doubt as to their veracity. I argue that this is because the capability of reading such things as clues to the resolution of the plot is unrelated to information provided within the narrative from different characters. It is solely the description of those items, underlining their material properties and an understanding of their place in contemporary social contexts of real life, that is necessary. Stewart discusses how objects in Christie's fiction provide a critique of realism, with detective fiction being a form where 'apparently, all objects described must be accounted for and ascribed a function in the plot' (p. 173). Regardless of whether the form critiques realism in this sense, this accounting for objects in the detective fiction plot relies on the realist mode for such objects to be understood as things, and that understanding applied to the resolution of the mystery.⁸⁵

The process of reading detective fiction by focusing on objects to decipher between clues and red herrings to reach the resolution to the plot is of particular importance in relation to thinking about things as re(a)d herrings. These are items which function as red herrings but have the potential to be clues if they are only read appropriately. Stewart suggests that 'in

⁸⁴ Joanna Soćko, 'Objects Don't Lie. The Truth and Things in Detective Fiction', in *Materiality and Popular Culture: The Popular Life of Things*, ed. by Anna Malinowska and Karolina Lebek (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 157–66 (p. 159). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

⁸⁵ I describe this methodology in greater detail below.

Christie's narratives, there is very little room for even the temporarily superfluous, or for false clues. Her narratives are constructed very economically, which makes moments of description or even, more straightforwardly, itemisation, all the more arresting' (p. 174). These moments of description and itemisation are arresting, drawing attention to the items depicted and included. This economic use of significant objects-as-clues in Christie's texts – whereby there are few superfluous details – extends to the use made of those that are 'false', or red herrings. Such 'false' clues often double as genuine clues to the resolution of the mystery once they are correctly interpreted, instead of being discarded as wholly incorrect or useless to the resolution. Stewart's analysis of Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, and specifically Poirot's rearranging of spills on a mantelpiece, points to how objects are transformed into clues. It is at this transformation that their 'thingness [...] comes into view' (p. 183). As clues – or re(a)d herrings – such items are things for containing both, and simultaneously, their uncomplicated context (what is termed by Brown and by Stewart as their 'use-value') and the contexts of knowledge that are significant to the resolution of the crime (Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 27; Stewart, p. 184). They require reading with that knowledge.

Thus, objects-as-things in the detective fiction narratives become intrinsically connected to understanding them as clues and re(a)d herrings. In understanding objects-as-clues-as-things, I follow Brown's questioning of 'how are objects represented in [these...] text[s]? How are they made to mean?' to argue that it is within the genre itself – and that genre as a part of the middlebrow – that we should look to answer these questions (*A Sense of Things*, p. 18). A significant part of the detective fiction genre is how it renders the normal abnormal.⁸⁶ This process is allied to the 'interruption of habit, the failure of repetition' that Brown, following Leo Stein, identifies as 'call[ing] our attention to what we might call the thingness of the object' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 75).⁸⁷ Brown, distinguishing between habit and repetition, defines habit as 'simply repetition that has become unconscious' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 73). By calling attention to objects as potential clues and re(a)d herrings, the detective fiction genre involves a process of reading whereby attention is paid to habits – those unconscious repetitions – in relation to objects and that are subsequently brought back to consciousness. This idea of habit is specifically important to objects in detective fiction as connecting both the contexts surrounding those objects, and also for connecting objects to subjects.

⁸⁶ Both York and Bernthal discuss how Christie uses, disrupts, and exploits a sense of 'normality' in the communities in which crime takes place in the novels. See York, p. 21; Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 3.

⁸⁷ Brown contrasts Stein's approach with that of his sister, Gertrude Stein, with the former 'committed to approaching art through the aesthetic recognition of objects' (p. 75).

Interruptions to habit might involve the misuse of objects – such as an object out of the context in which it might usually be found – and also interruptions to how it is usually used by a particular character.⁸⁸ I argue forcefully that Christie employs both.

Understanding the process by which objects become clues as related to interruptions of habit is not without complexity. There are numerous questions related to such habits, such as whose habits; when, where they occur; and their connection to what different contexts of knowledge, behaviour, and motivations (Freedgood, p. 13). However, detective fiction provides a narrative structure that focuses this complexity through the lens of how the interruption of habit might relate to the resolution of the mystery. The expectations of the genre are clearly focused on finding the truth to the mystery of the crime committed. It is therefore expected that primary focus will be centred on objects, things, and habits associated with them as they relate to the resolution of the mystery. These expectations thereby reduce what Freedgood identifies as the wide variety of interpretation by readers in first and subsequent readings of a text (p. 13). I am not suggesting that this complexity of questions related to the interruption of habit is not important or that such questions have no place in detective fiction. On the contrary, some of these questions are indeed pertinent to understanding the contexts of objects in order to decipher them as clues or re(a)d herrings. Yet the demands of the genre facilitate this process of deciding which of these are to be pursued for the resolution of the plot. For example, as will be discussed, many of Christie's texts require an understanding of the character of the victim and their behaviour, such as what they usually wear and in what contexts. Such understanding helps to ascertain how objects related to the murder – and habits associated with them – might have been 'interrupted' and so how they relate to the crime and the murderer.

Privileging objects first, before understanding their relation to a particular subject, requires a greater focus on their other contexts. I avoid defining this too closely as such contexts in many ways have a wide variety of applications. However, in relation to fashion accessories in Christie's texts, I am largely concerned with the sociohistorical context of such items.⁸⁹ Freedgood advocates a similar method, 'one in which the historically and theoretically

⁸⁸ An example of the former would be the small piece of rubber and wooden peg found in Simeon Lee's room in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938); of the latter, the extra wigs that Mrs Ravenscroft orders in *Elephants Can Remember* (1972) indicates a change in her behaviour and a question as to why she suddenly requires additional wigs.

⁸⁹ Rather than, for example, the economic history of such items which might focus on their manufacture and consumption.

overdetermined material characteristics of objects are sought out beyond the immediate context in which they appear' before returning them to 'their novelistic homes' to uncover meaning in the texts (pp. 5–6). I am less concerned with material characteristics than the context of such items in the social landscape contemporary to the novels' publication. This consideration is not without difficulties. As Marshik notes in relation to fashion garments, it is not possible to 'simply invoke the abstraction "culture" or "society" to explain a given phenomenon' (p. 11). Understanding these items therefore cannot be considered by solely drawing on one particular aspect of class or social context and perceiving this as encompassing the totality of that understanding. Instead, understanding must be drawn from a broad consideration of these cultures and contexts. As detailed below, my approach is therefore broad-ranging in order to uncover the sociohistorical context of the women's fashion accessories that appear in Christie's texts. It has a particular focus on British and American societies, and on the upper-middle-class to high-class contexts. Freedgood suggests that the attempt to uncover contexts and meanings contemporary to the publication of novels is 'difficult but partly possible', yet it is difficult to 'justify the making of our own' (p. 24).⁹⁰ The process of uncovering contemporary contexts related to items within the novels can be difficult, but must not become secondary or subordinate to current contexts of our own that are perhaps easier to identify, if only because they are more recent in chronology.

I therefore look to both magazines contemporaneous with the first publication of Christie's works as well as more recent analyses of fashion history to understand the fashion accessories that appear in the texts. I focus primarily on both British and American contexts due to the publishing history of Christie's texts. Most of her books were published in both the UK and US (or vice versa) within a few months of each other.⁹¹ Furthermore, as John Curran explains, '[h]er work was in demand for the lucrative magazine market in the UK and North America and for translation throughout Europe'.⁹² I look to magazines that included serialisations of Christie's works. Furthermore, given my focus on women's fashion accessories, I have primarily focused on women's magazines, including titles such as *Good Housekeeping* (both

⁹⁰ Freedgood also points to the historical and cultural contingencies of uncovering these meanings and contexts, dependent on our accessibility to information and our own background from which such information is approached (pp. 15–16).

⁹¹ I am not concerned with tracing differences between these versions: the plots are substantially the same, although occasionally some texts are shorter or with slight variations in chapter divisions, as in serialised versions.

⁹² John Curran, *Agatha Christie's Complete Secret Notebooks: Stories and Secrets of Murder in the Making* (London: HarperCollins, 2020), p. 169. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

UK and US versions), *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Town and Country*, amongst others.⁹³ Whilst Christie's readers have increasingly ranged across class divisions – slippery as they are to define – her characters and communities are largely drawn from upper-middle and high classes. I therefore also look to magazines aimed at a more upper-class readership, such as *Vogue* (US).⁹⁴ Where I have included examples of fashion accessories found in these publications to support my analysis of Christie's texts, it should be noted that they are indicative of the advertisements and articles of these magazines more broadly. They are not intended to be seen as unique examples specific to one publication. I have further supported my use of these examples from magazine publications through more recent fashion history studies. In so doing, I ensure that my understanding of both Christie's texts and these magazines is informed by a broader appreciation of fashion as a discipline. It is a discipline that encompasses a range of contexts, although I focus particularly on sociohistorical contexts.

These sociohistorical contexts help our understanding of how objects can be read within Christie's novels. In so doing, I do not advocate an abandonment of the subject nor imply that they are insignificant. I seek to provide a more thorough understanding of key identities of the genre – victim and murderer – in relation to Christie's plots.⁹⁵ Nor is this to suggest that objects, understood as “things” or even as “human-like”, solely take the place of subjects. Indeed, as Sarah Wasserman suggests in her work on ephemera in American novels, there is a need ‘to practice a mode of reading that recognizes the importance of objects without elevating them to the role of subjects and, thereby, replicating the very discourses that object-oriented thinking is meant to repudiate’.⁹⁶ Consideration of the significance of fashion accessories does not imply that these items take on a sense of subjectivity in Christie's texts – becoming characters in themselves. Instead, there is a fine balance in subject-object relations. Naming this relation as things, as discussed above, I consider objects and their contexts

⁹³ I have largely drawn on magazine titles available through ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive, Collections I, II, and III. Further information can be found at the 'ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive' (2022), <<https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/Womens-Magazine-Archive/>> [accessed 21 October 2022].

⁹⁴ For further details of this archive, see 'ProQuest The Vogue Archive' (2022) <https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/vogue_archive/> [accessed 9 November 2022].

⁹⁵ As Brown suggests in *Other Things*, getting over the subject as ‘an exclusive concern’ is not to ‘get rid’ of the subject (p. 292).

⁹⁶ Sarah Wasserman, *The Death of Things: Ephemera and the American Novel* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), p. 13. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

contemporary to the texts' publication. This understanding is then applied to the context of the novel and subjects associated with them. In so doing, I am less concerned with 'how objects organise our desires, knowledges, and fantasies' than how objects are depicted as being used and manipulated by characters to serve the expectations and demands of the detective fiction genre (Brown, *Other Things*, p. 11). As opposed to focusing on the affective aspects of the thing – the subject-object relation – I consider primarily the formal and functional aspects of that relation. I focus particularly on the transitions between objects, clues, re(a)d herrings and their application to the resolution of the mystery.

Women's fashion accessories have a particularly unique place in relation to applying thing theory to consideration of them as such clues and re(a)d herrings in detective fiction. Wasserman, in considering the disappearance of ephemera, discusses this as a specifically 'feminist undertaking' as ephemera 'point to entangled, embodied ways of being', as opposed to 'masculinist [...] narratives of origins and ends', and foreground 'certain forms of temporary community and fleeting resistance that have long been the province of women' (pp. 35–36). Fashion accessories, for the continual process of being in or out of fashion, are just such temporary and fleeting things. Considering them as temporary in this way is equally applicable to the transitory status of their roles as clues and re(a)d herrings. Women's fashion accessories start as objects, transitioning through such roles in the plot, before finally becoming evidence at the resolution of the mystery. As Wasserman highlights, these transitions are very much allied to the (feminist) *process* of the plot – specifically, embodied ways of being in the thing-status of the fashion accessories – in contrast to the (masculinist) focus of beginnings and endings. Boscagli makes a similar point that objects related to fashion 'allow for the female subject's rematerialization of experience' (pp. 29–30). This female experience in detective fiction is, I suggest, closely allied to roles of victim and murderer. Understanding the contexts of fashion accessories before applying them to the subject-object relations of the murder mystery plot of the novels privileges this female experience. It is an experience of a feminised mode of reading; one that permits an understanding of the generic identities of victim and murderer, and of how Christie engages with these in her plots.

Thesis Structure

Each of the three chapters of this thesis takes a different type of fashion accessory as its focus, whereby these types of item are all present in the texts analysed in that chapter. I have aligned

each chapter to a particular focus on genre, identity, or habits. In so doing, it is not my intention to suggest that these aspects are only present in relation to jewellery, hats, or make-up respectively. On the contrary, they are present in relation to all the types of fashion accessories analysed here. In aligning one particular type of fashion accessory to just one of these aspects, I frame my discussion of Christie's texts for a more focused analysis. Each chapter also takes a chronological approach; it begins with Christie's earlier texts through to those published later. This approach is for clarity of discussion in relation to changing fashions. As discussed above, there are connotations of linearity in fashion, and I therefore discuss earlier texts before later ones to avoid confusion and repetitions. This has also influenced the order of the chapters. Chapter One spans texts covering the period 1924–1950, Chapter Two considers the years 1932–1956, and Chapter Three covers 1942 through to 1964. I am not, however, suggesting that Christie's texts follow a chronological development, nor is this notion of progress a focus of this thesis. I therefore do not align my discussion of Christie's detective fiction to a chronological progression.

In Chapter One, I focus on jewellery and genre to discuss how Christie engages with notions of value. Such notions are considered both in relation to the jewellery items themselves and how this relates to wider questions of the value of the detective fiction genre. These jewellery items are largely necklaces yet vary in style and the stones and gems used, including diamonds, rubies, and pearls. I begin by discussing two of Christie's early short stories, first published in the late 1920s and collected in *The Listerdale Mystery* (1934). I consider how jewellery is used to explore genre conventions of adventure and romance, before establishing these stories as detective fiction. This is further developed in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928) in relation to hierarchical notions of genre, and the place of detective fiction within these. My discussion of *Death on the Nile* (1937) expands on this to examine how the place of the detective fiction genre within the middlebrow permits engagement with other middlebrow themes. Finally, I discuss *A Murder is Announced* (1950) whereby such themes are used to further develop the detective fiction plot of the narrative. Throughout, I argue that a feminised mode of reading Christie's texts enables an understanding of the multiple and varied values in items of jewellery, and the significance of these to resolving the mysteries.

My second chapter analyses hats in relation to identities inherent to the detective fiction plot – those of victim and murderer. I begin by considering how a murderer presents themselves as a victim in *Peril at End House* (1932). Reading this murderer's hat provides a clue to their identity. However, this clue-potential is lost, with the hat instead being misinterpreted as

indicative of victimhood, and so becoming a re(a)d herring. I then analyse how the murderer's hat in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) becomes disassociated from any particular character, established only as the unknown murderer's possession. By contrast, the hat in *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) enables the establishment of the victim as a particular character. However, such establishment becomes problematic for how this is manipulated by the murderers. In my analysis of *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), I return to this notion of murderers disguising themselves as victims. Such disguise is established in the novel through notions of "foreignness" in relation to a particular style of hat. Throughout my discussion of these four texts, a feminised mode of reading provides contextual information that enables the resolution of the mysteries to be reached. This contextual information further relates to the ways in which Christie engages with notions of these identities of victim and murderer and their connection to the detective fiction genre. I suggest that this engagement shows these identities to be less clearly defined and distinct from each other than previously presumed, both by readers and critics of the genre.

The final chapter considers make-up and cosmetic items in relation to habits, both in terms of habits related to these items and habits of reading the genre. My discussion engages with the fast-changing pace of the make-up and cosmetics industry. To begin, I analyse how these habits establish a victim-type in *The Body in the Library* (1942). I relate this to the context of make-up and cosmetics in the film industry. In my discussion of *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952), these habits of reading a victim-type are related to habits of understanding the crime scene, and how this informs identifying suspects. I relate make-up and cosmetic habits in this text to habits in domesticity and interior design; these contexts provide a feminised mode of reading that can be applied to reading the resolution of the mystery. A further context of cleanliness in relation to make-up and cosmetics informs my discussion of *The Pale Horse* (1961) – a context that I relate to habits of reading the culpability of the murderer(s) in the genre. Finally, I analyse *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964) and concepts of natural and artificial appearance. Naturalness versus artificiality relates to an obfuscation of understanding women as victims. This obfuscation in itself relates to the habit of reading clues to resolve the mystery. In relation to all the texts discussed in this chapter, these changing contexts of make-up and cosmetics are pertinent to a feminised mode of reading. This mode of reading can also perceive how these habits themselves relate to habits of reading the genre, and Christie's engagement with such habits.

Throughout this thesis, I argue for an expansion of the middlebrow notions of reading to incorporate cultural knowledge of fashion accessories brought to the texts and applied to the plots in order to understand the demands of the detective fiction genre. This thesis argues that fashion accessories permit a broadening of the scope of the middlebrow. My discussion of the contexts related to these items, which prove integral to the detective fiction plots, demonstrates the connection between these contexts and other middlebrow themes and concepts. Tracing different kinds of fashion accessories in relation to generic identities demonstrates how integral modes of reading are to reveal the resolution of the plots. Such a process involves reading both in terms of the genre, the contexts of the objects themselves, and their “thing” status as naming the relation between subject and object. The middlebrow concept of reading can be expanded to incorporate this sense of cultural knowledge and context of fashion accessories. This knowledge is brought to the texts to apply to the generic conventions of detective fiction. I expand on this in detail in relation to victims and murderers. Fashion accessories are a part of how victims’ identities are constructed, and how this is manipulated by murderers (both in terms of how they construct their own identities as victims, and also in terms of the identities of other subjects as victims). Such manipulation is, I argue, largely unquestioned by detective characters, and therefore the extent to which victims “deserve” or are “acceptable” in relation to the demands of the genre is also unquestioned. Fashion accessories, however, also provide the possibility for detectives to read discrepancies between the fake and the authentic as indications of the resolution of the narrative plots.

Fashion accessories and cultural knowledge of these items provide the possibility for understanding these items as clues to resolving the mysteries of who is the murderer, who is the victim. They are not merely red herrings, or re(a)d herrings when clues are incorrectly “read” thereby preventing the resolution being reached. These re(a)d herrings are rarely, if at all, accounted for within the detective fiction narrative. It is signalled that they have misled detectives (or, in a few instances, provided a means of indicating the truth only once other factors have also provided this). Yet an admission that the resolution of the plot could have been revealed far in advance by reading the fashion accessories with the apposite knowledge is rarely acknowledged. I argue that it is vital to consider novels across Christie’s writing career to demonstrate that this feminised mode of reading fashion accessories is not limited to interwar contexts. It is incorrect to suggest that Christie’s narratives are in any way static or trapped within the same recycled narrative conventions. Analysis of these items demonstrates that different accessories and the way in which they are used, *and the knowledge they require*,

changes across the decades. The lack of recognition of re(a)d herrings serves to problematise women's roles within narratives in terms of conventions of the genre. A lack of reassessment of fashion accessories as significant clues to the resolution of the plots leads to a corresponding lack of reassessment of the place of these identities of victim and murderer within the genre. By advocating for a feminised mode of reading Christie's texts, I argue that Christie engages with these questions of conventions of the detective fiction genre in ways hitherto under-acknowledged and under-explored.

Chapter One

Jewellery and Genre

‘Heavily cultured or even Woolworth! Darling, they really are *incredible*, so exquisitely matched. They must be worth the *most* fabulous sum!’ (Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile*)

This chapter examines items of jewellery and their values in Christie’s texts, particularly how jewellery functions in relation to Christie’s engagement with genre.⁹⁷ Jewellery has worth that draws together monetary values with conceptual frameworks such as authenticity, taste, and cultural symbolism of the stones. These items have further significant values in relation to the texts.⁹⁸ Understanding of value is intrinsically connected to middlebrow concerns with taste: taste as a means of measuring these values. The very nature of *questioning* these values and the notion of taste is intrinsic to the middlebrow.⁹⁹ Christie engages with this questioning in relation to literary genre: central to my analysis are ‘A Fruitful Sunday’ and ‘The Manhood of Edward Robinson’, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, *Death on the Nile*, and *A Murder is Announced*. A feminised mode of reading uncovers Christie’s engagement with these questions of value and taste. As middlebrow concerns, these questions are instrumental to the plots in the exploration of genre. Items of jewellery function as clues in the process of detecting the resolution of the mystery. It is only through a feminised mode of reading that we can understand jewellery items as indicators of the broader cultural contexts of the mystery in question.

Jewellery items weave together interconnected values. I build on Freedgood’s call for ‘a more extravagant form of object relations [...] [where] systems of value [are] not quarantined from one another’ (p. 8). Jewellery’s monetary value – and consequently understanding of these items as commodities – has to some extent prevented a fuller appreciation of their other values.¹⁰⁰ Freedgood suggests that ‘we need to literalize [commodities] in order to re-figure them, that is we need to re-materialize them in order to understand their value differently, less

⁹⁷ I make a distinction between Christie’s novels that feature uncut or cut stones and gems, such as those in *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas* (1938) and *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959), and those that are the focus of this chapter: texts that feature such gemstones cut and set into items of women’s jewellery, intended to be worn on the body.

⁹⁸ For further discussion of this concept of value and how considering items as things pushes against the privileging of value in relation to money and Marx’s ideas of commodities, see Freedgood, pp. 7–8.

⁹⁹ I do not suggest that there is a certain mindset whereby particular values epitomise middlebrow taste.

¹⁰⁰ For discussion of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism in relation to thing theory, see Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 28; Freedgood, p. 26.

abstractly’ (p. 28). Reconsidering objects by reframing them in terms of their materiality – what they are made of, how they are used – enables an understanding of other possible values residing within the objects themselves. Freedgood implies a distinction between an object’s value as a commodity and as a thing: that to understand other values – its “thing” status – an object must be separated from its status as commodity.¹⁰¹ However, I suggest that an object’s value as commodity and as thing can be understood as related. With jewellery items, the monetary value of their commodity status exists in relation to other values; to understand these other values does not necessarily generate a process in which the monetary value of an object must be excluded. By contrast, these other values exist alongside the monetary value within an object and, collectively, it is these values that contribute to the “thing” status of an object.

But what are these “values” residing in things? Freedgood has a broad consideration of value, but one that implies a separation between them:

our sense of value is, after all, constrained into a rather small number of distinct categories, many of which are quarantined from one another. The aesthetic, the economic, the personal – whole disciplines are now deployed to maintain the distinctions between what we hope are incommensurable realms of worth and worthiness. (p. 148)

This concept of distinct categories of value should be discarded for one in which different values are understood as interconnected. Recognition of such values perceives these as indicators of worth, collectively understood as “taste”. Marshik explains that garments ‘serve as touchstones for expressing values such as conformity (read more positively as “good taste”) or transgression, for privileging psychology (interiority) or appearance (exteriority), and for registering a person’s degree of interest in aesthetic pleasure’ (p. 4).¹⁰² This suggests that taste is dependent on degrees of recognition and acceptance of values represented within items.¹⁰³ My consideration of jewellery items in Christie’s texts is not concerned with this

¹⁰¹ Freedgood’s separation of commodity and thing values is distinct from Brown who argues that Marx’s concept of doubleness – use and exchange values – in the commodity applies to things as well, suggesting that this doubleness converts ‘the thingness of the object (the Thing in excess of the object) into value’, implying that value is a financial construction in itself, with the idea of worth as solely determined in monetary terms, and with objects-as-things also subject primarily to concepts of monetary value (*A Sense of Things*, p. 42).

¹⁰² Whilst Marshik is discussing garments, I argue in the Introduction that these ideas are equally applicable to fashion accessories.

¹⁰³ As will be seen with Linnet Doyle’s pearls in *Death on the Nile*, questions over whether they are vulgar suggests that, whilst they are recognised as an expensive item of jewellery, it is questionable whether it is appropriate for Linnet to be continually wearing them.

attempt to separate “good” and “bad” taste. Instead, it concerns the questioning of that measure. Jewellery items and their perceived value to different characters demonstrate how Christie engages with questions of genre. This engagement is interconnected to how jewellery’s values relate to middlebrow concepts and specific plot demands.

By looking in closer detail at how values are understood to be indicative of an entire cultural, social or class perspective, more specific aspects of these values can be uncovered. In so doing, these values do not necessarily fit neatly into promoting one particular outlook. Previous studies have predominantly employed this terminology of value to describe cultural and social values, with taste as an indicator of support for those.¹⁰⁴ My consideration of the middlebrow concept of questioning taste and values challenges this. Light suggests that Christie’s work implies the interwar middle class was ‘not one coherent grouping with a shared set of values and complacencies’, but instead was comprised of ‘continually fragmented factions, ill at ease and suspicious of each other, endlessly divided against themselves’ (p. 98). In the jewellery items analysed here, terms such as vulgar are used to imply poor taste. Yet uncovering specific values, such as monetary and aesthetic, suggests these items do have values that are considered more positively. Where Light perceives this as ‘fragmented factions’ of classes of people, I suggest that analysing items – as opposed to characters – uncovers such fragmentation within these items themselves. Such fragmentation within items implies that any notion of values and taste as shared by a broad spectrum is problematic. Instead, I advocate a feminised mode of reading, through which a multiplicity of conflicting and interconnected values and taste can be observed.

Analysing jewellery through a feminised mode of reading further engages with the gendered aspects of the middlebrow, and detective fiction’s place within this. Light’s suggestion of ‘fragmented factions [...] divided against themselves’ is perhaps a somewhat negative framing of the concept of flexibility that I argued was an inherent part of the feminine middlebrow to which Christie’s texts belong. Such fragmentation incorporates a sense of individuality. With it being impossible to categorise and group people – and things – that emphasise their lack of cohesion, their uniqueness is instead foregrounded; a uniqueness that necessitates a flexibility in how they are considered. In relation to objects, this is of particular

¹⁰⁴ Bloom discusses Allen Lane’s Penguin series as disseminating cultural values (p. 63); Humble discusses Q. D. Leavis’s understanding of the middlebrow as a wider cultural movement, affirming ‘middle-class cosiness and complacency as dominant and abiding values’, (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 20–21).

importance to ways in which they are noticed and understood. My emphasis on a feminised mode of reading allows these objects to be considered at their own invitation; individualised to the context of the object itself. This is a way of recognising that there is value in these items and in ways of considering them that have thus far been neglected. In my Introduction, I discussed how a gendered approach to detective fiction had led to an emphasis on objects directly associated with crime. Here, my discussion of jewellery and the values attended upon it is intended to demonstrate that such gendering has neglected these items. The multiplicity of values observed in these items similarly demonstrates how this gendering has further neglected what these items reveal about the middlebrow and the detective fiction genre.

This has implications for the genre of detective fiction: Christie explores this multiplicity of values as defining the detective fiction genre in relation to others, such as adventure. I discuss two early short stories, ‘The Manhood of Edward Robinson’ (1924) and ‘A Fruitful Sunday’ (1928) to explore how the jewellery in these texts has value in demonstrating Christie employing elements of the adventure genre before resolving the stories as detective fiction. Whilst there is no serial detective character (such as Poirot, Miss Marple, or Tommy and Tuppence), these stories maintain “detecting” characters who must resolve the mysteries before them. I use both the terms “detective fiction” and “mystery” indiscriminately throughout this chapter to refer to the genre. The interplay between the adventure and detective fiction genres features in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928) to engage with middlebrow concepts of genre hierarchies, implying a sense of equality between genres. The place of the detective fiction genre within the middlebrow canon permits the genre to frame other middlebrow concepts, as demonstrated in *Death on the Nile* (1937). My discussion is focussed particularly on women’s independence. Finally, I consider *A Murder is Announced* (1950) to discuss how this particular middlebrow concept is used to further develop the plotting of the narrative in the detective fiction genre. Throughout, I argue that Christie’s texts invoke a feminised mode of reading in order to understand the multiplicity of values in items of jewellery and how these are applied to the resolutions of the mysteries.

‘It’s Like a Fairy Story!’: Adventure and Detective Fiction in ‘The Manhood of Edward Robinson’ (1924) and ‘A Fruitful Sunday’ (1928)

These two stories speak to a key argument in my thesis: namely, Christie’s manipulation of genre expectations through objects. These stories, later collected as part of *The Listerdale Mystery* collection, differ from the rest of the texts considered in this thesis as they are short

stories.¹⁰⁵ However, in both the significant object is a piece of jewellery; I argue that the value of the jewellery is important in how this item is understood by the protagonists. The jewellery's value, as assessed by the protagonists, enables them to apply a feminised mode of reading. They read widely and with an appreciation of different genre conventions to advance the plot through various generic modes before the stories are firmly located in the detective fiction genre. This leads the jewellery to also have value in relation to wider middlebrow concerns with values and taste. Christie's stories imply that the protagonists' taste in literature enables this feminised mode of reading of genre necessary to uncovering satisfactory resolutions to the mystery plots. With these resolutions within the stories, the characters are able to find a sense of satisfaction and resolution beyond this mystery.

Both short stories open with indications of the protagonists' dissatisfaction with their current economic circumstances. In 'The Manhood of Edward Robinson', Edward holds 'a clerkship in a flourishing concern' but the frugality of his fiancée, Maud, highlights the discrepancy between his desired extravagance and the reality of what he is able to afford.¹⁰⁶ This is clearly demonstrated in relation to Maud's engagement ring:

His salary was not large. He had wanted to give her an expensive ring – she had been horror stricken, and had forced him to take it back and exchange it for a cheaper one. Her qualities were all excellent qualities, but sometimes Edward wished that she had more faults and less virtues. It was her virtues that drove him to desperate deeds. (p. 108)

The ring's monetary value functions as a means of demonstrating the differences between Edward and Maud; to him, its worth enables an expression of his feelings for Maud yet to Maud, the high monetary value of the ring is problematic. The ring also has value as a means of demonstrating Maud's values of prudence and how Edward feels that these will lead him to 'desperate deeds'; the narrative opens with the expectation that the remainder of the story will recount such deeds. This sets up the genre expectations in relation to items of jewellery, although the specific *type* of plot is only hinted at here. The ring and its representation of Edward's difference from Maud leads him into the plot where he mistakenly takes another

¹⁰⁵ This is not to suggest that the stories are in any sense inferior to Christie's novels as has been implied by other scholars; Mary S. Wagoner argues that Christie's stories rarely contain 'complex character analysis' and have 'only vestigial character development' (*Agatha Christie* [Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986], p. 16). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰⁶ Agatha Christie, *The Listerdale Mystery* (London: HarperCollins, 2016), p. 107. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. First published in the UK in 1934. The stories considered here were published in the US in *The Golden Ball and Other Stories* in 1971.

driver's car, and discovering a diamond necklace in the car, he attempts to return this, leading him to Lady Noreen who has stolen the necklace as part of a joke.

The ring encapsulates Edward's feelings of dissatisfaction and his aspirations to exceed these economic constraints. He desires to escape the confines of his economic circumstances in order to provide Maud with an expensive engagement ring that she cannot refuse on these grounds of economic imprudence. A similar sense of dissatisfaction is expressed by the protagonists of 'A Fruitful Sunday', in which Dorothy Pratt and her partner Edward (Ted) discover what appears to be a ruby necklace at the bottom of a fruit basket.¹⁰⁷ They believe it might be the necklace reported as stolen from a Parisian jeweller, but finally discover it to be part of an advertising ruse. The conversation between Dorothy and Ted at the beginning of the story has them comparing their situations with those of a higher social status:

[...] It makes me mad to think of these swells who can walk into a place and buy a couple of Rolls-Royces without turning a hair. There's no sense in it. I'm as good as they are.'

'And the jewellery,' said Dorothy, sighing. 'Those shops in Bond Street. Diamonds and pearls and I don't know what! And me with a string of Woolworth pearls.' (p. 170)

Both characters express an aspirational desire for what they cannot afford; for Ted, this is a Rolls-Royce car, and for Dorothy, this desire centres on genuine jewellery. Jewellery has value in both stories as an aspirational target related to economic independence – both Dorothy and Edward express a desire to escape the economic constraints of their current status through desiring expensive jewellery (whether for themselves or to give to others).

The aspirational values that jewellery can hold are reflected in magazine articles of this period from more middlebrow publications, such as *Ladies' Home Journal*. In an article promoting patterns for making 'afternoon frocks' for the Christmas season in 1927, 'a new and fascinating necklace and bracelet set of turquoise' is advertised from Lanvin.¹⁰⁸ As a haute couture house, products from Lanvin are implicitly recognised to potentially be beyond the

¹⁰⁷ To avoid confusion, I use 'Edward' to refer to the male protagonist of 'The Manhood of Edward Robinson' and 'Ted' for 'A Fruitful Sunday', although the latter is referred to as both 'Ted' and 'Edward'.

¹⁰⁸ 'Six Fashionable Afternoon Frocks: To Make the Christmas Season Merry', *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1927, p. 52, in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/six-fashionable-afternoon-frocks/docview/1876376085/>> [accessed 24 March 2022]. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

financial capabilities of some readers: '[s]ince costume jewelry in endless variety is displayed in all the smart shops nowadays, the matter of finding a suitable gift to carry out the same idea should not prove difficult' (p. 52). Costume jewellery – for its lack of authenticity and monetary value – is more affordable than jewellery set with genuine stones and gems. Yet this reference to costume jewellery also relates to such jewellery as a growing trend amongst fashion houses in the 1920s. Simon Bliss's analysis of jewellery between 1918 and 1940 suggests that in the 1920s, 'costume jewellery was becoming increasingly popular at all levels of the market' but that 'most of the major modern jewellery houses of Paris were still geared to the production of items that featured precious materials'.¹⁰⁹ The reference to costume jewellery in the *Ladies' Home Journal* article demonstrates this trend but it also represents how costume jewellery can fulfil the aspirational desire to mimic and reflect trends in genuine jewellery.

In Christie's texts, the working-class status of the protagonists – Dorothy, Ted, and Edward – is positioned as important to characterising their reaction to the jewellery.¹¹⁰ As outlined in my Introduction, I am not overly concerned with separating the complex class gradations in Christie's oeuvre, yet in this instance the working-class background of the characters is important to how they understand and approach the jewellery they find. Light notes the common assumption that Christie's fiction represents that 'of a natural Tory' (p. 62), whilst Humble argues that Christie 'embraces the modern, meritocratic, and suburban middle classes' (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 186). However, Christie's representation of working-class characters cannot only be read in relation to her personal class affiliations and outlooks. Conversely, this representation explores a mindset in which jewellery is an aspirational target, but one that is unachievable and unknown. Edward is forced by Maud to return the extravagant engagement ring as she knows he cannot afford it, and Dorothy is unable to imagine the contents of fashionable and high-end Bond Street jewellery stores beyond '[d]iamonds and pearls and I don't know what'. This is not to suggest that these circumstances are intended to be disparaged. Instead, these circumstances are woven into the plot to inform the protagonists' approach to jewellery and its value. Such weaving of circumstances and plot has wider implications for the genre of the stories.

¹⁰⁹ Simon Bliss, *Jewellery in the Age of Modernism 1918–1940: Adornment and Beyond* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 23. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

¹¹⁰ These stories differ from the majority of the other novels I discuss (with the exception of *Mrs McGinty's Dead*) in their working-class protagonists. However, this notion of economic independence does occur in several of Christie's texts, particularly in relation to broader middlebrow questions of women's independence.

These implications are tied to this lack of knowledge of jewellery – particularly a lack of understanding its monetary value, its expense in relation to wages, and as to what it is made of and looks like. However, the jewellery has value in relation to how it frames this interpretation of genre. In these opening sections, the main mystery narrative of the stories has yet to be introduced. Rowland suggests that ‘[t]he intentional conservatism of the golden age writers [including Christie] is complicated by their use of self-conscious fictionality to criticise (as well as ultimately uphold) traditional class structures as they threaten to become outmoded and morally empty in modernity’ (p. 42). In these stories, the self-conscious fictionality can be seen throughout in relation to how the protagonists refer to their discovery of jewellery items. This works alongside their working-class background: these circumstances inform *how* the protagonists rely on their knowledge of literary genre to interpret the jewellery that they discover. The jewellery has value as it enables a shift from adventure to detective fiction.¹¹¹ This is not simply an upholding of traditional class structures; this blends working-class backgrounds with middlebrow concerns and questions over literary genre and taste.

There is particular resonance within the adventure genre in the discovery of jewellery by the protagonists. An unexpected change in economic circumstances is not uncommon as a plot basis in this genre.¹¹² The items of jewellery are viewed both in terms of the monetary value of the items themselves, and what this signifies to the characters. In ‘The Manhood of Edward Robinson’, Edward discovers ‘[a] diamond necklace worth probably thousands of pounds (for the stones were large ones)’ (p. 113). His amateurish appraisal of the necklace demonstrates his lack of familiarity with jewellery, leading to this equation of large diamonds signifying a large monetary value. The nuances between imitation and genuine, fashionable and unfashionable, become lost. In ‘A Fruitful Sunday’, Dorothy and Ted’s discovery of the ruby necklace occurs after reading of a jewellery theft in Paris, with Ted’s immediate response to be laughter and to ask ‘[y]ou don’t imagine you’re holding fifty thousand pounds in your hand, do you?’ (p. 173). Ted’s laughter implies that Dorothy’s equation of the necklace they have discovered with the stolen rubies is intended to be seen as fanciful and impractical. His

¹¹¹ I discuss these terms – and the differences between how the genres were understood – in greater detail below.

¹¹² Examples of such adventure plots include those of the Dr Fu-Manchu series by Sax Rohmer (1883–1959) in which the protagonist, Denis Nayland Smith, begins as a police commissioner in Burma and is eventually knighted, and the Future Invasion novels by William Le Queux (1864–1927).

reaction is largely informed by the financial value of the genuine rubies stolen in Paris.¹¹³ Consequently, the necklace found in the basket has value, both in terms of the item itself and in terms of the aspirational desires of Dorothy and Ted and what they believe to be possible of their own economic circumstances. This reaction potentially locates the story in the adventure genre, but it also suggests the possibility of a mystery to be resolved as to the necklace's origins. Ted's connecting the discovered rubies to the Parisian theft suggests there must be a rational explanation and that they cannot keep the necklace or realise their aspirational desires. Thus, the generic mode begins to shift. The genre moves from adventure – whereby the discovery of the necklace suggests significant change and possibility for the protagonists – to detective fiction, in which a central mystery is to be resolved.

To uncover how this shift between generic modes takes place in Christie's stories, the hierarchies between genres are worth discussing here. The adventure, or adventure-romance, genre in the 1920s was one of the most popular genres, alongside detective fiction (Bloom, pp. 87–88). However, Humble suggests that readers portrayed within middlebrow novels ranged in type with 'lowbrow' readers' indiscriminate absorption in the romance or adventure plots distinct from the pleasant mood-enhancement of middlebrow readers (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 50). This suggestion implies that adventure-romance novels of this period provided a sense of escapism for readers, read with the view of providing an exciting, albeit somewhat improbable, "alternative" to their reality. Such escapism can be clearly seen in the aspirational desires of Edward and Dorothy to improve the reality of their economic circumstances. Humble's assessment also carries negative connotations, however, with the implication that adventure plots are targeted towards 'lowbrow' – or, less intellectually engaged – reading. Christie's stories challenge this conceptualising of adventure as 'lowbrow'. They imply that the protagonists' reading of this genre informs their understanding of the jewellery they discover. This knowledge of genre is part of the feminised mode of reading imperative to the plots: it enables the protagonists to interpret the jewellery and its value. In so doing, they are able to *avoid* the consequences of a false interpretation of these items and of the generic mode of the plot.

¹¹³ This sum of money ('fifty thousand pounds') in 1928 would be worth approximately 2.4 million pounds in September 2022. 'Bank of England Inflation Calculator' (2022) <<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>> [accessed 6 November 2022].

In ‘The Manhood of Edward Robinson’, Edward’s reading of the situation in which he finds himself is informed by his understanding of the adventure genre. At the beginning of the story, Edward is reading a romantic adventure novel. His choice of book leads him to wonder ‘[w]as there such a thing as a world of romance and adventure?’ (p. 107). The impact of this reading material is also evident as he tries to ascertain the truth of why Lady Noreen has taken the necklace:

‘[...] But who is she? Your ladyship, they called her. What does she want to steal a necklace for? Bridge debts?’

In the *feuilletons* which he occasionally read, the beautiful and titled heroine was always driven desperate by bridge debts. (p. 120)¹¹⁴

He compares Lady Noreen’s situation to that of the heroine of the novels he reads. When Dorothy wears the necklace in ‘A Fruitful Sunday’, Ted ‘had never seen Dorothy quite like this. There was a triumph about her, a kind of regal beauty that was completely new to him [...] She looked insolently serene, a kind of Cleopatra and Semiramis and Zenobia rolled into one.’ (p. 175). In comparing Dorothy to historical Middle Eastern women rulers, Ted’s impressions emphasise the regal unreality of Dorothy’s appearance. His knowledge of such references engages with the revival of Egyptomania and interest with Middle Eastern cultures in the 1920s, which in turn was employed extensively in the adventure genre.¹¹⁵ It is the necklace that has value in transforming Dorothy, irrespective of whether the jewels are genuine and of correspondingly high monetary value. The necklace has value as permitting the *possibility of belief* that Dorothy is wearing genuine jewels that enacts this transformation.

The necklaces function as things – becoming more than merely objects – in both stories by exposing these literary notions of the jewellery, and their values in relation to different genres. Understanding these genres, and employing a feminised mode of reading, is necessary to how the protagonists interpret the jewellery. In ‘The Manhood of Edward Robinson’, Edward decides to follow the address on the paper found with the necklace, with him ‘start[ing] off almost happily. After all, this was an adventure. This was the sort of thing that didn’t happen every day. The diamond necklace made it exciting and mysterious’ (p. 116). There is a direct

¹¹⁴ Feuilletons originated as newspaper supplements containing fiction, particularly serialised novels. For discussion of newspapers in relation to popular fiction, see Bloom, pp. 31–39.

¹¹⁵ Basil Glynn discusses this as part of his study of the figure of ‘the mummy’ on screen, noting a ‘shift in popular understanding that the rediscovery of ancient Egypt served the supernatural as much as science’. *Mummy on Screen: Orientalism and Monstrosity in Horror Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 48. A number of Christie’s novels are set in Middle Eastern locations, such as *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *Death on the Nile* (1937), *Appointment with Death* (1938), and *Death Comes as the End* (1945).

correlation between the diamond necklace and the sense of ‘adventure’, ‘excitement’, and ‘mystery’ that Edward experiences at the prospect of investigating. It is significant that there are two purposes to Edward’s investigation – first, the mundane need to recover his car, and the second this discovery of the necklace. It is, however, the necklace that has value in indicating the generic mode. As Edward acknowledges to himself, it is the ‘diamond necklace [that] made it exciting and mysterious’, emphasising that it is the generic connotations of the discovery of the necklace that motivates Edward to pursue the mystery. Having read adventure novels, Edward views the diamond necklace in terms of its role within an adventure narrative – it is a thing that is exciting and mysterious. He does not employ a fuller feminised mode of reading that perceives the necklace as an indicator of serious crime; nor does he consider the possible legal consequences of his being discovered in a car that is not his own with such a necklace.

