

The Last Hurrah

An examination of the social change in Britain between the 1930's and the 1960's as depicted in Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* novels

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis discusses how the change in the British society and class system is reflected in three of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple novels written in the period of four decades: *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), *The Body in the Library* (1942) and *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side* (1962). The theoretical approach applied to the thesis is New Historicism. The aim of New Historicism is to understand history through literature and literature through history. The thesis discusses how reliable a depiction texts such as Christie's Miss Marple novels convey of the era they were written in. The results show that Christie's Miss Marple novels are a reliable depiction of the era they were written in since they do not contradict any major historical phenomena of the time and present the social change that occurred during that period in accordance with the mainstream historical narratives. Nevertheless, Christie's novels are not a neutral overview of the period but a commentary from the upper class perspective.

Keywords: New Historicism, social history, class, Britain

Table of Contents

1 Introduction	1
1.1 The primary sources	4
1.2 The secondary sources	6
1.3 The theoretical approach	8
1.4 Counterhistory and anecdotes	9
1.5 The background of the author	10
2 'We've outlived our usefulness.' Change in class relations.....	12
3 'We had housemaids then, you know.' Change in domestic service.....	30
4 'Cheap, tawdry, and flamboyant.' Change in manners and morals.....	41
5 'He's a producer – or do I mean a director?' Change in popular culture	48
6 Conclusion.....	52
List of References	54
Appendix 1: Finnish Summary	

1 Introduction

The opening of Agatha Christie's novel *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side* (1962) defines perfectly what my thesis is about: change. Change in society, the way people react to change, the way people write about change. The timeframe in which Christie wrote her novels, from the 1920's to the 1970's, included some of the most rapid and pivotal changes in the British society. Christie's stories were never intended as social commentary as such but as a contemporary account they offer a first-hand description of the phenomena of the period. *The Mirror Crack'd* was one of Christie's later works and in it she often reflects on how the British society had changed during the decades, as in the quote below:

St Mary Mead, the old world core of it, was still there. The Blue Boar was there, and the church and the vicarage and the little nest of Queen Anne and Georgian houses, of which hers was one. Miss Hartnell's house was still there, and also Miss Hartnell, fighting progress to the last gasp. Miss Wetherby had passed on and her house was now inhabited by the bank manager and his family, having been given a face-lift by the painting of doors and windows a bright royal blue. There were now people in most of the other old houses, but the houses themselves were little changed in appearances since the people who had bought them had done so because they liked what the house agent called 'old world charm'. They just added another bathroom, and spent a good deal of money on plumbing, electric cookers, and dish-washers. But though the houses looked much as before, the same could hardly be said of the village street. When shops changed hands there, it was with a view to immediate and intemperate modernization. The fishmonger was unrecognizable with new super windows behind which the refrigerated fish gleamed. The butcher had remained conservative – good meat is good meat, if you have the money to pay for it. If not, you take the cheaper cuts and the tough joints and like it! Barnes, the grocer, was still there, unchanged, for which Miss Hartnell and Miss Marple and other daily thanked Heaven. So obliging, comfortable chairs to sit in by the counter, and cosy discussions as to cuts of bacon, and varieties of cheese. At the end of the street, however, where Mr Toms had once had his basket shop stood a glittering new supermarket – anathema to the elderly ladies of St Mary Mead. 'Packets of things one's never even heard of,' exclaimed Miss Hartnell. 'All these great packets of breakfast cereal instead of cooking a child a proper breakfast of bacon and eggs. And you're expected to take a basket yourself and go round looking for things – it takes quarter of an hour sometimes to find all one wants – and usually

made up in inconvenient sizes, too much or too little. And then a long queue waiting to pay as you go out. Most tiring.' (Christie 1962, 3-4)

The quote above splendidly demonstrates Christie's style: detailed description of social change with a touch of bittersweet nostalgia. That is also my main objective in this thesis: to detect the parts where Christie's personal nostalgia has tinted the way she portrays the British society of the era.