The value of jewellery in permitting the protagonists, through a feminised mode of reading, to interpret events in relation to genre fiction is more fully explored in ‘A Fruitful Sunday’:

[...] ‘Oh, Ted, do you really think it is IT? It’s like a fairy story!’

‘I don’t think it sounds like a fairy story,’ said Edward. ‘It sounds to me more like the kind of story where the hero goes to Dartmoor unjustly accused for fourteen years.’ (p. 174)

Dorothy questions whether the rubies they have uncovered are those reported as stolen in Paris. Her thoughts lead her to surmise that, if so, they render these circumstances as like a fairy story for her and Ted: the discovery of an expensive ruby necklace will lead to an improvement in their lives. Ted’s reaction demonstrates a more realistic approach to the circumstances of their discovery, but one that is similarly referenced in terms of genre fiction. The reference to story and its hero is indicative of this literary concept of their circumstances; the allusion to Dartmoor suggests that Ted is viewing their story in terms of the mystery and crime genres. According to Ted, the necklace – if genuine – could lead to them being accused of crime and subsequently imprisoned for it. This discrepancy between the light-hearted, positive outlook Dorothy has for the narrative trajectory of the necklace and Ted’s more pessimistic framing does not in either case diminish the value of the necklace in terms of the generic mode. In both, it is the necklace that structures these responses and enables them to employ a feminised mode of reading to understand the significance of the necklace.

Concealment of the jewellery, suggesting its value as a potential indicator and clue to crime, secures the stories in the detective fiction genre. There are a number of references in these

stories to this jewellery being hidden and concealed – particularly in pockets. In ‘The Manhood of Edward Robinson’, not only is the necklace first discovered by Edward in the pocket of the car, but Noreen tells Edward to ‘[s]hove it in your pocket again. The village policeman might come along and see it’ (p. 117). In ‘A Fruitful Sunday’, Ted takes the necklace from Dorothy and ‘dropped it into his pocket’ leading him to feel ‘worked up, exalted, the very devil of a fellow!’ (p. 177). In both instances, this is a convenient way for male characters to handle the necklaces. Both Noreen and Dorothy wear the necklaces (albeit temporarily) but for the majority of the stories, these items remain concealed and carried by men in pockets of cars and of clothing. Whilst the potential monetary value of the necklaces is central to the detective fiction plots, the necklaces also have value as clues and objects of interest. This is evident in Noreen’s advice to Edward to put the necklace in his pocket, which emphasises the clandestine nature of the plot surrounding the necklace. This accentuates the potential for the necklace to be read by a detective character – the policeman – as a potential clue to crime or mystery. Noreen’s instruction to Edward demonstrates her ability to employ a feminised mode of reading to the situation to identify the necklace’s potential value as a clue in a detective fiction plot. The necklaces are therefore concealed by characters because, in applying a feminised mode of reading, they understand them to have significance and possibilities within the detective fiction plots that lead to other situations and circumstances, favourable or otherwise.

The jewellery therefore has value as a means of enabling both couples to interpret it through a feminised mode of reading. Their interpretation is informed by their understanding of literary genre. The initial excitement experienced by Dorothy and Edward is created by their reading of the necklaces through the adventure genre, providing them with the possibility of alleviating their disappointments in their current circumstances. In both stories, this change in economic fortune is not carried through to the resolution – Edward leaves Noreen with the necklace she has stolen as part of a bet and returns to his life as a clerk engaged to the practical Maud, and Dorothy and Ted discover that their necklace is a fake as part of an advertisement campaign. However, this concept of possibility and change – represented by the necklaces – is evident in how the discoveries of the necklaces enable changes in the protagonists. Edward becomes more assertive in his relationship with Maud, and Dorothy and Ted reassure themselves of their moral standing. They look to their future focused on what they already have, as opposed to what they do not. This shift in genre through the stories relates to the self-conscious fictionality highlighted by Rowland. The jewellery has value in providing a trajectory of how these items can be read in relation to genre. A feminised mode

of reading shifts the reading of the jewellery. Beginning from the possibility of escapist adventure, the stories end as a mystery resolved with the protagonists' return to their social milieu in a state of greater contentment.

Christie's texts provide an exploration of literary genre that overturns a sense of hierarchy in relation to genre and to corresponding assumptions of classed modes of reading. Wagoner describes Christie's short stories as 'preserv[ing] a significant, satisfying tradition of the story as a brief unified tale that creates a single, decisive effect' and as having 'end-directed' plots (pp. 32; 15). The unified aspects of the tale are part of the demands of the detective fiction genre to resolve the mysteries that occur in the narrative satisfactorily – with no loose ends or questions remaining. Similarly, York argues that the detective fiction genre guides the reader's expectations of the narratives, with Christie using and deflating these expectations in her works (pp. 25–26). However, in these short stories, Christie is not so much deflating or challenging the expectations of the detective fiction genre but is instead creating an interplay between genres. She allows the exploration of readerly expectations in different modes of reading; at the resolution the stories are firmly cemented in the detective fiction genre. The necklaces in these stories are central to this. They establish how, through a feminised mode of reading, the characters – and readers of the stories – can establish the detective fiction genre as the main generic mode of the stories.

In so doing, Christie's texts can be seen to refute criticism of the middlebrow in relation to the concept of reading for escapism and pleasure. Humble notes the generality of criticisms of reading for pleasure throughout the inter-war period (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 23). This is particularly pertinent in relation to intellectual hierarchies established regarding genre, whereby the adventure genre is perceived as more lowbrow than mystery and detective stories. However, in these short stories, a reading of genre is necessary to the protagonists' interpretation of the jewellery they discover. Their initial excitement, informed by the adventure genre, enables them to re-evaluate their economic circumstances. Jewellery potentially provides them with the prospect and possibility for improvement and change. That this improvement and change is shown not to occur does not imply that Christie is situating the adventure genre as lesser to that of detective fiction. On the contrary, the jewellery in the stories has value in drawing upon a feminised mode of reading to permit an interpretation of those items, informing the resolution of the plots. A feminised mode of reading is here emphasised as one that reads widely and appreciates the conventions of different genres. Whilst the protagonists eventually move from reading in the adventure genre to reading

detective fiction, the adventure genre is still significant. It enables the protagonists to change their outlook on their economic circumstances and to appreciate the resolution of the *mystery* as sufficiently satisfactory.

‘A Trail of Tragedy and Violence’: Mystery as History in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928)

I argued that, in the stories analysed above, the jewellery has value in establishing a feminised mode of reading widely across genres; satisfaction is derived from the resolution of the mystery. Here, the rubies in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* establish a corresponding value in the detective fiction genre. This novel was written immediately following Christie’s disappearance and divorce from her first husband; the novel was acknowledged by Christie herself to be her least favourite, perhaps contributing to the subsequent critical neglect of it.¹¹⁶ The plot is centred on the murder of American heiress Ruth Kettering on the eponymous train with her rubies – a gift from her millionaire father, Rufus Van Aldin – stolen.¹¹⁷ Poirot establishes that the murder and theft are the work of Van Aldin’s secretary, Major Knighton (along with his accomplice, Kitty Kidd, posing as Ruth’s maid Mason), who has been operating under the alias of the Marquis to orchestrate several jewel robberies. This novel poses several significant aspects of Christie’s engagement with genre. The jewellery has value in showing the significance of the detective fiction genre as “wrapping” for the historical value of the jewels. The rubies also provide a sense of awareness of the place of the genre within a broader concept of time.¹¹⁸

A feminised mode of reading establishes this value of the genre in relation to the rubies. Throughout the novel, the historical references made through the jewellery function as genre devices. Once again, there is a borrowing from the adventure genre before transitioning to detective fiction. The historical references provide a transition between genres; they also function within the plot as a means of establishing the value of the jewellery. Ruth’s life also becomes valued in relation to the jewellery. This is established in the priorities accorded the

¹¹⁶ Curran describes how this novel was written ‘at the lowest point of Christie’s life’ and cites Christie’s autobiography in which she states that ‘I cannot say I have ever been proud of [this novel]’ (p. 146). Christie disappeared in late 1926, following a series of personal crises including the death of her mother and her husband’s wish to divorce; she was subsequently found in Harrogate where she claimed to have no recollection of the events of the disappearance – she finalised her divorce from her first husband in April 1928.

¹¹⁷ Agatha Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (London: HarperCollins, 2001). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. First published in the UK and US in 1928. First serialised in the UK in an abridged format in *The Star*, between 1 February and 15 March 1928.

¹¹⁸ I explain my use of this term “wrapping” below.

crimes of theft and murder, and as part of this wider story of the rubies. Ruth's murder becomes part of the rubies' tale and a further layer of value to the narrative potential of the jewels. In so doing, the detective fiction plot itself becomes a small part of the rubies' history – a history that spans centuries – with an awareness of the detective fiction genre as part of a wider story, albeit a fictional one. My reading of the text engages with middlebrow and detective fiction scholarship that has previously drawn attention to the self-referential aspects of these novels.

The emphasis on the importance of the rubies' history and the value that this gives to the jewels is clear from the beginning of the novel. Van Aldin discusses his gift with Knighton; the rubies contain 'the three largest in the world. Catherine of Russia wore them [...] That centre one there is known as "Heart of Fire". It's perfect – not a flaw in it' and are said to be worth '[f]our or five hundred thousand dollars [...] and that is apart from the historical interest' (p. 30).¹¹⁹ In outlining the lineage of the rubies, and with the largest and most significant stone having acquired a name, the rubies are given a status as somewhat unique, privileging their historical significance. Named stones feature in a number of Christie's novels, including in *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) in which the theft of the Koh-i-Noor diamond threatens the security of the (fictional) European state of Herzoslovakia.¹²⁰ The "Heart of Fire" thus carries the associations of romance, tragedy and violence linked with real stones of historical importance. The rubies accrue value through the association with stories and histories of previous owners and events associated with them.

Such stories and histories are equally represented in magazine articles that detail known significant jewellery. Almost ten years after the publication of Christie's novel, an article in *Town & Country* magazine outlines notable items of jewellery owned by wealthy American women. It contains a section on rubies that describes how 'during the Depression [rubies] depreciated less in value than any other precious stone'; it further describes how '[l]arge ones are so rare that they increase in value more rapidly in proportion to weight than diamonds, emeralds, or sapphires'.¹²¹ This exemplifies how the extraordinary monetary value of the

¹¹⁹ This is worth between seven and nine million dollars in 2022. 'CPI Inflation Calculator' (2022) <<https://www.in2013dollars.com/>> [accessed 6 November 2022].

¹²⁰ The Koh-i-Noor diamond is one of the largest cut diamonds in the world, and forms part of the British crown jewels, although ownership of the diamond is claimed by several other countries.

¹²¹ La Roche, 'These Disarming Women Ablaze', *Town & Country*, November 1937, pp. 66–69; 97–98; 124 (p. 97), in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/these-disarming-women-ablaze/docview/2126827271/>> [accessed 30 March 2022]. Further references are to this edition and given after quotations in the text.

fictional “Heart of Fire” has a strong basis in historical fact, finely attuned to the market in jewellery prices and values, particularly as the novel predates the 1929 Wall Street Crash and Depression that followed. The *Town & Country* article further notes ‘several of the small number of rubies notable enough to have been recorded in history have disappeared’, including a reference to ‘the five large rubies which Catherine de’ Medici removed from a vase containing the Crown of Thorns in the Ste. Chappelle’ (p. 97). Christie’s fictional rubies therefore have a connection to historical jewels and the notion of ‘disappearance’. The article draws attention to the few examples of ‘rubies notable enough to have been recorded in history’, and by relating the disappearance of some such examples, emphasises the historical value of those still extant.

The question of where the value of the rubies resides in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* becomes evident in the subplot. A replica of the jewels is made by the Comte de la Roche, Ruth’s lover, as a precursor to an attempt to steal them. Poirot takes these imitation rubies to a dealer as part of his inquiries and declares that ‘They are not, for instance, worth five hundred thousand dollars’ (p. 237). These imitation rubies have a different type of value; they are not of comparative financial value, but aesthetically – as replicas of the real rubies – they have a similar worth. To the thieves (both the Comte and the Marquis/Knighton), the primary motivation for the theft of the rubies is their monetary value. The aesthetic value of the replica necklace resides in how successful it is at imitating the authentic rubies. In labelling the imitation rubies as superb and excellent, the dealer and Poirot emphasise that, as a means of giving the illusion of the authentic rubies, the imitation copy has high aesthetic value (p. 237). But where does this leave the historical value of the rubies? This is intrinsically connected to the jewellery’s monetary worth. The subplot involving the imitation serves to highlight that only the authentic rubies carry the royal connections and histories. These connections contribute not only to the monetary value of the jewellery, but also its value as a plot device.

These historical connections and the value they have for the rubies relates to the genre of the novel. In ‘A Fruitful Sunday’ and ‘The Manhood of Edward Robinson’, the jewellery has value in how it mediates the protagonists’ engagement with various literary genres. Here, the text is more explicitly centred in the detective fiction genre: the inclusion of Poirot as a central detecting character determines this. There are fewer metafictional references to text and genre than in the short stories. However, this is not to say that the adventure genre has no

place in this novel; several aspects of this detective fiction plot borrow from the adventure genre.¹²² These aspects also extend to the historical value of the rubies. They are part of the Russian crown jewels – jewels that have had an uncertain history since the 1917 revolution, suggesting the possibility for the combination of adventure and detective fiction.¹²³ In his discussion of Christie’s *Countess Rosakoff*, Bernthal highlights that the British presentation of Russia, following the revolution and the establishment of communism in the country, had ‘a sense of lost mystique mean[ing] that the Russian monarchy – and the old social order – had romantic connotations in the face of perceived soulless communism, evidenced by the popularity in Britain of romantic stories surrounding the Grand Duchess Anastasia’ (*Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 133).¹²⁴ The fate of the Russian crown jewels ties into this sense of mystique, providing not so much a *romantic* overtone but one that has a pervading sense of mystery and potential adventure.

The combination of genres relates to how the novel itself provides a sense of “wrapping” for the rubies. The jewellery further gives value to the detective fiction genre through this sense of “wrapping”. From the outset of the novel, the physical wrappings of the rubies are highlighted, particularly as Van Aldin shows his recent purchase to Knighton:

From his pocket he drew out a parcel carelessly wrapped in brown paper. He tossed off the wrapping and disclosed a big, shabby, red velvet case. In the centre of it were some twisted initials surmounted by a crown [...] Against the slightly dingy white of the interior, the stones glittered like blood. (pp. 29–30)

The shabby case and its slightly dingy interior imply regular wear, transportation, and change in ownership, speaking to the longevity of the jewellery’s history. The jewels glitter like blood, implying both a sense of vitality and of violence. The mundane and grubby appearance of the wrappings and case emphasise this aspect by being used as a framing device for presenting the jewellery. The royal insignia and recent Russian history thereby align this sense of violence to a recent historical context. This vitality and violence of the jewellery provides a sense of the rubies as living entities – existing through and beyond human life spans. Their longevity is marked by their physical wrappings, and also the novel itself. Although these rubies are fictional, applying a feminised mode of reading recognises the

¹²² This is particularly evident in relation to the Marquis’s efforts to acquire the jewellery, including an early murder attempt on Van Aldin and the impersonations as employees of Van Aldin and Ruth.

¹²³ As highlighted below, the royal insignia that appears on the case – the ‘twisted initials surmounted by a crown’ (pp. 29–30) – is not related to any specific country, but it is implied through previous references to Catherine the Great that these jewels and their case are from the Russian crown jewels.

¹²⁴ Countess Rosakoff does not feature in this novel, but does in a number of short stories, commonly as something of a ‘love interest’ for Poirot (Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie*, pp. 129–34).

creation of a lineage and history for them (echoing jewels such as the Koh-i-Noor). Such a reading enables the novel to become a further means of wrapping additional layers of rumour and story. Value accrues as a result of this – both to the fictional rubies, perpetuating their significance, and to the genre itself as part of the stories related to the rubies.

The novel as a form of wrapping the fictional jewels in further layers of story, history – albeit fictionalised – and value has a further significance when considering the antecedents of Christie’s novel. *The Mystery of the Blue Train* reworks an earlier short story by Christie: ‘The Plymouth Express’ (1923) details the murder of Flossie Carrington on board the Plymouth Express train, with her jewel case stolen containing a large emerald given by her father, Ebenezer Halliday.¹²⁵ Similar to *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, the murder is revealed to have been perpetrated by two jewel thieves, one of whom masquerades as the maid to the murdered woman. In the novel, Mason and Knighton are implied to be thieves of some renown – Knighton operates as ‘a master of the game’ under the sobriquet of the Marquis (p. 374). Significantly, in the short story the thieves are part of a lower-class criminal gang.¹²⁶ With the change in the social status of the gang, the novel’s jewellery acquires a greater value. It is considered of significant interest to warrant the attention of more accomplished thieves; they employ an elaborate plot of impersonation, manipulation of timings, and casting of suspicion elsewhere in order to perpetrate the murder and theft. Other jewellery robberies are also referenced in the novel, with the stealing of the “Heart of Fire” becoming part of a wider context of similar thefts.¹²⁷

This has a further layering effect of the value of the rubies; the rubies are not the sole jewels of interest to the thieves. The objects themselves – the particular stones and way they have been set in the necklace – are of less importance than the money that they have been determined to be worth. However, as argued above, this monetary value is intrinsically

¹²⁵ First published in the UK in *The Sketch* magazine, issue 1575, on 4 April 1923 under the title ‘The Mystery of the Plymouth Express’. First published in the UK as part of the short story collection *Poirot’s Early Cases* in 1974 by Collins Crime Club. First published in the US as part of the short story collection *The Under Dog and Other Stories* in 1951 by Dodd Mead and Company.

¹²⁶ The class status of the gang in the short story is implied through their being already known to the police; Inspector Japp describes Red Narky – the counterpoint to the Marquis – as ‘[a] particularly sharp jewel-thief [...] not one to stick at murder. Usually works with a woman – Gracie Kidd’. Agatha Christie, ‘The Plymouth Express’, in *Poirot’s Early Cases* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 181–204 (p. 199).

¹²⁷ Katherine Grey – who travels on the Blue Train and identifies the dead woman as Ruth – stays with her cousin, Lady Tamplin in Nice. Here, she learns of the theft of the Tamplin emeralds during the war when the house was run as a hospital and where Knighton was staying to recover from a leg wound, thereby linking him to this theft.

connected to the historical value of the jewels – which *can* be seen as centred on the setting of the stones in the necklace. The historical aspect of the rubies' value grows through their becoming the focus of the jewellery thefts. This story – of the rubies as a theft perpetrated by the infamous Marquis – adds value to the rubies by providing another “wrapping”, another story to their already substantial history. As I detailed above, this part of the plot has strong elements of the adventure genre. The adventure genre is significant to this aspect of the plot regarding the theft of the jewellery; it provides value to the rubies as signifiers of the genre itself. It also highlights how a feminised mode of reading that is aware of this can be employed. Yet the jewellery in the novel does not only have value in relation to the adventure genre – this is only part of the “wrapping” of genre that is enacted in the novel.

The detective fiction genre provides this other “wrapping” and is signalled early in the narrative in relation to the rubies. Ruth's handling of the jewels inspires Van Aldin to reflect on

the series of women who had worn the jewels. The heartaches, the despairs, the jealousies. ‘Heart of Fire’, like all famous stones, had left behind it a trail of tragedy and violence. Held in Ruth Kettering's assured hand, it seemed to lose its potency of evil. With her cool, equable poise, this woman of the western world seemed a negation to tragedy or heart-burnings. (p. 39)

Ruth's handling of the jewels prefigures how the detective fiction plot is related to this precedence of previous owners of the jewels. The violence of her murder (she is bludgeoned to death to the extent that her head and face are completely disfigured) establishes this connection. That this jewellery has been previously linked to murder and violence is commented upon by Derek Kettering, Ruth's estranged husband and suspect: later in the novel he states ‘Poor Ruth, it was those damned rubies did for her [...] There has been murder done for those same stones before now, I believe.’ (pp. 189–90). Both of these instances highlight how the long history of the rubies has the potential to inform the reading of genre within the novel itself. At the beginning, Ruth is positioned as a ‘woman of the western world’, a negation of the tragedy and violence associated with the rubies. She is a negation to reading this history of the jewels as indicative of their future. However, Derek's comments suggest that understanding the rubies and their history informs how the mystery of Ruth's murder is another “wrapping” of the rubies' history. Such understanding encompasses a fuller appreciation of their value as a motivation for crime: thus, employing a feminised mode of reading.

A feminised mode of reading the rubies and this text extends to how this impacts the concept of value in relation to Ruth as the murder victim. Her death acts as motivation for resolving the mystery of who has killed her, as opposed to who has stolen the rubies. Jewellery, perhaps uniquely, incorporates multiple different values – in this case, particularly between monetary, historical, and aesthetic. That the rubies are a gift from Van Aldin to his daughter frames their relationship within this concept of values. This is exemplified in Van Aldin’s reaction to Ruth’s gratitude for the rubies as he informs her that she is all he has (p. 40). Ruth is framed in terms of value that relate to the value of the jewels; to her father, Ruth is valued as much as any jewels he gives are to her. Her life is not necessarily valued in monetary terms as the equivalent of the jewels, yet the concept of value permits this comparative sense of worth between Ruth and the “Heart of Fire”. This comparison between the rubies and Ruth is extended in that both are the subject of crime – the rubies are stolen at the same time as Ruth is murdered. Yet the latter crime is the one that has a greater value as motivation for resolving the mystery. This is particularly evident when, during Poirot’s investigations, he returns the rubies to Van Aldin but reveals that they are imitation. Van Aldin’s voice is ‘harsh with emotion’ and he orders Poirot: ‘Find Ruth’s murderer for me [...] that is all I ask.’ (p. 252). The emotion in Van Aldin’s voice indicates the strength of feeling – the strength of value – he places on his daughter’s life. He does not ask Poirot to find the genuine rubies but instead his attention remains focused on resolving the mystery of his daughter’s death.

A comparative sense between Ruth’s value and that of the rubies is significant for understanding not only the priorities of the detective fiction plot – Ruth’s murder over the theft of the rubies – but also how this plot becomes framed as part of a wider story. The long history of the rubies incorporates multiple “wrappings” of stories; it includes previous owners and their romances, violence, and tragedies. The rubies’ history frames the plot of the novel: Ruth’s murder is situated within an elaborate plan to steal the rubies, as part of this long history of the jewellery itself. Whilst Ruth’s murder is the focus of this particular story, there is a sense that the rubies exist both prior to and beyond these circumstances. Their existence is within the narrative world and thereby provides an external commentary on the genre. This engages with a type of self-referentiality that previous critics have pointed to in works by Christie and other detective fiction writers.¹²⁸ Rowland suggests that Christie’s early work

¹²⁸ I use self-referentiality to encompass a broader sense of self-awareness of writing in the mystery genre – such as references to expected plot devices of the genre – and not necessarily to refer to explicit references within Christie’s works to her own texts – although *The Mystery of the Blue Train* does have these connections, with a character in Christie’s *Death on the Nile* referring to Van Aldin.

parodied her male predecessors, later becoming increasingly self-referential with this being an ‘irony [that] indicates a novel perceiving itself at a double remove from the authorising texts of the law: once because crime fiction and twice because defining itself against (even as it so constructs) a masculine heroic tradition’ (p. 25). I argue that the manner in which Christie frames the rubies forms a part of this self-referentiality; they indicate a broader concept of history and story beyond the concerns of the novel itself. By showing this broader time span, Christie appears to allocate space for the novel and the detective fiction genre more widely.

Allotting the detective fiction genre a place within literature more broadly engages with this concept of writing against ‘authorising texts of the law’ that Rowland identifies. The rubies in the novel are fictional, as are the stories, rumours and historical references associated with them. Yet they should not be dismissed, either because of this fictionality, or because these types of story verge towards the sensational or dramatic, as I discussed above in relation to the short stories. Christie’s novel instead invites a feminised mode of reading that places value on such stories within a broader context of time and literature. Understanding the rubies through a feminised mode of reading enables their value within the wrappings of both the adventure and detective fiction genres to become evident. This understanding frames concepts of value that motivate the resolution of the mystery of Ruth’s murder. In reading Christie’s self-referentiality in detective fiction alongside those texts she published under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott, Bernthal suggests that

[t]his self-referential playfulness, which reaffirms the dominant image of ‘Agatha Christie’, remains understated. Christie was able to avoid getting caught up in further commentary because she channelled complicated thoughts and questions into less-structured prose, unconnected to her name. (*Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 54)

This comparative approach somewhat over-simplifies the complexity of the ideas and concepts presented in Christie’s detective fiction. The rubies in this novel invite a feminised mode of reading conscious of a type of self-referentiality in Christie’s fiction that encompasses a self-awareness of the genre. In so doing, questions regarding the place of the genre amongst other types of story and history are raised.

At the close of the novel, Poirot is in discussion with Lenox, the daughter of Lady Tamplin with whom Katherine Grey is staying, who suffers from unrequited love. They hear the whistle of the Blue Train and Lenox comments:

‘Trains are relentless things, aren’t they, Monsieur Poirot? People are murdered and die, but they go on just the same. I am talking nonsense, but you know what I mean.’

‘Yes, yes, I know. Life is like a train, Mademoiselle. It goes on. And it is a good thing that that is so.’ (p. 383)

The rubies have a similar value throughout the novel to the train as expressed here. Their longevity and history demonstrate that they, too, are ‘relentless things’ and that ‘life [...] goes on’, despite, perhaps because of, the wrappings of murders and death that are perpetrated and perpetuate around them. The tone of this conversation corresponds to the value that the rubies have in relation to the detective fiction genre. Poirot and Lenox’s dialogue highlights how stories of this genre are part of a wider history and context that ‘go on just the same’. This conversation epitomises a feminised mode of reading, aware of the self-referential aspects of the novel and the value placed on genre. Lenox’s admission that she is ‘talking nonsense, but you know what I mean’ implies to readers a knowing self-referential sense of the accusation of triviality often levelled at the genre.¹²⁹

However, through a feminised mode of reading the rubies and the value that such a reading provides, there is a more serious understanding to be had of this self-referentiality. Poirot’s admission that ‘life [...] goes on. And it is a good thing that that is so’ superficially appears to refer to Lenox’s falling in love in the future. However, it also responds to Lenox’s ‘you know what I mean’ to demonstrate a self-referential awareness of the place of the detective fiction genre in a broader context. In advocating a feminised mode of reading the detective fiction genre, I am not implying that Christie sought to place it at the apex of a genre hierarchy, or to treat it solely in a serious manner. In contrast, Christie demonstrates awareness of the value of the genre *amongst* histories and stories of other genres: these stories – such as the plot of this novel – have a place as equally important as those others. Poirot’s acknowledgement that ‘it is a good thing that that is so’ echoes the satisfaction with that equality between stories and histories. I suggest that this advocates for a feminised mode of reading of Christie’s novels that recognises the place of detective fiction amongst other types of text.

‘Holding the Purse Strings’: Jewellery, Genre, and Women’s Independence in *Death on the Nile* (1937)

¹²⁹ It could be argued that this sense of triviality continues to echo in terms such as Bernthal’s use of ‘playfulness’ above or the ‘game’ and ‘clue-puzzle’ that I discuss in the Introduction; however, I use these terms to evoke the pleasure to be derived from the genre, and not as a reason to dismiss it.

I now focus on the value of jewellery in relation to specific aspects of the detective fiction genre. Namely, how reading items of jewellery as clues demonstrates how this genre frames other middlebrow concepts. This is particularly pertinent to *Death on the Nile*. The novel's plot details the murder of Linnet Doyle (née Ridgeway) – a newly married American heiress on her honeymoon aboard a Nile cruise, where her husband Simon's ex-lover, Jacqueline (Jackie) de Bellefort, is also present.¹³⁰ For much of the investigation by Poirot and Colonel Race, it is widely assumed that neither Simon nor Jacqueline can be the murderer. Jacqueline is seen by others to have shot Simon in the leg prior to Linnet's murder, and Jacqueline herself is sedated and monitored following this. However, Poirot proves that this shooting of Simon is staged by him and Jacqueline to provide each other with alibis, enabling Simon to murder his wife before genuinely injuring himself in the leg. Linnet's pearls are something of a sub-plot to this main plot of her murder and the ensuing investigation.¹³¹ However, I argue that they have values – aesthetic, monetary, and authenticity values – that relate to how the novel is located in the detective fiction genre, and how this genre frames the middlebrow concept of women's independence.

In my Introduction, analysis of Christie's works was framed in relation to reading these texts as clue-puzzles. However, in so doing, I am not seeking to 'place the purely conventional and structural aspects of the mystery at the centre of [...] readings, while marginalising the presence and significance of the victim', as identified by Mills in a discussion of early commentators of the genre ('Victims', p. 150). I am suggesting that analysis of the clue-puzzle aspects – specifically Linnet's pearls in this novel – highlights how the identity of the victim, Linnet, is constructed. Hoffman notes that the 'female murder victim's identity and the structure of the crime and its subsequent investigation provide a lens through which representations of women, the feminine and deviance can be questioned and explored' (p. 158). It is Linnet's identity as an "authentically" independent woman that is shown to be the motivation for her murder. The term "independent" encapsulates both financial and emotional freedom from the ties of others; the term "authentically" is used to suggest that it is Linnet's

¹³⁰ Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile*, in *Poirot in the Orient* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 189–417. Further references made are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. *Death on the Nile* was first published in the UK in 1937, first serialised in the US in *The Saturday Evening Post* 15 May–3 July 1937 and first published as a novel in the US in 1938.

¹³¹ Linnet's pearls are discovered to have been stolen on the night of her murder, and there is some suggestion that the two crimes are linked before it is revealed that they have been stolen by a fellow passenger, Tim Allerton, and swapped with an imitation that is then also stolen by another passenger, Marie Van Schuyler, who suffers from kleptomania.

inability to change this aspect of herself that provides a motivation for her murder.¹³² Linnet's pearls have value within the plot of the novel for locating the novel in the detective fiction genre. The middlebrow concept of women's independence is thus framed in relation to questions of victimhood and representations of women in the genre.

The issue of authenticity in relation to the pearls' value is introduced at the beginning of the novel as a friend, Joanna Southwood, questions Linnet about her pearls:

'I suppose these are real, aren't they, Linnet?'

'Of course.'

'I know it's "of course" to you, my sweet, but it wouldn't be to most people. Heavily cultured or even Woolworth! Darling, they really are *incredible*, so exquisitely matched. They must be worth the *most* fabulous sum!' (p. 193; emphases in original)

The perfect uniformity of the pearls' appearance draws into question their authenticity; the authenticity value of the pearls is connected to their aesthetic value. There is the implication that their aesthetic value is so high – they are so *perfectly* uniform – that it suggests that their authenticity is questionable to the extent that they might be heavily cultured, or even not real, and from Woolworth. This suggestion is unique to pearl jewellery. In the 1890s, Kokichi Mikimoto had started to develop techniques to produce cultured pearls by artificially introducing small beads into oyster shells.¹³³ This created the distinction between natural pearls – those created in nature – and cultured pearls, with the rarity of large natural pearls becoming undermined (Phillips, p. 156). Whilst cultured pearls are still authentic pearls, the reference to Woolworth suggests that the authenticity of Linnet's pearls could be considered so doubtful as to render them potentially the equivalent of fake pearls from a retail store.¹³⁴

¹³² I discuss this notion of women's independence in relation to the middlebrow in greater detail below. Whilst Linnet marries Simon and so can be seen to have an attachment to him, she does not form emotional ties but instead is acquisitive of what she wants. This is echoed in how Linnet is described after first meeting Simon as thinking 'I'm frightfully – frightfully happy. I like Jackie's young man... I like him enormously [...] Lucky Jackie...' (p. 205). There is an emphasis here on what Jacqueline has in her relationship with Simon, and a jealousy of this; Jacqueline later describes how Linnet 'went all out to get Simon away from me [...] She just went baldheaded for Simon...' (p. 411). Again, there is an emphasis of getting Simon *away from* Jacqueline, not on Linnet's love for him.

¹³³ Clare Phillips, *Jewelry: From Antiquity to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 156. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

¹³⁴ *Death on the Nile* is not the first detective fiction story of the 1930s that contains a mix-up between Woolworth pearls and real pearls – in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Have His Carcase* (1932), a photograph is faked of a Russian princess where '[n]o doubt the pearls were merely the best Woolworth, like the whole pathetic illusion, but these things serve their purpose' (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), p. 413. Christie's 'A Fruitful Sunday' (1928) also refers to Woolworth pearls, as discussed above.

A hierarchy of pearls in relation to their value is established. Real, natural pearls have high monetary, aesthetic and authenticity value. They are followed by cultured pearls that have a lesser monetary value. Finally, fake pearls have little monetary or authenticity value. Linnet's pearls are at the pinnacle of the very best in available pearls – they are natural pearls, so exquisitely matched as to give them a high aesthetic value. That Linnet has to verbally give assurance as to their authenticity, however, demonstrates the borderline between the appearance of the pearls as real and fake. Little in their aesthetic value alone gives assurance as to their authenticity value.¹³⁵ The connection between the authenticity, aesthetic, and monetary values of the pearls is further demonstrated by Linnet's concerns that the pearls potentially appear '[r]ather vulgar' (p. 193). This corresponds to how Linnet is described at the outset of the novel through gossip and rumour of the men in the village pub – 'Millions, she's got' (p. 191). They describe her fortune coming from America: '[h]er mother was the only daughter of one of those millionaire blokes. Quite like the pictures, isn't it?' (p. 192). The somewhat disparaging tone in which this information is relayed implies that Linnet's identity as a wealthy American heiress is a source of potential criticism. By questioning her English friend Joanna as to whether her pearls are vulgar, Linnet relates her pearls to her wealth and outsider status as an American. She demonstrates her awareness of how her money and her nationality set her apart.

Concern with vulgarity in relation to her outsider status – both in her nationality and her wealth – is further indicative of Linnet's authenticity; her truthfulness to herself. Whilst Linnet is aware of how her pearls – and by extension, herself – might be perceived as vulgar, there is little indication that she attempts to change her behaviour and appearance.¹³⁶ She subsequently remains her authentic self. Linnet's authenticity is centred on her independence, and her pearls – notably a *string* of pearls – provide a clue as to this aspect of her identity. As discussed by Simon Bliss, Christine Bard's analysis of the appearance of the *garçonne* – the flapper – identifies how long pieces of jewellery emphasised particular parts of the body and its movement, with the image of these women dancing with their pearls swinging around them as 'probably one of the strongest representations of women's emancipation' (p. 24). Such associations between strings of pearls and the notion of women's independence are

¹³⁵ This verbal assurance of the pearls' authenticity becomes particularly pertinent in how this is echoed in relation to the lethal potential of the pearl-inlaid pistol used to shoot Linnet – see below.

¹³⁶ This is particularly evident in relation to Linnet's purchase of Wode Hall and alterations to the building. It can also be seen in Linnet's pursuit of Simon and Jacqueline's description that Simon 'didn't want Linnet. He thought her good-looking but terribly bossy, and he hated bossy women! [...]' (p. 411).

further exemplified in magazine articles of the period. In a 1937 edition of *Good Housekeeping* (US), an article details appropriate fashions for ‘female freshmen’, including advice that ‘[a] string of pearls adds a typical touch’ to wearing sweaters.¹³⁷ This creates a clear connection between young American women who enjoy a certain degree of emancipation in their ability to attend college, and the wearing of strings of pearls in such settings. The pearls are fashionable and stylish items of jewellery, but also in turn imply this notion of youth and emancipation. Linnet’s pearls thus serve to emphasise how she is a woman of independence, the manifestation of that independence having been bought by herself for ‘about fifty thousand’ (p. 193).¹³⁸

Linnet’s attitude towards her pearls further demonstrates that independence; when questioned about fears of their being stolen, she replies ‘No, I always wear them – and anyway they’re insured.’ (p. 193). A lack of attachment to the pearls themselves is indicated. She is not concerned about their unique uniformity potentially being difficult to replace and suggests that an insurance pay-out of money can replace them. In the 1937 *Town & Country* article ‘These Disarming Women Ablaze’ on notable items of jewellery in America, reference is made to how ‘[s]ince the Depression a series of daring robberies has scared the owners of valuable jewels out of their wits’, citing how ‘Mme. Mathis [...] was held up [...] and an assortment of Paul Flato’s most glittering gems were stripped from Mrs. James Forrestal in Beckman Place’ (p. 67). Christie’s novel therefore builds upon this context of American women being targeted in crimes of burglary for their jewellery. Linnet’s lack of attachment to her pearls could therefore be seen as a need to distance herself from any such emotional ties to the item itself as insurance against their loss in such a targeted crime. The pearls therefore do not carry any significant sentimental value for Linnet in relation to another person. They have no associations as inherited family heirlooms or gifts from any particular person; they indicate her independence in her aloofness from sentimentality and material possessiveness.

A feminised mode of reading – one that is aware of these connotations of pearl jewellery in this form – permits the pearls to become clues to the resolution of Linnet’s murder. By

¹³⁷ Margaret Stone, ‘Four-Page Portfolio of College Fashions: On Or Off the Campus’, *Good Housekeeping* (US), August 1937, pp. 66–69 (p. 66), in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/four-page-portfolio-college-fashions/docview/1858686713/>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

¹³⁸ Fifty thousand (presumably pounds) would be worth approximately 2.6 million pounds in September 2022. ‘Bank of England Inflation Calculator’ (2022) <<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>> [accessed 9 November 2022].

understanding these pearls as representative of Linnet's independence, they become indications – clues – to how these attributes are part of the reason she is murdered. Once Poirot has identified them as murderers, Jacqueline's description of Simon's attitude to Linnet confirms this:

‘He said his idea of having money was to have it himself – not to have a rich wife holding the purse strings. “I’d be a kind of damned Prince Consort,” he said to me. [...] I think I know when the idea came into his head. He said one day: “If I’d any luck, I’d marry her and she’d die in about a year and leave me all the boodle.” And then a queer startled look came into his eyes. That was when he first thought of it... (p. 411)

Simon and Jacqueline's motivation is more than simply to obtain money from Linnet – there is no suggestion that they seek Simon's marriage to her in order to control Linnet's wealth with her still alive. Instead, they seek to be left all her possessions and wealth from her death, including her expensive jewellery.¹³⁹ In this context of marriage as part of the plot to murder, the pearls have a further significance. Beatriz Chadour-Sampson notes the contradictory symbolism of pearl jewellery over many centuries, suggesting ‘[i]t was variously thought to symbolize seductiveness or to embody purity; to bring good luck in marriage or to represent tears and misfortune’.¹⁴⁰ Linnet's pearls can be argued to represent all of these attributes. At the beginning of the novel, Linnet's pearls should be read as a clue; they foreshadow her marriage and represent the financial gain for her future husband. They are therefore a clue to the resolution of her murder having been perpetrated for that gain.

By reading the pearls as clues to the resolution of Linnet's murder, they function from the beginning of the novel to frame Linnet as the victim; her pearls are representative of her independence and authenticity. Simon and Jacqueline plot to murder Linnet because they know that she is incapable of changing her character, leaving Simon as ‘Prince Consort’ whilst she is ‘holding the purse [and pearl] strings’. York's reading of this novel centres on the criminal partnership between Simon and Jacqueline. He argues that the latter is motivated by her love of Simon but is

¹³⁹ Indeed, Simon admits as much; when interviewed early in the investigation, he suggests that the only valuable jewellery Linnet had were ‘those damned pearls’, implying that her murder is connected to their theft (p. 308).

¹⁴⁰ Beatriz Chadour-Sampson with Hubert Bari, *Pearls* (London: V&A Publishing, 2013), p. 10. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

also influenced by a certain sense of superiority: she feels just a little aloof about Simon's love of money and she knows that he is too stupid to work out an effective plan of action, so that it is her ingenuity that creates the mystery of the book. (p. 120)

As suggested above, Linnet's attitude to her pearls is indicative of her independence; she has a similar sense of aloofness that York identifies in Jacqueline's attitude towards money. Both women have a detachment from money and place little value on it. In the case of Linnet, it can be argued that this is because she has so much money that it consequently means little to her. Money is literally no object that cannot be replaced, as indicated in her attitude to her pearls. Contrastingly, Jacqueline has little but is motivated by her love of Simon and uses her intellectual superiority to protect him.

Independence from monetary motivations challenges the previous emphasis on women's independence in the feminine middlebrow that is closely aligned to the notion of financial security. Women's choices between marriages and careers are particularly cited as a means of achieving this. Beaman notes how women's interwar writing demonstrates women's searches for freedom and independence being ended by marriage or the loss of a partner (p. 65). Similarly, Maslen understands post-World War One women novelists as addressing both the power and powerlessness of women, including the pressures on daughters of suffragettes to – somewhat unwillingly – embark on careers in place of settling for domesticity (p. 147).¹⁴¹ Yet in Christie's novel, Linnet and Jacqueline's independence – represented in Linnet through her pearls – is framed in terms of the value they place on money. They do not face choices between careers and marriages, but instead their values are framed through the detective fiction genre.¹⁴² Reading the pearls through a feminised mode gives them significance as clues; they are indicators of Linnet's independence, independence which is then echoed in Jacqueline's attitude to money. The pearls-as-clues frame Linnet and Jacqueline in relation to key roles of the detective fiction plots: as victim and murderer. Although this framing does have a connection to marriage (Simon marries Linnet for her money so that he can subsequently marry Jacqueline), marriage functions primarily as a plot device. It is a

¹⁴¹ Humble frames her discussion of marriage and careers in relation to class formations, arguing that Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935) denounces the 'womanly woman' who sublimates her own needs to those of her husband, further suggesting '[s]uch retrogressive attitudes are seen as essentially lower-middle-class, with the upper-middle-class woman typically pursuing intellectual and professional independence' (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 78).

¹⁴² There are references to Jacqueline's having worked several jobs, and to Simon's need for a job that leads Jacqueline to introduce him to Linnet as a prospective land agent for her. However, these are part of the necessities of the murder mystery plot to demonstrate the motivations that lead Simon and Jacqueline to murder Linnet.

reasoning for the motivation behind the murder: Simon and Jacqueline know that Linnet's independence will mean that he cannot have financial control whilst she lives but that he can inherit as her widowed husband and subsequently marry Jacqueline. Consequently, a feminised mode of reading of Linnet's pearls permits this understanding of how Christie frames middlebrow themes and concepts – such as women's independence – in relation to the detective fiction genre.

This engagement with women's independence framed through the detective fiction genre is further evident through a feminised mode of reading of pearl as a material in the novel. Jacqueline owns the pistol used to kill Linnet, and it is described as a 'small pearl-handled pistol – a dainty toy it looked' (p. 237). Duplication of pearl creates a purposeful correlation between Linnet's pearl string and the weapon of her murder. Although the pearl handle of the pistol does not possess the same monetary and aesthetic value as pearl jewellery, the choice of pearl has value for the questions of authenticity that it poses. Jacqueline shows the pistol to Poirot and comments that it looks 'too foolish to be real, but it is real!' (p. 237). This implies that the pistol's appearance – including its pearl handle – conceals the deadly potential of the item as a weapon. The repeated references to its dainty toy appearance, fitting within the palm of a woman's hand and easily concealed in a 'little silk bag' collectively function to diminish the item and render it of little significance (p. 237). Reducing the physical properties of the pistol in this way has a corresponding effect in diminishing its potential to harm, and its later use for murder. Jacqueline emphasises that just '[o]ne of those bullets would kill a man or a woman' (p. 237). As with Linnet's need to verbally reassure Joanna as to the authenticity of her pearls, the pistol requires a similar verbal affirmation of its authenticity and potentially lethal uses.

The diminishing of the appearance of the pistol in this way potentially corresponds to a diminishing of Linnet's death. When Jacqueline uses the pistol to shoot at Simon – theoretically providing him with an alibi for Linnet's murder – it is described as only 'sound[ing] like a cork' (p. 288). Later, Colonel Race suggests that this 'little fellow wouldn't make much noise anyway [...] Just a pop, that's all' (p. 334). The sound of a cork popping is described here as comparatively quieter than the expected noise of a gunshot, and also has connotations of celebration.¹⁴³ The pistol itself is described in much greater detail when Poirot examines it as part of his inquiries: 'There is the ornamental work on it – and the initials J. B.

¹⁴³ The similarities between a cork popping and a gunshot are also used in Christie's short story 'Dead Man's Mirror'. This story was first published in the *Strand* magazine, July 1932.

It is an *article de luxe*, a very feminine production, but it is none the less a lethal weapon.’ (p. 321). Disparaging the pistol as an *article de luxe*, and a very feminine production emphasises the ornamental work of the pearl handle, the initialling, and pop noise the pistol makes when fired. These elements, it is implied, diminish the deadly potential of the pistol to the extent that several people assert that it is nonetheless a lethal weapon. In murdering Linnet with this weapon, Jacqueline and Simon diminish Linnet’s death to the equivalent status of the pistol used to murder her. It requires a weapon that only appears as a dainty toy that makes little noise and is easily confused with the celebratory noise of opening a champagne bottle.

Through a feminised mode of reading pearl as a material, a correlation is drawn between this use of a pearl-handled pistol and Linnet’s pearls. The fact that she is murdered so easily with a dainty toy by her husband and his lover in a plot to inherit her wealth appears to diminish and dismiss Linnet’s independence. Yet this is to misread the correlation between the pistol and the pearl string as the marker of Linnet’s independence. Linnet’s pearls are representative of her independence and their symbolism as a clue to her murder *because of* that independence. The pistol echoes that independence in its pearl-inlaid handle, enabling this weapon to be read as a further clue to the resolution of the mystery. This is emphatically framed in relation to the mystery genre; the pearl-inlaid pistol does not represent Jacqueline’s independence in the same way that the pearl string does Linnet’s. Jacqueline has neither financial independence (she must work to supplement her income), nor emotional independence (she is motivated by her love for Simon). Linnet’s pearls as representative of her independence in relation to values such as authenticity, aesthetic, and monetary is established from the outset of the novel. Such representation then frames how the pearl-inlaid pistol – echoing this same material of pearl – can also be read as the murder weapon in relation to this concept of women’s independence.

Connotations of marriage, seduction, and wealth that pearl as material carries are echoed in the murder weapon. It is established prior to Linnet’s murder that Jacqueline owns the pistol. Both the “why” and the “how” of the resolution of the mystery are aligned in the use of pearl as a clue. If Linnet is murdered for her pearls – representing her wealth and her authentic independence – then the pistol echoes this reasoning: it echoes the material qualities of the string. Through this feminised mode of reading, the connotations of pearl and the correlations between the string and the pistol can be understood as clues. Women’s independence becomes framed through the detective fiction genre: it also contributes to these clues to how the mystery can be resolved. To return to Hoffman, as discussed at the beginning of this section,

Linnet's identity as an independent woman and the shooting of her with such a pistol provides a way of understanding this concept of women's independence in relation to the detective fiction genre. In contrast to focussing on women's independence as a binary choice between career and marriage, Christie uses the detective fiction genre to frame this middlebrow concept as part of the plot. Through a feminised mode of reading the pearl string and its authenticity value and – by using the same material – the pistol, these concepts are framed as reasons and resolutions to the detective fiction plot.

A focus solely on Linnet as victim or Jacqueline as murderer – privileging the subjects of the novel – would potentially frame this concept as a diminishing of Linnet's death and, in so doing, the concept of women's independence. However, I argue that through a feminised mode of reading the clue-puzzle elements of the text – the objects and things of the narrative – the genre itself has value. It frames this middlebrow concept of women's independence. Christie uses the genre to engage with these middlebrow concepts, whilst maintaining focus on how these concepts relate to the genre itself. Linnet's pearls enable an understanding of the connotations and symbolism that emphasises her as an authentically independent woman. These values of authenticity correlate to the pearl-inlaid pistol, with both the pearl string and pistol becoming related to this concept of women's independence, yet they maintain their potential as clues above all else. Linnet is, then, to be understood as a murder victim whose identity in the narrative as such is clearly signalled and clued throughout the narrative through her jewellery. She is not to be understood an independent woman solely diminished by her murder with a disparaged weapon. Her pearls signal both the "why" of her murder – her independence as a motive for her murder – and the "how", with the pistol as an indicator of how the method of shooting relates to this motive. The jewellery has value in highlighting how middlebrow concepts are framed in relation to the genre.

'So Dreadfully False-Looking': Authenticity and Jewellery in *A Murder is Announced* (1950)

Having considered how jewellery has value in relation to the middlebrow concept of women's independence, I now turn to consider the plotting of the narrative. Christie's use of significant items – things – provides clues to the resolution of the mystery, but these items are frequently misread by detective characters. In this section, I focus on *A Murder is Announced*.¹⁴⁴ The

¹⁴⁴ Agatha Christie, *A Murder is Announced* (London: HarperCollins, 2016). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. First published in the UK and US in 1950; first

plot of the novel centres on the apparent attempted murder of Miss Letitia (Letty) Blacklock who has previously worked for a financier, Randall Goedler, and who will inherit his fortune when his wife, Belle, dies. For much of the narrative, it is assumed that Randall's nieces are behind the murder attempts as they will inherit if Letitia predeceases Belle. However, the resolution of the mystery reveals that Letitia's sister, Charlotte (Lotty), has assumed her place after Letitia's untimely death; the murders are not attempts on her life but to prevent the truth of her identity being revealed.¹⁴⁵ Her identity is closely associated with the pearl choker-style necklace Miss Blacklock wears throughout the narrative; it is worn to hide a scar from an operation to remove a goitre. The choker functions as a clue to the truth of the resolution of the mystery when employing a feminised mode of reading, but it is also misread by multiple characters. I analyse how Miss Marple's ability to employ a feminised mode of reading provides the resolution to the mystery; this reading is intrinsically connected to middlebrow themes of women's independence and femininity.¹⁴⁶

Miss Blacklock is frequently referred to by the narrator and other characters as wearing a pearl choker necklace; it is the authenticity value of these pearls that has significance in relation to how the police investigation develops as to the attempted murder.¹⁴⁷ For most of the novel, the pearls are assumed to be fake by those around Miss Blacklock. A gradual suspicion arises that the pearls may indeed be authentic and possessing significant monetary value: in a conversation between Inspector Craddock and the vicar's wife, Bunch Harmon, the latter describes them as 'so dreadfully false-looking' (p. 256). To the Inspector's suggestion that they might be real pearls, she exclaims 'Oh! they *couldn't* be!' and 'they're so glassy' (p. 256; emphasis in original). Bunch's incredulity at the Inspector's suggestion is based on their aesthetic value, implying that genuine pearls would not have such a poor lustre. Her understanding is akin to a feminised mode of reading – an understanding of pearls' aesthetic

serialised in an abridged format in the UK in the *Daily Express* between 28 February and 11 March 1950; first serialised in the US in the *Chicago Tribune* from 17 April–12 June 1950.

¹⁴⁵ Whilst the murderer is technically Lotty Blacklock, she is known as Letitia by most of the other characters in the narrative who use this name. As I discuss both Letitia and Lotty, to avoid confusion I refer to this character as Miss Blacklock.

¹⁴⁶ I refer to Christie's detective as Miss Marple – rather than solely by her surname or by her first name of Jane – as this is also pertinent to my discussion in this section of Miss Marple's status as a spinster. I also do so to keep consistency with how characters are referred to within the novels; Christie makes clear use of titles such as 'Miss' and 'Mr'. In many cases, this is intentional to imply a sense of respectability to characters later revealed to be less so. Such respectability is clear in relation to Mr Osborne in *The Pale Horse*, whose respectable pharmaceutical business conceals his identity as a murderer.

¹⁴⁷ Occasionally, the pearl choker is replaced by a choker of cameos. However, there are fewer references to this style of necklace – whilst it serves the same function in concealing the scar, I suggest that it does not serve the same purpose in providing a clue to the resolution of the mystery.

appearance, and specifically lustre. Neil H. Landman *et al.* suggest that ‘luster is one of the most distinctive features of a pearl [...] more than a surface reflection. It appears to originate from within the pearl’.¹⁴⁸ Lustre relates to the manner in which Miss Blacklock conceals her true identity – the surface reflection suggests she is Letitia, yet the truth of her identity does indeed originate from within. The pearls have potential to be clues to the resolution of the mystery through a feminised mode of reading. Such a reading understands this aspect of the aesthetic appearance of pearls, but the choker is instead misread.

The Inspector initially misreads the pearls as potentially genuine based on his process of elimination. In struggling to find a motive for attempted murder of Miss Blacklock, he begins to consider her false pearls as genuine and consequently of value, particularly against her life. This should be read as part of the post-war setting of the novel and implications this has for the economic circumstances of the suspects.¹⁴⁹ Marshik has argued that ‘a focus on reaching a wide audience [...] meant that many middlebrow writers took in popular cultural phenomena’ uncommon in modernist texts, citing the example that ‘in the interwar period, a class emerged that came to be known as the “new poor,” a phrase that identified individuals and families whose standard of living had radically fallen’ post-World War One, necessitating the wearing of second-hand garments (p. 5).¹⁵⁰ Experience of reduced financial circumstances following global conflict – and its representation in middlebrow literature – is not solely evident in the interwar period. It is also visible in texts such as *A Murder is Announced*, published following World War Two.¹⁵¹ Characters such as Miss Blacklock are not shown to struggle economically to the same extent or in the same ways – I am not suggesting that her pearl choker is a second-hand acquisition – yet a similar lack of security is evident in relation to economic circumstances. Miss Blacklock’s impersonation of her sister in order to inherit the

¹⁴⁸ Neil H. Landman *et al.*, *Pearls: A Natural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), p. 46. The issue of lustre is also mentioned in the *Town & Country* article describing notable jewellery items, which suggests that ‘[i]t’s an exploded theory that pearls “die”. Old ones often lack lustre because their moisture has gradually dried out; and they do wear out from friction and can be affected by the acids in perfume’ (p. 68).

¹⁴⁹ This is not the same social milieu as *The Mystery of the Blue Train* or *Death on the Nile*; this novel has many details of post-war life in an English village, including rationing, bartering, and identity checks.

¹⁵⁰ Whilst Marshik’s comparison of middlebrow and modernist texts here implies that middlebrow writers were motivated by readership figures, I am less concerned with writers’ motivations than the way in which these texts engage with this cultural phenomenon.

¹⁵¹ Barnard similarly notes that ‘one of the strengths of this book is the meticulous way Agatha Christie chronicles, and in particular the way she *uses*, the changing mores of [...the time]. What we have here are not so much reduced gentleness [...] but gentleness faced with the aggressive threats to their position posed by an egalitarian age’ (p. 97).

estate of her sister's wealthy financier boss is primarily in aid of financial security. The inheritance from the Goedlers would provide for a woman who has spent most of her life as a recluse; Lotty has been incapable of earning her own independence – both financially and socially – and reliant on her sister to support her.

The issue of the pearl choker's authenticity in the latter stages of the novel engages with this context of economic security in relation to women's independence. It also highlights how a feminised mode of reading is integral to understand the pearl choker as a clue to the resolution. The Inspector's suggestion that the pearls may be authentic implies that he suspects Miss Blacklock may not be as she represents herself to be to the other villagers. In incorrectly basing this on the authenticity of the pearls, the pearls become re(a)d herrings – potential clues that are misunderstood through a lack of a feminised mode of reading. Bunch's dismissal of the Inspector's theory equally dismisses this misreading of the pearls. Through a feminised mode of reading, she focuses on the appearance of the pearls before her, instead of any attempts to contextualise them based on Miss Blacklock's connection to a wealthy financier. Whilst the Inspector suggests that genuine pearls of the size in the choker may be affordable by Randall and given as a gift to Miss Blacklock, Bunch's feminised mode of reading understands the pearls as false based on what she knows of the pearls in the choker itself: that they are false-looking and glassy. As the resolution to the plot demonstrates, Bunch is indeed proved correct – the pearls are false. However, it is not only the appearance of the individual pearls in the choker that must be understood through a feminised mode of reading.

The clue-potential of the choker in relation to Miss Blacklock's identity centres on how it conceals a scar from an operation to remove a goitre. The scar distinguishes Lotty's identity from that of Letty, and hence Miss Blacklock's need to conceal it. The pearls thus have value to Miss Blacklock as a means of concealing her scar, albeit through a choker-style necklace that is repeatedly labelled as old-fashioned and incongruous. It is important to note the context of when this style of necklace was last fashionable prior to the context of the novel. As Phillips observes, the broad choker that fitted close to the neck was at the height of fashion in the early twentieth century and was encouraged by Queen Alexandra who wore this style to conceal scarring on her neck (p. 156). Chadour-Sampson notes that this style – known as *collier de chien* – was continued by Alexandra's daughter-in-law, Queen Mary, for many years (p. 115). Phillips describes how such necklaces might be constructed of a deep band of separate jewelled plaques attached to a black ribbon, or alternatively of a central ornamental plaque flanked by multiple strings of pearls (p. 156). Both these descriptions correspond to

Miss Blacklock's choker-style necklaces of pearls and cameos. Their old-fashioned appearance corresponds to a style popular in Miss Blacklock's youth for the purposes of concealing scarring.

Choker-style necklaces did, however, enjoy a brief moment of popularity in the late 1940s and early 1950s. An article in *Chatelaine* magazine from September 1949 describes '[n]eckline glitter' of '[b]ibs and chokers, that's what they'll be wearing this fall'.¹⁵² Yet there is an important distinction to be made from the type of choker necklace that Miss Blacklock wears, with the *Chatelaine* article describing '[m]ore colored pearls featuring the best of fall shades: brick, putting, and fashion rose' (p. 8). Miss Blacklock's pearls are thus described as 'old-fashioned' due to the unfashionable colour of the pearls and their setting. Such unfashionability is further emphasised through articles from *Woman's Day* that provide instructions for women to make their own accessories to fit with these new styles: 'The buttons we used were made by La Mode; the beads and ribbons were from chain and variety stores; the old baroque pearls – a cherished possession of a *Woman's Day* staff member'.¹⁵³ This implies that 'old' jewellery can be refashioned into more appropriate styling for the late 1940s and early 1950s; Miss Blacklock's pearls and their setting demonstrate that she has not attempted to render herself more fashionable in this manner. Therefore, her pearls provide a connection to the last time this very specific style of choker-necklace was in fashion – and its use to conceal scarring. These contexts of choker-style necklaces as concealment of scarring are integral to a feminised mode of reading Miss Blacklock's choker as a clue.

A feminised mode of reading further reveals how, in the novel, the choker is significant for not only concealing Miss Blacklock's identity, but also blatantly indicating the truth. Miss Blacklock touches her necklace when speaking to the Inspector of the past as a visual clue to the secret of her identity. That the pearl choker functions as a visual clue in this manner is evident from the scene in which Miss Blacklock breaks the choker:

Miss Blacklock, standing with her hand pulling at the choker of pearls round her neck, said in a hoarse voice:

¹⁵² 'Fashion Shorts', *Chatelaine*, September 1949, p. 8, in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-shorts/docview/1715478944/>> [accessed 25 March 2022]. Further references are to this edition and given after quotations in the text.

¹⁵³ 'Made from Beads & Buttons', *Woman's Day*, April 1948, pp. 52; 89–90 (p. 89), in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/made-beads-buttons/docview/1814088252/>> [accessed 25 March 2022].

‘It’s getting worse and worse. Whoever’s doing these things must be mad, Inspector – quite mad...’

‘I wonder.’

The choker of pearls round Miss Blacklock’s neck broke under the clutch of her nervous fingers. The smooth white globules rolled all over the room.

Letitia cried out in an anguished tone.

‘My pearls – my *pearls* –’ The agony in her voice was so acute that they all looked at her in astonishment. She turned, her hand to her throat, and rushed sobbing out of the room. (p. 253; emphasis in original)

Miss Blacklock’s initial pose, with her hand pulling at the choker, suggests a physical discomfort with the pearls as an embodiment of her secrets: both as to her true identity and her identity as the murderer. By pulling at the choker, she attempts to release the physical choking of her secrets. This is apparent in her reference to the mental health of whoever is committing the crimes. With the later knowledge of Miss Blacklock’s identity as the murderer, this statement can be read not as an attempt to cast suspicion elsewhere, but as an admission of guilt. Once she has broken the pearl choker, Miss Blacklock does not, however, reveal her secrets explicitly. By contrast, her anguished tone, the agony in her voice, and eventual sobbing suggest that Miss Blacklock is aware that the breaking of the pearl choker enables all around her to perceive her secrets *without* the necessity of explicit explanation. Her reaction correlates to what would be expected of her had her secrets become known, as opposed to simply grief at breaking her necklace.

The pearl choker can be understood through a feminised mode of reading as having value to Miss Blacklock as a means of concealing her secrets; it also has value within the detective fiction plot as a physical representation of the truth of the murders. Miss Blacklock’s reaction to the breaking of the pearls corresponds to an expected reaction had the truth of her impersonation of her sister and murdering to conceal this fact been revealed. She is able to reconceal her scar – and the truth of her identity – with the cameo choker. However, the sense of security afforded to her by the pearl choker has broken with *its* breaking, shown in how ‘for the first time fear showed from her darkly circled eyes, and betrayed itself by her twitching hands’ (p. 258). Whereas previously, Miss Blacklock has been shown to clutch at her pearl choker when anxious over the possible revelation of the truth (p. 219), here, she no longer touches her necklace of cameos. Her darkly circled eyes, twitching hands, and general expression of fear demonstrates that – to her – the breaking of the pearl choker leads to a sense of inevitability that the truth will be revealed. The pearl choker functions as both a

means of choking – preventing – her secrets from being revealed whilst simultaneously drawing attention to the means of revealing those secrets. Once it has been broken, Miss Blacklock no longer fears *possible* exposure of the truth of her identity. Instead, she begins to react as though it is already *probable* that her secrets will be exposed.

The significance of the choker is not limited to its value as a means of concealing Miss Blacklock's identity – both as impersonating her sister and as a murderer. It is also a means of *constructing* that identity, particularly in relation to the middlebrow concept of women's independence. Miss Blacklock is first described as 'a woman of sixty odd, the owner of the house, sat at the head of the table. She wore country tweeds – and with them, rather incongruously, a choker necklace of large false pearls' (p. 16). Her pearls are incongruously worn alongside her tweeds. These garments are somewhat expected and therefore unremarkable for Miss Blacklock as head of the household and owner of the house. Both her ownership and status within the house highlight Miss Blacklock's independence, particularly financially. Emphasis is consequently placed on the choker itself as remarkable for how it does not fit with these aspects of Miss Blacklock's identity as an independent woman. This aspect is also closely related to how Miss Blacklock's attitude to jewellery is portrayed. When she gifts a diamond brooch to her friend, Bunny, she states 'I never cared for jewellery', yet she repeatedly wears the incongruous pearls (p. 188). This suggests that she does care for jewellery, but that the values she places on such items – for concealing her scar and true identity – are not the typical values of aesthetic, monetary, sentimental or authenticity that jewellery usually carries.

Expected values of jewellery are closely aligned to the concept of femininity in the novel.¹⁵⁴ This is evident in the conversation between the Inspector and Belle where the latter suggests that Letitia Blacklock

'hasn't any feminine feelings or weaknesses. [...] She was never particularly pretty and she didn't care for clothes. She used a little make-up in deference to prevailing custom, but not to make herself look prettier. [...] She never knew any of the fun of being a woman.' (pp. 177–78)

As the resolution of the novel shows, the Letitia referred to here by Belle is not the same woman as Miss Blacklock, who is impersonating Letitia. These statements as to a disregard of feminine feelings and interest in clothes – including accessories such as make-up and

¹⁵⁴ I use the notion of femininity here to reflect the 'fun of being a woman' that Belle Goedler describes; namely, an interest in appearance including jewellery, clothing and make-up.

jewellery – are equally applicable to Miss Blacklock. She values her choker not as jewellery, but to establish and affirm her identity as an independent woman; it hides the scar that identifies her as the previously financially-dependent Lotty and not the financially-independent Letty. This issue of femininity in relation to women's independence is highlighted by Shaw and Vanacker who frame this discussion in terms of the figure of the spinster. They argue that

[t]he two Miss Blacklocks, Letitia and Charlotte, represent opposing and stereotyped images of the spinster common during the inter-war period: the de-sexed career woman and the frustrated wife and mother. Letitia trained as a chartered accountant [...] But Charlotte did know the fun of being a woman [...] and it is this thwarted femininity and reluctant spinsterhood which leads to disaster. (p. 42)

This has implications in relation to how these middlebrow concepts of femininity and women's independence are framed in the detective fiction genre. The Miss Blacklocks should not be perceived solely as oppositions of each other; these aspects of femininity and independence instead relate to the presentation of the clues to the resolution of the mystery.

Through a feminised mode of reading the pearl choker – understanding the contexts of its style and fashionableness – it becomes a clue to Miss Blacklock's mindset and construction of her identity as an independent woman. It is this independence that she values above her innate femininity, with her choosing of a pearl choker to cover the identifying scar in place of a more fashionable item. This disparity between Miss Blacklock's valuing of her choker and expected values of jewellery is significant to how the Inspector misreads the pearl choker as a motive for Miss Blacklock's attempted murder. He considers the societal values of jewellery – its sentimental worth, its monetary worth – and neglects to consider how Miss Blacklock presents herself and how therefore she values the jewellery that she wears. Miss Blacklock's necklaces do not have the authenticity and monetary values traditionally associated with jewellery. In the context of Miss Blacklock's lack of 'feminine feelings', the choker necklaces also do not have any aesthetic value in attempting to render her appearance more attractive or as aesthetically pleasing objects in themselves. However, as shown by Belle's comments, the societal expectations and conventions of jewellery in relation to women are that items of jewellery are expected to have at least some of these values. This explains why the Inspector – despite being informed by both Belle and the incongruity of the pearl choker in Miss Blacklock's appearance that Miss Blacklock does not subscribe to these conventions – continues to misread the pearls and pursue his inquiry based on attempting to find such values and motives for crime from the jewellery itself.

Miss Marple's ability to detect the true resolution to the mystery resides in her feminised mode of reading the items and things pertinent to the mystery, such as the pearl choker. Using Miss Marple as the detecting character here is significant. Her ability to read items as clues, and not to misinterpret them as re(a)d herrings as the Inspector does, also has implications pertinent to the middlebrow concepts of women's independence and femininity. Shaw and Vanacker further frame this in relation to spinsterhood, suggesting that 'Miss Marple reigns as spinster supreme; if they [the Blacklocks] are versions of the idea, she is the idea itself. In appearance, age, manners, social class, she is the essence of the English spinster' (p. 42). In addition to these attributes listed, mode of reading should also be included: Miss Marple is the essence of the English spinster in her ability to read clues.¹⁵⁵ Miss Marple's feminised mode of reading is connected to her ability to understand these concepts of women's independence and femininity from her perspective as a spinster like the Blacklock sisters. As Shaw and Vanacker highlight, if the Blacklocks are versions of spinsters – opposites in their outlook on femininity – then Miss Marple is the idea itself: capable of understanding *both* outlooks and applying this to the mystery. She thereby perceives in things the motivations behind the wearer. She perceives in the choker Miss Blacklock's previous financial dependence and subsequent desire to conceal her true identity; her desire to inherit Letitia's potential fortune.

Miss Blacklock conceals her identity as the murderer, not only through the concealment of her identity as Lotty, but also through presenting herself as the victim of attempted murder. The first of these attempts is staged as a shooting at her house – the eponymous murder that is announced. The staged event leads to her being apparently shot, whilst in reality she has cut her ear to create 'a horrifyingly gory sight' that implies this wound (p. 37). This calls into question the concept of authenticity based on appearance. Miss Blacklock *appears* to be an authentic victim of attempted murder as a result of the blood covering her. Therefore, the Inspector's consideration of the possible authenticity of the pearls is not so far misled as at first appears. The truth of the murders does indeed rely on understanding what is "authentic" and what is not. I analyse this further in the following chapter on hats and the complexities of separating the identities of victims and murderers. Here, the resolution to the murders is

¹⁵⁵ Miss Marple's status as a spinster not only refers to her marital status, but also to her as a 'woman (or, rarely, a man) who spins [thread], *esp.* one who practises spinning as a regular occupation'. 'Spinster', in *Oxford English Dictionary* (2022) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/186771>> [accessed 17 November 2022]. This relates to Sheehan's observation of the etymological connection between text and textile, as discussed in my Introduction (p. 14). Miss Marple's status as a spinster enables her to understand 'types of reading for textures' – to understand how to read the pearl choker as a clue (Sheehan, p. 14).

provided through considering the pearl choker and its intrinsic connection to Miss Blacklock. Namely, in considering her construction and concealment of her identity – both as an independent woman and her femininity. Miss Blacklock’s concealment of her identity as the murderer behind a façade of victimhood has echoes of the truth concealed behind the pearl choker’s falsehood. The choker’s value as a concealment of scarring is obscured by the façade of the pearls’ potential authenticity. These façades are constructed by the Inspector in his misinterpretation of the pearls as a re(a)d herring, and of Miss Blacklock as a victim. They demonstrate the significance of a feminised mode of reading to detect the resolution to the mystery.

The ability of Miss Marple to see the truth of this façade through a feminised mode of reading is connected to her understanding the fashions of the choker-style necklace. This speaks to Makinen’s reading of Miss Marple as a complex combination of ‘scripted forms’ of Victorian and modern femininity (p. 57). Miss Marple’s understanding of the choker is based on knowledge of later (Edwardian) and more recent trends in women’s fashion accessories. Miss Marple is able to read these forms (or lack of) in others. More significantly, she can read these forms in the things associated with them. She thereby employs a feminised mode of reading to uncover the resolution of the mystery. Makinen further suggests that the ‘construction of the elderly amateur detective hinges on the disjunction of her appearance and her knowledge of human depravity’ (p. 57). However, it is Miss Marple’s appearance as a spinster and her knowledge of *that* status in relation to women’s independence and femininity that enables her success as an elderly amateur detective to resolve the mystery in this novel. In so presenting Miss Marple, Christie engages with middlebrow themes of women’s independence; this theme relates to femininity as part of the plot of the novel. Such themes become pertinent to understanding how Miss Marple is able to detect the resolution through a feminised mode of reading.

Miss Marple’s detection has significance in relation to the genre of the novel: the detective character is constructed as requiring this feminised mode of reading through which to resolve the mystery. Miss Marple relies on her knowledge of the role of the choker in connection to middlebrow concepts of women’s independence and femininity to resolve the mystery. In so doing, I argue that Christie advocates for this mode of reading as integral to the detective fiction genre. This is not only evident for Miss Marple’s ability to accurately read the choker’s value to Miss Blacklock. It is also pertinent to how other detecting characters – such as the Inspector – are unable to employ this feminised mode of reading; they misread things

such as the pearl choker, thereby constructing re(a)d herrings. Similarly, characters such as Bunch demonstrate how this feminised mode of reading can be employed but without progressing this to the resolution of the mystery. Bunch correctly reads the pearl choker as fake but does not extend this knowledge any further in order to understand *why* Miss Blacklock wears this jewellery and its consequent value to her. These misreadings and lack of a full feminised mode of reading do have value within the detective fiction genre: the plot is constructed *through* such misreadings. This exemplifies just how integral a feminised mode of reading and its employment is to the resolution of the mystery. The genre relies on these misreadings to fully appreciate how the mystery is resolved only once knowledge is fully related to the clues, contexts, and circumstances.

Conclusions

The texts discussed in this chapter demonstrate how items of jewellery have multiple and complex values throughout the narratives. I began by analysing how these values relate to the genre of detective fiction and its place within the middlebrow. Reading different genres is a middlebrow practice valued in Christie's texts, such as 'The Manhood of Edward Robinson' and 'A Fruitful Sunday', for showing how this can be employed to resolve the mystery. This has further significance in relation to how Christie engages with specific aspects of the detective fiction genre. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, the self-referential awareness of the place of the genre within the broader spaces of middlebrow writing is evident. The place of detective fiction suggests that it has value amongst other genres, and advocates for an equality of genre within the middlebrow canon. Christie further uses the detective fiction genre as a means of framing middlebrow concepts such as women's independence, as in *Death on the Nile*. This text also privileges the demands of the genre above all else. Jewellery items have value as indicators of middlebrow concepts, but it is their value as potential clues that is most significant to the demands of the detective fiction plot. This is not to suggest, however, that middlebrow themes and concepts are irrelevant. Knowledge of these is essential to the resolution of the mystery in texts such as *A Murder is Announced*, and the trajectory of that process of detection and resolution.

In my readings, I have suggested throughout that a feminised mode of reading is integral to Christie's texts to understand the detective fiction narrative more effectively. Items of jewellery have values that require this mode of reading for their significance to be understood. I argue that a feminised mode of reading uses knowledge of different types of genre to inform an understanding of items such as jewellery. It appreciates the conventions of these different

genres to inform the resolution of the plots. This responds to my discussion in the Introduction of middlebrow hierarchies, and the place of detective fiction within these. Reading through a feminised mode uncovers how knowledge of jewellery items relates to knowledge of genre – and both types of knowledge are important to reading the text to its resolution. Determining this as a *feminised* mode of reading challenges the hierarchical model that privileges a masculinised form of detective fiction above other genres. Therefore, a feminised mode of reading engages with the gendered hierarchies of the middlebrow to interpret items within the text, and in so doing, demonstrates how these gendered hierarchies do not serve the plots of the novels. Rather, equality is accorded between different types of genre and text, such as history and mystery. It is only when items are interpreted *without* recourse to gendered hierarchical notions of genre that their significance to resolving the mystery can be acknowledged.

A feminised mode of reading also encompasses an appreciation of how the detective fiction genre frames middlebrow concepts and ideas, such as women's independence. Focussing on *women's* fashion accessories creates a link to specifically gendered concepts within the middlebrow. Consideration of jewellery items connected to women characters – and how these parallel contemporaneous examples of women's jewellery – invites reflection of issues related specifically to women. Yet whilst I have focused here on women, knowledge of these middlebrow concepts is a further part of this mode of reading, beyond its gendered implications. This knowledge enables the interpretation of items of jewellery as clues, and not solely misinterpreting them as re(a)d herrings. Whilst in the examples analysed above, this has centred on women, this is not to imply that less gender-specific middlebrow concepts cannot also be uncovered through consideration of objects and items in the texts. The resolution of the plot is reliant on reading through this mode: this demonstrates its integral place in the genre. The detection process entails items being misinterpreted as re(a)d herrings, and these becoming clues to the resolution of the mystery only through this feminised mode of reading. In the next chapter, I expand upon my notion of a feminised mode of reading in my discussion of hats in several of Christie's Poirot novels. The chapter explores how this mode of reading has significance in relation to questions of identity in the genre. Specifically, it considers how characters are presented as victims and how victimhood is assumed by several characters later revealed to be murderers.

Chapter Two

Hats and Identities

‘I have seen many fashions of hats in my time – the cloche that shaded the face so completely that one gave up in despair the task of recognising one’s friends. The tilted forward hat, the hat attached airily to the back of the head, the beret, and many other styles.’ (Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*)

In this chapter I discuss how women’s hats in Christie’s texts materialise identities of the detective fiction plots. Focused particularly on the identities of victim and murderer, and the boundaries between these, a feminised mode of reading can uncover the resolution of the mystery. The resolution relies on recognition of the characters in these identities, and in so doing, a feminised mode of reading uncovers how such identities are unstable. In my discussion of *A Murder is Announced*, I argued that Miss Blacklock’s pearls were part of her identity. Significantly, they were part of her presentation of herself as a victim of attempted murder; yet they are also clues to her identity as the murderer. In this chapter, I develop these ideas of identities intrinsic to the detective fiction plot – there has to be a victim and a murderer. I look to how women’s fashion accessories, specifically hats, can provide a lens through which these identities are interrogated and questioned. I argue that a feminised mode of reading brings stability to these identities at the resolution of the plots: it identifies which characters are the victim and the murderer. Yet this mode of reading is also pertinent to interrogating the very notion of distinguishing between such identities in this genre.

I use the term “identity” to describe the fact of who or what a person or thing is – the essential fact of their being. It also describes very specific identities within the detective fiction plot: the victim and the murderer. In describing the victim and the murderer as “identities”, I locate my discussion within a broader framework of thing theory and middlebrow scholarship.¹⁵⁶ Pertinent to my discussion is Brown’s analysis of ‘an object’s capacity to materialise identity’ (*A Sense of Things*, p. 25).¹⁵⁷ This foregrounds objects as part of a process of materialisation of identity. Identity is created through this process of accumulating objects; the materiality of

¹⁵⁶ I specifically use the term “identity” over “roles” as this latter term has connections to performance and theatricality; I consider these in relation to *Lord Edgware Dies*, but my discussion of victims and murderers is broader than solely this aspect.

¹⁵⁷ Brown focusses specifically on Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881); however, I argue that objects’ ability to create identity in this manner is not limited to the context of fin-de-siècle American consumerism. Brown also points to nationality, gender and hybridity as major strands of conceptualising identity in previous literary criticism (p. 17).

such items enables the construction of identity. This has implications for how objects can equally *dematerialise* identity. Brown suggests that ‘the point may be that identity depends less on authorised value and function, [and] more on recognition and use’ (*A Sense of Things*, p. 38). Discarding the concept of authorised value and function enables a recognition that objects – such as women’s fashion accessories – function differently for different characters. The same object can function differently in changed circumstances, such as in relation to a different character or used in a different manner. Instability in relation to identity materialised through objects has a strong connection to the concept of modes of reading. Characters’ different modes of reading these objects uncover the unstable distinctions between these identities of victim and murderer. Such instability forms much of the detective fiction plot, yet a feminised mode of reading can determine the identities of victim and murderer.

A feminised mode of reading challenges critical approaches to the detective fiction genre that have hitherto focused attention on the identities of victim and murderer in relation to broader questions of sexuality and gender.¹⁵⁸ In the Introduction, I discussed how this mode of reading is informed by gendered approaches to the middlebrow; namely, detective fiction as a masculine middlebrow genre that is informed by the feminine middlebrow in how readers are invited to engage with it. However, in framing this gendered connection between modes of reading and identities inherent to the genre, this is not to suggest that the gender of those identities is itself integral to how the objects that materialise and dematerialise them are read. Rather, my consideration of the identities of victim and murderer – and the place of those identities within the examples of the genre examined here – demonstrates that such issues of gender are somewhat subordinate to the broader generic demands. My focus on women’s fashion accessories has necessarily led to a focus on women characters as those that primarily engage with such items; those whose identity is primarily materialised and dematerialised through these objects. Yet this is not to the exclusion of men: as will be seen in the plots of *Evil Under the Sun* and *Dead Man’s Folly*, the identity of the murderer involves a couple – man and woman. In the case of the former, the male murderer engages with the item in question as a means to permit the modus operandi of the crime. I am therefore less concerned with tracing how the *gendered* identities of victim and murder operate in Christie’s detective fiction, than how such identities operate in the genre more broadly.

¹⁵⁸ Examples include studies by Makinen, Hoffman, and Bernthal to name just a few.

I focus on women's hats in this chapter as part of my consideration of this intersection between materialising and dematerialising identity. Of all the fashion accessories discussed in this thesis, hats are somewhat unique for the manner in which they are variously worn, carried, and discarded.¹⁵⁹ Brown details how fin-de-siècle theorists of consumption, and department stores, exemplify that it is 'not the production of objects, but their accumulation and display that generates [...] the feel of identity' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 33). The sense of identity as being evident in objects that are accumulated and displayed is of particular relevance to considering hats. These items are not only *worn* as fashion accessories but are also *displayed*, and so can be read as intrinsic to specific character identities. Colin McDowell suggests that film directors' use of hats to define character in the twentieth century made use of 'a statement which writers and poets had been making for a long time': using hats as central, statement pieces of attire that enable a swift distinction between characters.¹⁶⁰ Christie is engaged in a similar mode of understanding. Women's hats in her novels not only distinguish between specific characters (such as between the Italian student and Lady Stubbs in *Dead Man's Folly*). Rather, those distinctions are themselves used to blur and obfuscate distinguishing between the identities of victim and murderer.

Obfuscation and blurring in relation to identities engages with the uncertainty about identity in middlebrow and detective fiction that I discussed in the Introduction.¹⁶¹ I progress discussion of these identities of victim and murderer beyond that which focuses on the 'erasure' of women murder victims' identities, with Hoffman noting this particularly in texts where one body is swapped with another (p. 177). Similarly, Plain highlights how detecting characters 'scrutinise the corpse-as-text, seeking clues to facilitate a reading of the crime, while the material reality of the corpse decomposes beneath their narrative indifference' (p. 12).¹⁶² I consider both victim and murderer in the texts; for much of the narratives these identities are not stable yet with the resolution providing this stability. In so doing, I demonstrate that Christie does not erase these women victims' identities. Instead, she uses

¹⁵⁹ The jewellery I consider in Chapter One is either worn or carried; only Linnet's pearls are transformed into a rosary in *Death on the Nile*. Similarly, make-up and cosmetics in Chapter Three refer to both the application of these products to the body and face, and to the products themselves, but in both instances, these are intrinsically connected to the wearing of these items.

¹⁶⁰ Colin McDowell, *Hats: Status, Style and Glamour* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1992), p. 77.

¹⁶¹ Maslen perceives this as a 'persistent theme' of the writing of many women in the late 1940s and 1950s (p. 48). Maida and Spornick also offer a biographical connection in Christie's 'hidden identities motif', perceiving this to be based on her sister Madge's ability to act various roles (p. 11).

¹⁶² Mills also points to how 'viewing the victim as a catalyst for a puzzle and mapping the victim as a scene of society's crimes elides the victim's own subjectivity but inscribes their symbolic significance in different ways' ('Victims', p. 150).

this notion *of* their identities, both in the sense of who the characters are and whether they are victims or murderers. The very nature of these identities of victim and murderer is questioned, both in the detective fiction genre and in middlebrow literature more broadly. This questioning of the nature of the identities of victim and murderer is carried out through the modes of reading applied by various characters. By focussing on women's hats in these texts, these modes of reading are shown to provide a means of distinguishing between the identities of victim and murderer. It is a feminised mode of reading that successfully stabilises these identities in the resolutions of the mysteries.

All of the texts discussed in this chapter feature Poirot as the detective character. However, it is not my intention to suggest that it is only Poirot who is capable of providing this feminised mode of reading. Nor do I imply that there is a progression of improvement in how this mode of reading is shown to develop across the texts. On the contrary, these texts all engage with specific middlebrow themes to question the notion of the identities of victims and murderers. In the first section, Christie uses Nick's hat in *Peril at End House* (1932) to establish her as a supposed victim. The hat is also a clue to Poirot's failure to perceive his manipulation in the role of detective by Nick as the murderer. I then discuss how the murderer's hat in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) becomes disassociated from any particular character; it is instead established only in relation to the unknown murderer. My discussion of *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) contrasts this notion of disassociated items to determine how the identity of the victim is established by the murderers through a hat. This is then developed in my final section on *Dead Man's Folly* (1956): I focus on how a sense of foreignness is established through Lady Stubbs's hat. Foreignness enables her to be perceived as a victim and to cast suspicion elsewhere, before finally establishing her as the murderer. In relation to all the texts, I discuss how a feminised mode of reading establishes the resolution of the mysteries. It is also integral to the notion of questioning these roles of victim and murderer in the detective fiction plots.

'The Bee in the Bonnet – the Hole in the Hat': Poirot's Misreading in *Peril at End House* (1932)

In *Peril at End House*, the hat owned by one of the protagonists, Magdala 'Nick' Buckley, functions as a clue to her identity as the murderer, but also as a deliberate re(a)d herring. It is carefully planted by Nick to lead Poirot to identify her as a murder victim. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Poirot's detective sidekick, Captain Arthur Hastings, and tells the story of Nick, a young woman who has inherited End House on the Devon coast. She attracts the attention of Poirot and Hastings when she leaves behind her hat at a chance

meeting.¹⁶³ From the condition of the hat and Nick's conversation, Poirot perceives her to be a victim of several murder attempts. However, the resolution of the mystery identifies the attempts as staged by Nick as the murderer and her cousin, Maggie, as the intended victim. Nick plots Maggie's murder in order to inherit Maggie's inheritance from her fiancé for the purpose of maintaining End House. The characterisation of Nick also speaks to the middlebrow theme of youth and modernity, and to the connections this has specifically to women and reading. I suggest that this has implications for how Nick is perceived as both victim and murderer: the hat exposes how the distinctions between these two identities depend on mode of reading. Poirot fails to employ a feminised mode of reading that acknowledges Nick's attitude to life and her independence; this is perhaps most markedly evident in the resolution of the mystery that fails to account for the hat as a clue that has been misread by Poirot.

Nick's hat features early in the narrative, and it is at this stage that Poirot begins to misread it. The conversation between Poirot and Hastings cements a mode of reading as a key element in the interpretation of the significance of the hat. Poirot guides Hastings's attention towards the hole in the hat's brim:

He held it towards me. 'You see the reason for my interest?' [...]

I looked at it more closely.

'You see, Hastings?'