In this thesis I will examine how the change in the British society and class system is reflected in three of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple novels written in the period of four decades: *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), *The Body in the Library* (1942) and *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side* (1962) (referred to as St Mary Mead novels in the thesis from now on for the sake of clarity). Miss Marple is, alongside Hercule Poirot, Christie's most famous sleuth and the main character in twelve of her novels and twenty of her short stories.

Miss Marple is an elderly spinster living in the fictional village of St Mary Mead. She is famous for solving crimes with her quick wit and wide knowledge of human nature, but unlike Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple is not a professional detective. Her background is never extensively covered but from the mentions in the stories in which she features it can be concluded that Miss Marple is an upper class lady with aristocratic relations and friends. The first Marple story was published in 1927 and the last in 1976.

The reason I chose these three novels for examination is that they all take place in the same setting, Miss Marple's home village of St Mary Mead. The village is indeed fictive and it is set in the also-fictive county of Radforshire, South East England. The village is described as small, charming and sleepy, a model of traditional English country village. For the purposes of my thesis it helps that the setting and most of the characters remain the same. Another reason for choosing these particular novels is that they are written and set in the timespan of thirty years. From the interbellum idyll of *The Murder at the Vicarage* to the uncertainty brought on by the war in *The Body in the Library* all the way to the brave new world of the Swinging Sixties in *The Mirror Crack'd*, in her St Mary Mead novels Agatha Christie presents the most crucial and radical social shift in the British society in recent history. I will examine this period and the changes that occurred within it from three perspectives: class, manners and morals,

and popular culture. In the class section I will also pay particular attention to the change in domestic service during that period.

The theoretical approach I will apply to my thesis is New Historicism. The aim of New Historicism is to understand history through literature and literature through history. Thus I will pose the question in my thesis: how reliable a depiction texts such as Christie's St Mary Mead novels convey of the era they were written in? How do these novels present the era they were written and set in? What sort of an effect did the era they were written in have on the novels? For the base for New Historicist deliberations in the thesis I will use Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt's *Practicing New Historicism* (2000).

I will introduce the mainstream historical narratives of the era covered in the novels before examining how the St Mary Mead novels mirror those narratives. For the more general presentation of the era I will mainly use material from Lawrence James's *Aristocrats: Britain's Great Ruling Classes from 1066 to the Present* (2009), Martin Pugh's *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (2008) and Dominic Sandbrook's *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (2005). To introduce Agatha Christie's background I will use Lydia Kyzlinkova's article "Social Issues in Agatha Christie's Mysteries: Country, Class, Crime, Clothes and Children" (1997) and Jared Cade's biography *Agatha Christie* (2006).

Particularly the decline of the upper classes is very much present in Christie's St Mary Mead novels. Christie herself belonging to the upper echelon of society was naturally in a perfect position to convey the feelings and exacts of that decline. In the St Mary Mead novels there is a clear continuum in the way the decline of the upper classes is described. However, it must be remembered that Christie's own upper class background naturally has influenced her in this matter and the plight of the aristocrats receives disproportioned attention in her novels. But, on the other hand, were it not for the novels such as Christie's, the plight of the upper classes might not warrant a place at all in the mainstream narratives of history.

I have divided the thesis in six: in the first chapter I will introduce the primary sources, the principal secondary sources, the theoretical approach and the background of the author. In the following four chapters I will examine how the social change in Britain between the 1930's and the 1960's is depicted in St Mary Mead novels

and by applying New Historicist concepts compare those depictions to mainstream narratives of history. In the sixth and last chapter I will present my results and conclusions.