'A perfectly plain fawn felt. Good style –'

'I did not ask you to describe the hat. It is plain that you do *not* see.' (p. 23; emphasis in original)

The repetition of the sight motif in Poirot and Hastings's speech draws attention to this notion of perception as central to interpreting the object before them. Whilst both Poirot and Hastings's mode of perception – their mode of reading – is later proved incorrect, this emphasis on sight is important to understanding the hat's significance. The clue-potential of the hat does indeed rest in its appearance and how this is perceived and understood. Poirot admonishes Hastings that it 'is plain that you do *not* see', yet the details Hastings *does* see are the details that are more significant to reading the clue-potential of the hat. These details are more significant than the misreading of the hole in its brim. They comprise that the hat is a plain fawn felt and a good style – these details are clues to Nick's identity as the murderer.

¹⁶³ Agatha Christie, *Peril at End House* (London: HarperCollins, 2001). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. First published in the US and UK in 1932. First serialised in the US in June-August 1931 in *Liberty* magazine, vol. 8 nos. 24–34.

The description of the hat as a plain fawn felt corresponds to fashion trends of this period for such hats worn in spring and summer weather amongst upper-class women. Susie Hopkins notes how ‘[l]arge pastel-coloured, brimmed felt hats worn on cool summer days to set off light, soft summer fur coats were considered to be the height of luxurious decadence and chic’.¹⁶⁴ An article in *Ladies’ Home Journal* from 1930 suggests that ‘[i]f you don’t like straw hats but are tired of felts you will be interested to hear that in Paris Agnès and Florence Walton are making fascinating models in taffeta’.¹⁶⁵ This implies that felt hats had become synonymous with spring and summer fashion for women. *Ladies’ Home Journal* was aimed at women for whom ‘luxurious decadence’ was perhaps not so easily affordable, yet it suggests such styling was ubiquitous. Varying in quality and design, felt hats were still worn by many women in various socio-economic circumstances. The mention of designers such as Agnès and Florence Walton is not to imply that readers of *Ladies’ Home Journal* would necessarily be able to afford such millinery, but instead to suggest the use of taffeta as an alternative to felt. Hastings’s comment that Nick’s hat is of good style implies that Nick is not inhibited by her economic circumstances and thus limited to finding cheaper alternatives to fashionable, high-end millinery.

The colouring of Nick’s hat is therefore integral to how her millinery choices are intended to present her as fashionable. The same article in *Ladies Home Journal* points to ‘beige, brown and blue’ as one ‘of the most wearable and at the same time elastic of this spring’s color combinations’, advertising ‘fawn-colored’ shoes (p. 50). Fawn is therefore shown to be a fashionable and stylish choice for this particular spring season. This contemporaneous knowledge of colour locates Nick as a fashionable and relatively wealthy young woman. It is this perception of her that provides the clue to her identity as the murderer. When visiting End House, Hastings notes the house ‘was clearly in bad repair’, suggesting that Nick is *not* as wealthy as her fashionable appearance suggests (p. 33). Whilst this *Ladies’ Home Journal* article is from a middle-class magazine, Nick’s ability to follow the latest fashion trends still suggests a degree of wealth that is greater than the dilapidated condition of her house implies. The hat can be read as a clue to Nick’s *desire* to be fashionable and wealthy – specifically

¹⁶⁴ Susie Hopkins, *The Century of Hats* (London: Aurum Press Ltd., 1999), p. 43. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶⁵ ‘Highly Important Details: Upon such Notes Depend the Individuality and Chic of Your Spring Wardrobe’, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1930, p. 50, in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/highly-important-details/docview/1821825404>> [accessed 30 March 2022]. Further references are to this article and are made after quotations in the text.

with the aim of repairing End House – instead of an indicator of her already possessing this wealth. Reading this clue provides the motivations for her murderous actions. The style of the hat is indicative of this identity and further corresponds to contemporary fashions. Even as late as 1941, *Vogue* gave advice on a summer wardrobe to include at least five hats, including two for town, one of which should be ‘a brimmed felt or straw’.¹⁶⁶ It is the hole in the brim of Nick’s hat that provides the instigation for the mystery – and that is misread by Poirot as a clue to Nick’s identity as a murder victim.

Poirot draws attention to the hole in Nick’s hat, yet Hastings still does not perceive the connection to murder at this stage:

The slowly turning hat was revolving on his finger, and that finger was stuck neatly through a hole in the brim of the hat [...] It was a small neat hole, quite round, and I could not imagine its purpose, if purpose it had. (p. 23)

The appearance of the hole in the hat does not suggest anything unusual to Hastings, who seeks to find a purpose for it. Whilst this could be dismissed as indicative of Hastings’s function in the text as a foil to Poirot’s intelligence, it can be observed that here Hastings does indeed have a more developed mode of reading the hat than Poirot.¹⁶⁷ Hastings focuses on the hat before him – on its style, colour, and material. This focus provides a closer connection to the context of wealth and fashionableness; this context is more pertinent to reading the hat as a clue than the suspicion of attempted murder that absorbs Poirot’s attention. The precision and neatness of the hole in the brim of the hat imply the planning of the placement of the hole. Such implications are evident despite Nick’s intention to suggest a spontaneous attack on her as the victim of an attempted murder. This demonstrates a recognition that the hole made in the hat is so neat and precise that it does not correspond to the seemingly erratic and chance opportunism of attempted murder.

The clue-potential of the hole in the hat, and Poirot’s misreading of it, is also established in this early stage in the narrative. Poirot himself draws attention to this fixation of his when he describes how ‘Mademoiselle Nick flinched when a bee flew past’, making the connection to the ‘bee in the bonnet – the hole in the hat’ (p. 24). This idiomatic expression refers to the preoccupation with a particular subject or idea. Attention is drawn to the expression in a

¹⁶⁶ ‘The World of Fashion: Your Summer Clothes: 5 Months Plan for a Summer Wardrobe’, *Vogue* (US), 1 May 1941, pp. 92–93 (p. 92), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/879228791/>> [accessed 30 October 2020].

¹⁶⁷ Throughout many of the Poirot novels, Hastings traditionally fulfils the role of a less intelligent and perceptive sidekick to the brilliance of Poirot’s deductions, in his role as a Watson figure.

literal manner through a passing bee; the bee is supposed to have been a bullet that Poirot later finds on the ground close to where Nick has been sitting. In the idiomatic sense of this phrase, it is Poirot's obsession with murder that is the bee: he perceives the hole in the hat to have been caused by the supposed bullet, reading this as an attempt to murder Nick. It is Nick's reading of Poirot and this bee that enables her to leave the hole in the hat and the bullet as clues for him to misread. By leaving the hat along with the bullet, Nick is able to provide Poirot with clues to the false evidence; she presents herself as the intended murder victim by using Poirot's own obsession with murder against him. The hat is therefore central to this manipulation of evidence and the change in the identity of the murder victim that is central to the plot of the novel. Maggie's intentional death is concealed within a series of murder attempts against Nick. The hat provides the decisive manner from which to manipulate Poirot's own obsessions to conceal Nick's true identity as Maggie's murderer.

The hole in the brim of the hat indicates the planning and precision Nick has adopted; her construction of a false trail of evidence implies her identity as the murder victim, in place of Maggie. In so doing, the hat is part a series of evidence including 'the picture whose cord she cuts through. The brake of the car that she tampers with. The boulder – that perhaps was natural and she merely invented the story of being underneath on the path' (p. 275). Within this litany of events, the hat is the most closely manipulated to appear to be an item of evidence of attempted murder. Nick's making of the hole in the brim and leaving behind a bullet are intended to imply murder of a direct violent assault. Murder in this manner cannot be dismissed as merely the chance coincidence that the natural fall of the boulder and the possible accidents of frayed picture wire and faulty car brakes provide. It is only in conjunction with the other items of evidence, and therefore as an excess of unfortunate coincidences, that these three – the boulder, car brakes, and picture wire – are misread by Poirot as a series of murder attempts. The hole in the hat brim with the spent bullet left behind directly imply murder – and Nick as the victim – without necessitating other evidence to support them. However, they also provide clues to Nick's identity as the murderer. The precision of the hole and context of the hat as a fashionable item worn for leisure purposes by young, wealthy women provides this clue-potential, as detailed above.

Nick's manipulation of Poirot further extends to how she relies on him misreading not only the planted evidence as clues to her identity as the *victim*, but also the character and identity of the murderer more generally. Hoffman points to Poirot's repeated references to the murderer as a clever man, suggesting that Nick's

constructed identity as a flighty young flapper who is barely serious enough to acknowledge herself as a would-be murder victim is an extremely effective smokescreen. Nick manipulates the stereotype with great success, time and again sidestepping Poirot by emphasising the fact that she is not a ‘clever man’ and so cannot be the killer. (p. 170)

Reading the murderer’s identity in this way as Poirot does so, with his subsequent failure to perceive Nick as that identity, relates strongly to the clue-potential of the hat. This item demonstrates this ability of Nick to put on and take off identities. When she first meets Poirot, they discuss women’s millinery fashions and how much easier hats are to remove in the present. Nick is described as having ‘dragged off the simple wide-brimmed felt she was wearing and cast it down beside her’ with an exclamation that ‘[a]nd now we do this’, highlighting this ease and unconcern (p. 19). We can read this as Nick demonstrating – through the ease with which she takes off and replaces her hat – that she is equally capable of putting on and casting off identities, including those of victim and murderer.

There are implications here for the middlebrow preoccupation with youth and modernity in this period. Humble suggests that a repeated trope of the period is the ‘silliness of library subscribers, and the arbitrary nature of their taste in literature’, with library users characterised as ‘young, female, frivolous – and clueless about books’ (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 42). This echoes Nick’s characterisation as a ‘flighty young flapper’. In both instances, this notion of being young, female and frivolous appears a barrier to undertaking serious reading. Poirot’s exasperation with Nick exemplifies such a barrier, leading him to exclaim ‘young people of today, will nothing make you serious?’ (p. 39). It is Poirot’s misreading of Nick and her apparent ability to be serious that leads to his failure to read her identity as the murderer. Characterisation of her as one of the young people of today leads Poirot to underestimate Nick. Specifically, to underestimate her ability to apply a mode of reading that is superior to the stereotyped ‘clueless’ young woman reader of the period. In so doing, Poirot fails to perceive how Nick has understood him as a detective and his motivations. He fails to detect how she has provided him with a ‘bee in the bonnet’ to pursue, knowing how he will interpret the false evidence as misread clues to her identity as a victim of attempted murder. Poirot thus perceives a stereotypical young, female and frivolous reader in the identity of the victim. By suggesting that actually, this identity has been manipulated by a more sophisticated and superior reader of the detective, Christie overturns this notion of young women solely capable of clueless reading.

The murderer's identity is presented as one that is aware of these stereotypes of young women and uses readings of those stereotypes to manipulate the detective character. With presenting how Poirot is manipulated into thinking of this murderer as the victim, Christie engages with the notion of modes of reading. These modes are not only in relation to how the detective resolves the mystery but also how the criminal constructs the crime. A feminised mode of reading reveals both the identity of the murderer, and also points to how this identity has been concealed. Modes of reading are relied upon to prevent the distinction between the identities of victim and murderer being made. Presenting Nick as a young woman who is identified as the murderer is in contrast to previous work on Christie and others of the post-war generation. Namely, works that consider such novels as having a 'brightness of tone and the premium placed on youth, that elixir with healing powers which had been so wantonly wasted' (Light, p. 69).¹⁶⁸ *Peril at End House* does not privilege this notion of youth unquestioningly. Christie demonstrates how a *misreading* of youth can be problematic, particularly one that underestimates the reading abilities of young women. Christie therefore accords a fuller recognition of youth, one that is capable of occupying the identities of both victim – as in the case of Maggie – and murderer.

In according a fuller understanding of youthhood, particularly in relation to women, Christie does not permit this to be recognised by her detective character. The hat exposes how Poirot has been manipulated in his role as detective. He is committed to pursuing the case of attempted murder with Nick identified as the victim, yet the hat's status as evidence of Nick's identity as the murderer is left ambiguous at the close of the novel. There is no further mention of the hat once Poirot dismisses it as having been used as a means of provoking his interest in Nick's attempted murder plot (p. 276). There is no mention of how Nick makes the hole in the hat, whether Poirot has perceived the hole prior to the supposed bee/bullet interchange, or whether he has seen Nick drop the bullet at the time. This indeterminate reference to the hat – the lack of explanation of its manipulation by Nick and the effect it has for Poirot – is a rare ambiguity in the narrative closure of the novel. Elsewhere in *Lord Edgware Dies*, *Evil Under the Sun*, and *Dead Man's Folly* there are fuller explanations of how the hats provide clues to the murderer's identity. Yet in *Peril at End House* this is not recognised; to some extent, this is partly of necessity. The misreading of the hat by Poirot as detective instigates the plot, provoking interest in Nick and the subsequent exposure of her false trail of evidence to hide her identity as the murderer of her cousin.

¹⁶⁸ Light discusses Christie's fiction as addressing those who identified with the younger generation being stifled by their elders and silenced by discussions of war.

However, this lack of a fuller explanation of the hat as a clue to the murderer's identity is intrinsically connected to the notion of a feminised mode of reading. This is not employed in connection to the hat by Poirot as detective, but instead by Nick as the murderer. She reads Poirot as a detective who is 'like a surgeon who's invented an operation or a doctor who's found an obscure disease and wants everyone to have it' (p. 39). She already knows that Poirot will become obsessed by evidence of attempted murder and uses this to cast herself in the identity of the victim. Through a feminised mode of reading, Nick understands Poirot as a detective: she knows what will interest him, and how to present it. The evidence she provides of attempted murder – including the hat – is indicative of that. Having been constructed through a feminised mode of reading, this evidence can also reveal the resolution to the mystery through that same mode of reading. In relation to the hat, this is evident in how the hole constructs the plot of a series of murder attempts with Nick identified as the victim of these. It is also evident in how reading the hat as indicative of Nick's desire for wealth, her ability to put on and take off identities, can provide the clue to the resolution of the mystery. In relation to the genre, the distinction between victim and murderer is further obscured. Christie points to how the evidence both constructs the crime, enabling the murderer's perpetration of the crime against the victim, yet also reveals the resolution of the mystery and the murderer's identity.

As evidence, the hat is an indicator of the clues that have been misread; it is deliberately excluded by Poirot in the resolution of the mystery for its relevance as this indicator. The hat is briefly referred to as part of the series of evidence that Nick constructs to appear as a victim of attempted murder. Yet the hat as a clue to this constructed evidence – and Nick as the murderer – is not mentioned. This extends to a manipulation of the narrative, whereby Poirot's fallibility and misreading, with the hat as representative of this, are concealed. This has implications for the genre more widely. Knight has suggested that the focus of Christie's novels is often the 'personality and value of the detective', arguing that 'Christie's investigators are all passive but clever in persona' (p. 90).¹⁶⁹ Yet Poirot is not presented merely as clever or as having a personality and value in the narrative of satisfactorily resolving the mystery. The presentation of the resolution provides a denial of Poirot's own

¹⁶⁹ Knight is not the only one to highlight Christie's detectives as central to her texts; a number of studies, including those by Aldridge and by Shaw and Vanacker, take the various detective characters as the basis for their studies. Similarly, Makinen notes 'crime criticism's fetishization of the detective to the detriment of all other characterisations' (pp. 1–2).

fallibility – having been manipulated by Nick to misread clues and the identity of the victim and murderer – and of the evidence of that fallibility. Consequently, Poirot is not able to employ a feminised mode of reading within the narrative. Nick’s application of this instead to obscure the distinctions between the identities of victim and murderer implies that mode of reading – specifically, a feminised mode of reading – are not solely the preserve of the detective character. A feminised mode of reading can be manipulated within the narrative to obscure identities intrinsic to the detective fiction genre.

A feminised mode of reading open to murderers in the construction of the crime further extends to how the detective identity is presented. In this novel, Poirot’s identity as a detective cannot rely solely on his supposed ability to employ a feminised mode of reading to discover the resolution of the mystery. He conceals the hat’s relevance as a potential clue and does not acknowledge that he misinterprets it as a re(a)d herring deliberately constructed by Nick. York has suggested that Poirot is motivated as a detective by his professionalism and love of truth, and that Poirot acts as a ‘force for control’ in the novels (pp. 87; 90).¹⁷⁰ The significance of the hat – as an indicator of Nick’s false evidence and one that Poirot misreads – and how Poirot does not acknowledge this misreading must be considered. It suggests that this construction of Poirot’s identity – as professional, in control, and truthful – generalises and fails to acknowledge the subtleties between Christie’s plots. Particularly, to acknowledge the subtleties between how Poirot presents the resolutions of the mysteries he detects. Poirot’s failure to explain the true significance of the hat (and to acknowledge misread and misinterpreted clues) alters his identity as a detective. He is no longer solely a controlled professional in search of truth, but a detective who conceals his own weaknesses: he misreads Nick and succumbs to her trail of false evidence. In so doing, Poirot misreads the intended murder victim, yet he presents the resolution of the mystery as a success of his detection.

Peril at End House consequently presents several important interventions in the detective fiction genre. Analysis of the hat points to how clues can be misread, but also how this notion of misreading can be manipulated to obscure distinctions between the identities of the victim and murderer. A feminised mode of reading is consequently shown not only to be available to the detective characters in Christie’s texts but can also be used by the murderer. Nick’s

¹⁷⁰ In his reading of *Peril at End House*, York does note that the ‘detective is a tool of the criminal’, acknowledging some degree of Poirot’s fallibility (p. 95). However, the characterisation of Poirot as a detective tends to rely on generalisations from across Christie’s works and often ignores details of the plots, such as in this text where Poirot both misreads and is misled.

awareness of how she is perceived by Poirot is part of her successful employment of a feminised mode of reading to read *him* as a detective. In so doing, Christie obscures not only the identities of murderer and victim; she also suggests that the detective's presentation of the resolution of the mystery cannot rely solely on their ability to interpret clues and provide an appropriate mode of reading to reach that resolution. The identities of victim, murderer, and detective are all connected to this notion of a feminised mode of reading. Employment of this both instigates the crime and has the potential to provide the resolution. Presentation of Poirot as incapable of employing this feminised mode of reading to all the potential clues – and allocating these a place in his resolution to the mystery – is not to suggest that this mode of reading is not intrinsic to the plot. By contrast, I suggest that it has significance to the plot *beyond* solely the detective's resolution.

'Like An Inverted Soup Plate': The Murderer's Hat and Theatricality in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933)

I now develop this notion of misreading of clues to the process of identifying the murderer. In *Lord Edgware Dies*, the plot centres on the murder of Lord Edgware and the identification of his wife, actress Jane Wilkinson, as the murderer despite her having an alibi.¹⁷¹ This alibi hinges on her being at a dinner party at the time of the murder. It is later revealed that the actress Carlotta Adams, famed for her impressions, has impersonated Jane at the dinner party; she is subsequently killed by Jane to prevent her revealing this plot. There are clues to Jane's identity as the murderer throughout the novel; these can be seen in the below reading of the hat worn by the murderer and further instances of Jane's use of hats. Understanding how these items are conversely mistakenly or accurately read in relation to resolving the mystery is intrinsically connected to a feminised mode of reading. Such a mode recognises how these items are related to contemporary trends in fashion. In *Lord Edgware Dies*, this is perhaps all the more remarkable given that Christie wrote the majority of the novel whilst abroad, and away from London and its latest fashions (although this is not to underestimate the international transmission of such trends).¹⁷² I suggest that this feminised mode of reading provides not only the resolution of the mystery; it also uncovers Christie's engagement with the notion of theatricality in the genre's presentation and development of the murderer's identity.

¹⁷¹ First published in the UK under this title by Collins Crime Club, and in the US by Dodd, Mead and Company as *Thirteen at Dinner*, in 1933. Prior to publication, the novel was also serialised in six parts as *13 For Dinner* in *The American Magazine*, vols. 115.3–116.2, March–August 1933.

¹⁷² Curran notes that the novel 'began life in Rhodes in the autumn of 1931 and was completed on an archaeological dig at Nineveh on a table bought for £10 at a bazaar in Mosul' (p. 206).

The connection between the fictional hats in the novel and early 1930s fashion trends is evident in Poirot and Hastings's conversation with a friend of Carlotta Adams, the milliner Jenny Driver. Following Carlotta's death, she mentions Carlotta's recent purchase of a hat with a specific directive:

‘She said she wanted one to shade the left side of her face.’

There I must insert a few words of explanation as I do not know when these words will be read. I have seen many fashions of hats in my time – the cloche that shaded the face so completely that one gave up in despair the task of recognising one's friends. The tilted forward hat, the hat attached airily to the back of the head, the beret, and many other styles. In this particular June the hat of the moment was shaped like an inverted soup plate and was worn attached (as if by suction) over one ear, leaving the other side of the face and hair open to inspection.¹⁷³

Hastings's summary of the latest fashions in hats demonstrates a typical privileging of his perspective, disregarding any sense of how these hats might be perceived by the women who wear them. However, his summary does demonstrate the rapidity with which fashionable styles changed in this period; an accurate reflection of those styles is presented, albeit stated in somewhat unsophisticated terms. In the early March 1930 edition of *Vogue* (US), an article on ‘Vogue's Eye View: Of the Mode’ was focused on the latest fashions in millinery for spring and summer. This article describes how ‘[f]or the newest hats are not worn as were those of last season. They are designed to sit much farther back on the head and to show a little hair, in direct opposition to the severe effects of past seasons’.¹⁷⁴ Comparison to what has been worn before emphasises how the style Christie describes in her novel is very much “of the moment” – the very latest in fashion.

The *Vogue* (US) article emphasises this notion of wearing tilted hats as a very new departure – one that warranted further explanation as to how this style differed from previous designs. It continues by imagining that ‘one wears such a model just as one wore last year's hat’ in order to advise against this:

[o]bviously, the newest hat made will lose its high-cut look if one pulls it down on the forehead, and, moreover it will fit badly in the crown. And if one persists in wearing a

¹⁷³ Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 134–35. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁷⁴ ‘Vogue's Eye View: Of the Mode’, *Vogue* (US), 1 March 1930; p. 43, in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/879199397/>> [accessed 9 November 2020]. Further references are to this edition and made after quotations in the text.

sever coiffure, or merely refuses to pull a little hair forward, the hat will almost inevitably be too severe for chic, newness, or becomingness. (p. 43)

The article implies that this style of millinery affects not only the wearing of the hat itself, but also the styling of the hair to accommodate its placement on the head. The growth and spread of this particular style continued throughout 1930 and the following year. By autumn 1931 – contemporaneous with Christie’s writing of the novel – *Good Housekeeping* fashion editor Elaine Neal described ‘four or five main types’ of hats in the Paris collections, and that they all ‘tilt very deliberately over the right eye’.¹⁷⁵ This trend continued for at least a year, with it remarked that by autumn 1932, hats were ‘worn to one side, but not at so exaggerated an angle as they have been’.¹⁷⁶ Hastings’s description of the wearing of hats at sharp angles to the face corresponds to contemporaneous millinery fashions. This is significant for the manner in which the concealment and shading of the face is a key aspect of how the murderer can be identified.

Hastings and Poirot’s questioning of Jenny Driver establishes that – as a result of her hat – no one can have seen the woman’s face who called at Lord Edgware’s house except for the butler (who had not met Jane Wilkinson). The identity of the woman is thus left open to questioning. In referencing a domestic item – a soup plate – to compare the shape and style of the hat, Hastings trivialises this particular style of hat. His comments position him as somewhat outdated, but also belittle the significance of this style for shading one side of the face. This trivialising extends to the concept of changing fashion trends and those that follow them: it consequently provides the re(a)d herring of the millinery at this stage in the narrative. Hastings’ understanding of the murderer’s hat in relation to millinery trends fails to extend to a serious consideration of the list of suspects. He does not consider who fits the type of person to care for maintaining an appearance of fashionableness and the knowledge of how to achieve this appearance. The hat worn by the murderer becomes just that – the murderer’s hat – without a fuller appreciation of how that hat potentially reveals clues as to their identity. At this stage, Hastings and Poirot connect the hat to the purchase made by Carlotta from Jenny. Yet Jenny’s reasoning for Carlotta’s buying a new hat – to shade the left side of her face –

¹⁷⁵ Elaine Neal, ‘Autumn Smartness’, *Good Housekeeping*, September 1931, pp.58–63; 143 (p. 58), in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/autumn-smartness/docview/2539628508>> [accessed 31 March 2022].

¹⁷⁶ ‘Paris Marks Hats for Autumn with a Conservative Stamp’, *Good Housekeeping*, August 1932, pp. 65–67; 140; 142 (p. 65), in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/paris-marks-hats-autumn-with-conservative-stamp/docview/2535750315>> [accessed 31 March 2022].

appears an unusual motive: it is not for the purposes of remaining fashionable. Therefore, Poirot and Hastings misread the potential clue in the fashionableness of the hat and its intended wearer.

That these clues are misread is evident from the questioning Poirot undertakes as to how these hats are worn usually on the right side. Jenny replies that ‘we keep a few to be worn on the opposite side’ because ‘there are people who much prefer their right profile to the left or have a habit of parting the hair on one side only’ (p. 135). Jenny’s explanation distracts from the fashionableness of the style, and instead focuses attention on deliberate alterations to suit the wearer’s preferences. In the case of Carlotta, her choosing of this particular style to conceal the left side of her face is surmised by Hastings to relate to the opening angle of the door at Lord Edgware’s home. Specifically, the style of hat would permit the concealment of the wearer’s face from all except the butler and concealing the left side of the face equally conceals an identifying mole that should appear close to Lady Edgware’s left eye (p. 135). Poirot’s and Hastings’s investigation continues to focus on how the hat enables the potential for either Jane, or Carlotta impersonating her, to have committed the murder. They focus on the angle of the hat and how its concealment of identifying facial features does not rule out either suggestion (although, with Carlotta buying the hat, there is the implication that it is for her to impersonate Jane).¹⁷⁷ As the hat conceals one side of the face, this suggestion of a divide between the two women as to who is the murderer is physically embodied by the hat. By concealing half of the face – the half with an identifying facial feature – the hat enables the two women to be indistinguishable from one other. It prevents a positive identification of either Jane or Carlotta as the murderer.

The misreading of the hat as a clue extends to the discussion between Jenny and Hastings later in the narrative about the changing fashions in millinery. Their joking instigates a dismissal of the relevance of the hat as a potential clue to the swapping of identities between Carlotta and Jane:

‘Soup plates, as you rudely call them, are going very well. When everybody has got thoroughly laden up with them, there’s going to be dirty work done.

¹⁷⁷ Curran notes that Christie’s ‘inspiration for the book and the character of Carlotta Adams came from the American actress Ruth Draper, who was famed for her ability to transform herself from a Hungarian peasant to a Park Lane heiress in a matter of minutes and with a minimum of props’ (p. 206). Hastings misreads on two levels – both in that it is Carlotta’s intention to wear the hat, and that she needed it to conceal her lack of distinguishing facial feature, when the skill of Draper’s – and Carlotta’s – art lay in her convincing performance and mannerisms, not physical transformation.

Something like a blister with a feather attached is going to be worn bang in the middle of the forehead.’

‘Unscrupulous,’ I said.

‘Not at all. Somebody must come to the rescue of the ostriches. They’re all on the dole.’ (p. 292)

In referring to the hats as soup plates and imagining a future hat fashion as looking like a blister with a feather attached, the hats become ridiculous.¹⁷⁸ Consequently, the significance of the murderer’s hat as a clue to the concealment of identities and Jane’s swapping clothes with Carlotta is lessened. Generalising about hats representative of a particular style prevents a consideration of the significance of any one specific hat from the many soup plates referred to; the murderer’s hat – and its status as a potential clue – is also disparaged. Aldridge suggests that ‘the book really shines [...] in the way that it makes a reasonably straightforward ruse seem impossibly difficult to untangle, until some important clues [...] catch the eye’ (p. 71–72). Jenny’s and Hastings’s disparagement of the hats acts as a means of preventing the clue-potential of the hat from ‘catch[ing] the eye’. It is only when Poirot singles out the murderer’s hat from the generalised mass of soup plates observed by Hasting that he perceives its significance to the murder plot. Poirot employs a feminised mode of reading of the murderer’s hat as actually part of a stylish, black, theatrical *costume*.

However, the hat’s potential to function as a clue to the murderer’s identity is not understood through this feminised mode of reading until the close of the narrative. This delay is despite the visual affirmation of Jane’s appearance as the murderer. Jane plans the crime based on her understanding of acting roles: she allocates herself and Carlotta costumes to wear, including a similar modish black hat for the role of murderer. This costuming is a contributing factor in how the hat comes to be perceived as belonging to the unknown murderer, as opposed to a possession of Jane or Carlotta. Jane herself perceives it as distinct from her later role as innocent widow. She is subsequently emboldened to present herself ‘trying on hats in front of the glass [...] in a filmy creation of black and white’ as mourning attire in front of the

¹⁷⁸ This is not to suggest that the serious aspects of millinery as an industry are not recognised within the conversation. The reference to ostriches being on the dole owing to a lack of demand in feathers may have a light-hearted tone but the conversation demonstrates the serious context of the effects of supply and demand within the industry and the precarity of operating a business affected by fluctuations in fashions. For a discussion of career women, such as Jenny Driver, in Christie’s novels, see Makinen (pp. 81–93), who argues that Christie’s novels demonstrate women engaged in a range of professions and suggests that Christie’s works do not disparage women devoted to careers as well as, or rather than, husbands. For a discussion of the millinery industry in relation to feathered hats, see Clair Hughes, *Hats* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 224–26. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

detectives (p. 83). As a fashionable woman, she is shown here choosing mourning attire as a widow that is of the very latest designs. Whilst the exact style of the hats is not described, it can be assumed that, given Jane's desire to be stylish and 'fit to be seen', these hats are of a similar style to the 'hat of the moment' purchased by Carlotta (p. 88). In wearing these hats – hats that echo Carlotta's choice – and being dressed in black and white clothing, Jane's appearance closely corresponds with her attire worn at the scene of the murder.

This is all the more remarkable for being a scene in which Jane is interviewed about her whereabouts at the time of the murder. Wearing these items points directly to her physical resemblance to what is known of the murderer at this stage. As Jane is trying on hats in front of the glass, a mirror image of her appearance is presented. Any hat positioned on the right side of the head – as this type of hat was predominantly styled – would appear to be positioned on the left side of the mirrored image. This presents a potential visual clue – to readers and to the detectives – as to the identity of the murderer, despite Jane's insistence on her alibi. Whilst this style of hat has been selected by Carlotta and Jane as a means of concealing the murderer's identity, in this scene it has the opposite function; it draws attention to Jane's appearance in these hats and her similarity to the murderer's appearance. However, this clue is misread by the detectives: the hat is read only in the sense of what it *conceals*. The detectives are focussed on the effect that this style of hat has over the wearer's face as a means of shading and concealment from possible witnesses. They do not consider the potential of the hat to *reveal* the identity of the murderer by presenting a physical resemblance when the style is worn again by Jane. This centres the hat as a clue as being specifically contained within the item worn by the murderer; such a reading makes it this specific hat that is considered of significance to the detectives' attempts to resolve the plot.

The hats – both the style worn by Jane to commit the murder and the later styles she tries on for mourning – are re(a)d herrings. They provide the possibility of clues to identify Jane as the murderer. This involves a feminised mode of reading: recognising the significance of fashionable trends in hat styles and the character of Jane as a fashionable woman who would replicate these styles in both her identities as the grieving widow and the murderer. Yet, the detectives' misreading prevents such identification of Jane as the murderer. Wagoner has suggested that this novel is distinguished from Christie's other works as a result of the 'unlovability' of most of the characters, and that Poirot's exclusion of false suspects becomes a process for ascertaining those who lie about their opportunity for murder (pp. 50–51). This supposedly wide number of possible suspects is limited by considering the significance of the

hats. They are only referred to in relation to Jane and Carlotta – Jane with her trying on of mourning garments, and Carlotta in her purchasing of the hat. Limiting the number of suspects to the two women is also evident through the oppositions created in their styles and colour of clothing on the night of the murder. In the final pages, it is revealed that the women swap clothing items in order to enact the deception. This swapping of clothes creates a distinction between the two women – the two “Janes” – by creating a suggestion that their styles of clothing are different and distinguishable one from another. The implied differences are important for distinguishing the identities of “Jane the dinner party guest” and “Jane the murderer”.

The style of clothing chosen for these two identities further relates to fashions contemporary with the writing and publication of the novel. The dinner party guest wears ‘a fair wig, a white taffeta dress and ermine wrap’ while the murderer is ‘inconspicuously dressed in black’, including the hat shading the left of her face (pp. 337; 339).¹⁷⁹ In a *Good Housekeeping* article on hats for Easter 1932, it is noted that ‘[t]he leading shades in hats are red, white, black, navy blue. Many black hats are touched with white or with colour. [...] Many all-white hats are seen, or hats in which white is just accented somewhere with black or red’.¹⁸⁰ The article concludes ‘[b]ut all black, or all white is eminently safe for the beginning of the season’ (p. 121). Jane’s two disguises therefore correspond to a ‘safe’ yet fashionable choice of womenswear. This is significant as the ruse between Carlotta and Jane relies on them being recognised as Jane, a fashionable woman, but not looked at too closely that the disguise is penetrated. Both the dinner party guest and the murderer are attired in clothing and millinery that engages with the latest styles without drawing too much attention to specific features of body and face that identifies – or not – the wearer. An April 1931 article in *Vogue* (US) draws attention to the latest Paris fashions, suggesting that ‘[l]ight and dark in vigorous half-and-half effects is, paradoxically, the most colourful combination of all [...] by far the most striking and important – black-and-white’.¹⁸¹ The disguises of “Jane the dinner party guest” and “Jane

¹⁷⁹ Jane’s statement that she dislikes wearing black is also intended to distance herself from the murderer’s attire, as is the implied suggestion of her struggle to find an appropriate hat when in mourning.

¹⁸⁰ ‘A New Hat for Easter’, *Good Housekeeping*, March 1932, pp. 55–57; 121 (p. 57), in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/new-hat-easter/docview/2515571244/>> [accessed 31 March 2022]. Further references are to this edition and are made after quotations in the text.

¹⁸¹ ‘Paris Goes In for Form and Colour’, *Vogue* (US), 1 April 1931, pp. 43–49; 115; 117; 119 (p. 43), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/879192452/>> [accessed 17 November 2020].

the murderer” can therefore be understood in light of this trend for ‘half-and-half’. The two disguises – one a set of white clothing, one of black clothing – are both part of the deception that enables Jane to commit the crime.

The hat is therefore central to the deception of the two identities – preventing a positive identification of either woman as the murderer. The confusion which Jane’s different roles creates for the detectives extends to their misreading; they do not see the significance of the hat as a clue to her identity as the murderer. The hat therefore enables the exclusion of a number of suspects: it provides a clue to the murderer’s identity, but equally enables this concealment of the murderer’s identity – the question of whether it is Jane or Carlotta – to extend to the close of the narrative. The hat prevents a positive identification of either woman as a result of its styling. Hoffman argues that ‘Jane is a supremely competent professional actress who is clever enough to use negative assumptions about her intelligence and competence to her own advantage’ (p. 161). Jane’s ability to convincingly play different roles – including that of murderer and innocent widow – creates a confusion for the detectives. They must detect which of her different identities is the truth of the circumstances of the case – whether she attended the dinner party or murdered her husband. The process of this detection enables the murderer’s identity to become distinct from either of the women as suspects, and particularly from Jane as a suspect. The murderer is regarded a character apart from the suspects considered by Poirot, with the hat misread as a clue to identifying Jane as the murderer.

Emphasis on Jane’s career as an actress, and the connections to theatricality more broadly, are evident through a feminised mode of reading. In identifying Carlotta as the purchaser of the hat, her career as a famous impersonator is emphasised; her profession highlights the possibility of her impersonating Jane to commit the murder. However, in so doing, Poirot and Hastings neglect *Jane’s* career as a famous actress. They do not consider the corresponding possibilities of her committing the crime as herself and acting her innocence. Schaub suggests that

[c]areer women who support themselves with resolution in the face of oppressive social standards are quite common in Christie’s works. But frequently such women are depicted as hardened by their lives, and overly preoccupied with money in a way that makes them vulnerable to temptation. (p. 84)

Schaub references Carlotta in *Lord Edgware Dies* as an example of this.¹⁸² However, instead of presenting Carlotta and Jane as supporting themselves with resolution, Christie presents their careers as an essential part of the plot. There is less of a focus on their careers as necessary livelihoods than on how those careers enable a further confusion between them as the potential murderer. Their careers enable Jane and Carlotta to have the financial means to buy a hat that is at the current apex of fashionableness, albeit styled slightly differently. They also have the demonstrable capability of acting and impersonation to a degree that enables the confusion between their identities: Carlotta in her impersonation of Jane at the dinner party and Jane in her portrayal of innocence through the investigation of her husband's murder.

There is a further connection between the hat and Jane and Carlotta's professions as actresses of various kinds; through a feminised mode of reading, this connection provides the clue potential of the hat. Hughes's discussion of millinery on stage and screen highlights Sarah Siddons's wearing of hats as part of her costume: '[t]he murder of Duncan in *Macbeth* hardly seems an occasion for millinery, but in a 1786 painting of Siddons as Lady Macbeth, her modish black hat provides an effective frame to an elaborate coiffure and tense pale face' (p. 157). The portrait in question, now owned by the Garrick Club, was featured in a 1933 theatre exhibition.¹⁸³ Whilst there is no evidence that Christie attended this exhibition or was aware of this portrait, it highlights a connection between the concept of costume and theatricality in relation to murder. Bernthal relates such theatricality to wider questions of performativity, suggesting that

[d]espite assuming one of the major character roles in detective fiction, that of the murderer, Jane Wilkinson never really exists. If her artificiality is a heightened version of femininity's masquerade, then Christie draws attention to the constructed, performed nature of an apparently independent, strong modern femininity. (*Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 146)

In addition to this focus on the 'performed nature' of modern femininity, through considering the aspects of Jane's attire that are part of this performance – her hat – Jane's theatricality is closely aligned with the murder plot. Her manipulation of attire enables the continued confusion over the murderer's identity.

¹⁸² This reading of Carlotta as vulnerable to temptation in relation to money signals the anti-Semitic overtones in Christie's text that are present in relation to several minor characters. Early in the novel, Carlotta herself is described as having 'faint traces of Semitic ancestry' leading to Poirot's stereotyping that it 'makes for success' but that 'Love of money might lead one from the prudent and cautious path' (p. 17).

¹⁸³ Thomas Beach, *John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons*, oil on canvas, 179 x 152.4 cm, The Garrick Club Collections, <<https://garrick.ssl.co.uk/object-g0390>> [accessed 26 April 2022].

This connection between performative gender and theatricality in Christie's novel has connections to the middlebrow in relation to characterisation. These connections are of particular significance in relation to identities. Humble's analysis of camp and the middlebrow follows Susan Sontag's description of character as 'a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing' with this being 'a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility'.¹⁸⁴ Humble further suggests that this is evident in many middlebrow texts and particularly 'detective fiction in general, which has no real interest in character development' ('The Queer Pleasures of Reading', p. 220). Christie's texts engage with this notion of character as a theatricalization of experience – a process of exaggerating specific aspects of individuals – but far from providing no real interest in character development, this theatricality is used to interrogate those identities intrinsic to the detective fiction plot. Character development occurs in relation to identities such as that of the murderer. The narrative is premised on the idea that the murderer's identity is not revealed until the resolution; this process of detecting the murderer's identity necessitates that identity developing and switching between different suspects.¹⁸⁵ In relation to *Lord Edgware Dies*, Jane's theatricality and costuming of her different identities – including that of the murderer – points to how the genre itself requires the murderer's identity to be tried on. As with a theatrical casting, several different characters are considered in the role before the mystery can be resolved through identifying the "right" character as the murderer.

Theatricality in the process of detecting the murderer's identity involves a feminised mode of reading. As argued in the previous chapter, this mode of reading understands the parallels between contemporary fashion styles and, in this text, the millinery to provide opportunities to read these items as clues to the resolution of the mystery. The murderer's hat is identified by the detectives as limiting the suspects to two: Jane or Carlotta. Yet for much of the narrative, they misread the information provided by the hat. They read it as not absolutely associated with one woman, but instead with the unknown murderer. A feminised mode of reading enables the clue-potential of objects to be realised, permitting the identification of the

¹⁸⁴ Nicola Humble, 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow', in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, pp. 218–30 (p. 220). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁸⁵ Some of Christie's novels do begin with the murderer being already identified, such as *Five Little Pigs* (1942) or *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958); however, I would suggest that many of these narratives are still based on the notion of detecting whether these identified murderers are guilty of the crimes with which they have been charged.

murderer from amongst the suspects. The identity of the murderer develops through being tried on various suspects by the detectives. A feminised mode of reading recognises this process of the theatricalization of experience – this process of exaggerating specific aspects of individuals. It enables the identification of the clue-potential in objects associated with those individuals. In this novel, Poirot is able to understand how the theatricality and acting of different roles are aspects of Jane’s identity. He perceives how these aspects point to reading the murderer’s hat as a costume worn for her role as the murderer, and thus providing the clue to her identity as the murderer.

‘They Are Just – Bodies!’: Identifying the Victim in *Evil Under the Sun* (1941)

My analysis of hats in Christie’s texts has so far focused on their significance in uncovering the murderer’s identity, specifically in connection to the detectives’ mode of reading. In this section and the next, I focus on this detective process in relation to the identities of victim and murderer, and the distinctions between these identities. In *Evil Under the Sun* and *Dead Man’s Folly*, the identities of victim and murderer are presented as relatively interchangeable, with hats having a significant role. The plot of *Evil Under the Sun* centres on the murder of Arlena Stuart (whose married name is Marshall), an actress and known femme fatale with a reputation for manhunting, on the beach at Pixy Cove.¹⁸⁶ She previously attracted the attention of Patrick Redfern, a young married man also on holiday with his wife Christine. It is later revealed that Patrick and Christine are the murderers; the resolution revolves around a disguise, including a hat, assumed by Christine to masquerade as Arlena. The disguise allows Patrick to identify the apparent corpse as that of Arlena before she has actually been strangled. I argue that this prevents a clear distinction between the identities of murderer and victim, despite these terms being used to designate specific characters in much critical scholarship.¹⁸⁷ A feminised mode of reading points to how reading the hat can provide clues to the resolution of the mystery. More significantly, it points to how Christie manipulates this notion of distinguishing between the victim and murderer.

There are clear indications – clues – from the outset of the novel as to the later difficulties of applying these terms of “victim” and “murderer” once the murder has been committed. These

¹⁸⁶ First published in the UK and US in 1941. First serialised in the US in 1940 in *Collier’s Weekly*, vol. 106, no. 24–vol. 107, no. 8.

¹⁸⁷ For example, *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction* contains chapters that separate ‘Victims’ and ‘Criminals’; studies on Christie’s works also tend towards this separation of victims and murderers, with studies by Makinen and by Hoffman both separating detectives, villains and victims.

are evident in relation to the presentation of Arlena. She is repeatedly referred to as wearing an outfit of ‘a simple backless white bathing dress’, with a bronze skin tone, auburn hair and ‘a fantastic Chinese hat of jade green cardboard’.¹⁸⁸ The white and bronze tones associated with Arlena’s body imply the statuesque. This is equally evident from the initial description of her as being ‘as perfect as a statue’, with ‘a Chinese immobility about her face’ (p. 15). Previous work on Christie’s texts has indicated the racist connotations of some of her language and depictions, and this is evident in this phrasing (Barnard, pp. 23–24).¹⁸⁹ However, the ‘Chinese immobility’ of Arlena’s face is also a deliberate phrasing intended to correlate to her hat; it implies that this particular style complements Arlena’s natural features. It is also a deliberate indicator of the statuesque aspects of Arlena’s body. Her statuesque physique is of particular significance in relation to Poirot’s discussion of bodies on the beach. This takes place just before the description of Arlena: ‘Regard them there, lying out in rows. What are they? They are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just – bodies!’ (p. 6). Poirot’s comment can be interpreted as the impossibility of identifying individuality between the people on the beach; it is also as a reference to a lack of person-like features, relating to Arlena’s immobility of face and statuesque appearance.

That this statuesque appearance of Arlena, and the discussion of bodies, is connected to crime is exemplified in Poirot’s further comments. He describes how ‘everything is *standardized!* [...] That reminds me very much of the Morgue in Paris [...] Bodies – arranged on slabs – like butcher’s meat!’ (p. 7; emphasis in original).¹⁹⁰ Much work on this novel has paid close attention to Poirot’s comments here. Bernthal suggests that ‘Poirot confirms that women’s bodies exist to be looked at. He does not configure individuality or character beyond the body’s physical appearance and sexual suggestiveness’ (*Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 148). Similarly, Hoffman points to how the contemporary context of the ‘lack of substantial clothing required by the modern fashion for sunbathing’ publicly exposed more of women’s

¹⁸⁸ Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun* (London: HarperCollins, 2014), pp. 15–16. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁸⁹ Whilst notable examples of racist language have been removed – such as the change to the original title of *And Then There Were None* (1939) – the language *within* the texts has not been changed. Christie was not unusual in her use of racist stereotyping and language in this period; I discuss this in greater detail in the following section on *Dead Man’s Folly*. For a fuller discussion of race and marginality in women’s fiction of this period, see Maslen, pp. 99–144.

¹⁹⁰ The reference to the Morgue in Paris may perhaps seem at odds for readers used to the emphasis on Poirot’s Belgian nationality and unfamiliar with the history of this particular Morgue, which was open to the public in nineteenth-century Paris, and with interest in the story of ‘L’Inconnue de la Seine’ peaking in the 1920s and 1930s. See Taryn Cain, ‘Paris Morgue and the Public Spectacle of Death’, 1 June 2015, <<https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/W-RTBBEAAO5mfQ3M>> [accessed 7 August 2022].

bodies than ever before (p. 181). Yet, as Hoffman explains, ‘this exposure does not make women recognisable; rather, they are objectified, exposed to the gaze of those around them’ (p. 181). These interpretations of Poirot’s comments place emphasis on the gendered aspects of Poirot as a male detective looking at Arlena as a woman. However, Poirot’s comments – and their connection to the presentation of Arlena – provide an important indication of the mode of reading of bodies in this text. Such a mode of reading extends beyond solely gendered connotations to encompass the detective fiction genre. That these are first and foremost bodies, separate from identity labels of “victim” and “murderer”, is of significance to the later plot developments. In this narrative, these identity labels obscure how the crime has been committed.

The immobility of Arlena’s face relates to her Chinese cardboard hat in the clue-potential of both. As discussed above, her statuesque appearance provides a clue to a mode of reading her body in the detective fiction genre that does not assign the identity of “victim” too readily. Her hat also provides this clue-potential by complementing this impersonal, statuesque appearance of Arlena’s body – the colouring of the cardboard as jade green relates to jade as a gemstone and mineral that has been used in China since the Neolithic period. The hat also is integral to resolving how the murder of Arlena has been committed. This clue-potential is evident in the material properties of the hat: its colouring, material, and style. These properties relate to Arlena’s wearing of a white bathing suit and her sunbathing activities. The green colour of the hat, together with the white bathing suit, reference the theme of summer holiday activities at the seaside. Many *Vogue* magazine articles of the period promote ‘dead-white’ bathing suits ‘to show up [...a] honey tan’.¹⁹¹ The colour is significant for Christine’s later pretence as Arlena. Whilst Arlena wears this bathing suit to highlight her tanned skin, Christine’s wearing of it is intended to convince others of her impersonation. The dead-white colour consequently becomes a potential clue to reading Arlena as an inert body: it emphasises her non-person-like qualities even whilst she is still living.

It is difficult to know for certain what is meant by a ‘Chinese hat’. The term may refer to an Asian conical-style hat that Christie elsewhere terms a ‘coolie hat’ (as in *Dead Man’s Folly*),

¹⁹¹ ‘In Southern Waters’, *Vogue* (US), 15 December 1939, pp. 56–57 (p. 57), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/904292743>> [accessed 30 October 2020]. Similarly, a 1935 article suggests ‘[d]ead-white bathing-suits are terribly smart – especially the hand-knit English ones from Fortnum and Mason’ – see ‘In Town and Out’, *Vogue* (US), 15 July 1935, pp. 42–45; 70 (p. 70), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/911864275>> [accessed 30 October 2020].

or to the origins of the style. However, given the sunbathing and beach context of this item, I suggest that the style loosely corresponds to the Asian conical-style hats. A 1935 *Vogue* magazine article ‘Brim for Beaches’ describes ‘[h]uge hats – high, wide, and making you very handsome’.¹⁹² Similarly, a later article describes a beach hat with a ‘bonnety, high-sweeping line’ of ‘shiny straw [...] and tied in the back with beige cotton ribbons’.¹⁹³ The large style of Arlena’s hat corresponds to these contemporary trends for beach hats; it also provides the ability for Christine and Patrick to conceal the face of the body on the beach. The material properties of this style also have clue-potential in the narrative. Arlena’s hat is described as being made of cardboard. Whilst these styles of hat were usually made of straw – as in this *Vogue* description – the cardboard material potentially relates to the contemporary context of wartime shortages of millinery materials.¹⁹⁴ The use of paper in millinery in this period is echoed in magazine articles that provide guides to creating hats from crocheted paper, using water repellent solution to ‘give [...] as much wear as straw’.¹⁹⁵ This use of cardboard is intrinsic to the plot: the difficulties of disposing of the cardboard hat – rigid and unwieldy in structure – provide clues to the murder.

These three elements of Arlena’s appearance – her skin tone, bathing suit, and green cardboard hat – are central to how Christine and Patrick commit the crime. Christine’s impersonation as Arlena’s dead body allows Patrick to “identify” the murder victim before the crime has been committed. Patrick is also able to convince another character, Emily Brewster,

¹⁹² ‘Brim for Beaches’, *Vogue* (US), 1 January 1935, pp. 26–27 (p. 26), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/904325539>> [accessed 29 Oct 2020]. Many articles of the period describe hats by making connections (and disparagements) to styles known in those countries – this same article, for example, describes a hat with ‘a high pointed crown with a silly knob on top and a wide brim rolled up at the edge à la Mexican’ (p. 27).

¹⁹³ ‘Shop-Hound Combs the Beach Shops’, *Vogue* (US), 1 June 1939, pp. 90–91 (p. 90), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/897851281>> [accessed 30 October 2020].

¹⁹⁴ Although millinery materials were not rationed in the same manner as clothing during World War Two and in the post-war period, there was still a shortage in certain materials – such as straw – that impacted the making and construction of hats in this period (Hopkins, pp. 64–69). Curran’s discussion of Christie’s notebooks, which she used for the planning of many of her works, dates the writing of this novel to 1938, prior to the outbreak of war and certainly before any shortages. However, from the few transcriptions of notes relating to this novel that Curran provides, there is limited indication that the hat being made of cardboard is not a later addition in keeping with the wartime context. Even if the cardboard hat is a coincidental feature in relation to the context of World War Two, this does not negate the relevance of the publication context and features of the text (Curran, pp. 322–29).

¹⁹⁵ Mabel S. Hill and Dorothy Wagner, ‘Paper ... in Fashions and for the Home’, *Woman’s Day*, August 1939, pp. 20–21 (p. 20), in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com/magazines/paper-fashions-home/docview/1815456387>> [accessed 22 February 2022].

of his identification. Emily recognises the “Arlena” on the beach as having ‘the attitude of a sun-bather. So had she lain many a time on the beach by the hotel, her bronzed body outstretched and the green cardboard hat protecting her head and neck’ (p. 73). The hat – and bathing suit and tan – identify Arlena as a sun-bather. It creates the expectation of her as therefore engaged in this activity when she is seen on the beach. However, the fact that ‘there was no sun on Pixy’s Beach and there would be none for some hours yet’ points to the incongruity of “Arlena’s” appearance on the beach (p. 73). The questionable presence of the hat in a context where it is rendered unnecessary leads to a seeking of alternative reasons behind Arlena’s presence. It is this that leads to the assumption of the body on the beach as a victim of crime. In so doing, the hat – and other aspects of Arlena’s appearance – become re(a)d herrings. The misreading is established through Emily’s assumption that the incongruity of “Arlena’s” dress on a beach with no sun implies she is a victim of crime.

This transition from seeing “Arlena’s” body to seeing it as the victim of crime is captured in how Emily sees individual parts of “Arlena” but does not perceive these parts as the whole of her. She sees

as one sees in a dream, the bronzed limbs, the white backless bathing dress – the red curl of hair escaping under the jade-green hat; saw something else too – the curious unnatural angle of the outspread arms. Felt, in that minute, that this body had not *lain* down but had been thrown... (p. 74; emphasis in original)

The limbs, bathing suit, and hat are not referred to as belonging to Arlena, but to ‘this body’. There are no references to specific identifying features of the body – such as birthmarks or bone structure – but only to entirely changeable elements such as the clothing and hair. At this stage of the narrative, these elements provide a clue to the resolution of the mystery. In listing these specific, changeable aspects of “Arlena’s” appearance, Christie draws attention to how these items provide only a surface dressing of the body on the beach. Christine’s assumption of Arlena’s appearance is little more than an assumption of these constitutive parts in order to represent an appearance of Arlena. A feminised mode of reading looks at these elements of appearance, but also beyond them; when it is employed, these parts do not indicate that this body is Arlena. Instead, it becomes apparent that these parts create an artfully arranged *semblance* of Arlena’s body, such as with the careful arrangement of the curl of hair escaping underneath the hat.

The hat, whilst one of several items assumed by Christine to resemble Arlena, is further essential in the subterfuge between Patrick and Christine in the murder plot. Patrick’s initial

discovery of “Arlena’s” murder is carefully managed to ensure Emily reads the body as a victim of crime. Patrick is the one to approach the body, and his statements to Emily convince her that Arlena is a murder victim:

‘My God, she’s dead...’

And then, as he lifted the hat a little, peered at the neck:

‘Oh, God, she’s been strangled... murdered. (p. 74; emphases in original)

The hat here provides essential coverage of Christine’s neck that would show a lack of the strangulation that is asserted to have taken place by Patrick. The idiomatic phrase “keeping something under your hat” refers to the notion of keeping a secret: Christine’s hat is a clue to how the secret of her identity – as not a victim of crime and as one of the murderers – is kept. Literally looking under the hat would expose the confusion between victim and murderer that is being enacted here. A feminised mode of reading attends to the structure of the hat – its large and wide style and rigid cardboard material that covers the head and neck, preventing a view of facial features. Through doing so, the hat can be understood as a clue to how Emily’s perception of “Arlena’s” body is filtered; Patrick’s deliberate manipulation and the information he provides is privileged over her own knowledge. The hat is consequently integral to the creation of this fake crime scene where the murderer assumes the identity of the victim.

The hat also prevents the questioning of the body on the beach and the notion that it is a victim of crime based solely on Patrick and Christine’s manipulation. Because this hat is synonymous with Arlena’s appearance, the appearance of the hat on the body on the beach is enough for Emily to identify this body as Arlena’s and so as a victim of crime. Linden Peach has remarked on the similarities of the crime scene and the literary text itself, suggesting that both are masquerades; they instigate a game between the author and reader with the crime scene managed to mislead investigators – both fictional and real.¹⁹⁶ Such comparison somewhat undermines the careful presentation of fictional crime scenes in Christie’s work. Whilst they do mislead – and hence, in this novel, Emily’s misreading of the body as a victim – they are also carefully presented to enable the resolution of the mystery. A feminised mode of reading that is sensitive to the presentation of the fictional crime scene enables this resolution to be reached. This mode of reading is sensitive to exactly how the crime scene is described, by whom and to who, and the details of such. In *Evil Under the Sun*, this is evidenced through the manner in which the body on the beach is described in parts. The

¹⁹⁶ Linden Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction: Criminal Deceptions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 57. I discuss the analogy of games and detective fiction in the Introduction.

“discovery” scene is managed by Patrick and Christine to ensure that Emily misreads Christine’s live body as Arlena’s dead one – and misreads this *as* a crime scene.

Management of the crime scene provides important interventions in the detective fiction genre in relation to the notion of identities intrinsic to the plots. York’s reading of the disguising of dead bodies in Christie’s texts, including in *Evil Under the Sun*, demonstrates not only ‘the instability of identity’ but also ‘that the body can be impersonal – in other words, it insists on character as identity’ (p. 33). Instability and impersonality are exemplified in how “Arlena” is incorrectly identified as the body on the beach based solely on the dressed appearance of that body. York’s notion of ‘character as identity’ has wider significance in relation to the identities of victim and murderer in the detective fiction plot. Arlena’s identity as a victim of crime is based on the items of dress and fashion accessories applied to the body on the beach. In presenting victimhood this way, Christie questions not only how individuals are identified, but also the notion of victims and murderers more generally. The crime itself – the manner in which Patrick and Christine murder Arlena – necessitates a suspension in designating characters these identities. There is the implication that such identities, whilst necessary to the genre, cannot be designated definitively and conclusively throughout the novel. The body on the beach is first assumed to be that of Arlena, but in revealing that it is Christine – one of the murderers – it becomes impossible to consistently describe this body as a victim of crime.

The body on the beach – Christine pretending to be Arlena’s dead body – is eventually replaced by the murdered Arlena. Yet the eventual establishment of Arlena as the body on the beach does not completely resolve the issue of who is the victim and who the criminal. It might be assumed that once Poirot and the police detectives have found Arlena’s body, it is possible to describe her as the victim. However, even at the end of the novel, there is continued discussion over whether Arlena can be considered a ‘natural victim’ (p. 269). These discussions centre on whether she ‘fatally attracted men’ or was herself ‘fatally attractive’ to them (p. 255).¹⁹⁷ The idea of Arlena being fatally attractive/attracted to men is significant here – use of the term ‘fatally’ implies the notion of death. It equates her behaviour as criminal, even potentially murderous, with these men as her victims. Equally, as noted at the beginning, Arlena’s immobility of face and dead-white bathing suit already foreshadow a sense of *her* being the victim; there is an implied physical resemblance to the inertia of a dead body. This

¹⁹⁷ The main opposition is between Poirot and fellow hotel guest Mrs Gardener – the latter thinking Poirot ‘a shade on the indulgent side’ in his perception of Arlena as a victim of predatory men (p. 269).

presents Arlena as identified as both the victim and – to some extent – the criminal, even after the resolution of her murder has been presented. Identifying Arlena as the victim of murder by Christine and Patrick does not resolve the broader issue of defining these identities within the detective fiction plot.

The hat has further significance here for continuing to indicate this issue of defining identities intrinsic to the detective fiction genre. Interpretation of Arlena depends on how sympathetic her fellow hotel guests are towards her. Similarly, understanding the hat as a clue to these differing interpretations of Arlena depends on how its clue-potential is read. Through a feminised mode of reading, it is possible to perceive how the hat indicates Arlena as a fashionable woman intent on making herself fatally attractive to men. Yet it also enables Christine and Patrick to commit the crime of murder with Arlena as the victim. As Poirot describes in the midst of his investigation, ‘Arlena Marshall herself is the best, the only clue, to her own death’ (p. 146). I have discussed how a feminised mode of reading of this novel suspends designating identities of victim and murderer to the bodies in the narrative. In so doing, this is not to suggest that understanding the individuality of these bodies – these characters such as ‘Arlena Marshall herself’ – cannot provide clues to the resolution of the mystery. This is echoed in York’s notion of character as identity. A feminised mode of reading considers the context of Arlena’s beach hat as contributing to understanding of her individuality. Reading the hat as a clue to her behaviour as a fatally attractive woman further provides an understanding of how this item is subsequently used as part of the murder plot.

By extending this difficulty of distinguishing victimhood to the conclusion of the novel, Christie makes an important intervention in the detective fiction genre. The genre itself relies on establishing characters in these identities. In the Introduction, I suggested that the notion of instability in relation to identity was at the heart of Christie’s plots. However, perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that this instability is at the heart of Christie’s use of the genre more broadly. Instead of the resolution establishing a clear definition of which characters are the victim and which the criminals, the distinctions between these identities are left clearly open to question and debate. This informs my understanding of a feminised mode of reading. This mode of reading does not assign these identities of victim and murderer so readily to specific characters in the novel – or even, as in *Evil Under the Sun*, to specific *bodies*. By extending this issue of designating identities beyond the resolution of identifying Arlena’s murderers, Christie’s detective fiction engages with this issue beyond solely detecting the resolution of the mystery. In so doing, Christie presents such designations as an ongoing issue, one that

does not close with the closing of the novel and resolving of this specific mystery. A feminised mode of reading understands these identities of victim and murderer as less oppositions to each other, and more nuanced. They are less easily designated unquestioningly; characters have traits that enable them to be identified as both. Such a reading is applicable, not only to this novel, but to Christie's engagement with the genre as a whole.

'Made Up in an Exotic Un-English Style': Identifying the Murderer in *Dead Man's Folly* (1956)

My analysis of *Evil Under the Sun* focused on Christie's engagement with identities intrinsic to the detective fiction genre. It concentrated particularly on the difficulty in distinguishing between victim and murderer, with an emphasis on this notion of victimhood. This section focuses on *Dead Man's Folly*: I argue that this complication in distinguishing between victim and murderer is framed through a manipulation of the concept of foreignness.¹⁹⁸ The plot centres around the disappearance of Lady Hattie Stubbs, wife of Sir George Stubbs of Nasse House, during a garden fête. The end of the novel reveals that the real Hattie has been murdered many months previously for her money and has been buried under the eponymous folly. The disappearance of the woman masquerading in her place is precipitated by the appearance of Hattie's cousin, Etienne de Sousa, at the fête. The woman masquerading as Lady Stubbs has been doubling as an Italian student staying at a neighbouring youth hostel; she assumes this latter disguise to escape the country and justice.¹⁹⁹ The hat is central to the appearance of the disguise of "Lady Stubbs". It not only provides clues to the manner in which the disguise operates – and thereby to the resolution of the mystery – but also in relation to how notions of "foreignness" are intrinsic to the identity of the murderer in detective fiction more broadly.

The description of Lady Stubbs's hat throughout the novel has connotations and contexts that are significant to this item's clue-potential to the resolution of the mystery. From her first appearance, she is described as

¹⁹⁸ Agatha Christie, *Dead Man's Folly* (London: HarperCollins, 2002). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. First published in 1956 in the US by Dodd, Mead and Co., and in the UK by Collins Crime Club. First serialised in an abridged format in the US in *Collier's Weekly*, 20 July 1956 (vol. 138, no. 2)–17 August 1956 (vol. 138, no. 4) and in the UK in *John Bull*, 11 August 1956 (vol. 100, no. 2615)–15 September 1956 (vol. 100, no. 2620).

¹⁹⁹ For clarity, I refer to the murdered Lady Stubbs as "Hattie" and the woman criminal who masquerades in her place as "Lady Stubbs" and her alternate persona as "the Italian student".

wearing a big coolie-style hat of vivid magenta straw [...] She was heavily made up in an exotic un-English style [...] She was a creature of the tropical sun, caught, as it were, by chance in an English drawing-room. (p. 37)

The ‘exotic’ connotations of the hat correspond to the presentation of Lady Stubbs’s unusual behaviour. Her ‘un-English’ appearance relates to the characterisation of her demeanour and behaviour; she disappears throughout the day and has a marked lack of involvement in arrangements for the fête. Both appearance and behaviour are untypical for an English society woman.²⁰⁰ Whilst this behaviour is unusual, the characterisation of Lady Stubbs as being somewhat exotic and ‘un-English’ through her millinery style normalises this behaviour. It makes her actions appear *less* unusual and unexpected of her character. This normalisation of her behaviour proves to be integral to facilitate the disguises between the two characters of the Italian student and Lady Stubbs. The ‘made-up’ Lady Stubbs is therefore made-up in both senses of the word: as a woman with an unusual style and heavy use of cosmetic products, and as a pretend version of a dead woman. The style of the hat is integral to this ‘made-up’ disguise. By choosing a style of hat that can be worn in a variety of social settings and circumstances, “Lady Stubbs’s” clothes – and millinery – become a uniform for this identity.

Her uniformity of appearance is further evident in how Lady Stubbs is shown to wear the same style of clothing – albeit with changes in colour – on the day of the fête. This time, she wears ‘an enormous coolie-shaped hat of black straw’ (p. 87). That her choice of millinery is not entirely expected for this social occasion is remarked on by her husband’s secretary, Miss Brewis. She sardonically murmurs ‘[t]hinks it’s the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, evidently!’ (p. 87). Wearing an appropriate hat for the horse-racing at Ascot was deemed a gateway to social acceptance (Hopkins, p. 91).²⁰¹ Therefore, Miss Brewis’s sardonic comment implies that Lady Stubbs has dressed inappropriately, with Ascot and a local garden fête not being comparable social occasions. Lady Stubbs’s admission that she did indeed wear the hat for Ascot has two implications: either she does not have the social *savoir-faire* to distinguish between the two social events or she has a disregard for such matters (p. 88). This relates to Lady Stubbs’s “uniform” – wearing the same style of hat does not permit her to conform to the subtle distinctions in dress expected for different social occasions. Lady Stubbs’s Asian conical-style hats become a uniform response to the necessity of wearing a hat. The style of the hat is as versatile as possible in its appropriateness across social scenarios. This is evident from how

²⁰⁰ The use of ‘caught’ also has connotations of prey; a further connection to how Lady Stubbs is perceived as a victim, rather than a murderer, as I outline below.

²⁰¹ Hopkins notes that this race meet was the most glamorous in the year (p. 91).

several characters remark on Lady Stubbs's decision to wear the hat at the breakfast table, for afternoon tea and at the fête, yet it is accepted as usual behaviour for her.

The use of a “coolie”-style hat to respond to the necessity of wearing a hat across various social scenarios further engages with contemporary fashions in millinery. A preliminary report in *Vogue* (US) on Paris spring fashions for 1951 reports that fashion house Dior has hats with a ‘Chinese slant’, specifically naming ‘[t]he coolie hat’ worn ‘[u]p back, down front. Almost floating around the head’.²⁰² Two weeks later, a fuller report on these fashions describes how ‘Paris hats this season can be worn in three directions’ and that ‘[c]ertainly a coolie hat belongs in every wardrobe – everyone has made them’.²⁰³ Lady Stubbs's wearing of such a style of hat as this therefore engages with the latest in Parisian fashions, particularly those designed by high-end fashion houses, such as Christian Dior. Whereas the tilted style of hat discussed in relation to *Lord Edgware Dies* was very clearly fixed in relation to how it could be worn on the head – including to the impact on hairstyling this had – these articles on fashions of the early 1950s suggest that this fixed styling is not the same. Instead, these hats ‘can be worn in three directions’, implying that Lady Stubbs's choice of a “coolie” style hat is deliberately made to permit this changeability in appearance, despite the uniformity of the style itself. Although she remains fashionable, the extent to which Lady Stubbs wears this hat – including in situations where it is not expected, such as at the breakfast table – is further pertinent to her disguise.

Lady Stubbs's ‘un-English’ and unusual behaviour demonstrates her lack of engagement with the appropriate social codes – the unspoken rules and behaviours expected of her social status and the social occasions she attends. This lack of engagement is part of her disguise: it is an assertion of her as an *outsider* – foreign – to the social group to which the majority of the characters in the novel belong. This is deliberate in terms of the necessities of the detective fiction plot. It permits her disappearance from the fête to be viewed by the police, Poirot, and other characters as not wholly unexpected; her vanishing becomes part of her eccentricities and unusual behaviour displayed elsewhere. I argue that this also has distinct racial profiling that relates to the terms in which the hat is described. Whilst the term “coolie” is now widely

²⁰² ‘First Paris News’, *Vogue* (US), 1 March 1951, pp. 139–143 (p. 139d), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/879244211/>> [accessed 28 October 2020].

²⁰³ ‘Paris Collections: Full Report’, *Vogue* (US), 15 March 1951, pp. 76–95; 144 (p. 144), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/879258047/>> [accessed 28 October 2020].

recognised to have racist connotations in relation to unskilled labourers – with the term “Asian conical hat” used instead to describe such hats – in the 1950s, such description of these hats was common. Early 1950s examples in magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *She* provide instructions for making such hats.²⁰⁴ Similarly, *Vogue* magazine’s article on summer fashions for 1955 advocates covering the head; it suggests that ‘new hats not only cover, but shade – widely and coolly’, including a ‘[r]affia coolie hat by Lilly Daché’.²⁰⁵ I am not suggesting that Christie used this term being aware of its racist connotations; instead, the connection to Asia in the terms used to describe the hat provides a further context to the clue-potential of the hat in relation to the plot.

The connection to Asia is a significant part of the construction of the identity of this woman, and not only to that of “Lady Stubbs”. Her identity as one of the murderers relies on this connection as a means of casting suspicion elsewhere; it enables her to frame herself as a potential victim. At this stage in the narrative, the connotations of exoticism are a necessary part of Lady Stubbs’s disguise. Her ‘exotic un-English style’ is deliberately vague with no particular reference to Lady Stubbs’s origins specifically for the plot.²⁰⁶ The portrayal of her as unusual and atypical of a fashionable society lady through this style of hat is therefore a clue to her identity as foreign. She is marginalised from the social norms of the novel; this foreignness and marginalisation also relate to her identity as the murderer.²⁰⁷ The coolie-style hat worn by Lady Stubbs relates to anxieties over race and marginality more broadly in this period. Maslen notes that throughout the 1950s, liberalism and anti-racism were most commonly expressed in relation to events in Europe following the end of World War Two; she explains that ‘further afield, old conventional references to “savagery” and the exotic

²⁰⁴ Alice Carroll and Elizabeth C. Ramsay. ‘5 Hats to Sew from Circles’, *Good Housekeeping*, March 1953, pp. 244; 246, in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/5-hats-sew-circles/docview/1847827181>> [accessed 22 February 2022]. ‘Make Everything on these Two Pages for a Total of Just Over £5’, *She*, August 1955, pp. 40–41; 78, in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/make-everything-on-these-two-pages-total-just/docview/2535755332>> [accessed 22 February 2022].

²⁰⁵ ‘Vogue’s 1955 Summer Fashion Textbook’, *Vogue* (US), 1 May 1955, pp. 102–107 (pp. 103; 105), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/911863338>> [accessed 28 October 2020].

²⁰⁶ Hattie is supposed to have come from the West Indies, but this woman is from a criminal gang in Italy, although it is not explicitly stated that she is Italian.

²⁰⁷ I use marginalised here following Maslen’s definition of marginality as shifting and changing over time whereby those who are ‘secure in what they regard as a dominant group’, defined as those characters that are upper-class, white, and British, ‘will marginalize those whom they perceive as not belonging there’ (p. 99).

remain[ed] largely in place' (p. 124). As evidenced above, prejudice is particularly apparent in this novel where Lady Stubbs's "exotic" appearance and coolie-style hat imply a stereotypical Asian appearance. Connection to Asia is particularly significant in relation to the genre of the novel and anxieties regarding Asian characters that have defined detective fiction. Ronald Knox's 1928 'decatalogue' of rules for the genre state '[n]o Chinaman must figure in the story', which Edwards perceives to be a response to 'thriller writers whose reliance on sinister Oriental villains had already become a racist cliché' (p. 118).

These anxieties are carefully manipulated in the presentation of Lady Stubbs. The use of the coolie-style hat as a uniform of this identity is an intentional means of confronting these prejudices and 'old conventional references'. The characters around this woman recognise that her behaviour is unusual, but they are prevented from making any connection to criminality by these longstanding conventions of the genre.²⁰⁸ The hat thus becomes a re(a)d herring – the use of it as Lady Stubbs's "uniform" (with the notion that this is a 'made-up' identity) provides a clue to her identity as the murderer. However, the anxieties over how she is racially profiled – her coolie-style hat connected to Asia – mean that this clue is misread. Sheng-Mei Ma's study of Anglo-American cultural interpretations of China suggests that '[t]he detective and mystery genres revolving around Sherlock Holmes [...] continue unabated their stock yellowface characters, who exude a magnetic charge [...] Representations of the Other invariably teeter on the knife-edge of good and bad, the well known and unknown'.²⁰⁹ With regards to Lady Stubbs, the 'magnetic charge' of how she is racially profiled prevents this 'teeter[ing] on the knife-edge of good and bad' from tipping towards the latter. Due to the suggestion – implied through her choice of millinery – of a connection to Asia, other characters do not consider her as the criminal. This racial profiling does not work only in connection to Asia. On the contrary, the woman criminal's understanding of these long-standing prejudices is a deliberate manipulation in relation to other races.

That these prejudices against foreigners exist amongst other characters in the text is firmly established following the death of Marlene Tucker and the police investigation that ensues. Marlene is a local girl guide posing as the "victim" in a fake murder hunt organised for the

²⁰⁸ This is also somewhat metafictional, whereby the fictional characters are aware of the genre in which they are operating.

²⁰⁹ Sheng-Mei Ma, *Off-white: Yellowface and Chinglish by Anglo-American Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 11.

garden fête. She has been murdered by the woman criminal due to her blackmailing Sir George Stubbs regarding the murder of Hattie. Following her death, the local police constable gives his opinion that the murder has been committed by ‘[a f]oreigner [...] ’Twouldn’t be anyone local’ (pp. 108–109). Here, this term foreigner is used to make a distinction between people who are local – born in the local area – and those who are not. Just before this conversation, the constable uses the same term to refer to Lady Stubbs when asked if Sir George married a local girl. He answers ‘[n]o. Foreigner of some sort. Coloured, some say, but I don’t think that’s so myself’ (p. 108). This extends this definition of foreigner beyond solely those who are not local to Nassecombe. It draws in a suggestion of race, with the implied suggestion that Lady Stubbs’s skin tone is a factor in the extent to which she is a foreigner. The negative connotations of foreigners are further emphasised in Marlene’s mother’s opinion that the murder has been committed by ‘one of them nasty foreigners up at the Hostel [located next to Nasse House]. You never know where you are with foreigners’ (p. 120). These comments are somewhat indicative of the concern with lack of origins that have previously been identified in Christie’s texts.²¹⁰ Yet, these definitions of foreigners are further important in how the woman criminal deliberately uses these prejudices in the plotting of the crime.

It is significant that Mrs Tucker’s suggestion that Marlene has been killed by someone from the Hostel proves to be correct; Marlene is killed by the woman criminal whose other disguise to that of Lady Stubbs is of a hiker staying at the Hostel. This removes the notion that these prejudiced comments are solely reflective of anxieties over changing communities, with such anxieties being upheld through the resolution of the plot. Rather, the connection between these prejudiced comments and the resolution of the mystery provides a deliberate manipulation of anxieties about foreigners by the woman criminal to cast suspicion elsewhere. These anxieties are also intrinsically connected to the murderer’s identity; they further provide clues to the resolution of the mystery through a feminised mode of reading, as discussed below. This casting of suspicion elsewhere is particularly evident in relation to

²¹⁰ This concern has been particularly perceived in relation to the post-war context of *A Murder is Announced*; Barnard sees it as ‘capitaliz[ing] on the details of social intercourse in rural England in the post-war years’ (p. 99). Similarly, Sarah Martin’s work on Miss Marple and psychogeography points to how this novel shows ‘transformations and restructurings in the village social space’, whereby the ‘community’s rejection of the “aliens” and the rise of nationalism in the country may have strengthened the social boundaries, yet the threat to the boundaries of the house, village, and the country space’ remains – see Sarah Martin, ‘Psychogeography and the Detective: Re-evaluating the Significance of Space in Agatha Christie’s *A Murder is Announced*’, *Clues*, 36.1 (2018), pp. 20–29 (p. 22).

Etienne. As detailed above, Maslen's comment that beyond Europe, conventional references to savagery and the exotic remained in this period here signifies that the foreign elements of Lady Stubbs relate not only to the connections to Asia evident in her coolie-style hat. They also relate to her familial upbringing in the West Indies, to which Etienne, as her cousin, is consequently also connected. These prejudices against foreigners are carefully manipulated by the woman criminal to move suspicion away from herself, and onto Etienne. This has wider implications for the plot. The use of the coolie-style hat implies a connection to Asia that to some extent prevents Lady Stubbs being connected to criminality. Therefore, her foreign origins are considered less pertinent to resolving the murder plot than those of Etienne.

A feminised mode of reading is capable of resolving the mystery: it must acknowledge the racial prejudices and anxieties that inhibit some detective characters in the text but read beyond these. This inhibition is exemplified in the text through Inspector Bland who '[a]lthough he had none of Constable Hoskins' ingrained prejudice against foreigners, [...] took an instant dislike to Etienne de Sousa' (p. 137). The Inspector's reaction is indicative of how detective characters are shown to acknowledge the existence of this prejudice but fail to perceive these impacting on their own judgements. The Inspector understands that Hoskins is innately prejudiced against those who are not local but fails to perceive that he himself still understands Etienne to be a foreigner. His prejudice is connected to his suspicions of criminality based on Etienne's origins, with the Inspector subsequently perceiving him as a suspected murderer. The woman criminal's disguise as Lady Stubbs is an important manipulation of how this term foreigner is applied in relation to these suspicions. Her unusual behaviour and the descriptions of her 'un-English style' relates her appearance – including her coolie-style hat – as the source of this foreignness. These aspects are emphasised over her country of origin and this notion of locality. The hat is intentionally chosen to manipulate these prejudices against foreigners to *prevent* Lady Stubbs from being considered as such. Thus, a feminised mode of reading that perceives how the clothing is a carefully manipulated disguise for "Lady Stubbs" can perceive the hat as a clue to the resolution of the mystery.

In so doing, the woman criminal is seen primarily as a *victim* with the "uniform" of her disguise enabling the search for her to become a search for her clothing and accessories. She is not seen as a suspect of criminal behaviour, as with Etienne. Even Poirot, who is aware of how he himself is perceived as foreign, identifies Lady Stubbs primarily by the clothes he has seen her in. He 'recall[s...] vague glimpses of her tall, cyclamen-clad figure with the drooping

black hat' when questioned after her disappearance from the fête (p. 134).²¹¹ The disappearance of Lady Stubbs, her physical presence, is rendered to be a disappearance of these specific items, and one that necessitates a search for them. The clothing and accessories become synonymous with Lady Stubbs. This connection is evident from the manner in which, after finding the 'black sodden mass' of the hat in the river, the police conclude that '[t]hat makes it look as though it's the way [they...] think it is'— that Etienne has murdered Lady Stubbs and thrown her body in the river – although they do acknowledge that there is '[n]o certainty yet' (p. 205). As a sodden mass, the distinctive shape of the hat has completely disintegrated, with this disintegration suggesting that the hat has been submerged in the river a lengthy period of time.²¹² This provides a further clue to the woman criminal's discarding of her disguise as "Lady Stubbs". It is a clue that becomes a re(a)d herring through the police's inability to distinguish the clothing from the body: they equate the drowned hat to a drowned body.

The discarding of the hat follows a discarding of the associations of foreignness and connection to Asia that it provided. The woman criminal's disguise as Lady Stubbs ensures that her foreign status is not perceived in the same way as that of Etienne in order to remove any prejudiced connection to criminality for her. Discarding the hat relates to the manipulation of connections between notions of foreignness and criminality; these connections are of particular significance in relation to identifying the murderer. Having cast suspicion on Etienne – providing this re(a)d herring for the police – the woman criminal no longer requires her coolie-style hat; she has made her escape in an alternative disguise. Just as there is this confusion over who is foreign to the community of the novel – from hostel guests to Lady Stubbs, and her cousin – there is also confusion over the identity of the murderer. "Lady Stubbs" is understood as both victim and murderer in the course of the novel.²¹³ This notion of foreignness becomes indicative of a lack of certainty over identity: the murderer's identity is based on this sense that they are "foreign" to the community of the novel. However, the murderer cannot be identified through this notion of prejudiced instinct alone. The resolution necessitates a feminised mode of reading that acknowledges this foreignness but disassociates it from a prejudiced basis in racial profiling.

²¹¹ Poirot acknowledges his foreign status – and how this enables people to confide in him and permits him to recognise clues – in several novels. I suggest that this provides an indication of how notions of foreignness and interrogating these are central to the genre and the resolution of the plots.

²¹² Coolie-style hats were traditionally made of straw which turns black, rotting and eventually decomposing, when exposed to excessive amounts of water.

²¹³ Indeed, at the end of the novel, "Lady Stubbs" is a title that can be applied to both Hattie and to the woman criminal.

Christie points to how the identity of the murderer – and how closely this is related to that of the victim – relies on a sense of foreignness to the community of the novel. She also points to how this in itself is open to manipulation in the plot. This has implications for the detective fiction genre more broadly than just this novel. Gregoriou has pointed to how some ‘crime fiction accounts of criminal behaviour can be reductive and problematic’, yet ‘the figure of criminality is itself a complex one, the actual criminal phenomenon complicated and ambiguous and the line between criminal and non-criminal behaviour very often blurred and hard to discern’.²¹⁴ Gregoriou’s ideas are particularly evident in relation to this notion of the murderer’s identity as “foreign”. The criminal cannot be identified through suspicions based on prejudice – such as, in *Dead Man’s Folly*, racism and xenophobia – but must instead be based on clues and an interpretation of these that takes a broader and more nuanced approach. Perceiving “Lady Stubbs” and Etienne solely through an understanding of this term “foreign” in relation to racist prejudices fails to perceive how these prejudices are in themselves used and manipulated within the plot. These prejudices provide clues to the resolution of the mystery, whereby the woman criminal uses them to cast suspicion on others whilst ensuring that she herself is protected from associations of criminality. This is indicative of a feminised mode of reading to resolve the mystery that Christie’s works invite more broadly: a casting off of suspicions that are solely based in prejudice or instinctual reaction.²¹⁵

A feminised mode of reading understands how the identity of the murderer in Christie’s detective fiction is from the outset characterised as foreign – particularly within the community in which the crime takes place. This foreign element is understood and manipulated within the narratives to cast suspicion elsewhere; it demonstrates how the identity of the murderer must instead be resolved through basis in clues and contextual understanding of these. This is evident in how “Lady Stubbs’s” coolie-style hat is worn as part of a “uniform” for her identity. The hat implies that her foreignness has a connection to

²¹⁴ Christiana Gregoriou, ‘Criminals’, in *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, pp. 168–76 (p. 168).

²¹⁵ Critics have pointed to Christie’s presentation of ‘women’s intuition’ particularly in relation to her detective and detective fiction novelist, Ariadne Oliver: Bernthal suggests that Oliver’s ‘woman’s intuition’ becomes increasingly implausible in the texts in which she appears in order to distinguish it from ‘legitimate, masculine and professional ‘instinct’” (*Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 60). However, Makinen suggests that Christie ‘blurs the boundaries between ratiocination and intuition, and accommodates feminine and feminised forms of detecting, or of knowledge’ in her detective characters’ methodologies (p. 63). I am not suggesting that these instances where detectives’ instinctual reactions are proved correct endorse prejudices – rather, that the narrative and detecting process shows these reactions to be based in a fuller and more nuanced approach to clues and their contexts.

Asia that prevents her from being connected to criminality – and instead identifies her as a victim – by the innate prejudices of the genre. Understanding this hat as a clue to the woman criminal’s manipulation of the “foreign” identity of the murderer exposes how the genre itself requires this aspect of the murderer’s identity to be recognised. It must also be understood beyond solely prejudices and instinctual reactions. A feminised mode of reading positions the hat as part of the uniform of the “Lady Stubbs” disguise – and understands why this is discarded. It enables the identity of the woman criminal to be detected and the resolution of the mystery reached. In relation to the genre more broadly, this mode of reading appreciates how the murderer’s identity is intrinsically connected to this notion of “foreignness”. There is a sense that the mystery cannot be resolved without the murderer being identified: the process of doing so must have basis in clues and their contexts that provides a more nuanced approach.

Conclusions

In my discussion of these novels, I have suggested that women’s hats have significant clue-potential for the resolution of the plots in relation to identities intrinsic to the detective fiction genre. *Peril at End House* demonstrates how Nick’s hat provides a clue to her identity as the murderer; it highlights how this is intrinsically connected to modes of reading. Nick’s false trail of evidence is constructed in light of how she has read Poirot as a detective. It allows her to manipulate him into misreading this evidence to identify her as a victim of attempted murder. In *Lord Edgware Dies*, the murderer’s hat does not construct a similar confusion between victim and murderer. Instead, the hat draws attention to how this limits the suspects to between two women. It remains misread as not being absolutely associated with one of these women, but instead as the possession of the unknown “murderer”. My reading of *Evil Under the Sun* demonstrates how this notion of suspending the identification of the murderer can be extended to include the victim. The resolution does not establish clear designations of characters in these identities but instead, these identities are left open to question. *Dead Man’s Folly* further demonstrates how notions of foreignness are intrinsic to the identity of the murderer. Lady Stubbs’s hat enables the use of this foreignness both to provide clues to her identity as the murderer, and to prevent her from being identified as such. In the presentation of all these hats and millinery styles, Christie engages with contemporary fashion trends to use these in the construction of these fictional hats as clues.