1.1 The primary sources

In this section I will introduce my primary sources, the three novels by Agatha Christie (*The Murder at the Vicarage* (1932), *The Body in the Library* (1940) and *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side* (1962)), the major plot points and the main characters. *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1932) is notable for being the first novel to feature Miss Marple. It introduces the village of St Mary Mead, although the character of Miss Marple already appeared in an earlier short story by Christie. *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1932) opens with the murder of Colonel Lucius Protheroe. He is found shot in the study of the local vicar Leonard Clement who lives in the vicarage with his wife Griselda and his nephew Dennis. The murdered Colonel Protheroe was the most hated man in the village. His first wife one day just walked out of the door and never came back. The Colonel leaves behind his daughter Lettice and his second wife Anne, neither of them too sorry for his death. At the time of the Colonel's death St Mary Mead is replete with rumours of church offering thefts and illicit romances. A handsome painter by the name of Lawrence Redding is visiting the village and has sent the hearts of the village's women to flutter. The rumour has it that he is involved with both of the Protheroe women, the daughter and the stepmother. The village gossips, such as Miss Hartnell and Miss Weatherby, are appalled.

Miss Marple, however, is not bothered with idle gossip. The shrewd spinster who lives next door to the vicarage is privy to all the secrets there are in the village. She has a reputation of someone who knows everyone and draws the worst possible conclusions about everything. She believes that the worst option is usually the correct one. Other prominent characters in the novel are the village doctor Haydock, the vicarage maid Mary, a mysterious new resident in the village Mrs Lestrangle and archaeologist Dr Stone and his assistant Gladys Cram. There is no shortage of suspects in the village, especially when everyone has something against Colonel Protheroe. In the

end, as per usual, Miss Marple is able to solve the murder and put the local police in shame.

The Body in the Library (1942) introduces the great country house of St Mary Mead, Gossington Hall, and its owners Colonel and Mrs Bantry. The novel begins with the Bantries being woken up by their maid and informed that there is a body in their library. Neither Colonel nor Mrs Bantry first believes the maid but the information is soon confirmed by their trustworthy butler Lorrimer. There really is a body of a dead, blonde, young woman in the library of Gossington Hall. The police is alerted and Mrs Bantry also calls her old friend Miss Marple inviting her to come over.

The fact that the body of a beautiful young woman has been found in Colonel Bantry's library sends the tongues wagging in St Mary Mead. Everybody think that the Colonel must be guilty. However, the pathologist report states that the dead girl was a virgin. The suspicion then falls on Basil Blake who is disliked by the villagers for throwing immoral parties in his house. The body is later identified as Ruby Keene, a dancer in the nearby Majestic Hotel. Miss Marple and Mrs Bantry travel to the hotel and get acquainted with Ruby Keene's dancing partner Raymond Starr and her cousin Josephine Turner who also works at the hotel. They also come across an old friend of the Bantries, Conway Jefferson. He is an elderly man who has lost most of his family in a plane crash. He is now staying at the Majestic with his son-in-law Mark Gaskell, his daughter-in-law Adelaide Jefferson and her son from an earlier marriage, Peter Carmody. The plot thickens as a local girl scout Pamela Reeves is reported missing. Soon a burnt car is found on a nearby beach with a body of a young woman in it. The plot begins to unravel, at least to Miss Marple, and she sets a trap which finally leads her to the real murderer of that body in the library.

In *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side* (1962) things in St Mary Mead are not as they used to be. There is a new supermarket in the village and a new residential area called The Development. Nowadays women go to work and wear trousers. Miss Marple is getting old and the doctor has forbidden her from gardening. She is accompanied by a daily help girl Cherry and an elderly companion called Miss Knight. Miss Marple despises Miss Knight because she treats Miss Marple like a little baby. The supermarket and women wearing trousers are not the only changes in the village. The Clements no longer live in the vicarage and Colonel Bantry has died. After her husband's

death Mrs Bantry has sold Gossington Hall, to the horror of the villagers, to Americans. At the beginning of the novel a Hollywood film star, Marina Gregg, and her sixth husband, Jason Rudd, move into Gossington Hall causing great excitement in St Mary Mead. To appease the villagers who mourn the loss of their great country house to the Americans, Marina Gregg holds a garden party. However, the party is spoiled when a local woman, Heather Badcock, dies of a stroke. Later it turns out that she was poisoned. The police believe that the poison was actually meant for Marina Gregg but Miss Marple is not so sure. The old lady may be confined to her own drawing room because of her age, but that does not stop her from solving the crime without even leaving the said room.

1.2 The secondary sources

In this section I will introduce the principal secondary sources used for historical and theoretical research in this thesis. The reason for choosing this particular material for the principal secondary sources in my thesis is that these books all provide a comprehensive and general overview of their respective subjects. The aim of my thesis to compare Christie's texts to mainstream historical narratives and for this purpose I decided that source material which gives an extensive summary of Britain's social history would serve the best.

Pugh's *We Danced All Night* is a wide-ranging outline of the British society from the end of the First World War to the beginning of the Second. It encompasses the way the British reacted to the trauma of the Great War by indulging in numerous entertainment activities, and the nostalgia the British people felt for the pre-war days. Pugh recounts how the upper classes refused to accept the realities of the changing world and how their escapism was one of the reasons that drove Britain into another world war. *We Danced All Night* also reflects on such social phenomena as the birth of the consumer society and the evolution of popular culture that took place in the interbellum era.

Sandbrook's *Never Had It So Good* depicts the changes Britain went through after the Second World War. He pays particular attention to the modern consumer

society, rising immigration and the way new pop culture shook the traditional values of the British society. In his research Sandbrook also explores the collision of cultural nostalgia and economic realities.

James's *Aristocrats* covers the history of the British upper classes from the arrival of William the Conqueror in 1066 to the present. For the purposes of this thesis I will mostly use the last chapters of James's book, which address the decline of the upper classes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He describes the development which led the aristocracy to fall from grace economically, socially and politically. He also reports how the upper classes reacted to their own decline and how they as a class managed to survive all the way to this day and age.

In the section concerning the change in domestic service my main source will be Lucy Delap's *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in the Twentieth Century Britain* (2011). Delap gives an extensive account of the lives of the servant classes in the last century Britain. She discussed topics such as servants' living conditions, wages and duties, the way the domestic service evolved during the century and the role servants have had in popular culture. Delap's research is remarkable for being one of the few studies exploring the topic of domestic service in its own context.

To explore the background of Agatha Christie I will use the biography *Agatha Christie* (2006) by Jared Cade and an article "Social Issues in Agatha Christie's Mysteries: Country, Class, Crime, Clothes and Children" (1997) by Lydia Kyzlinkova. Cade's biography of Christie centres on her mysterious disappearance in 1926 but also gives an overview of her life in general. Kyzlinkova's article focuses on the way Christie's background is reflected in her texts.

My source for exploring New Historicism is Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt's *Practising New Historicism* (2000). Gallagher and Greenblatt introduce the theory in layman's terms and explain the core ideas of New Historicism. Their aim is to persuade the reader that New Historicism is not as old-fashioned as its reputation and that the theory is useful for interpreting literature. In the next section I will introduce the main features of New Historicism and the theory's concepts I will be using in this thesis.

1.3 The theoretical approach

Literature is to be examined and interpreted in the context of the period it was written in and the context of the history of the author. This, in its simplest form, is the core of New Historicism. New Historicism asks questions such as what kind of an effect the era in which the work was written had on it and in which ways the work reflects the writer's background. The theory of New Historicism has largely been formed by the literature critic Stephen Greenblatt who in turn has been greatly influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, a philosopher.

New Historicism is often criticised for being old-fashioned. Some say that it is not even a proper theory (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 2). The starting point for New Historicism is that there is no unitary history (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 5). According to Gallagher and Greenblatt "any individual culture, no matter how complex or elaborate, can express and experience only a narrow range of the options available to the human species" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 5). With that they mean that no written history is the absolute truth and in that vein any form of literature should be studied as a historical account of the period it was written in. Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 9) accept the fact that major works of history writing remain the centre of research but they believe that lesser texts have an important aspect to add to the canon. They describe that such texts have been considered to have been written by "a rabble of half-crazed religious visionaries, semiliterate political agitators, coarse-face peasants in hobnailed boots, dandies whose writings had been discarded as ephemera, imperial bureaucrats, freed slaves, women novelists dismissed as impudent scribblers, learned women excluded from easy access to the materials of scholarship, scandalmongers, provincial politicians, charlatans, and forgotten academics" (2000, 9-10).