A feminised mode of reading is central to Christie's engagement with identities intrinsic to the detective fiction genre. My readings have shown how this mode of reading is not only the preserve of detective characters in the novel; it is also manipulated by characters who are subsequently identified as the murderer. This mode of reading provides both the construction of the crime and also the means of resolving the mystery. I have previously acknowledged the gendered framing of this mode of reading and its connection to gendered notions of the middlebrow. Yet, here I emphasise that to read through this mode is not reliant on understanding the gender identity of the criminal and victim in question, as such. Rather, it is an engagement with objects that relies on using knowledge and contexts of these items to understand the generic identities, including but not solely limited to their gender. Furthermore, the murderer's identity is intrinsically connected to notions of foreignness. A feminised mode of reading recognises this – the mystery cannot be resolved without identifying a murderer. However, the process for doing so must be based in clues with a more nuanced approach than a basis in prejudices and instincts. This includes prejudices and instincts based solely on gendered approaches to objects. A feminised mode of reading describes ways of using knowledge that have previously been defined as belonging to the feminine middlebrow, as discussed in the Introduction. Yet this does not signify a *prejudicial* gendered approach, but that such ways of using knowledge themselves react against such prejudices.

This mode of reading further recognises the connection between the detective process and theatricality. Recognition of this theatricality is not aligned to a specifically gendered project, whereby such theatricality is a by-word for a feminine approach to the detective process. Describing a feminised mode of reading is instead intended to emphasise how the identification of the clue-potential of objects reveals exaggerated aspects of individuals, regardless of their gender and the gender of the detective. This identification of clue-potential enables the murderer's identity to be "tried on" the individuals of the plot, and it is this process that relies on ways of using knowledge that have been defined in relation to the feminine middlebrow. They align with Brown's analysis of 'an object's capacity to materialise identity' and the way in which objects can equally *dematerialise* identity (*A Sense of Things*, p. 25). "Trying on" the murderer's – and victim's – identity is a process that exposes how those identities are both materialised and dematerialised through objects that provide clue-potential. This process responds to Woolf's essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', discussed in the Introduction, to demonstrate that detailing objects and things have significance to characters' identities – particularly in the detective fiction genre. Christie's

texts invite a feminised mode of reading of clue-potential that does not assign these identities of victim and murder to specific characters so readily. In so doing, these identities are less oppositions to each other. Instead, there are more nuanced connections between these identities that can be uncovered through this mode of reading.

Chapter Three

Make-Up, Cosmetics and Habits

‘these professional girls, they have to ring a change, so to speak [...] and, of course, the make-up varies a good bit’ (Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library*)

In the previous chapter, I argued that a feminised mode of reading of hats in Christie’s novels uncovers not only their clue-potential. It also reveals how Christie engages with questions of identities intrinsic to the detective fiction plots. In this chapter, I expand on this instability in relation to identities of victim and murderer; my consideration of make-up and cosmetic items centres on the connection of these items to notions of habit.²¹⁶ This term habit is used to describe both the repeated act of wearing and using make-up and cosmetic items, and also the habit of reading. Such a habit particularly relates to understanding these items through a feminised mode of reading and the connections this has to the middlebrow. Understanding how these habits operate within the texts demonstrates not only the clue-potential of these items and their misinterpretation as re(a)d herrings. It also emphasises how these habits inform notions of reading through genre conventions to challenge these.²¹⁷ Thus far, I have suggested that a feminised mode of reading is central to reading for the resolution of the mystery plots in Christie’s works. Here, I expand on this: whilst the centrality of this mode of reading to the plots remains unchanged, how this is employed is less fixed. Christie’s challenging of genre conventions necessitates that this mode of reading shifts to incorporate fresh approaches to the genre. Such shifts also incorporate knowledge of changing contexts of the items in question.

These changing contexts are of particular note in relation to make-up and cosmetic items. The publication of Christie’s novels coincided with the substantial growth of these industries in the Western world. The range of products available is well represented in Christie’s texts: face cream, hair dye, lipstick, perfume, mascara, and nail polish all feature in various of her novels. With make-up and cosmetics there are relatively few, if any, brands named. This can in part be explained by the nature of the growth of the industries in this period. Geoffrey

²¹⁶ I use the terms make-up and cosmetics to describe these items, distinguishing the latter from the former as encompassing products that are applied to the body, skin, and hair but are not necessarily visible, such as face creams, hair shampoo, etc. whereas the former refers to items that are more visible.

²¹⁷ I use genre conventions to describe the expectations inherent to reading texts in this genre, particularly in relation to objects and their functioning as clues, and also identities such as those of victim and murderer.

Jones's work on the global beauty industry repeatedly draws attention to the rapidity with which the industry grew; a significant number of firms and businesses were established, expanded and closed during this period, particularly following the end of World War Two.²¹⁸ This expansion of the industry led to the need for these businesses to appear legitimate. Jones argues that this was achieved through the creation of standards that were premised on women buying products to ensure a beautiful appearance (p. 66). The lack of named brands in Christie's novels should be understood in relation to this context of a rapidly expanding industry. Firms and products were launched amongst wide competition and with precarious opportunities to legitimise themselves. The growing beauty industry is therefore present in Christie's novels in the proliferation of product types that are referenced, in place of specific brands. All of these types are presented with an accuracy that reflects the ubiquitous presence of make-up and cosmetics in women's lives in this period.

In the Introduction, I discussed how thing theory can be applied to the detective fiction genre and its emphasis on the resolution of the mystery. Namely, how interruption to characters' habits draws attention to the clue-potential of objects. Brown discusses the difficulty of 'differentiating habit from repetition, on which our common sense understanding of "habit" depends' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 73). He concludes that '[h]uman habit [...] is simply repetition that has become unconscious' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 73). Christie's texts render the habit of wearing make-up a *conscious* habit. This is evident in texts such as *The Pale Horse* and *The Body in the Library* in which habitual use of cosmetics and make-up are accepted as part of routine actions of particular characters. However, the plot draws attention to this habitual action in how these items have clue-potential.²¹⁹ This clue-potential is further emphasised through what Brown describes as 'scenes of misuse and dislocation [that] all result in the magnification of physical properties' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 78). With cosmetics and make-up, this sense of growing awareness of the physicality of the particular objects is increasingly complex. Cosmetics and make-up refer to both the objects themselves – the tube of lipstick, the bottle of hair dye – as well as the traces they leave behind. This is evident in how the phrase 'to wear lipstick' commonly refers to the application of lipstick to the lips,

²¹⁸ Geoffrey Jones, *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 151. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

²¹⁹ This relates to my discussion in the Introduction of Brown's idea of how the 'interruption of habit, the failure of repetition, can call our attention to [...] the thingness of the object' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 75).

and not the carrying of the tube of lipstick.²²⁰ This distinction between the physical object and the traces and marks made and left behind is of significance to several of Christie's novels. In these texts, the physical object is not necessarily referred to explicitly, but its presence is implied through these traces.

Cosmetic and make-up products are distinguished as things – distinct from how jewellery or hats can be understood as things – through the intimacy of their relationship with the subject that wears and uses them. Cosmetics and make-up are applied *to* the body, covering up and changing certain aspects of the subject's natural appearance. Such items therefore have a more immediate significance within the subject-object relation. There is complexity of the interaction between cosmetics and make-up – traditionally holding the place of the object – and the subject who wears them. Consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate “subject” and “object” to analyse this sense of a binary relationship. My understanding of cosmetics and make-up items as things correlates with Boscagli's consideration of stuff. She suggests that such items are ‘a hybrid objectivity that declines [their...] role as the eternal sidekick of the subject’ (p. 3). It is more appropriate to consider cosmetics and make-up as things *beyond* this sense of the subject-object relationship, particularly as this necessitates a labelling of the two. Rather, we should consider a subject-object relationship that is emboldened and also threatened; specifically, by the intrinsic complexities of such items and subjects that bear such a close relation between them. This has significance in relation to notions of habits in Christie's texts. By assuming a closer relationship to the subject, the complexity and hybridity of these items draws attention to the habits related to them within the plots of the novels. These items also emphasise how this complexity translates to habits in modes of reading the genre.

The genre conventions – habits – of reading for clues to the resolution of the mystery foregrounds items such as cosmetics and make-up. Genre conventions also draw attention to habits relating to them: both in relation to how these items are used by characters within the plot and how this reading-for-clues becomes a habitual mode of reading. This habit of reading provides opportunities to question and challenge conventions of the genre more broadly. These opportunities are particularly in relation to this habitual reading for clues to resolve the mystery, with this itself being questioned and inviting a broader mode of reading. A feminised mode of reading understands how this notion of reading clues is – in Brown's terms – a habit

²²⁰ That is, ‘lipstick’ refers to both the small amount on the lips, and the tube of lipstick itself, so ‘to wear lipstick’ could refer to either, but the former is more common.

of unconscious repetition inherent in the genre. This feminised mode of reading applied to Christie's texts renders this reading-for-clues – as with the cosmetic and make-up items within the plots – a *conscious* repetition. Brown discusses how

[o]ur habitual interactions with objects both bring them to life and impose order on that life [...] By doing the same thing with the same things you create the illusion of sameness and continuity over and against the facts of disorder and change. (*A Sense of Things*, p. 64)

A repeated reading of detective fiction has the opposite function.²²¹ It does not impose order on the text – and the genre – through an acceptance of its conventions. Rather, reading multiple examples of Christie's works demonstrates how the order, sameness and continuity are part of a *questioning* of the genre's conventions. An illusion of sameness over changes to the plot is not presented. Instead, the habit of reading Christie's detective fiction invites a feminised mode of reading that recognises the differences between these texts. This mode of reading also acknowledges how these differences relate more broadly to the habit of reading the genre.

The rendering of the habit of reading for clues as a conscious repetition through a feminised mode of reading engages with the gendered approaches to the middlebrow discussed in the Introduction. I noted specifically how Christie's status as a "mistress of plotting" is informed by how the genre has been aligned to masculine middlebrow conventions that have underplayed the role of knowledge more typically assigned to the feminine middlebrow. Reading a detective fiction novel entails a process of reading for clues to resolve the mystery. Gendering of this process has thus typically favoured a focus on clues related to what Rowland describes as 'the masculine western tradition of privileging reason, intelligence, order and rationality', as discussed previously (p. 16). Here, focusing on a *feminised* mode of reading can equally uncover this habit of reading for clues – but not limiting such clues to those that immediately respond to 'reason, intelligence, order and rationality', such as objects traditionally thought of as murder weapons. This masculine tradition of 'order and rationality' can be aligned to the 'illusion of sameness and continuity' that Brown identifies. Yet, reading through a feminised mode of reading instead emphasises the individuality of the plots. Not all clues respond to this 'reason, intelligence, order and rationality'; they require more flexibility – an inherent trait of the feminine middlebrow, as discussed in the Introduction – in how they are approached and their clue-potential recognised. Considering objects through this

²²¹ I use this term repeated reading to imply instances when multiple examples of the genre are read; I am not suggesting this is only applicable when the same text is read multiple times.

feminised mode of reading invites habits of reading the genre to be less fixedly related to gendered approaches that privilege certain types of clues over others.

A feminised mode of reading is aware of how the genre operates and can perceive these subtleties between the different plots. Particularly, it can recognise what this suggests about the conventions of the genre more broadly. My reading of make-up and cosmetics in Christie's works begins with *The Body in the Library*. The context of the film industry is analysed, along with how this relates to the make-up items in the text. Similar to *Evil Under the Sun*, this text emphasises the difficulties of labelling the "victim" in the plot. In this text, this difficulty exposes the habit of assuming the eponymous body to be a straightforward replication of a "victim type" in the genre. My discussion of *Mrs McGinty's Dead* expands on "victim types" in relation to the context of make-up and domesticity. Here, habits of understanding the crime scene and reading this in relation to the suspects are undermined. *The Pale Horse* presents changing contexts of make-up and cosmetics in relation to cleanliness.²²² The notion of cleanliness in itself has connections to the habit of reading the genre and the assigning of culpability to the murderer. The final section considers *A Caribbean Mystery* and its presentation of hair dye in relation to the natural and artificial appearance of the women. Constructs of naturalness and artificiality obfuscate how they are understood as victims with the connections this has to the habit of reading clues to resolve the mystery. Throughout, I suggest that a feminised mode of reading can be applied to these texts. This mode of reading questions not only the notion of habit in relation to characters' use of make-up and cosmetics; it also asks how such instances of habit relate to the habit of reading the genre.

'All These Girls with Their Make-Up [...] Look So Alike': Reading *The Body in the Library* (1942)

The plot of *The Body in the Library* presents a clear indication of how make-up and cosmetics are used to confuse the identities of the victims.²²³ In so doing, the novel draws into question

²²² This text has been neglected by the scholarship: for example, York describes it as demonstrating 'a very strenuous effort of the part of the elderly author to grasp the changing world of the 1960s' (p. 83), while Barnard comments more generally of the novels of the late 1950s and early 1960s that 'this is an old person interpreting the younger generation for the benefit of other old people [...] And sometimes these efforts are downright embarrassing' (p. 14). In both cases this use of the word effort implies a sense of trying – and failing. It should also be noted that recent adaptations of *The Pale Horse*, such as the 2013 ITV *Agatha Christie's Marple* adaptation and 2018 BBC adaptation directed by Sarah Phelps, have significantly changed the plot.

²²³ First published in the UK by William Collins, Sons and in the US by Dodd, Mead and Co. in 1942. First serialised in the US in *The Saturday Evening Post*, 10 May–21 June 1941 (Vol. 213, Nos. 45–51).

the notion of “victim types”. The plot details the discovery of the body of a young woman, wearing heavy make-up and a dancing outfit, in the library of Gossington Hall. She is mistakenly identified as Ruby Keene, a dance hostess from a seaside hotel, by her cousin Josie Turner. It is later revealed – with the detection skills of Miss Marple – that Ruby’s body is the body found burned in a car and assumed to be that of a schoolgirl, Pamela Reeves. Pamela’s body is actually that found in the library. Ruby and Pamela are both murdered by Josie and her husband Mark Gaskell, whom she has secretly married. The murders are perpetrated to prevent Ruby becoming heir to the fortune of Mark’s father-in-law, Conway Jefferson, who is staying at the hotel where Ruby works. The misidentification of Ruby and Pamela is not based solely on mistaken assumptions regarding habits related to make-up and cosmetics. The confusion between identifying the two women is also related to habits of reading the detective fiction genre. As with *Evil Under the Sun*, this has connections to assumptions of victimhood. Here, it also extends to how these habits of reading prevail in the text despite the resolution of the mystery. I discuss how make-up and cosmetics have clue-potential in the text. I then relate this clue-potential to habits of reading by the police and Miss Marple, and the wider impact this has in relation to the genre.

Make-up and cosmetics are used on both victims. Ruby’s habitual use of make-up is a significant feature of her characterisation, particularly in descriptions of her appearance by those who knew her prior to her death. Mark describes how ‘with make-up she managed to give quite an effect of good looks’.²²⁴ His statement is corroborated by his sister-in-law, Addie, who describes Ruby’s make-up as ‘rather chocolate-box, pink and white business. She had nice blue eyes’ (p. 111). Mark further states that Ruby had an ‘innocent baby stare, and the heavily-blackened lashes brought out the blueness’ (p. 111). These descriptions correspond to contemporary magazine articles that refer to women and girls’ make-up in similar terms. A 1940 *Woman’s Day* article includes captions of ‘types’ of girls attractive to men, including the ‘Baby Doll’ whose habitat is stated as being ‘[w]herever there are men’ and whose ‘[w]orld begins and ends with anything in trousers’; her style is described as ‘[c]utie-pie. [...] Pink and white make-up and a cupid-bow mouth’.²²⁵ Similarly, a 1938 *Vogue* article advises women on a fashion trend for ‘pink in your face’ but cautions this is ‘[n]ot the pink and white of a china

²²⁴ Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library* (London: HarperCollins, 2016), p. 111. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

²²⁵ Susan Bennett Holmes, ‘The Kinds of Girls Boys Like: The School Bus’, *Woman’s Day*, June 1940, pp. 6–7 (p. 6), in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/kinds-girls-boys-like/docview/1814069227>> [accessed 1 April 2022].

doll’.²²⁶ In both the magazines and Christie’s novel, the pink and white make-up is described in disparaging terms, with the *Woman’s Day* article making a clear connection between this make-up and the sexual morality of the wearer. It is therefore further implicit in Christie’s novel that Mark’s description of Ruby’s make-up in similar terms is intended to draw upon these connotations.

The subtle distinctions in pink and white make-up – and their connection to a “doll-like” appearance – were explored in other magazine articles of this period. In a 1939 feature for *Vogue* (US), ‘beautiful’ women in three different cities – London, Paris, and New York – were asked for their make-up advice. The article describes how ‘[t]here is a definite feeling towards the pink and white in make-up, which looks fresh and new in comparison with the vibrant colours this winter brought forth’.²²⁷ It further examines how ‘[i]n London, [...] several [...] advocates of the pink-and-white school purposely place almost doll-like spots of pink rouge on their cheeks. The younger generation, however, will have little traffic with rouge, and most American beauties have been trained to apply rouge so that it looks like their own colour’ (p. 103). By implication, Ruby is therefore shown to be less skilled in her use of make-up than perhaps initially inferred from Mark and Addie’s comments. To them, her use of rouge is taken to indicate a purposeful “doll-like” style, rather than a failed attempt to make it blend with her own colouring. Yet her use of eye make-up is perhaps more successful where Addie compliments her eye colour. The *Vogue* (US) article describes how ‘[t]he first things these beauties do is look at you wide-eyed, and you realize that the frames they create for these eyes are really works of art’ (p. 59). Mark’s and Addie’s descriptions of Ruby imply that she habitually used make-up to enhance her features and create a style that typifies her. The reference to chocolate-box, pink and white business, and an innocent baby stare are central to this style. The ‘pink and white’ make-up connotes that – to Mark and Addie – Ruby’s intention in using make-up is to present herself at the intersection of this innocence combined with sexual attraction.

²²⁶ ‘Keep Your Face in the Pink’, *Vogue* (US), 1 May 1938 pp. 66–67 (p. 67), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/904281987>> [accessed 17 November 2020].

²²⁷ ‘Inside Stuff: The Individual Tricks of Beauties in Three Countries’, *Vogue* (US), 15 February 1939, pp. 59; 103 (p. 103), in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/879213155/>> [accessed 18 November 2020].

Ruby's use of make-up and how it characterises her in the eyes of other characters – notably, as being deliberately sexually promiscuous – is evident in the contrast to the police's perceptions of Pamela. Their observations are given prior to understanding Pamela's to be the body in the library. After Inspector Harper visits Pamela's family to inform them of the supposed discovery of her burned body in the car, he notes that she is '[a] nice kid'; he is 'look[ing] at the earnest face of the pigtailed girl' in a photograph which shows her as part of a hockey team (p. 127). This photograph leads the Inspector to surmise that Ruby 'might have asked for what was coming to her, but Pamela Reeves was quite another story. A nice kid, if he ever saw one' (p. 128). These thoughts as to the extent to which the women asked for it, are based on their appearances. It is the photograph of Pamela that leads Harper to assess her as nice and earnest, deserving of his finding her killer. It further leads to his comparison with Ruby's appearance; assuming hers to be the heavily made-up body in the library, Harper determines Ruby may have 'asked for' her murder. This comparison demonstrates the significance that the use of make-up and cosmetics has for the treatment and assumptions made about the two women throughout the novel. Ruby's habitual use of make-up renders the body in the library as believably hers. Conversely, Pamela's nice and earnest face – presumably devoid of any make-up – is taken as indicative of her inability to be "made-up" like this, and so to be sexually promiscuous as Ruby is assumed to be.

Pamela's willingness to allow herself to made-up as Ruby relates to a further context of make-up and cosmetics in this period: the growth of the industry in connection to film and cinema. Cosmetics and make-up were regularly used in these industries prior to the increasingly widespread use of these items amongst the population more generally.²²⁸ As part of their murder plot, Mark and Josie pose as film industry professionals offering Pamela a screen test that 'the poor child couldn't resist' and permitting them to make her up as Ruby (p. 210).²²⁹ The confusion between Pamela and Ruby as the body in the library dramatizes this aspirational appeal of Hollywood glamour. Such appeal was tinged with the – albeit diminishing as the century progresses – mistrust and association of make-up use with immorality in the women who used it (Jones, p. 63). Pamela's trusting of Josie and Mark is part of her aspirations to be part of the film industry. The couple copy Ruby's appearance and habitual use of make-up when making-up Pamela, with this style echoing contemporaneous

²²⁸ Lisa Eldridge, *Face Paint: The Story of Makeup* (New York: Abrams, 2015), p. 255. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

²²⁹ This ruse is also deliberate to allow them to frame Basil Blake – a neighbour of Gossington Hall and involved in the film industry at the fictional Lemville Studios, who originally finds the body in *his* house but moves it.

fashions in make-up on screen.²³⁰ These fashions relate to the transformational effects of make-up and cosmetic items in their association with film and theatre industries. Eldridge describes how, in the silent movie era, the style and type of make-up worn could ‘signal to the audience the type of character’ played – particularly by women – including the ‘fun-loving flapper’ and ‘the vamp’ (p. 127). By presenting a “making-up” of Pamela as Ruby, Christie exposes the falsity of this notion of women defined as “types” through their make-up. In the police’s perceptions, Pamela is ‘quite another story’ from Ruby, yet her appearance *as* Ruby demonstrates that this means of distinguishing between them is dubious.

The connection to the film industry through make-up and cosmetics is further emphasised in relation to the trajectory of the police’s suspicions. At the start these are focused on Basil Blake, a neighbour of Gossington Hall who works in the film industry, and the platinum blonde woman with whom he has been seen (p. 17). This woman is first mentioned in reference to her hair colour that matches that of the body found in the library. There is emphasis on how the hair of the murdered body is ‘unnaturally fair’, pointing to the use of hair dye and the changeability of its colouring (p. 11).²³¹ It is on the basis of the similarity of changeable hair colouring that the police attempt to interview Basil. He answers: ‘You’ve come round to ask me if I’ve missed a blonde?’ (p. 24). Referring to ‘a blonde’ exemplifies how the use of make-up and cosmetic products has the effect of reducing women to the status of objects. Once this woman arrives, Basil introduces her to the police but continues to refer to her by her hair colouring. He states ‘[a]nd now, Colonel, that you’ve seen my blonde is alive and in good condition, perhaps you’ll get on with the good work concerning old Bantry’s little bit of fluff’ (pp. 25–26). Basil’s ironic comment – his partner Dinah is arguing with him, showing herself to be alive and well as she berates him – attempts to reduce her to

²³⁰ Mark tells Pamela he is thinking of casting her for ‘a kind of Bergner part’ (p. 179). Elisabeth Bergner began her career on the stage and was most notable for the play *Escape Me Never*, written for her by Margaret Kennedy and which was made into a film (1935). Part of the plot involves Bergner disguising herself as a schoolgirl.

²³¹ Blonde hair, and stereotypes associated with it, has a strong connection to the American film industry. The 1933 film *Bombshell* (Dir. Victor Fleming, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer), starring Jean Harlow is widely acknowledged to be the origin of the term blonde bombshell, itself the precursor to the dumb blonde stereotype. Harlow is also widely associated with the term platinum blonde from a 1931 film of the same name (Dir. Frank Capra, Columbia Pictures). For further detail on Harlow’s hair colouring and career, see Susan Ohmer, ‘Jean Harlow: Tragic Blonde’, in *Glamour in a Golden Age: Movie Stars of the 1930s*, ed. by Adrienne L. McLean (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), pp. 174–95. Maria DiBattista also points to how Harlow ‘most often *played* the sexual siren as disingenuous child and who, off-screen, answered to her mother’s pet name, “the Baby”’ (*Fast-Talking Dames* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001], pp. 94–95; emphasis in original). This has clear connections to the seeming contradiction between Ruby’s ‘pink and white’ innocence and supposed sexual promiscuity.

an object. She is an item that can be in good condition; these terms assimilate her with the derogatory reference to Bantry's little bit of fluff. Such descriptions frame how women are discussed and referred to throughout the novel in relation to their use of make-up and cosmetics. Habitual use of cosmetics – such as hair dye – appears to invite derogatory remarks and negative associations. These associations thereby frame the police's later misreading of the make-up and cosmetics as clues, both those used on the body and those found in Ruby's bathroom.

The similarity between the three women is centred on the appearance produced through use of make-up and cosmetics. Pamela, Ruby and Dinah are all mentioned at various points in the text as wearing heavy make-up: this includes lipstick, mascara and nail varnish, and having dyed blonde hair. To a certain extent, this similarity approaches homogenisation – the discovery of the blonde in the library leads to misreading based largely on make-up and cosmetic use. As Miss Marple suggests, 'all these girls with their make-up and their hair and their nails look so alike.' (p. 17). This likeness is further related to the stereotyping of these women. Their appearance leads the police and, to a certain extent, Miss Marple to consider this '[j]ust an ordinary, sordid, [...] *night-club* type of crime' (p. 206; emphasis in original). Hoffman suggests that the 'recognition of the sameness of bodies often works, as in [...] *The Body in the Library*, to call into question certain stereotypes about female sexual morality and also social class' (p. 158). However, this questioning of stereotypes does not lead to a reassessment of those stereotypes. There is little indication in the text that any characters change their opinions of Ruby, Pamela, or Dinah, even after the resolution has been revealed. That is not to undermine the clue-potential of the make-up and cosmetics for the resolution of the mystery. Rather, these stereotypes, and reading through these, leads the police to misinterpret these clues: the make-up and cosmetics becoming re(a)d herrings.

That the make-up – and habits associated with it – provide a potential clue to the resolution of the mystery is evident in the police's examination of Ruby's bathroom:

It was illuminating. Colonel Melchett silently marvelled at the amount of aids to beauty that women could use. Rows of jars of face cream, cleansing cream, vanishing cream, skin-feeding cream! Boxes of different shades of powder. An untidy heap of every variety of lipstick. Hair lotions and 'brightening' applications. Eyelash black, mascara, blue stain for under the eyes, at least twelve different shades of nail varnish, face tissues, bits of cotton wool, dirty powder-puffs. Bottles of lotion – astringent, tonic, soothing, etc. (p. 86)

Melchett is bewildered by the quantity and diversity of make-up products showing habitual use. The untidy heap of lipsticks and dirty powder-puffs suggest Ruby and Josie, who share the bathroom, regularly use a significant amount of make-up.²³² The listing of the quantity and types of products portrays their abundance, with Melchett's incredulity centred on the habitual use of such items by Ruby. There is a corresponding effect of this listing: the clue-potential of the *specific* make-up worn on the body found in the library becomes misinterpreted. Ruby's habitual use of make-up suggests the probability that she would have worn certain products to correspond to the outfit the body was found wearing. Inspector Slack describes how 'these professional girls, they have to ring a change, so to speak. They do exhibition dances, [...] and, of course, the make-up varies a good bit' (pp. 86–87). His statement suggests that Ruby's make-up corresponds with the dress and dance to create different appearances. It further speaks to the police's awareness of the correspondence between particular outfits and make-up styles. Yet the association of whether the make-up and dress found worn on the body match with Ruby's habits is not explored, with the make-up becoming a re(a)d herring.

Possibility of changing the appearance significantly and achieving any effect becomes apparent with this quantity of products available. These effects include enhancing specific facial features or replicating the appearance of another woman. However, these possibilities do not occur to the police; they instead further misread the make-up in relation to Ruby and Josie's use of such items as professional dancers. Ruby and Josie's make-up collection contains 'every variety' of lipstick, over ten shades of nail polish and different face creams for different purposes. The quantity and variety of products provides a significant clue to the resolution of the mystery; they permit Pamela to be "made-up" to look like Ruby and take her place as the body in the library. The make-up *on* the body in the library further has this clue-potential in drawing attention to the physical features of the body: 'The face was heavily made-up, the powder standing out grotesquely on its blue swollen surface, the mascara of the lashes lying thickly on the distorted cheeks' (p. 11). The make-up creates the dramatically violent appearance of 'a gash' across the mouth and the 'deep blood-red' of the enamelled nails, alongside the violence of the blue face (p. 11). These aspects stand out from the face and body instead of blending in to enhance the natural features. The painted nails suggest a permanency to the use of this make-up, whereby the murdered body is 'made-up' and

²³² The dirty powder-puffs also correspond to the wartime shortage of materials for producing powder puffs that would have led to many women reusing theirs. For further details of the impact of World War Two on the availability of make-up products, see Eldridge (p. 249).

solidified to appear the victim of overt violence. Although no blood results from the murder, the make-up literally “makes-up” the body as the victim of violence.

This appearance of the body in the library has clue potential: the make-up draws attention to the physical features of the girl – namely, her face, mouth, and nails. Miss Marple is the only character capable of reading beyond the outward signs of appearance that the make-up creates – the blackened lashes, bleached hair, painted nails. She reads the clues of the body itself and identifies the bitten fingernails and alignment of the teeth as being those of Pamela. However, her ability to identify that these attributes are those of Pamela again resides in typecasting. Miss Marple explains that ‘I realized that girls who are very much made-up, and all that, usually have very long finger-nails. Of course, I know that girls everywhere do bite their nails [...] But vanity often does a lot to help’ (p. 157). Whilst the make-up creates an appearance of the body in the library that is misread by the police, leading them to a misidentification of the body, Miss Marple is able to read beyond this. Her knowledge of girls’ habits – whether ‘very much made-up’ or not – permits her to correctly identify the body through the same concept of “types” of women to which the body conforms. This ability is indicative of Miss Marple’s employment of a feminised mode of reading to the clues that the make-up provides. Miss Marple takes a broader approach to this notion of viewing the body in the library as a “type” of girl. She perceives “types” that are indicative of girls’ habits more broadly than just the application of make-up, incorporating behavioural trends such as bitten nails. In so doing, Miss Marple is able to read this body as a victim of violent crime *regardless* of whether she ‘might have asked for what was coming to her’ or was ‘quite another story’.

The confusion between the two girls – and the emphasis on the similarities between them in their appearance in being “made-up” like the body in the library – has significance for how they are understood as victims at the resolution of the mystery. The police’s perceptions of Ruby as potentially having ‘asked for what was coming to her’, and Pamela as ‘quite another story’ takes place before the swapping of the bodies in the car and library is revealed. In my discussion of *Evil Under the Sun*, I highlighted how Christie leaves instability at the heart of her use of the genre. A feminised mode of reading less readily assigns characters to the identities of murderer and victim. In *The Body in the Library*, the notion of habit has a further connection to this feminised mode of reading. The police’s comments have echoes in how Knight describes victims of “Golden Age” detective fiction of this period: ‘The victim [...] [is] a person against whom malicious hostility and envy can be credibly raised, [...] a person whose wealth and status bring danger, in a complex message of identification and anxiety for

the wider audience' (pp. 87–88). Whilst Knight emphasises economic factors as this source of hostility and envy, the broader sentiment of this statement echoes the police's understanding of Ruby and Pamela. They perceive that Ruby invites this murderous hostility and envy, with her status as a sexually promiscuous woman bringing danger, yet Pamela does not.²³³

Christie demonstrates that this notion of victimhood is not so easily applicable as such commentary supposes. Ruby and Pamela are shown to be open to the same desires and aspirations for wealth – Ruby through her inheritance from Conway, and Pamela through finding celebrity in the film industry. Miss Marple's feminised mode of reading is equally invested in the notion of “types” of women and girls. However, there is less emphasis on the judgemental aspects of this notion. Miss Marple's identification of Pamela as the body in the library is not intended to cast aspersions on Pamela's motivations and aspirations. Instead, Miss Marple shows understanding of how these have been manipulated by Josie and Mark. This is not to imply that judgement of *Ruby* is altered. Most characters, with the exception of Conway, variously refer to her in terms such as a ‘clever little devil’ and ‘[c]ommon or garden gold digger’ (pp. 88; 107). Even Miss Marple herself sees that Ruby ‘saw her opportunity and played it for all she was worth’ (p. 99). Miss Marple's ability to read the make-up as clues is therefore indicative of the subtle distinctions to be made in understanding this notion of “types” in relation to habits. Miss Marple understands the body in the library as first and foremost that of a young girl. She consequently reads the application of make-up in light of this; her understanding of the make-up is not allied to the “type” of girl Ruby or Pamela was in life. It is connected to the type of *habits* that girls demonstrate in relation to appearance, including but not limited to the wearing of make-up and cosmetics.

Miss Marple's reading of the body in the library as a young girl supersedes any notion of the body as the person in life. The police become invested in this living person – such as Ruby's culpability in exploiting Conway, or Pamela's schoolgirl innocence – and how this relates to notions of victimhood. Bernthal's examination of the female body in *Evil Under the Sun* and *The Body in the Library* identifies that, in the latter,

[t]he body is a product of ‘aids to beauty’ such as bleach and glitter, but it is also too understated for what it is supposed to be [due to features such as the bitten fingernails...] Class is, ultimately, all that distinguishes these two teenagers – Ruby

²³³ The resolution of the mystery reveals that Ruby does indeed have this economic status – as Conway's heir, she would have become a wealthy woman ahead of Josie and Mark, whose share of Conway's money would have been dramatically reduced.

and Pamela – who share investments in a rags-to-riches metanarrative of feminine worth.²³⁴

The make-up, whilst it does ‘produce’ the body in the library, obscures the identities of these two girls further than this focus on class suggests. Neither Ruby nor Pamela is sufficiently distinguished from the body in the library – the product of make-up – at the resolution of the mystery of their deaths. The stereotyping that has assigned Pamela the role of undeserving murder victim where Ruby has ‘asked for what was coming to her’, as discussed above, is not reassessed. There is no exoneration or blame of both women. Instead, this reading of habits in relation to make-up and cosmetics extends to habits in relation to reading the genre more broadly. Miss Marple’s ability to read the body in the library, and the make-up and cosmetic habits of Pamela and Ruby, is indicative of a feminised mode of reading.²³⁵ This mode is aware of how these stereotypes can inform reading the genre.

A feminised mode of reading does not deliberately perpetuate these stereotypes, as Miss Marple appears to do so in her reaction and opinion of Ruby. By contrast, in some ways these stereotypes are irrelevant to this mode of reading. Miss Marple’s ability to resolve the mystery does not require her to confront, or even acknowledge, her prejudices regarding Ruby and Pamela. Instead, this mode of reading is aware how such stereotypes inform modes of *misreading* clues and information in the texts. That this is a habitual form of reading is indicated through the repeated references to make-up and cosmetics throughout the text.²³⁶ Connections are thus made to “types” of women and girls who habitually use these items. As Pamela is referred to as ‘quite another story’ from Ruby, this emphasises the notion of reading. Reading provides a means of engaging with these stereotypes of women and girls that informs the police’s and Miss Marple’s resolving of the mystery. The title of the novel itself further draws attention to this notion of reading. Both the body in the library and *The Body in the Library* require an understanding and approach – a mode of reading – that withdraws from this notion of typifying the “story”. There are “types” of victims traditionally found in the genre – the notion of victims as inspiring ‘hostility and envy’ – along with

²³⁴ J. C. Bernthal, “‘If Not Yourself, Who Would You Be?’: Writing the Female Body in Agatha Christie’s Second World War Detective Fiction”, in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26:1-2 (2015), 40–56 (p. 52) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2015.1035023>> [accessed 4 August 2020].

²³⁵ To an extent, I consider each novel in isolation and therefore do not make a distinction based on their gender between Miss Marple’s ability to detect clues through a feminised mode of reading and Poirot’s occasional failure to do so. I note below how Poirot has been read as queer – and the insight this provides regarding make-up and cosmetics – in relation to *Mrs McGinty’s Dead*.

²³⁶ This is equally true of all the texts that I analyse in this chapter, and hence my focus on habits of reading: the repeated references to make-up and cosmetics are strongly aligned to how these consequently inform habits of reading the genre.

attempts to distinguish the body of the victim from the character in life. These can be set aside in favour of a feminised mode of reading that takes a broader approach, one that is less invested in such stereotypes and typifying of the genre.

‘You Expected a Woman, Didn’t You?’: Make-Up Habits and Domestic Settings in *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* (1952)

The habitual use of make-up and cosmetics is also evident in *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* where this is informed by middlebrow themes of domesticity.²³⁷ An understanding of this connection between women’s use of cosmetics and make-up and domesticity provides potential clues to the identity of the murderer. These items can also become re(a)d herrings that reduce the women associated with them to “types”. The novel centres on the murder of charwoman, Mrs McGinty, and the conviction of her lodger.²³⁸ Poirot’s investigations reveal that Mrs McGinty had recognised a photograph from a Sunday newspaper story about women involved in past crimes. Suspicion falls on women in the village and leads to the murder of the invalid Laura Upward, when she states she also recognises the photograph. At the scene of Laura’s murder, a cup with a smear of lipstick on it and the scent of a woman’s perfume are found; these are intended to cast suspicion on the women in the village. However, it is eventually revealed to be Robin Upward, Laura’s adopted son and the biological son of a woman involved in a notorious murder case, who has committed the murders and planted this evidence.²³⁹ Following Laura’s murder and before the detection of Robin as the criminal, a significant part of the investigations centres on which women in the village of Broadhinny habitually use cosmetic products. The connection between habits of domestic settings and make-up use is integral to resolving the mystery. This link has further significance to habits of reading the genre: namely, a feminised mode of reading that embraces modernity.

²³⁷ First published in the US by Dodd, Mead and Co. and in the UK by William Collins, Sons under the same title in 1952. First serialised in the US as *Blood Will Tell* in the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper, 7 October–30 December 1951.

²³⁸ Plain highlights how ‘[a]lthough the emotional response evoked by most of these bodies [in Golden Age detective fiction] is deserving of the epithet bloodless, the same cannot be said for the actual corpses’ (p. 33); Mrs McGinty, bludgeoned to death, speaks to this. Curran also notes that ‘*Mrs McGinty’s Dead* is one of Poirot’s rare ventures into the working class. [...] the novel is decidedly unglamorous, reflecting post-war social adjustment’ (p. 496). Wagoner views this novel as evidence of Christie widening the social range of her characters to include those of the working-class (p. 79).

²³⁹ This murder case largely parallels the true case of Dr Crippen and Ethel Le Neve. For further details of Christie’s novel and the Crippen case, see Edwards (p. 350; pp. 356–57). There is a theme of eugenics that runs through this novel, with the suggestion that Robin has “inherited” the murderous inclinations of his mother. I suggest that the emphasis of the novel is placed on Robin’s desire to keep his personal history a secret, and not on an innate need to commit murder.

There is a clear connection between scenes of domesticity and women's make-up habits. Descriptions of the main women suspects and the houses and rooms in which Poirot meets them exemplify this.²⁴⁰ Eve is presented as '[a]n expensive and good-looking young woman. Platinum blonde hair, carefully applied make-up'.²⁴¹ Description of the room in which she meets Poirot is as follows:

a very new-looking room, a large brocaded suite of sofa and two wing-chairs, three or four reproductions of Chippendale chairs, a bureau, a writing desk. No expense had been spared, the best firms had been employed, and there was absolutely no sign of individual taste. The bride, Poirot thought, had been what? Indifferent? Careful? (pp. 109–10)

The expensive quality of the furniture demonstrates the latest trends of fashionableness in using the best firms to create a very new-looking room. Expense and fashionableness correspond to the description of Eve as a good-looking young woman using expensive make-up and cosmetic products carefully applied to create this impression. Poirot's questioning of whether she is either 'indifferent' or 'careful' with regards the room's décor can also be applied to the description of her outward appearance. The 'careful' application of make-up directly corresponds to this suggestion of care in disguising individual taste. The make-up is part of a more widespread attempt to conceal Eve's natural appearance and personality. Her use of expensive, fashionable products – such as the platinum blonde hair dye – parallels the décor of expensive furniture. Both give the impression of quality and fashionableness without giving any indications that can be used to infer her background.

Paralleling the decoration and adornment of domestic settings with the women's use of make-up is also apparent in consideration of Poirot's first impressions of Maureen Summerhayes, his hostess, and her house. Aldridge suggests that Poirot's 'revulsion towards the guesthouse where he's forced to stay makes him a particularly good focus for humour' (p. 202). However, this humour disguises the significance of understanding the connection between domestic interiors and personal appearance as clues. The Summerhayes' room is described from Poirot's perspective using free indirect discourse:

Steel engravings of unpleasant subjects hung crookedly on the walls with one or two good oil paintings. The chair covers were both faded and dirty, the carpet had holes in

²⁴⁰ These main suspects comprise Maureen Summerhayes, Eve Carpenter, Shelagh Rendell, and Deirdre Henderson; I focus on the first two who are considered as suspects for longer and are deliberately implicated by Robin.

²⁴¹ Agatha Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (London: HarperCollins, 2014), p. 110. Further references are to this edition and are made after quotations in the text.

it and had never been of a pleasant design. A good deal of miscellaneous bric-à-brac was scattered haphazard here and there. Tables rocked dangerously owing to absence of castors. (p. 31)

Whilst the house is explained to have been the family home of Maureen's husband (and the interiors unrelated to Maureen herself), there are numerous parallels between the room's appearance and Maureen's own. Maureen is first described as having red hair and a freckled face (p. 31). A lack of use of make-up and cosmetics to conceal her natural appearance or to appear fashionable in the way employed by Eve is thus implied. The reference to the 'miscellaneous bric-à-brac' is a direct contrast to Eve's home. It suggests a history and background to items in the house that corresponds to Maureen's lack of concealment of her own personal history. For example, at a social event, Maureen openly reveals her background as an adopted child (p. 147). The lack of make-up, when read in connection to the decoration of the house, can be seen as part of an openness and desire not to conceal or disguise Maureen's background and character. This openness is particularly evident when the opposite is portrayed by Eve's use of 'carefully applied' make-up.

The connections between these women's decoration of domestic interiors and their cosmetics habits becomes apparent later in the novel, following the murder of Laura. The Inspector and Poirot discuss the murder scene and what the clues reveal about the murder suspect. The Inspector describes how '[p]rints had been wiped off the guest's cup very carefully but lipstick is more difficult – there were still faint traces of lipstick' (p. 188). The physical properties of the lipstick are highlighted; the Inspector's surmise that it is more difficult to wipe off than fingerprints is later contradicted by Poirot who explains 'it is so easy to remove lipstick from a cup – I assure you every trace can be wiped off quite easily' (p. 255). This concept of make-up leaving traces behind has resonance with a 1951 feature in *Good Housekeeping* magazine. This article explains the testing of dishwasher appliances: 'we want dishes soiled in a very normal, family-life way, so that we'll get the occasional lipstick mark'.²⁴² Lipstick traces left on used crockery was, it is implied, a part of everyday life. Yet Poirot's suggestion that they are easy to remove also relates to advances in lipstick formulae. In the early 1950s, these sought to rectify this problem of lipstick smears. Advertisements, such as those for Tangee, Max Factor, and Helena Rubinstein, were marketed specifically to highlight this aspect: 'at last a lipstick that *will not smear*'; '[c]urves your mouth with clean,

²⁴² Jane Cornish, 'How We Know a Dishwasher is Good', *Good Housekeeping*, June 1951, p. 27, in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/how-we-know-dishwasher-is-good/docview/1847828669>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

crisp lines. Never, never smears'; '[n]o more hurried "repair" worries or "tattle-tale" smears'.²⁴³ The context of innovations in lipsticks indicates how the smears at the fictional crime scene become possible to read as clues in the detection process. The fact of their presence is not unusual to those less familiar with women's fashion accessories. However, the possibility of their removal is closely aligned to the contemporary context of advances in lipstick formulae. Knowledge of such advances enables the significance of their presence to become a clue in itself.