New Historicism believes that all literature texts should be regarded as major achievements since they will unavoidably alter the canonical view on history. In their part works that are considered classics should be re-examined. According to Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 10) a more minor work of literature can "weaken the primacy of classic works" or, on the other hand, underline their prominence. Nevertheless, it is not New Historicism's aim to demote traditional historical research but broaden the field with the inclusion of lesser texts (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000,

12). New Historicism also recognises the problem there is: how to identify the essential ones from the enormous selection of texts? Gallagher and Greenblatt give no straight answer to this but settle for describing New Historicism as “a history of possibilities” (2000, 16). In the next section I will introduce the two concepts of New Historicism I am going to apply to my thesis: counterhistory and anecdotes.

1.4 Counterhistory and anecdotes

Counterhistory is, according to Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 52), “a spectrum of assaults” on the accepted historical narrative. Counterhistory contests prevailing narratives and predominant approaches of research. In New Historicist view counterhistories provide alternative chronologies (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 53). There is often an autobiographical touch to counterhistories which is why they are disregarded by mainstream historical research. New Historicists believe that the autobiographical side in counterhistories only deepens the mainstream historical narrative (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 58). Some believe that belles-lettres in itself can be read as one large counterhistory since fiction frequently concentrates on those who are in one way or another in opposition to the mainstream (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 60). Counterhistories are frequently built on anecdotes (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 58).

Anecdotes, then again, are considered trivial by most mainstream historians. They may serve as a rhetorical embellishment but nothing more. The aim of mainstream historians is to create a canon and anecdotes often counter that objective. New Historicism, on the other hand, believes that anecdotes enrich the canon and not argue against it (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 49). According to Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 50) mainstream historians feel that anecdotes “interrupt the continuous flow of larger histories. New Historicists literary critics think that anecdotes actually reveal a reality different to the accepted historical narrative. Of course there are plenty of anecdotes which are too outlandish to be taken seriously but most anecdotes open history and question historical truths (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 51).

Counterhistory and anecdotes are the two concepts I will apply to Agatha Christie's texts in the second chapter of this thesis

1.5 The background of the author

Agatha Christie née Miller was born on 15 September 1890 in Torquay, Devon, England to Frederick Miller, an American-born stockbroker and Clara née Boehmer. The family was financially secured and very much upper middle class in style. Christie, however, received no formal education. She learned singing and playing the piano in Paris and entered the society in 1910. She married Second Lieutenant Archibald Christie in 1914. With him she had a daughter Rosalind but the marriage ended in divorce in 1928. In 1930 she married her second husband, archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan with whom she was married until her death in 1976. Christie's first novel *The Mysterious Affairs at Styles* was published in 1920. The last one, *Sleeping Murder*, was published posthumously in 1976. (Cade 2006, 7-29).

The setting of Christie's own life delivered the setting for most of her stories: a huge upper class household with large domestic staff, and friends and family members staying. This was a natural choice since settings such as country houses provided multiple possibilities in victims, witnesses and suspects in a closed set-up. Most importantly it was a setting with which Christie was very well acquainted. She was familiar with the manners and morals of the British upper class milieu and it was easy for her to set her mysteries in that kind of surroundings. As a consequence the British society featured in Christie's texts is a somewhat conservative one and her characters conventional. Even though Christie is famous for making fun of her contemporaries' preoccupation with class and social hierarchy, her texts themselves are a model example of preoccupation with class (Kyzlinkova 1997, 116).

The way Christie depicts the working classes in her stories is a good example of Christie's class-conscious worldview. There are hardly any major working class characters in any of her stories. If there are, they are usually servants. Likewise, many working class minor characters in Christie's stories are portrayed as "foolish, child-like and endlessly loyal to the upper classes" (Kyzlinkova 1997, 123). Moreover,

characters of foreign extraction are often treated with prejudice. Although Christie often made fun of the upper class's predisposition against foreigners with the character of Hercule Poirot, many other foreign characters in her stories are usually regarded as a danger (Kyzlinkova 1997, 119). Christie's conventional mindset is also evident in the manner in which she portrayed younger characters: regardless of their young age they are frequently very old-fashioned in their conduct and traditional in their views and beliefs (Kyzlinkova 1997, 123). According to Kyzlinkova Agatha Christie was at her happiest "when everyone had a place, knew it, kept it, and dressed accordingly".

For the purposes of this thesis it is essential to bear in mind what kind of a background Christie had. New Historicism puts great value on how the author's own background has affected his or her texts. Upper class upbringing, financially secured lifestyle, conservative opinions and conventional manners are the essential characteristics from Christie's background to be examined in this thesis.

2 'We've outlived our usefulness.' Change in class relations

In the following three chapters I will discuss the social change that occurred in Britain between the 1930's and the 1960's and how those changes are depicted in Christie's St Mary Mead novels. First I am going to briefly introduce the main historical events and phenomena of that period and then offer a more focused examination of the British society and Christie novels through three themes: class relations, manners and morals, and popular culture. When interpreting Christie's work from a New Historicist perspective one has to take into account two crucial aspects: how has the era in which Christie's St Mary Mead novels were written affected the way they present British society, and in addition, how has Christie's own background influenced her writing? New Historicism believes that texts such as detective fiction enrich the accepted canon of historical research, even though sometimes interrupting the so-called flow of history and occasionally even contradicting the more mainstream larger histories. In the following I will discuss how the change in the British class society between the 1930's and the 1960's is depicted in Christie's texts and what kind of counterhistories these depictions form. I will also examine how Christie's depictions relate to mainstream historical research and how relevant they can be considered.

The interbellum Britain was a country divided: on one hand still handicapped by the trauma of the First World War but on the other enjoying the opportunities the post-war world war offering: freedom, higher incomes, cultural novelties such as jazz and cinema, more relaxed fashions and more relaxed moral standards (Pugh 2008, 2). Gone were the strict moral codes of Victoria and the pompous etiquettes of the Edwardian age. Nevertheless, the heavy losses in the war and the post-war unemployment followed by the Great Depression greatly dissatisfied the nation (Pugh 2008, 8). The euphoria of victory in 1918 was short-lived and throughout the interbellum era Britain was feeling insecure as a nation. Despite being on the winning side, the Great War had pointed out Britain's vulnerabilities (Pugh 2008, 17). These vulnerabilities came to the forefront in 1939 when Britain was once again ushered to another world war.

The Second World War interrupted the liberating process which had started at the end of the first one, concerning personal freedom, fashions, culture and

morals, but by the 1950's Britain was back on track to be one of the most stable and contented countries in the world (Sandbrook 2005, 29). People lived longer and enjoyed generally good health. Unemployment remained under two per cent for good many years (Pugh 2008, 446). Class society was still firmly in place but at the same time social mobility was greater than ever. Welfare state, nationalisation and trade unions became a part of the everyday life in Britain (Sandbrook 2005, 40). Queen Elizabeth II ascended the throne in 1952 and this was seen by many as the end of the post-war gloom and doom (Sandbrook 2005, 42). Whereas in the interbellum Britain the nation was engulfed in pessimism, after the Second World War the British felt their own exceptionalism stronger than ever. Contempt for both the Continental Europe and the United States sharpened. King George VI reportedly remarked to his mother Queen Mary that "he was pleased 'now that we have no allies to be polite to and pamper'" (Sandbrook 2005, 43). Sandbrook (2005, 44) notes that "this romanticised, nostalgic patriotism remained a powerful force in British life for decades afterwards".

The First World War saw the beginning of the decline of the British upper classes (Pugh 2008, 346). The high casualties of the war hit the upper classes especially hard since they were subsequently exposed to enormous death duties. This in turn resulted in once great families falling into poverty and being forced to sell their ancient family homes (Pugh 2008, 349). Fall of monarchies all over Europe, spreading of democracy and socialism, and high taxation, particularly on land, placed by Liberal and Labour governments did not help the upper classes' plight (James 2009, 366). Along with their money the upper classes also lost most of their influence. The House of Lords was marginalised in daily politics and power centralised in the House of Commons (James 2009, 375). The Conservative Party had long been the stronghold of the aristocracy but peers were soon dethroned by the steady rise of the middle classes (Pugh 2008, 360). Since 1902 there had not been any peers as Prime Minister and in the interbellum era both the Tory candidates and the Tory supporters became increasingly bourgeois (James 2009, 374).