The conversation between the Inspector and Poirot also implies a small amount of uncertainty in the assumption that the lipstick suggests the presence of a woman. The Inspector questions whether Poirot 'expected a woman, didn't you?' with Poirot confirming 'Oh yes. Yes, that was indicated' (p. 188). Uncertainty is necessary for the later revelation of Robin as the murderer. Poirot suggests that the use of the lipstick and scent are part of a scheme of 'someone who was anxious to involve a *woman* – any woman – in the crime. Again I asked why? And there can only be one answer – that it was not a woman who killed Mrs Upward – but a *man*' (p. 255; emphases in original). However, of the women who are under suspicion in the village, only Eve habitually uses make-up. Therefore, it is not possible that this scheme of leaving traces of make-up and perfume at the scene of the murder intends to 'involve a *woman* – any woman', but instead casts suspicion on one specific woman. Poirot confirms this: he states that the perfume used is 'an expensive and exotic scent which Mrs Carpenter uses alone of those concerned' (p. 254). Consequently, the lipstick can be considered in the same context as specifically related to Eve. Eve's make-up habits, and how these are used by Robin to cast suspicion on her, are intrinsically connected to her decoration of her home. It is Poirot's ability to read these habits that enables his resolving the mystery.

The labelling of Eve's perfume as expensive and exotic relates to the decoration of her house. With the room décor, there is a distinct lack of background and context to the items listed – everything is new and chosen by firms in place of Eve herself. This lack of background

²⁴³ 'Advertisement: New Tangee Lipstick', *Ladies' Home Journal*, April 1950, p. 218, in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-new-tangee-lipstick/docview/1871452049>> [accessed 30 March 2022]; emphases in original. 'Advertisement: Helena Rubinstein', *Town & Country*, April 1950, p. 29, in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-helena-rubinstein/docview/2130740159>> [accessed 30 March 2022]. 'Advertisement: Max Factor', *Seventeen*, June 1950, p. 12, in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-max-factor/docview/2013803213>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

history is equally found in the manner in which Eve presents her outward appearance. The label of exotic implies a similar lack of knowledge of background and sense of unfamiliarity.²⁴⁴ Early 1950s magazine articles on the history of wearing perfume or scent discussed the development of '[e]xotic sensuousness', including the example of 'Guerlain's clinging and mysterious L'Heure Bleue'.²⁴⁵ Other articles describe 'exotic, rich, heavy' scents as not being permissible for office wear.²⁴⁶ Alignment of the exotic with mystery and the suggestion that such scents were unsuitable for everyday workwear, speak to Eve as unsuited to the everyday village life of Broadhinny. Her unsuitability draws on the connotations of foreign otherness associated with the term exotic. However, these are somewhat contradicted when the scent is used by Robin to cast suspicion very definitely on Eve. The perfume has a dual function. It presents Eve's outward appearance as a woman without background, unknowable and – to an extent – foreign. It also creates a sufficient association with Eve that singles out her presence from all others and makes her "known" as the suspect. The perfume draws attention to her desire to present herself as "other", free from any individual history. Yet through this very distinction, it is also open to manipulation by others – and the possibility of it being misread as a clue to Eve as the murderer.

Robin's manipulation of the murder scene relies on knowledge of how Eve and the other women suspects "dress" themselves and their homes. Brown's arguments about habit as an unconscious repetition relates to this connection between the decoration of rooms and the uses of make-up (*A Sense of Things*, p. 73). The rooms' interior designs are shown as somewhat fixed and permanent. There are references to Eve's employment of the best firms, suggesting a recent change in the rooms' décor. Nevertheless, the listing of furniture items and soft furnishings in both Eve's and Maureen's houses suggests a level of permanency, albeit recently created. This sense of fixedness suggests that the construction of the rooms' interior décor is part of a wider context of habit. The lack of change or possibility of change indicates that the appearance of the rooms is based on a habitual use. Permanency and fixedness also apply to the use of make-up: there is no suggestion that there are changes in the established habits of wearing make-up by these women. With make-up habits remaining fixed and

²⁴⁴ I analyse some of the complexities relating to terms such as 'exotic' and 'foreign' in my discussion of Christie's later text, *Dead Man's Folly* – see Chapter Two.

²⁴⁵ Shirley Cook Mitchell, 'Right about Face', *Town & Country*, August 1950, pp. 22; 26 (p. 26), in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/right-about-face/docview/2120636994>> [accessed 25 March 2022].

²⁴⁶ 'Dear Beauty Editor', *Seventeen*, January 1952, p. 12, in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/dear-beauty-editor/docview/2013803483>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

unchangeable, the lipstick smear on the cup found at the scene of Laura's murder is read as an indication of a woman who regularly uses lipstick. The make-up foregrounds the habitual wearing of lipstick as central to this woman's identity. In terms of resolving the plot, the identity of the suspect becomes limited to this specific habit of wearing lipstick. The women suspects are thereby reduced to "types" based on their make-up habits.²⁴⁷

The resolution of the mystery establishes Robin as the murderer casting suspicion on Eve; understanding the perfume as a clue relies on understanding the connection between domestic settings and make-up habits. This connection is similarly informed by this notion of "types". Domestic settings have great importance in many of Christie's novels. Their significance in relation to appearance of the women associated with them resides in the quantity of details provided in description of these settings.²⁴⁸ Elizabeth Wilson suggests that the nineteenth-century ideology of the 'Angel in the House'

extended beyond dress to the home in which the woman reigned. Appearance became more and more mixed up with identity. It was the beginnings of the idea of the Self as a Work of Art, the 'personality' as something that extended to dress, scent and surroundings [...] By the mid twentieth century, a special emphasis on what was called 'the art of being a woman' reached its zenith. The women's magazines urged every woman to discover her 'type' and yet dress to 'be herself'.²⁴⁹

The details in the descriptions of these women's homes speak to this notion of surroundings as an extension of dress and appearance. Such extension of dress into home relates to modes of reading the detective fiction genre within the middlebrow more broadly. Humble suggests that '[r]epeatedly in the feminine middlebrow, the woman's ability to transform her surroundings is read as an index to her personality and creativity' (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 145). In Christie's novel, this index to personality and creativity is open to manipulation through Robin's use of Eve's make-up habits to cast suspicion on her. However, a feminised mode of reading understands Eve's careful decoration of her home and how her application of make-up echoes this. It also understands the properties of those items – the fact

²⁴⁷ This is particularly evident in Poirot and the Inspector's discussion of another suspect, Deirdre Henderson, and her lack of use of make-up. She is described by Poirot as 'an odd kind of girl' and by the Inspector as looking 'rather like the hockey captain from an old-fashioned girls' school' (p. 192). Both descriptions rely on a degree of typecasting based on Deirdre's make-up habits (or lack thereof).

²⁴⁸ This is perhaps most evident in novels that are centred on murders in household settings, such as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), in which a layout of the room in which the murder is committed is provided, and *Crooked House* (1949), in which the house is resided in by the extended Leonides family.

²⁴⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (London: IB Tauris, 2010), p. 123.

that her lipstick is unlikely to smear and is easily removed if so. Reading the murder scene this way ensures these items are read as clues to Eve's presence being deliberately implied by another.

Understanding of the connection between make-up and domestic décor enables the lipstick and scent at the scene of Laura's murder to provide clues to Robin as the murderer. Leaving the traces of make-up and scent at the scene is based on the premise that this centres suspicion on a woman who habitually uses such items.²⁵⁰ However, Christie's text presents a context in which it is men who habitually use make-up. Ariadne Oliver is staying with the Upwards as she collaborates with Robin on a stage adaptation of one of her books. Preceding the discovery of Laura's murder and the murder scene, Robin and Ariadne attend the theatre and are invited backstage; here, there are '[b]right young men, removing grease paint with towels' (p. 182). The theatre has strong connections to the development of the make-up and cosmetics industries. It is important to note that it is also a context in which the wearing of make-up by men was more common. Jones notes that male use of cosmetics had been extensive in the pre-industrial era; however, for much of the nineteenth century and beyond, such use became associated prejudicially with 'effeminate or homosexual men' (p. 62). Robin's connections to the theatre – he is writing the script of Ariadne's book – provide a context for his familiarity with the lipstick and scent.²⁵¹ Once the lipstick and scent are understood as having been deliberately left to conceal that it is a man – not a woman – who is the murderer, the make-up can be read as a clue to Robin. He is the only man connected to an industry that habitually uses make-up. Additionally, the murder scene itself becomes an extension of Robin's theatrical background. He "sets the scene" for the murder and subsequent investigation, and so a further connection is provided between habits in domestic interiors and make-up use.²⁵²

Poirot is shown to be cognisant of this feminised mode of reading necessary to equate domestic interior design and personal appearance. It thereby enables his resolution of the mystery. Makinen points to how Poirot is a 'small, elderly dandy, over-concerned with the

²⁵⁰ Curran's work on Christie's notebooks demonstrates her early planning of the novel: a note in Notebook 43 refers to 'Robin's method for second murder – has coffee cup with dregs and lipstick' (p. 499).

²⁵¹ It has been suggested that Robin Upward is homosexual, which would provide a further context to his familiarity with make-up and cosmetics. For further details of this, see Edwards, p. 350. Poirot has been read as queer, and this suggests why he is able to read through Robin's murder scene/set design; see Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie*, p. 124.

²⁵² Christie points to this, with Poirot describing how '[t]he whole thing was a theatrical scene setting with prepared props' after he has identified Robin as the murderer (p. 263).

appearance of his clothes and hair'; she perceives the concern with appearance and with 'tidiness and symmetry in furnishings' (amongst other aspects) as part of his 'feminine' traits (pp. 39–40). However, Poirot's ability to understand the clue-potential of the make-up does not solely reside in his over-concern with the appearance of clothes and hair. This is signalled from the beginning of the novel, in which Poirot's thoughts on the cinema are described. The cinema 'enraged' him, with 'even the photography which, raved over by some, to Hercule Poirot seemed often no more than the portrayal of scenes and objects so as to make them appear totally different from what they were in reality' (p. 3). My reading of this novel suggests a similar process is at work within the detective fiction plot. The decoration of domestic interiors has echoes in women's make-up habits; both require a particular mode of reading in order to *prevent* them appearing totally different from what they are in reality. In this opening scene, there is an awareness of fictional aspects of the texts: the construction of the portrayal of scenes and objects. Christie points to an emphasis on how these 'scenes and objects [...] appear' (my emphasis); how perception influences understanding. The emphasis in detective fiction on the significance of items as clues suggests that these can potentially be 'totally different' from reality. That is, in rendering them as significant, their fictionality becomes apparent. However, Christie points to how modes of reading the genre are integral. Certain modes of reading enable the perception of scenes and objects in ways that permit the resolution of the mystery *within* the fictionality of the genre.

Items with clue-potential invite a feminised mode of reading to understand their significance to the resolution of the mystery. A feminised mode of reading itself is informed by middlebrow themes and concepts. In this novel, these concepts centre on domestic interiors in relation to personal appearance. Christie's reliance on her readers' knowledge of both is apparent, informing a mode of reading across her novels more broadly. This is echoed by Light who identifies Christie as engaging with a readership that was 'confidently domestic' (p. 82). Christie explores both new money and new homes for their potential to create 'economies of desire' and to permit the exploration of 'tensions which lie within any domestic life' (Light, p. 82). This domestic 'confidence' implies a familiarity with such descriptions of décor that permit deeper understanding of the significance of these descriptions in the narratives more widely. However, Christie's exploration of 'economies of desire' is not rooted solely in her *presentation* of new money and domestic settings. Rather, these economies of desire – or aspirational outlooks – are part of a habitual feminised mode of

reading of the genre.²⁵³ By consistently aspiring to the “new”, this mode of reading habitually engages with new trends and fashions. It uses this engagement to inform how items with clue-potential are read and understood as significant to the resolution of the mystery.

Mrs McGinty's Dead thus presents make-up and cosmetics in relation to notions of habit that are informed by middlebrow themes and concepts of the domestic. These have wider significance in relation to the detective fiction genre. The connection between Eve's and Maureen's decoration of their homes and their make-up habits demonstrates how the lipstick left at the murder scene has clue-potential. The lipstick becomes something of a re(a)d herring for the Inspector, but its significance is understood by Poirot. He recognises the intention to cast suspicion on Eve and identifies Robin as the murderer through his own connection to make-up and cosmetics habits in his theatrical background.²⁵⁴ Poirot's mode of reading the lipstick as a clue to Robin as the murderer draws not only on this connection between habits in domestic settings and make-up. It also permits a greater engagement with the fictionality of the genre and with perception as integral to reading these texts. I argue that this is aligned to a feminised mode of reading that is continually renewed and refreshed in its outlook through engagement with trends and fashions. Reading items and recognising their clue-potential to the resolutions of the mysteries is informed by knowledge and understanding of modernity. Contexts of the items themselves, the middlebrow, and the detective fiction genre demonstrate this modernity. A feminised mode of reading detective fiction understands and recognises the innovations in the plots. *Habitual* reading of these texts invites an appreciation of such innovations and seeks to apply these to further readings of the genre.

‘All That Muck’: Habits of Cleanliness in *The Pale Horse* (1961)

Christie's *The Pale Horse* engages with further innovations in the detective fiction genre in relation to habits of reading the moral culpability of the murderer(s).²⁵⁵ I suggest that this is framed in relation to notions of cleanliness in the novel. The plot centres on Mark Easterbrook's investigation, aided by an interested police Inspector, of a list of names found

²⁵³ I discuss this notion of aspiration in relation to the middlebrow and fashion in the Introduction – see ‘Fashion and Identity in the Middlebrow’.

²⁵⁴ This contrasts with *Peril at End House* where Poirot does not employ a feminised mode of reading – as outlined in my Introduction, I do not suggest that there is a progression across the novels where Poirot gains this ability in later novels that has been lacking from earlier novels. Instead, I highlight how this mode of reading is integral to the detective fiction plots of both texts – whether used by the murderer, as in *Peril at End House*, or by the detective, as with this novel.

²⁵⁵ First published in the UK by William Collins, Sons in 1961, and in the US by Dodd, Mead and Co. in 1962. First serialised in the UK in *Woman's Mirror*, 2 September–21 October 1961, and published in an abridged format in the US in *Ladies Home Journal* in April 1962.

on a murdered Catholic priest. The names are connected to three women living in an old inn, the Pale Horse, who are rumoured to be involved in witchcraft. These women's activities have supposedly led to the deaths of a number of people, apparently through the victims' own "death wish". Mark's investigations lead him to identify the victims as having been poisoned with thallium, consumed through cosmetics and foodstuffs. The head of the operation is a pharmacist, Mr Osborne, who uses the Pale Horse as a cover for his "murder-on-demand" scheme.²⁵⁶ Mr Osborne's scheme requires significant monetary payment that limits the victims to wealthier classes. The victims are all visited by a consumer researcher to identify the products and brands that they habitually use; these products are then covertly exchanged for tampered-with items containing thallium. Throughout, there are references to notions of cleanliness in how the victims are described – particularly in relation to hair, and use of cosmetics and make-up. I argue that this physical cleanliness is extended to the manner in which the "murder-on-demand" scheme leads to a reconsideration of culpability. Namely, the culpability of the people who use this scheme to kill the victims, without being physically involved themselves. Notions of cleanliness in this novel engage with the habit of reading detective fiction for the resolution to restore order to the fictional world.

The notion of habit in relation to use of cosmetics and make-up is foregrounded through the research questionnaire central to Mr Osborne's murder plan. The questionnaire has significance to the detective fiction plot in enabling the identification of the brands and products habitually used by the victim.²⁵⁷ A previous employee of this consumer research, Eileen Brandon, explains to Mark the types of products she asked consumers about:

It varied. Sometimes it was foodstuffs. Cereals, cake mixes, or it might be soap flakes and detergents. Sometimes cosmetics, face powders, lipsticks, creams, etc. Sometimes patent medicines or remedies, brands of aspirin, cough pastilles, sleeping pills, pep pills, gargles, mouth-washes, indigestion remedies, and so on.²⁵⁸

This places cosmetics and make-up items amongst everyday household products, including food, medicines, and cleaning products. Their placement here is a distinct difference to the

²⁵⁶ Thallium is an odourless and tasteless chemical element; it is highly poisonous but, along with other thallium compounds, it has variously been used as a rat poison and a treatment for ringworm as it causes hair loss.

²⁵⁷ As make-up is the topic of a research questionnaire, there is a sense of less emphasis on make-up in relation to typecasting women, as seen in the 1940s and 1950s with *The Body in the Library* and *Mrs McGinty's Dead*.

²⁵⁸ Agatha Christie, *The Pale Horse*, in *Poirot: The Complete Ariadne Oliver, Vol. 2* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 545–727 (p. 712). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

emphasis on the use of make-up and cosmetics in the texts analysed above.²⁵⁹ The questionnaire in *The Pale Horse* provides the means of poisoning and thereby focuses attention on habit, instead of the individuals' characters. In *Mrs McGinty's Dead*, the murderer's identity is reduced by the detectives' investigation to the use of lipstick and scent. Similarly, the questionnaire draws attention to the object itself, and not solely the appearance of the subject that wears it. This reduces the importance of the *appearance* of cosmetics and make-up when worn and focuses attention instead on the *habit* – the owning of make-up and cosmetic items – itself. By asking the victims which make-up and cosmetic products they regularly use, the object – particularly the brand – is foregrounded. These items are placed in a context of analysing the habit itself.

In this context, the make-up and cosmetics as objects become related to the concept of a habit that is unremarkable, everyday, and mundane. Mills suggests that, in this novel,

Christie navigates the uncertainties of anonymity and lack of community and connection. Objects remain crucial in supplying the material texture of the plot, however; their presence or absence shape the form of the clue-puzzle narrative, as well as the identities of the characters.²⁶⁰

The anonymity of the people in the novel extends to how objects – specifically make-up and cosmetics – are depicted. The questionnaire serves to disguise the remarkableness of these items as potentially used to poison people by drawing attention to their *lack* of remarkableness. Concealed within a list of other items habitually used for purposes as varied as eating, cleaning, and medicating, the make-up and cosmetics acquire an equivalent status.²⁶¹ The list also conceals their potential to be used as poisons: it enables a distinction to be made between the items – the objects themselves – and the traces they leave behind. Thus far, my analysis has largely moved between these two related entities. In *The Pale Horse*, the distinction warrants a careful separation of the object (the pot of face cream) and the traces it

²⁵⁹ Eve's perfume in *Mrs McGinty's Dead* is described in terms of its 'exotic scent', emphasising its costly expense, and Ruby's use of make-up to create her 'chocolate-box' effects emphasises how the make-up transforms her appearance. By contrast, listing make-up and cosmetics amongst the mundane does not have these same connotations.

²⁶⁰ Rebecca Mills, 'England's Pockets: Objects of Anxiety in Christie's Post-War Novels', in *The Ageless Agatha Christie: Essays on the Mysteries and the Legacy*, ed. by J. C. Bernthal (Jefferson: McFarland, 2016), pp. 29–45 (p. 37). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

²⁶¹ This concealing information of significance as background information is a common trait of Christie's writing and detective fiction more broadly, as highlighted by York who describes the detective's resolution of the mystery as forcing 'the reader to reconsider, to reread, to realize that what seemed to be background information on families and décor was really a genuine clue allowing the constitution of the true, hidden story' (p. 102).

leaves (the cream absorbed into the skin). This separation enables the murders to be carried out.²⁶² However, the make-up and cosmetic products that are poisonous are only so when the item is used in the expected manner – that is, when the habits are followed.

Distinction between the object and the traces has implications for the subject-object relation, and how this relates to understanding the victims in this text. The subjects related to the make-up and cosmetic items – the victims – in this novel are not as clearly defined as other novels. It matters less who the people are that habitually use the items in question than that the items *are* used habitually. This is not to suggest, however, that there are no shared characteristics between the victims in this text. The references throughout the novel to notions of cleanliness – particularly in connection to this habitual use of make-up and cosmetic products – is a point of similarity. It further provides the clue-potential in the detective fiction plot. The Inspector's first interview with Mr Osborne permits the latter to provide insights into his pharmaceutical business. He details how it has changed:

‘Took a pride in it, I did. We’ve always kept good solid stuff. Old-fashioned. But quality. But nowadays’ – he shook his head sadly – ‘disappointing for a pharmacist. All this toilet stuff. You’ve got to keep it. Half the profits come from all that muck. Powder and lipstick and face creams; and hair shampoos and fancy sponge bags. I don’t touch the stuff myself. I have a young lady behind the counter who attends to all that. No, it’s not what it used to be, having a chemist’s establishment.’ (p. 572)

Mr Osborne's description of make-up and cosmetics as ‘all that muck’ brings in this notion of cleanliness. His low opinion of this side of his pharmaceutical business enables him to use it for the “dirty” business of his murder-on-demand scheme.²⁶³ His prejudice against make-up and cosmetics – and so against the women who use them – provides a slight hint of the clue-potential as to how his murder scheme operates. It is significant that this clue-potential is present only in Mr Osborne's conversation, not the Inspector's investigation of any *physical* objects. Despite his assertion that he does not ‘touch the stuff [...him]self’, Mr Osborne's role in his murder scheme does indeed require his active engagement with ‘all that muck’. He is

²⁶² The research questionnaire identifies the items used by the victims. Replicas of these items are then tampered with to include thallium, before an individual – again in the guise of a mundane, routine caller such as a gas-fitter – calls at the victim's home and replaces the existing items in the victim's possession with those that contain thallium.

²⁶³ Mr Osborne is engaged in this scheme ‘for the money’ and also because he ‘had always wanted to be more important than he was’ (pp. 724; 723).

responsible for poisoning these items with thallium, further equating his understanding of these items as “dirty” by their association – for him – with his criminal actions.

Cleanliness – particularly in relation to hair – is apparent throughout the novel, not only in relation to Mr Osborne. From the beginning, Mark notices the cleanliness of women’s hair. He describes his visit to a coffee bar where ‘[t]he clientele were almost all young people. They were, I supposed vaguely, what was called the off-beat generation. The girls looked, as girls always did look to me nowadays, dirty’ (p. 549).²⁶⁴ The implication is that this is related to their personal hygiene, including the use of make-up and cosmetic products.²⁶⁵ Later, Mark describes an encounter with a dinner party guest who ‘smelt of perspiration-soaked wool and also, strongly, of unwashed hair’ (p. 549). Mark’s comments about the off-beat generation and the term nowadays place him as an outsider to the young people and their fashions. There is a corresponding lack of understanding of trends in hairstyling and make-up use that leads him to label their appearance as ‘dirty’.²⁶⁶ York perceives Christie’s later novels as ‘an attempt to come to terms with modernity’ and that ‘[b]y the 1960s, [...] she had little grasp of the perspectives and norms of young people, but had a rather bewildered curiosity about them, manifest for instance in her repeated impression that young women of the time were physically dirty’ (pp. 80–81). This perception of young women as physically dirty should not be read as an indication of the mode of writing in which Christie engages as an author. It is the mode of *reading* – influenced by his habits of perceiving himself as an outsider – with which Mark is engaged.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Curran notes how ‘[a]lthough the notes [for Christie’s drafting of this novel] are scattered over five Notebooks, the basic plot was established early on, as were some of the characters. Notebook 38 contains a sketch of the opening pages and the coffee bar scene, with the important hair-pulling incident, appear[ing...] in the novel exactly as it does here [...] It seems that from the beginning thallium was to be the murder method’ (p. 583).

²⁶⁵ Jones describes the transformation of hygiene in Europe, from the fear of washing with water during the Black Death to the mass market for branded soaps in the twentieth century, with cleanliness increasingly becoming a mark of beauty (pp. 71–89; 99–100).

²⁶⁶ During the 1960s, a variety of trends in hairstyling led to fashions such as beehives (which require hair spray), long straight hair, and the geometric short styles pioneered by Vidal Sassoon (which required limited hair products); see Daniel James Cole and Nancy Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion: From 1850* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2015), p. 300. The notion of describing young people in terms of such epithets as the ‘off-beat generation’ is consistent throughout Christie’s works, such as with the description of the ‘Bright Young Things’ in her 1920s texts.

²⁶⁷ Mark describes himself as a ‘stranger in these parts’ when he visits a Chelsea coffee bar; he is engaged in writing a book on Mogul architecture, and states that he ‘existed in a world of [...] [his] own’ (p. 548). All this serves to render him as an outsider to the younger generation.

Mark's insistence on the dirty appearance of the young women has parallels with Mr Osborne's declaration of make-up and cosmetics as 'all that muck'. In reality, the post-war years saw an increase in women using shampoos to wash their hair, in place of soap and water; the invention of the hairdryer led to a greater frequency in women washing their hair (Jones, pp. 178; 169). This is echoed in advertisements in women's magazines of the early 1960s. A Clairol hair dye advertisement describes the product as a 'new hair-colour lotion' that 'shampoos and colours in one step. Not a tint, it lasts longer than a rinse. [...] There are special conditioning agents both in the lotion and in the Crème After Rinse used as a complement to the lotion'.²⁶⁸ This description epitomises the broadening range of products aimed at women in relation to washing and dyeing their hair, referring to shampoos, colours, tints, rinses and conditioners. Such products are themselves also promoted with the intention of being used to accommodate for more frequent hair-washing. This Clairol advertisement states that the product 'doesn't stain the scalp and it won't rub off on hairbrush or hands – there's no need to wear rubber gloves if you're using it yourself at home. The colour lasts for four to five weeks, persists right through a regular beauty schedule of normal, non-colour shampooing' (p. 215). Products were therefore marketed with the intention that they would be used by women themselves at home, rather than by professionals in hair salons, and adapted into their own 'regular beauty schedule'.

In the novel, the appearance of these girls is not described in any great detail. However, make-up and cosmetics can be used to achieve a particular style that – to the unsympathetic and naïve, such as Mr Osborne and Mark – would appear dirty. Indeed, as the advertisement for Clairol quoted above demonstrates, hair products in this period had different properties and potential unwanted side effects, such as the references to scalp staining and rubbing off on hairbrush and hands imply. Mr Osborne and Mark's mode of reading these girls' appearance – and the make-up and cosmetics used to achieve that appearance – has different significance owing to their differing roles in the murder plot. Mark, as the detecting character, is shown not to have either the relevant knowledge or habits to employ a feminised mode of reading. He cannot, consequently, perceive make-up and cosmetics as potential clues to the resolution of the mystery. Mr Osborne is revealed to be the murderer – Mills describes the crimes devised by him as a 'sanitized system of murder [that] leaves the hands of the guilty blood-free, and indeed implicates the victims themselves in their own demise, as they use the face-

²⁶⁸ 'The Lotion That Screens Out the Grey In Hair', *Vogue* (US), 15 September 1960, p. 215, in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/docview/911895876/>> [accessed 18 November 2020].

cream or lotion [that has been poisoned]’ (‘England’s Pockets...’, p. 39). This speaks to the connection between Mr Osborne’s own attitude to make-up and cosmetics as ‘muck’, and his use of such items to perform the “dirty” business of murder. His attitude to women using these products demonstrates his mode of reading these items as open to manipulation for murder.

Throughout the novel, the cosmetic products are rarely mentioned explicitly, yet the habit of using them is implied throughout. Ginger Corrigan tries to convince Mark to allow her to pose as his estranged wife in order to engage the services of the Pale Horse to expose the truth of the mystery. In this scene, use of make-up and cosmetics becomes central to effecting this change in her identity:

‘Anyone who knows me won’t see me. I’m away from my job, ill. A spot of hair dye – what was your wife, by the way, dark or blonde? – not that it really matters.’

‘Dark,’ I said mechanically.

‘Good, I’d hate a bleach. Different clothes and lots of make-up, and my best friend wouldn’t look at me twice!’ (p. 653)

The concept of altering appearance through hair dye is explored here through reference to the centrality of hair colour. As Makinen notes, in Christie’s works ‘the focus on hair as a signifier in the situating and placing of women remains a constant trope’ (p. 48). This draws on the growth in hair dyes in the post-war period, with advertising campaigns for hair dye brands centred on the concept of self-reinvention (Jones, pp. 169–70). The increase in such products is also demonstrated in the centrality of advertisements for hair dye in this period. In the serialisation of the novel in *Ladies Home Journal*, the text of the story was surrounded by advertisements for products as varied as the consumer research questionnaire of the plot: they included hair dye, food, crockery, cleaning products, sanitary towels, and medicines. An advertisement for Tiz crème-and-color rinses promotes a range of colours and ease of application that also ‘shampoos out completely’.²⁶⁹ Cosmetic and make-up products are central in enabling the change between identities – allowing Ginger to take the role of Mrs Easterbrook. These items have the potential to be understood through a feminised mode of reading that recognises their centrality to the plot and their potential to be understood as clues.

²⁶⁹ Agatha Christie, ‘The Pale Horse’, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1962, pp. 68–69; 82–84; 86; 88; 97–98; 101–102; 104; 106–108; 110–112; 115–116 (p. 98), in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/pale-horse/docview/1899006521>> [accessed 2 March 2022].

This notion that the clue-potential of items becomes apparent in verbal references to them, such as through conversation as above, has wider significance. Specifically, it is important in relation to the supposed witchcraft “front” to the murder scheme of the Pale Horse inn, home to “witches” Thyrsa Grey, Sybil Stamfordis and Bella Webb. Their activities blend older ritualistic tradition (e.g. Bella’s sacrificing of white cocks) and modern scientific thought. Thyrsa explains their approach as the idea that ‘[t]o destroy your subject, power must be exerted on his secret unconscious self. The death wish that exists in all of us must be stimulated, heightened’ (p. 601). There is the implication that the women believe that there is no need of objects to commit murder – that it is reliant only on stimulation of the victims’ ‘unconscious [...] death wish’. Their belief emphasises how, in *The Pale Horse*, there is potential for a lack of physical items as clues. A similar sense of the effect of belief can be found in Brown’s reading of Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899). He identifies that, in this novel, one of the characters, obsessed by the story of gold without actually possessing it, creates a ‘credence – based on the habit of hearing the story repeated again and again – [which] becomes something like a tactile embrace of description [...] turn[ing...] words into things’ (*A Sense of Things*, p. 69). A similar process is evident in Christie’s *The Pale Horse* with Mark’s repeated exposure to the story of witchcraft and the potential of manipulating a subject’s death wish. This exposure enables him to believe in the concept of murder committed without use of physical means.

The resolution to the murders in the novel demonstrates how Mark’s habits – his repeated belief and consideration of witchcraft and the subconscious death wish – have informed his interpretation of the mystery. His habits have further informed his mode of reading clues. The murders are committed through exposure to thallium in objects such as make-up and cosmetics. The revelation of this highlights how Mark’s mode of reading has prevented him from perceiving the clue-potential in these items until the end.²⁷⁰ Brown identifies this process in *McTeague* as leading to a transformation of words into things, with the repeated description of an item leading to a belief in its existence. In *The Pale Horse*, Mark’s habits in his beliefs lead to his embracing of the plausibility of murder in this manner that *denies* the existence of the objects and things significant to the murder. His belief in the repeated instances of murder committed by death wish leads him to fail in recognising the common symptom of hair loss

²⁷⁰ Even at this stage, it is in conversation – instead of in relation to physical objects – that Mark makes the connection between the varied illnesses the victims are diagnosed with and his recollections of a journal article detailing thallium poisoning and its symptom of hair loss.

amongst the victims.²⁷¹ He thereby fails to read the potential clues of the habitual use of make-up and cosmetics products. With the resolution of the mystery, this connection between hair loss and cosmetic and make-up products (particularly amongst women) signals the potential of objects to function as clues.²⁷² A feminised mode of reading uncovers this potential.

This feminised mode of reading is also pertinent to Christie's engagement with notions of cleanliness in relation to culpability in the genre. As discussed above, both Mark and Mr Osborne's mode of reading emphasise notions of cleanliness, with this becoming part of the clue-potential of objects. Cleanliness has further significance in relation to habits of reading the genre and the notion of culpability of the murderer. Mills argues that in this novel

[d]eath and murder are commodified, and by extension so are the victims whose deaths form part of the transactions [...] While the purchasers of murder have a connection to the victim[...] the visceral connection that murder ignites between killer and victim that is usually present in Christie's earlier work is outsourced to the efficient killing team of witches, the chemist and the middle-man, and mediated and diluted via the objects used. ('England's Pockets...', p. 39)

This mediated and diluted relation between murderer and victim has another effect in how the victims and murderers are perceived. The make-up and cosmetics create a sense of indiscriminate victims with less emphasis on the individuals than that they are all victims of murder. The murderers correspondingly lack in individuality; the fact that they are all murderers is of greater importance than any characterisation of individuals.²⁷³ The mediation and dilution of the murders relates to this notion of cleanliness. As Mark describes, the 'real work [of poisoning the items] is done by someone who has no connection whatever with the victim' (p. 711). The murderers therefore have no physical connection to the act of murder. In relation to the crime, these murderers – those who employ the services of the Pale Horse enterprise – are clean. They are not sullied by the physical act of murder, but this raises broader questions about their moral culpability. A feminised mode of reading here does not

²⁷¹ Mark has more opportunities of recognising this symptom than the other detective characters – he is present when a girl's hair is torn out in a fight, and when Ariadne Oliver describes her friend's hair loss.

²⁷² Most of the victims who are described with any detail, such as Thomasina Tuckerton, Lady Hesketh-Dubois and Mary Delafontaine, are women.

²⁷³ Mark does encounter some of these individuals, such as victim Thomasina Tuckerton's stepmother, and has suspicions of others, such as his godmother's nephew; however, there are many more victims listed in the novel than are encountered in the plot, with the implication that there are others whose murders remain undetected.

end with the resolution of the mystery but provides engagement with these broader questions that Christie poses.

At the end of the novel, justice does not appear to be meted out to these murderers that have used the Pale Horse. However, this notion of cleanliness in connection to habits of reading detective fiction remains at the fore at the close of the novel. Ginger is ‘busy with rags and bottles’ to clean the ‘Pale Horse’ inn sign, leading the vicar’s wife to quote from the Bible:

The grime of years removed, the figure of the rider on the horse was plainly discernible; a grinning skeleton with gleaming bones. [...]

‘Revelation, Chapter Six, Verse Eight. *And I looked and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him ...*’ (pp. 726–27; emphasis in original)

The cleaning away of the grime to reveal a figure of Death on the horse is akin to the plot of the novel itself. The resolution of the mystery, whilst not appearing to mete justice to those morally culpable of murder, is necessary to establish a *sense* of moral order. It identifies murder – Death on the horse – and the ‘Hell’ that follows it. Knight describes how ‘in most of Christie’s work the quest for the killer is a more searching inquiry into threats and tensions, and the final revelation has ethical force’ with ‘this sense that you cannot trust anyone at all [...being] a threatening message coded into the whole “golden age” form’ (p. 91).²⁷⁴ In this novel, the quest for the killer is complicated through these questions of moral and physical culpability. A feminised mode of reading relies on habits of reading detective fiction for the resolution of the mystery. These habits perceive a sense of moral order being restored to the world of the novel.

Through a feminised mode of reading the novel, the clue-potential is uncovered not only in physical objects and items, but also in how this extends to conversational references to them. In this novel, the references to notions of cleanliness inform the clue-potential of make-up and cosmetics items. These references also relate to how habits of reading enable this clue-potential to be recognised. Mark’s mode of reading demonstrates his inability to recognise the clue-potential in objects and items. Yet, his narration of the plot still provides key information to which a feminised mode of reading can be employed. This extends to habits of reading the genre itself. The representation of notions of cleanliness serves details of the plot of *The Pale Horse*. Notions of cleanliness also inform engagement with wider questions of the purpose of

²⁷⁴ I also mentioned this in the Introduction in relation to Barnard (pp. 36–37).

the resolution of the mystery. By representing murders with the suggestion that the murderers will not be brought to justice, or the crimes even identified, Christie draws attention to the habit of reading detective fiction. Namely, reading the genre with the idea of restoring order to the fictional world. The emphasis on notions of cleanliness – and understanding these through a feminised mode of reading – demonstrates that reading for this order to be restored is not solely premised on identification of *specific* instances of murder and murderers. Rather, it includes recognition of the moral implications – the ‘Hell’ – that follows these crimes.

‘Definitely Not Natural’: Hair Dye Habits in *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964)

In Christie’s *A Caribbean Mystery*, instances of make-up and cosmetic habits are intrinsically connected to concepts of the natural and the artificial. The plot centres on the poisoning of hotelier Molly Kendal by her husband, Tim, through the introduction of atropine, or belladonna, in Molly’s face cream.²⁷⁵ Tim intends to use the hallucinations and persecution mania that Molly develops as a result of this poisoning to present his intended murder of Molly as a suicide. Molly’s habit of applying face cream is consequently used as part of the murder plot against her. A sub-plot of the novel focuses on a hotel-guest staying at Molly and Tim’s hotel, Lucky Dyson. Her use of hair dye – in the same shade as Molly’s natural hair colouring – leads Tim to mistake Lucky for Molly and to murder her. Lucky is presented as potentially being a murderer herself; there is the suggestion that she is implicated in the death of her cousin, who was her husband Greg’s first wife. The habitual use of make-up and cosmetic items in this novel points to how concepts of the natural and artificial apply to a feminised mode of reading of items’ clue-potential in the text. I suggest that Christie’s representation of how these concepts inform habitual modes of reading blurs the boundaries between designating victim and murderer (where Lucky is understood to be both). More significantly, it blurs understanding boundaries between items with and without clue-potential.

Molly’s face cream is poisoned with atropine, and the use of this particular poison introduces the concept of natural and artificial in relation to behaviour. In her study of Christie’s use of poisons, Kathryn Harkup suggests that ‘[b]elladonna is a poisonous plant with a long history

²⁷⁵ Agatha Christie, *A Caribbean Mystery* (London: HarperCollins, 2016). Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text. First published in the UK by William Collins, Sons in 1964, and in the US by Dodd, Mead and Co. in 1965. Serialised in Toronto’s *Star Weekly Novel* in two abridged instalments, 16–23 January 1965.

of use by humans as a beauty aid, as a medicine and as a murder weapon'.²⁷⁶ She explains that belladonna means 'beautiful lady' in Italian; the term is derived from its use by Renaissance women to dilate the pupils of the eyes to appear more attractive (p. 51). This connection between cosmetic use and poison use of the same plant is further complicated by the process of placing this cosmetic-poison into another cosmetic product: face cream. The face cream is not intended to enhance the eyes, but to freshen and clean the face and smooth the skin (Jones, p. 52). The poison has the potential to cause hallucinations (including susceptibility to suggestion), blindness, and has an ultimately toxic effect within the face cream. The poisonous face cream blurs the boundaries between what constitutes Molly's natural behaviour, and that which is caused by the toxicity absorbed into her body. This conflict between natural and artificial exposes the concealed aspects of the face cream and cosmetic product. This item is intended to absorb into the skin, leaving no visible or discernible trace behind and so provide a "natural" look. However, it does have significant artificial traces in the effect it has on Molly's behaviour.

This difference between natural and artificial behaviour is discussed by Miss Marple and Esther Walters, secretary to a fellow hotel guest, Jason Rafiel:

'Mrs Kendal is a worrier? She always seems so carefree.'

'I think a lot of that is put on,' said Esther slowly. 'Actually, I think she's one of those anxious sort of people who can't help worrying all the time that things *may* go wrong.' [...]

'I think Molly wants desperately to try and appear very gay and to be enjoying herself. She works at it very hard but the effort exhausts her. Then she has these odd fits of depression. She's not – well, not really well-balanced.'

'Poor child,' said Miss Marple. 'There certainly are people like that, and very often outsiders don't suspect it.'

'No, they put on a good show, don't they?' (p. 67; emphasis in original).

In using terms such as 'put on' to describe Molly's behaviour, Esther's speech creates a connection between the 'putting on' of cosmetics and the 'putting on' of acts of behaviour. This discussion nearly approaches the solution of the mystery of Molly's behaviour. Esther believes it to be a good show that she 'puts on', seeing the odd fits of depression (in reality caused by the poisonous face cream) as Molly's true – natural – behaviour. This demonstrates the clue-potential of Molly's behaviour and how determining the natural from the artificial in

²⁷⁶ Kathryn Harkup, *A is for Arsenic: The Poisons of Agatha Christie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 49. Further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

relation to this can provide the resolution of the mystery. That it also has potential to become a re(a)d herring is evident: Miss Marple points to the potential for Esther to have misread Molly's behaviour. She suggests that outsiders are incapable of knowing the truth by not fully understanding the person involved. They therefore cannot distinguish between their natural behaviour and what is 'put on'. This begins to highlight how the process of detecting clues is framed in terms of deciding what is 'natural' and what is 'artificial' – what has clue-potential, and what can be misread.

The connection between Molly's use of the face cream and changes in her behaviour is central to the solution to the murder plot. This centrality becomes apparent in the discussion between Miss Marple and Jackson, Mr Rafiel's manservant and masseuse, when he is caught looking at Molly Kendal's cosmetics:

‘Actually,’ said Jackson, ‘I was just looking at Mrs Kendal’s brand of face cream.’[...]

‘Nice smell,’ he said, wrinkling up his nose. ‘Fairly good stuff, as these preparations go. The cheaper brands don’t suit every skin, bring it out in a rash as likely as not. The same thing with face powders sometimes.’

‘You seem to be very knowledgeable on the subject,’ said Miss Marple.

‘Worked in the pharmaceutical line for a bit,’ said Jackson. ‘One learns to know a good deal about cosmetics there. Put stuff in a fancy jar, package it expensively, and it’s astonishing what you could rook women for.’ (p.191)

In referencing specifically that he is looking at the *brand* of face cream, Jackson draws attention to the complexity of how cosmetic items are understood. Christie exposes these complexities for the detective fiction plot. The mention of Molly's brand of face cream creates a possessive link between the brand and Molly as the consumer. Whilst other women may use the same brand, this fact is denied by the link which demonstrates the personal connection between brands and the specific subject who uses them. Jones suggests that, by the post-war period and with the growth in television advertising, some types of cosmetic and make-up products gained greater brand loyalty than others (p. 154). He notes specifically foundation for the challenge of matching skin tone and its expense (p. 154). Jackson's comments on the quality and expense of Molly's face cream locates the fictional product within this context of brand loyalty that leads to a sense of individual possession. Molly is aligned with women who are rooked by the lure of expensive packaging and fancy jars, seduced into brand loyalty and therefore unquestioning of the brand and its products.

This is how Tim's poisoning of Molly through her face cream operates: Molly's loyalty to her specific brand of face cream corresponds to a faith and trust that the product, in Jackson's terms, suits her skin, and will not cause adverse side effects. Tim uses this loyalty and trust of Molly's in a particular brand for his poisoning of her face cream to remain undetected. He relies on the face cream being above suspicion. That this is starting to be detected is evident from Jackson's investigations of Molly's cosmetic products and his discussion with Miss Marple. Their conversation quickly moves on to drugs and how they have an effect on behaviour (p. 192). Jackson's intrusion into Molly's bathroom and his analysis of the individual pot of face cream draws attention to Molly's habitual use of particular cosmetics. Yet at this stage in the narrative, there is also an interruption to Molly's habit of using face cream that permits Jackson's intrusion. The accumulation of poison in Molly's system has left her susceptible to shocks, such as the murders of hotel guests and staff perpetrated by her husband. These shocks leave Molly bed-ridden and therefore unlikely to have applied face cream. This points to how the face cream in Molly's possession has been tampered with to include poison. It is her habitual use of the cream that leads to the accumulation of poison in Molly's system through the regular absorption through her skin of the poison it contains. The cause-and-effect of Molly's not applying the face cream owing to her indisposition *caused* by the face cream exposes the clue-potential of the item. It permits the opportunity for Jackson, and subsequently Miss Marple, to examine possibilities to explain Molly's changes in natural behaviour and the potential means by which she is being administered drugs.

Possibility of changes between the natural and the artificial is further represented in relation to physical appearance. This is particularly evident in the use of make-up and cosmetics that permit the possibility of changing natural appearance through artificial means, and the "natural" appearance that is artificially produced. Lucky's use of hair dye exemplifies this concept. Her use of hair dye is central to the plot, allowing Tim to mistake Lucky for his wife and drown her. Mistaking Lucky for Molly this way demonstrates the effects of hair dye to simulate natural colouring; it renders Lucky and Molly to be indistinguishable in the dark. There is no mention of physical bottles of hair dye. Instead, as with *The Pale Horse*, the focus is the effect of the product – the dyed hair – from which the existence of such an item can be inferred. Such inferences are evident in conversation about Lucky between Miss Marple and Miss Prescott, sister to Canon Prescott, who are also fellow guests at the hotel. The women's conversation draws attention to the similarity between Lucky and Molly's hair colour and the natural contrasted with the artificial:

‘Very beautifully tanned, isn’t she,’ remarked Miss Marple. ‘And her hair. Most attractive. Practically the same colour as Molly Kendal’s, isn’t it?’

‘The only difference,’ said Miss Prescott, ‘is that Molly’s is natural and Lucky’s comes out of a bottle!’ (p. 161)

Miss Marple’s comparison of Lucky’s and Molly’s hair colouring provides a hint of the later incident of mistaken identity that leads to Lucky’s death. This comparison also permits the contrast of the natural with the artificial. The reference to colour that ‘comes out of a bottle’ draws attention to the portable, changeable aspects of Lucky’s hair colour. These changeable aspects are concealed by the suggestion that her colour is practically the same as Molly’s natural tones, and therefore as unchanging as this natural appearance. The women’s conversation further demonstrates the complexities of the associations of hair dye. Miss Prescott and Miss Marple are aware of Lucky’s use of artificial means of achieving a particular hair colour. However, their conversation implies that – to some degree – Lucky’s use of hair dye is successful in providing her the same colour as that naturally available to Molly. The hair dye occupies a position as an aide to natural appearance; there is simultaneously a sense that this is to be scorned for being artificially achieved, and for being identifiable as such. Whilst the colour is ‘[p]ractically the same’ as Molly’s, Miss Marple and Miss Prescott are able to identify that it is *not* natural.

That Miss Prescott intends her comments on Lucky’s use of hair dye in a scornful manner is apparent from her brother’s reaction and defence of Lucky:

‘It looks very nice to *me*,’ said the Canon.

‘Of course. That’s why she does it. But I assure you, my dear Jeremy, it wouldn’t deceive any *woman* for a moment. Would it?’ She appealed to Miss Marple.

‘Well, I’m afraid –’ said Miss Marple, ‘of course I haven’t the experience that you have – but I’m afraid – yes I should say definitely *not natural*. The appearance at the roots every fifth or sixth day –’ She looked at Miss Prescott and they both nodded with quiet female assurance. (p. 161; emphases in original)

The use of hair dyes in the post-war period was one of the fastest growing aspects of the cosmetics industry, as detailed by Jones (p. 168). Magazine advertisements for hair dye in the early 1960s feature references to a natural look and dyes that ‘cover [...] up grey without changing natural hair tones’.²⁷⁷ The popularity of using hair dye to conceal grey hair is further

²⁷⁷ ‘Advertisement: Dyes’, *Ladies' Home Journal*, May 1962, pp. 72; 77, in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-dyes/docview/1899006591>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

evidenced in “Q&A” articles that aimed to address common queries about using dye. It is also evident in features on the changing hair dye industry that commented on how one in six women ‘used some kind of hair colour’ by 1962, with ‘a woman’s instinctive wish [being...] to go lighter, not darker and since a mere 5 per cent of British women are natural blondes, there is some room for progress’.²⁷⁸ This context of hair dye – the quantity of information about using hair dye aimed at women through such magazine advertisements and features – provides an indication of why Miss Prescott perceives that Lucky’s hair dye ‘wouldn’t deceive any *woman*’. Emphasis on ‘woman’ stresses the distinction from men’s awareness of the use of hair dye.²⁷⁹

It is not only Lucky’s use of hair dye that correlates to trends in women’s make-up and cosmetics in the early to mid-1960s. Indeed, the setting of Christie’s novel in the Caribbean draws upon articles and advertisements in both mid-range and high-end magazine publications that address the use of hair dye in beach and holiday contexts. In a *Vogue* (US) article from January 1962, women are advised that ‘[t]he mid-winter race to islands in the sun – a wonderful change for looks and outlooks – can be a change less wonderful for hair’, with various hair colour products promoted to ‘colour hair temporarily, condition, and protect it from the great-outdoors damage it will face’.²⁸⁰ Similarly, in *Woman’s Day*, a feature on ‘*Woman’s Day* Beauty Book: A Primer of Hair and Skin Care’ includes a section on hair colour that cautions that ‘[e]xposure to strong sunlight can dry, streak or lift color by several shades, so keep it covered on the beach. Wear a cap in chlorinated pool water because without

²⁷⁸ René Lecler, ‘The Rainbow Men’, *Good Housekeeping*, April 1962, pp. 60–62 (pp. 60; 62), in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/rainbow-men/docview/2529899596>> [accessed 25 February 2022]. For “Q&A” articles, see Ruth Drake, ‘25 Q’s & A’s’, *Redbook*, July 1964, pp. 66–67; 82–83, in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/25-qs-as/docview/1858643939>> [accessed 25 February 2022]; Marie Fromow, ‘GH’s Common-Sense Guide to Hair Coloring: Questions Most Frequently Asked – And Our Answers’, *Good Housekeeping* (US), March 1963, pp. 116–117; 150; 152, in *ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/ghs-common-sense-guide-hair-coloring/docview/1884677835>> [accessed 2 March 2022].

²⁷⁹ This is endorsed later in the novel when Tim mistakes Lucky for his wife, suggesting that even Molly’s husband is unable to see the difference between her natural hair colour and Lucky’s dyed hair. However, Jackson’s knowledge of cosmetics and make-up demonstrates that at least one male character is aware of the uses of such items and so complicates the simplistic sense of a male-female division in the effect of Lucky’s hair dye. It is not that her use of hair dye is only capable of convincing men, but that women are *more* aware (through a sense of shared knowledge of the use of such products) and thus able to make suppositions about Lucky’s intentions for doing so.

²⁸⁰ ‘Hair – Colour and Care Under the Sun’, *Vogue* (US), 1 January 1962, p. 23, in *ProQuest The Vogue Archive*, <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/magazines/beauty-hair-colour-care-under-sun/docview/879266839/>> [accessed 8 December 2020].

one natural blonde or blonde-tinted hair can turn green'.²⁸¹ Lucky's use of hair dye in the context of a prolonged visit to the Caribbean therefore relates to these cautions about the effect of the climate on dyed hair. These magazine features suggest that the appearance of the hair overall – not just the roots that Miss Marple focuses on – can provide indications of a regular hair dying habit.

Lucky's habitual use of hair dye allows Miss Marple to perceive its clue potential. Miss Marple's awareness is particularly based on the appearance of the roots of the hair that she sees when Lucky is sunbathing and when she examines Lucky's dead body. The roots have a further significance in the sense of the natural contrasted with the artificial. The roots of Lucky's hair suggest a darker natural colour that she conceals with the blonde dye. They correspond to Lucky's veneer of respectability that hides her possible role in her husband's first wife's death.²⁸² The hair dye consequently has a clue-potential: it is representative of Lucky's concealment not only of her grey hair but also her identity as a murderer. The roots of Lucky's hair – and her identity as a murderer – are recognised by Miss Marple when she discovers it is Lucky that has been killed instead of Molly: 'Her finger pointed. Then, very gently, she touched the blonde hair and parted it so that the roots were exposed...' (p. 210). Miss Marple's pointing at the roots intends not only to identify the body as that of Lucky, but also identifies Lucky as an appropriate murder victim.²⁸³ Throughout the novel, Lucky is presented as a potential murderer herself, involved in affairs with other men and capable of convincing others into criminal acts on her behalf. There is a sense, therefore, that she is more suited to being murdered than Molly. Hoffman identifies how '[t]he body, specifically the body involved in a crime, is inescapably loaded with meanings attached to social codes and the transgression of such codes' with women's bodies 'represent[ing] sites of social and sexual deviance that must be resolved' (p. 157). Lucky's body – with its dyed hair – is loaded with meanings related to her sexual transgressions as a married woman and her criminal

²⁸¹ Judith C. Chase and Nika Hazelton, 'Woman's Day Beauty Book: A Primer of Hair and Skin Care', *Woman's Day*, March 1963, pp. 73–80 (p. 75), in *ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive*, <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/womans-day-beauty-book/docview/1815464366/>> [accessed 2 March 2022].

²⁸² This only becomes apparent through gossip and conversations between characters in the novel, and not explicitly stated openly amongst all characters. Lucky is supposed to have been caring for her cousin but convinced one of her lovers, Edward Hillingdon, to purchase drugs that she then administered to murder her cousin. This enabled her husband Greg to inherit his wife's fortune and left him free to marry Lucky.

²⁸³ I have discussed this notion of "appropriate" murder victims in relation to *The Body in the Library*. In *A Caribbean Mystery*, Miss Marple and Jason Rafiel discuss this notion of appropriate murder victims, suggesting that '[p]roper type casting' occurs in detective fiction stories where the victims are '[e]lderly men with lots of money' (p. 146).

transgressions as a murderer. Her hair becomes representative of her attempt to conceal these transgressions, but in so doing, exposes them. The artifice of her hair dye draws attention to these transgressions that render her a more appropriate – a more natural – murder victim than Molly.

Lucky is both murderer and victim; understanding her body as a site that seeks to resolve the transgressions it represents is further complicated when the clue-potential of the cosmetics and make-up is taken into consideration. Hoffman suggests that both the victim's body and the bodies of those who commit crimes are significant when considering transgressive possibilities (p. 157). Lucky's dyed hair creates a superficial similarity to Molly, a woman who has none of the transgressive attributes of Lucky. Tim's mistaking Lucky for Molly, mostly on the basis of her hair colouring, suggests, however, that the distinctions between Molly as a young, innocent woman and Lucky as a criminally and sexually transgressive older woman are less easily separated. The hair dye operates as a clue to the concealment of Lucky's natural hair colour and of her true identity as a transgressive woman. It also operates as a clue to these aspects – her dyed hair ostensibly draws attention to the *act* of concealment that negates the purpose it attempts to achieve. Lucky is successful in concealing her identity sufficiently for her to be mistaken for another woman. Importantly, this operates in the opposite direction: Molly's natural hair colour can be mistaken as Lucky's dyed hair. The former's identity can thus be replaced by that of the latter to take the place of the murder victim. This confusion between murderer and victim relates to habits of reading, specifically for how this connects to habits of reading the clue-potential of items.

The difficulties in distinguishing murderer and victim – where Lucky is both – exposes how these distinctions between the natural and the artificial are blurred. They are less easily determined than the conversation between Miss Prescott and Miss Marple, analysed above, suggests. In relation to habits of reading the genre, this blurring has significance for how the clue-potential of items is understood. The natural and the artificial are part of the process of determining clues from red herrings. That is, the detective fiction genre itself is – to some extent – highly artificial. It is a fictional world in which fictional clues are presented, yet there is a need to determine what is “natural” to this artificial world – what is a clue, and what is artificially constructed to appear so.²⁸⁴ In her analysis of the Miss Marple novels and information values and behaviours, Michelle Kazmer suggests that ‘[i]nformation behaviors

²⁸⁴ For more detailed discussion of this notion of the world of the texts, see my discussion of Efron *et al.* in the Introduction.

and tactics used in detective fiction are complex and rely on the readers' shared and usually tacit understanding of information value, which can be manipulated by the author through the characters' actions and dialogue as well as through narrative'.²⁸⁵ This places an emphasis on reading as an activity that is shared between readers and the detective characters of the novels. The determining of clues and items' clue-potential is based on shared understanding of contexts of items that is then applied to determine their role within the plot. This process underpins a feminised mode of reading. In *A Caribbean Mystery*, it is an understanding of the context of hair dye and the growth in dyes to conceal grey hair and appear "natural" that permits Miss Marple to perceive the clue-potential in Lucky's dyed hair.

However, there is an additional significance to reading and understanding clues that informs habits of reading the genre. Christie points to how concepts of the natural and the artificial expose that understanding items as clues is less clearly defined than the resolution to the plots suggests. York analyses the analogies of the jigsaw and archaeology that are frequently applied to detection to suggest that

[t]he art of the detective story writer is to create queer-shaped pieces, to give an impression of oddness and incoherence – and to demonstrate the natural order that underlies this impression. The tension of queerness and naturalness is perhaps the essence of the genre; queerness is what arises when facts are seen from outside without the plan that unites them, and naturalness is recognition of the plan, of the combination of motive and ingenuity. (p. 93)²⁸⁶

York's phrasing of this as a tension between queerness and naturalness implies a sense of a more complete binary opposition between these two aspects in detective fiction. In relation to clues, it implies that only when items' clue-potential is understood – when there is recognition of the plan – that the mystery can be resolved. Without this plan, queerness is what arises in a failure to resolve the mystery. However, by phrasing this process of detecting clues as a determining between the natural and the artificial – and with a recognition that clues may be both – I suggest that this process is less a binary opposition between resolving the mystery and failure to do so. Christie's texts demonstrate that the reading of clues is a habit of the detective fiction genre. Repeated reading of such plots demonstrates that different clues have

²⁸⁵ Michelle Kazmer, "“One must actually take facts as they are”: Information Value and Information Behavior in the Miss Marple Novels", in *The Ageless Agatha Christie*, pp. 114–29 (p. 125). Kazmer defines information value as a shared understanding of what is worth attention and what information is significant, and information behavior as the full range of 'normative behaviors related to information', such as seeking, use, avoidance, rationing, and management (p. 115).

²⁸⁶ I discuss analogies for the detection process in greater detail in the Introduction.

different potential meanings in relation to the resolution of the mystery. Detecting what is “natural” and what is “artificial” is less about reading for the resolution of the mystery. It is more about employing a mode of reading that can appreciate how both elements can be applicable to that resolution.

Whether Lucky is read as a victim or as a murderer determines how the clue-potential of her dyed hair is understood. It is a re(a)d herring for Tim, who fails to perceive the artificial appearance of the dyed hair and mistakes it for Molly’s natural appearance. This in itself provides a clue-potential for Miss Marple. She can employ a feminised mode of reading that understands these concepts of the natural and artificial – in relation to the face cream, behaviour, and the context of hair dye – to perceive how the dyed hair is both a clue and re(a)d herring. She can therefore perceive Lucky as both murderer and victim in the resolution of the mystery. In presenting this, Christie points to how detecting the clue-potential of items – distinguishing the natural and the artificial – is a habit of reading the detective fiction genre. Repeated reading of the plots of such novels highlights how clues function with subtle differences within the plots. The mode of reading is integral to recognising items’ clue-potential. A feminised mode of reading recognises that items have clue-potential both as genuine – natural – clues, and how they can be misinterpreted as re(a)d herrings – recognising their artificial aspects. Both are integral to the resolution of the mysteries. In recognising this aspect of detecting clues, the definitions of the genre – of whether characters are victims and murderers, whether items are clues or re(a)d herrings – becomes less significant than that there is the possibility of reading these different definitions. This is not to say that clues have any less significance to the resolution of that mystery. Rather, that resolution is reached through a less rigidly fixed understanding of the clue-potential items can have.

Conclusions

All of the texts discussed in this Chapter were first published from the early 1940s onwards. As noted in the Introduction, this part of Christie’s career has been somewhat neglected by critics who have tended to privilege her interwar mysteries and credit these as being more innovative than her later texts. Yet in my discussion of make-up and cosmetic habits, I have shown that these texts demonstrate Christie’s continuing engagement with contexts of these items and changing trends in fashion accessories. By aligning these make-up and cosmetic habits to habits of reading detective fiction, I have demonstrated how Christie continues to make interventions in the genre; particularly, how clues and items with clue-potential are understood and detected. In *The Body in the Library*, detection of clues is strongly related to

notions of types of victims; it advocates a mode of reading – of the victim’s body and of the text – that withdraws from a basis on such types. My discussion of *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* points to how such types are aligned to concepts of domestic décor – habits of applying make-up and cosmetics have parallels in women’s decoration of their homes. In *The Pale Horse*, notions of cleanliness inform how clues are perceived in the text, and how habits of reading enable this clue-potential to be understood. This is developed in *A Caribbean Mystery*. The novel points to how concepts of the natural and the artificial – and distinguishing between these – inform habits of reading the genre to recognise items’ clue-potential.

A feminised mode of reading these texts demonstrates Christie’s interventions in the genre, specifically in relation to habits of reading detective fiction. This mode of reading is aware of how stereotypes lead to a misreading of clues in the texts. It subsequently takes an approach that is less invested in such typecasting as the basis of resolving the mystery. This is equally applicable to the manner in which objects with clue-potential are recognised. In the introduction to this chapter, I discussed how a gendered tradition of emphasis on ‘order and rationality’ instigates a process of reading the genre in which objects with clue-potential are predetermined, to the detriment of those with less immediately obvious potential. A feminised mode of reading instead demonstrates how these objects with less immediately obvious potential – those that are not necessarily traditionally understood as murder weapons – can be read as clues to the resolution of the mystery. Understanding the contexts of make-up and cosmetics is further pertinent to this mode of reading. Its engagement with trends and fashions requires knowledge and understanding of modernity in these aspects. This is aligned to ways of using knowledge that have been typically assigned to the feminine middlebrow; a feminised mode of reading relies on such ways to approach these contexts of the items themselves. This is equally applicable to an outlook on the genre itself. This mode of reading is open to innovations; habitual reading of the genre invites a recognition and appreciation of such interventions in the plots.

Consideration of make-up and cosmetics in these novels also points to how their clue-potential is not only limited to the physical items, or the traces they leave. Clue-potential is equally to be found in conversational references. This relates to how a feminised mode of reading does not have rigid definitions of what can and cannot hold clue-potential that this previous tradition of focus on order and rationality has invited. Christie’s engagement with concepts such as notions of cleanliness and the natural and the artificial relate to habits of reading the genre. Notions of cleanliness align with questions over the purpose of the

resolution of the mystery: this is less about detecting specifically “whodunnit” than the moral implications of crime. A feminised mode of reading thus recognises the potential of the genre to engage with broader issues. Whilst there is a process of reading to identify the criminal – and thus a focus on logic to that end – this is not the sole potential question requiring resolution at the conclusion of the novels. Similarly, concepts of the natural and the artificial relate to habits of reading clues and identifying items with clue-potential. A feminised mode of reading recognises that this is not a binary separation whereby clues are either genuine – natural – to the plot, or artificial re(a)d herrings. The resolution of the mystery is reached through a less rigidly defined understanding of the clue-potential items can have.

Conclusion

This thesis argues for a particular mode of reading Christie's works. Such a mode of reading permits a fuller appreciation of their engagement with conventions of the detective fiction genre, and of the middlebrow. I describe this as a "feminised mode of reading", building on previous scholarship on the feminine middlebrow. This is not to imply that the mode of reading is only open to women readers – both fictional and real. Rather, the method and mode itself relies on knowledge and ways of reading that have thus far been gendered as feminine. Our discussions of the feminine middlebrow should be broadened to include a knowledge and appreciation of women's fashion. Throughout this thesis, I have suggested that knowledge of fashion accessories is integral to a feminised mode of reading Christie's texts that leads to the resolution of the mystery at the heart of the plots. This knowledge includes the materiality of fashion accessories, the contexts in which items were worn and were advertised, and in which trends changed. My use of women's magazines contemporaneous with the publication of the novels demonstrates that Christie's works contain similar descriptions to those found in the magazines. The close correlation between such depictions nuances descriptions and representations of women's fashion accessories in these texts. This correlation provides a means for Christie to establish her representation of such items as – in Effron's terms, as discussed in the Introduction – 'believably realistic' (p. 203).

My discussion of jewellery, hats, and make-up and cosmetics in Christie's texts has been premised on this idea that these items are believably realistic. Analysis of these items in the novels has demonstrated that such realistic representation is further related to how these items can be read through a feminised mode of reading. In relation to jewellery, these items have specific values that invite this mode of reading for these values to be understood. Considering their contexts reveals how these items have values – monetary, aesthetic, and cultural symbolism of the stones – that relate to feminine middlebrow concerns, such as women's independence. Knowledge of these middlebrow concerns is an integral part of a feminised mode of reading. My discussion of hats in Christie's texts demonstrates how these middlebrow concepts inform contexts of fashion accessories. This enables these items to be understood as clues; they are not just items that are secondary details in the detective fiction plot. They are significant when read in relation to the resolution of the plot and not misinterpreted as re(a)d herrings. My reading of make-up and cosmetics in Christie's texts points to how this clue-potential is not limited to specific physical items, or their traces, but is equally present in conversational references. Whilst I have discussed these points in relation

to these particular types of fashion accessory, I suggest that these points are equally applicable to other types. All these accessories have values, relate to middlebrow concepts, and have clue-potential that is recognised and understood through a feminised mode of reading.

I have discussed how this mode of reading is specifically feminised for its relation to the feminine middlebrow. Yet a further aspect of this mode of reading resides in just that: reading. Knowledge of different types of genre informs this feminised mode of reading. Appreciation of the conventions of different genres informs the resolution of the detective fiction plots. My thesis demonstrates Christie's engagement with diverse and varying genres, such as adventure, history and mystery. Objects demonstrate this engagement but also establish the generic form as detective fiction in how they relate to the resolution of the mystery. A distinguishing between these genres enables the clue-potential of items to be realised. This feminised mode of reading accords equality between these varied genres and texts. Recognition of items' clue-potential is part of a process that recognises how other genres relate to reading these items; it is not a process of privileging the detective fiction genre in the establishment of a genre hierarchy. This process is further demonstrated through how this mode of reading invites an appreciation of how various genres frame middlebrow concepts and ideas. This appreciation of genre permits Christie's self-referential and metafictional devices within the plots. By considering Christie's engagement with genres other than detective fiction, I do not suggest that detective fiction is not integral to a feminised mode of reading Christie's texts. Indeed, this mode of reading is open to innovations and – to some extent – relies on a habitual reading of the genre. Habitual reading invites a recognition and appreciation of Christie's innovations in specific plots, and in the genre more broadly.

The process of employing a feminised mode of reading occurs both within and without the novels. Many readers of Christie's texts, and some of the characters within them, are able to use this feminised mode of reading. Within the plots, this mode of reading is not only open to detective characters; it is also open to manipulation by characters who are subsequently identified as the murderer. Such plots occur in novels from across Christie's writing career and in relation to different types of women's fashion accessories, such as the hat in *Peril at End House* and lipstick traces in *Mrs McGinty's Dead*. Consequently, this feminised mode of reading provides both the construction of the crime, and its resolution. Detective characters – and readers – in reading and understanding the clue-potential of objects must perceive how these items have been manipulated. They must use this perception to resolve the mystery. In identifying the murderer – and victim – through this clue-potential of items, a feminised mode

of reading also takes a more cautious approach. It does not assign these identities of victim and murderer to specific characters so readily; it acknowledges the nuanced connections between these two identities that can be uncovered through this mode of reading. This is partly evident through the murderer's identity being framed in relation to notions of foreignness in Christie's texts. This is a foreignness that is based on clues and reading their contexts, instead of based on prejudices; a feminised mode of reading recognises such notions.

This feminised mode of reading has implications for how the detective fiction genre frames items and their clue-potential in Christie's novels. This mode of reading has an integral place *within* the genre. The detection process entails items being misinterpreted: becoming re(a)d herrings. Their potential as clues to the resolution of the mystery only becomes fully realised through a thorough employment of this feminised mode of reading. Recognition of the clue-potential of items involves understanding connections between the detection process and theatricality. In so doing, these clues – for the exaggerated elements of individual characters that they reveal – enable a process of “trying on” the murderer's identity on various characters. There is a progression through this process towards the resolution of the mystery where this identity “fits”. However, in discussing these exaggerated elements, this is not akin to stereotyping characters into these identities of murderer and victim. Rather, a feminised mode of reading Christie's texts is aware of how such stereotyping leads to a misreading of clues. This mode takes an approach that is less invested in this typecasting as the basis of reaching the resolution of the mystery. It takes a broader understanding of contexts related to the clue-potential of items. In recognising this clue-potential, this mode of reading further appreciates that this is not a binary opposition between genuine clues and those that are artificial re(a)d herrings. The resolution of the plots is reached through a less rigidly defined understanding of what this clue-potential can comprise.

In my Introduction, I argued that objects in detective fiction are rendered significant by the expectations that the genre creates – namely, that there will be objects that function as clues. Uncovering and detecting the “ideas in things” – the ideas in clues – is imperative for the resolution of the detective fiction plots. This thesis has argued that these ideas are both closely aligned to the contexts of these items as fashion accessories, and also to the detective fiction genre. The murderer and victim can be identified through this process of detecting these ideas. This identification involves exploring the clue-potential of these items to understand their different contexts and what these may – or may not – signify to reach the resolution of the

mystery. I outlined how thing theory's framing of a changed relationship between subject and object is central to understanding "things"; this understanding is itself an integral part of the detective fiction plot. Stewart's consideration of works by Virginia Woolf and Christie suggests that their 'treatment of objects cannot be separated from their treatment of subjects. Objects are significant because they belong to, are associated with, or are contemplated by individuals' (p. 190). I have suggested in this thesis that objects' significance relates to how these items are integral to the detective fiction plot. The changed relationship between subject and object – the "thingness" – is central to perceiving the clue-potential of these items. It is central to perceiving how items are related to specific characters, and how they are not, or have been manipulated to suggest otherwise. Consequently, the relationship between subject and object has significance for identifying the victim and murderer.

By advocating that the genre invites a purpose of reading for the identities of victims and murderers, I have not suggested that this process privileges the subject above all else. Indeed, my analysis of Christie's texts has reached a similar conclusion to Stewart. She suggests that Christie's and Woolf's texts demonstrate an 'awareness of [...] [objects] to resonate and reverberate, to influence the subject rather than be dominated by it' and that this 'results not in animism or the fetishization of objects but in a reconsideration of how they contribute to the texture of the world and literary representations of it' (p. 190). My analysis of Christie's texts has demonstrated that this reconsideration of items' 'contribution to the texture of the world' is closely aligned to the very nature of these items as fashion accessories. The texture of the world is evident through understanding these items in light of their contexts as fashion accessories. It also evident through how these items render the "text" of that world readable. Detective fiction entails a process of reading to acquire information to enable the identification of characters as victims and murderers. Objects and things provide this information. This therefore has implications for a feminised mode of reading: it is apparent that the genre invites readers – and detective characters – to pay attention to such items. Attention should also be paid to appreciate the broad range of information that these items can provide, depending on the mode of reading.

I posed the question, following Brown, at the beginning of this thesis of 'how are objects represented in [these...] text[s]? How are they made to mean?' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 18). I suggested that it is within the genre of detective fiction itself that we should look to answer these questions. This thesis has shown how the representation of objects in detective fiction texts – and their meanings – aligns to the mode in which they are read, both by detective

characters within the plots and by readers of the texts themselves. Soćko draws a similar conclusion to suggest that the ‘plurality of possible narratives in the conveyance of truth undermines the power of texts as carriers of revelation’, and that in ‘detective fiction the truth (“what really happened”) assumes the role of a socially significant mystery, which is to be solved in a procedure that resembles scientific investigation characteristic for the nineteenth century’ (p. 165). There is a plurality of possible narratives in detective fiction in relation to objects. Their clue-potential can be read towards the resolution of the narrative or can become misinterpreted as re(a)d herrings. Instead of perceiving the process of reading detective fiction as a procedure of nineteenth-century scientific investigation, the socially significant mystery can be detected through (socially) significant objects and their clue-potential. Understanding the contexts of these items provides meaning for the resolution of the mystery. Items are made to mean by the nature of the genre, and of the imperative towards detecting the resolution of the mystery.

In my Introduction, I outlined how the detective fiction genre provides a bridge between masculine and feminine modes of the middlebrow. The genre is typically assigned to the former, but the means of resolving the mystery relies on the latter for understanding significant details and contexts. This notion of a bridge in middlebrow modes has been central to my definition of a feminised mode of reading. Particularly, for how this mode of reading can usefully be applied to fashion accessories in Christie’s texts. Such a process involves understanding the contexts of fashion accessories and then applying these to the detective fiction plots. A feminised mode of reading also engages with the feminine middlebrow more broadly, and the place of detective fiction within that. Christie’s detective fiction has traditionally been located in the context of women-authored texts of the genre. Light describes how the genre was typically seen as a masculine form, mainly read by men, and that therefore ‘writing detective fiction was, and is, for many women writers not only a way of claiming the “unfeminine” qualities of orderliness and control, but also of attempting to avoid the “stigma” of gender altogether’ (p. 162).²⁸⁷ This thesis has shown that such qualities are also integral to a feminised mode of reading: reading clues is a process that involves a sense of order and control in employing relevant information. In describing this as a *feminised* mode of reading, I have also sought to avoid the “stigma” of gender that designates such order and control as

²⁸⁷ Horsley also describes how, although there were works by male authors, the “Golden Age” period is generally thought to be when detective fiction became ‘feminized’ and lists female authors, including Christie, amongst those typifying this (p. 38).

solely the preserve of the masculine middlebrow; nor is knowledge of fashion accessories only accessible to women readers.

Christie's texts are 'ideologically flexible' – as Humble notes and I discussed in the Introduction – in their use of contexts relating to fashion accessories (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 3). This flexibility extends to the mode of reading these texts. By advocating a feminised mode of reading these texts, I have shown how such a mode is not necessarily possible for all readers, both within and outside the plots. Detective characters are occasionally shown to not understand this mode of reading. It has also – to a certain extent – become a process of recovering information and contexts from outside the texts themselves. I recognise that this knowledge is becoming increasingly distant from the lived experience contemporaneous with the publication of Christie's novels. Therefore, to uncover such information relevant to fashion accessories has involved looking to other texts, such as magazines. I have uncovered close connections between these magazines and the novels, even to the nuances of slight changes in fashion trends, such as the angle of certain styles of women's hats in the early 1930s. These nuances are replicated in the novels as fundamental parts of the plots. My methodology of using contemporaneous magazines is by no means the only way in which to uncover connections between contemporaneous trends and the texts.²⁸⁸ Such connections demonstrate the value of reading Christie's texts with an understanding of these fashion contexts. This value has implications: a feminised mode of reading must look for ways to recover this knowledge in order to employ it in reading the novels.

The detective fiction genre – and Christie's use of it – requires an 'intellectually engaged' mode of reading, relying on knowledge, typically defined as feminine, of the everyday world.²⁸⁹ By describing this as intellectually engaged, and in showing how this mode of reading can be applied to Christie's texts, I have demonstrated how this is not to be defined as an opposition to reading for pleasure or entertainment purposes. Instead, it is a process that requires reflection and engagement with different types of knowledge – intellect – to then employ this in reading Christie's detective fiction plots. In concluding her study of the feminine middlebrow, Humble argues that 'the woman's middlebrow novel establishes itself as both exclusive and accessible. With its ideal reader repeatedly constructed as a woman

²⁸⁸ Study of examples of physical fashion accessories in archives, collections and museums could provide similarly fruitful connections to Christie's texts; I have focused on the literary examples, and hence my use of magazines.

²⁸⁹ This phrase is used by Humble – see *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 53. I discuss this terminology in the Introduction.

simultaneously discriminating and abandoned to the pleasure of the text, the feminine middlebrow is understood as both cultural and enjoyable' (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 255). Whilst I do not suggest that Christie's ideal reader must be a woman, the implication of balance in Humble's words *is* applicable to Christie's works. A feminised mode of reading these texts is a balance between having and not having the knowledge to understand items as clues. It is further aware of how reading to resolve the mystery involves discriminating relevant information. This process is not to the detriment of the 'enjoyable' aspects of this mode of reading, regardless of whether clue-potential of items is wholly understood.

The middlebrow informs this mode of reading Christie's texts. Consideration of fashion accessories and their significance to the plots has uncovered wide-ranging connections to middlebrow themes and concepts. This is also further apparent in my methodology of using women's magazines contemporaneous with the publication of Christie's texts and more recent histories of fashion to inform my consideration of fashion accessories. These insights have informed the feminised mode of reading the plots of the novels and its connection to the middlebrow. In focussing on women's fashion accessories, I have suggested that fashion itself should be considered as a further concept of the middlebrow. My analysis of these items in the texts and their significance to the plots has demonstrated how fashion relates to other middlebrow themes and concepts. It has also demonstrated how fashion informs reading the texts in their own right. An understanding of fashion, recognising its complexity, within the detective fiction plot can enable the resolution of the mystery. I have defined this complexity throughout my consideration of different types of fashion accessory by considering different aspects of these items. Such aspects include their materiality, style, relation to contemporary trends, amongst others; however, these are not exclusive. My understanding of a feminised mode of reading these items appreciates how different aspects may further inform understanding of fashion accessories. It allows for a broader consideration of such accessories' representation in the novels, and the connections to women's magazines of the period.

Focused on women's fashion accessories in these narratives, my analysis has demonstrated how these items occupy a centrality in the resolution of the detective narrative plots. This term "accessory" has frequently been defined as an addition. However, these items occupy a place where they might be considered as "accessories to murder". They have significance to interpreting the identities of victim and murderer, and so to resolving the mystery. There are implications for a feminised mode of reading detective fiction: this mode of reading refuses to

relegate such items to the periphery of the narratives. It demonstrates how the resolution of the plots invites such a refusal – invites objects and items to be considered as significant, and not dismissed. In so doing, the significance of these items relies on “accessory” information: information and knowledge of details and contexts related to the items that is found beyond these detective fiction plots. This information must be applied to consideration of these items to recognise their clue-potential. Application of this information therefore becomes a process that permits discrimination between clues and re(a)d herrings. A feminised mode of reading authorises employing knowledge of contexts related to these items – and taking a broad approach to that knowledge – to determine how these items can indicate the resolution of the mystery. In so doing, the identities inherent to the genre are understood. In determining between clues and re(a)d herrings, a feminised mode of reading can therefore understand both how the crime central to the plot has been constructed, and how uncovering this construction can lead to the resolution.

A feminised mode of reading recognises how resolving the plots relies on taking a broad approach, both to the individuality of the plot, and therefore of the items within it. The process of determining clues corresponds to Gulddal’s discussion of how ‘the clue is tied to a principle of cohesion [...] it forms the core of a stable sequence, allowing criminal acts to be detected based on the traces they leave behind’ (pp. 197–98). In discussing how a feminised mode of reading can be employed in Christie’s texts, it has not been my intention to imply that there is a ‘stable sequence’ to follow in this mode. There is not a step-by-step sequence of reading objects in the texts and uncovering their connection to the resolution of the mystery. Indeed, such a claim would obscure the highly individual nature of Christie’s texts; it would imply that the plots are similar, if not identical, in their trajectory towards detecting the resolution. The knowledge relevant to fashion accessories – and the point in the narrative at which that knowledge *becomes* relevant – differs in the different novels. Gulddal’s suggestion that the crime can be detected based on the traces left behind is, however, central to my discussion of fashion accessories and their clue potential in Christie’s texts. A feminised mode of reading recognises this clue-potential, but also the significance of this for the detective fiction genre. My discussion of the novels has shown how the clue-potential of items is related to Christie’s wider innovations in the genre. Clue-potential relates to concepts of the culpability of the murderer, and of the interchangeability of the identities of victim and murderer.

My reading of Christie's detective fiction has emphasised the clue-puzzle format of these texts. The format has in turn informed how I have approached my discussion of the details of the genre. Such details range from the trajectory of the plots, clues and re(a)d herrings, and identities of victim and murderer. I recognise that this is not unproblematic: Gulddal argues that the emphasis on the 'clue-puzzle' format excludes

the polar opposite of the clue, namely contingency. The chance occurrence, the stray object, or the meaningless expression have no place in detective stories based on the logic of clues. From the point of view of narrative structure, this logic creates a weave of connections that link all elements of the story – in other words, it imposes a syntax on the social world, particularly the world of crime, thereby replacing its opaqueness with a fiction of readability. (p. 198)

My analysis of the clue-potential of fashion accessories in Christie's texts has emphasised how none of these items are stray objects. There is a weave of connections between: knowledge applied through a feminised mode of reading to recognise this clue-potential; middlebrow themes and concepts; and innovations in the detective fiction genre. The significance of objects is therefore not just limited to specific elements of the story. Items have meaning in the texts more broadly, both in understanding their connection to genre, and the place of that genre within the middlebrow. Gulddal's framing of these connections is too narrow to encompass how this sense of understanding – reading – these items and their clue-potential provides wider connections. These are not just limited to the 'social world' and 'the world of crime', but to a broader sense of how the genre itself can be read. I have focused in this thesis on reading the genre through a feminised mode of reading. This mode itself relies on an understanding and appreciation of different genres to inform understanding of the detective fiction genre.

Rather than imposing a fiction of readability, Christie instead demonstrates how readability (or "read-ability") is in itself intrinsic to the resolution, and to the genre and its place within the middlebrow more broadly. It is the ability *to* read that is of significance. As Gulddal implies, this is common across both the world of the novel and the real world. Knowledge of fashion accessories is shared across both, as seen in the similarities between representations of fashion accessories in both women's magazines and the novels. This knowledge becomes applicable through a feminised mode of reading elements of the detective fiction plot. Determining clue-potential is a process that is open to these clues being less clearly defined than Gulddal's notion of a fiction of readability would perhaps imply. By suggesting that clue-potential is understood through a feminised mode of reading, this is not to adopt

unquestioningly the notion that the ‘opaqueness’ of the world of the novels thereby gains a (false) sense of clarity. By contrast, this mode of reading engages with concepts to understand that clue-potential can only be secured as part of a wider understanding of the resolution of the novel. Such concepts include the natural and the artificial, as discussed in relation to *A Caribbean Mystery*. I have deliberately described a (singular) feminised mode of reading, open to suggestion that there are other modes of reading these texts; yet the process of reading is always intrinsic to these novels.

Different aspects of this feminised mode of reading have been explored to argue that it is a mode through which Christie’s texts can be understood and appreciated, both by readers old and new. In so doing, I have sought to overturn common disparagements of her works. My discussion of two of Christie’s earliest short stories emphasised how her texts are not limited to solely a middle-class outlook in relation to class. Rather, her use of characters of different backgrounds demonstrates an awareness of how fashion accessories have value. They expose different modes of reading genre whereby such reading is not proscribed by class. I have particularly sought to demonstrate that Christie’s later texts and short stories are in no way weaker, or in some way less brilliant, examples of detective fiction than her interwar novels. Throughout my analysis of texts from across her writing career, I have shown that Christie’s plots all engage with the detective fiction genre. They demonstrate a clear sense of innovation and expansion of what the genre can encompass, and how it can be read. By focussing on fashion accessories, I have also established how Christie’s texts all demonstrate awareness and knowledge of the “modern” world. That is, the world contemporaneous to publication of the novels. Her descriptions and representations of fashion accessories are consistently up-to-date. Knowledge of these latest trends and fashions has significance for understanding the clue-potential of these items in relation to the resolution of the plots. In so doing, I advocate that any hierarchical “ranking” of Christie’s works is arbitrary, serving little purpose. This should be discarded in favour of a more indiscriminate appreciation of the texts: a feminised mode of reading Christie’s collective works, and not a privileging of a select few.

This thesis has taken a form of a single-author study, focussing on Christie’s works largely in isolation from other detective fiction and middlebrow writers of her era. Yet I strongly argue that the feminised mode of reading discussed here has potential to be applied to other texts. To open this thesis, I used two epigraphs from Christie’s texts. The first, from *The Pale Horse*, permitted me to emphasise how throughout these novels, the means of resolving the mystery lies in reading ‘[t]he thing that caught my attention’ (p. 707). Such a reading has

potential to be applicable to other detective fiction writing of this period, particularly those that share an emphasis on fashion. The second epigraph from *Mrs McGinty's Dead* demonstrates this emphasis, stating that 'nothing is more ridiculous than the fashions of yesterday' (pp. 72–73). Fellow detective fiction writer Margery Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938) opens with a similar discussion of

[w]hy is it that a garment which is honestly attractive in, say, 1910 should be honestly ridiculous a few years later and honestly charming again a few years later still is one of those things which are not satisfactorily to be explained and are therefore jolly and exciting and an addition to the perennial interest of life.²⁹⁰

Both Christie and Allingham emphasise here how fashions of yesterday can be ridiculous. However, this emphasis belies how the potential for understanding fashion can provide a means of resolving the mysteries at the heart of detective fiction plots. Such understanding has further connections beyond the genre itself. Allingham's suggestion that the changes in fashion 'are not satisfactorily to be explained and are therefore jolly and exciting and an addition to the perennial interest of life' summarises my approach to fashion accessories in Christie's texts. Reading fashion accessories in Christie's detective fiction uncovers connections to middlebrow concepts. These connections highlight how modes of reading can inform approaches to these texts; these modes of reading make use of the exciting and additional information that such items can provide. Fashion accessories and their clue-potential are central to the detective fiction plots: they are, ultimately, accessories to murder.

²⁹⁰ Margery Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds* (London: Vintage, 2016), p. 1.

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