If the First World War saw the beginning of the decline of the upper classes, the second one put the finishing touches on it. "A field marshal's wife polishing the silver and stairs, abandoned gardens and rooms covered in dustsheets" was the way diarist James Lees-Milne described the state of the upper class in the post-1945 Britain (James

2009, 379). The difference between middle classes and upper classes became vague, somebody even claiming that “the upper class was now solely distinguished by its language” (Sandbrook 2005, 35). Thousands of old family houses were sold or simply torn down, and even greater portion were opened to public as tourist attractions (Sandbrook 2005, 38)

Nevertheless, even though their traditional way of life and their position in the British society was irrevocably altered between the 1930’s and the 1960’s, the upper classes as a whole survived (James 2009, 367). Lawrence James claims (2009, 369) that this is because although modern Britain may have “drive for social equality”, it has not “eliminated old-fashioned snobbery”. The upper classes have always been and continue to be an integral part of the national life of Britain, paragons of patriotism and nostalgia (James 2009, 367).

“The triumph of the middle classes” had already began in the Victorian era (James 2009, 310). The period between the 1930’s and the 1960’s finally witnessed the middle classes overtaking the upper classes in terms of wealth and influence. The middle classes saw themselves as a go-between for the upper classes and the lower classes, thus creating an influential position for themselves in the heated political climate of the 1930’s (Pugh 2008, 87-88). The middle classes virtually increased in numbers as new job opportunities were born after the First World War, as teachers or police officers for example, offered a way for the lower classes to rise above their station and advance into the ranks of the middle class (Pugh 2008, 92). The middle classes also became that social group whose attitude towards women going to work was the most favourable. This was partly due to the fact that the financial strains brought on by the war and the economic depression of the 1930’s made it more difficult for middle class families to support their daughters financially (Pugh 2008, 184).

As the novelist Nancy Mitford put it, after the Second World War “it was this affluent, middle class world of modern gadgets, brown suits and serviettes that was in the ascendant” (Sandbrook 2005, 37). It was now the middle classes who had the power to sway political supremacy from one party to another. The upper classes being steadfastly Conservative and the lower classes even more unwaveringly Labour, it was the votes of the middle classes the politicians had to seek after (Sandbrook 2005, 94). The phenomena of affluent society and consumerism were very much personified in the

middle classes. This development had already started in the 1930's and although it was interrupted by the Second World War, it continued unflinching during the 1950's and the 1960's. At the same time the upper classes were forced to give up the luxuries of the old world, the standard of living for the middle classes remained ascending.

Class relations, especially between the upper classes and the lower classes, worsened during the interbellum period. The war had deepened the economic distress of the lower classes and the automatic deference towards their social superiors was diminishing (Pugh 2009, 86). The working class unionised and the Labour Party became a legitimate political force (Pugh 2008, 86). By the 1930's the increasing social mobility, however, eased the lower classes' plight. Through entrepreneurship the lower classes made their way into the middle classes and especially shop keeping became a popular practice to rise in the social scale (Pugh 2008, 92). Similarly to the middle classes women, the women of the lower classes also entered the labour market (Pugh 2008, 185).

Improvement in the social position of the lower classes continued to increase after the Second World War. By the 1960's the working class had enjoyed a decade of virtually full employment and poverty was no longer the hallmark of the British lower classes (Sandbrook 2005, 32). Despite the class tensions of the interbellum era, the unions and general democratisation and growing social equality, after the Second World War there was more inequality amongst the lower classes themselves than between the upper and lower classes (Sandbrook 2005, 33). "There was not one working class, rather multitude of working classes", Sandbrook (2005, 33) writes.

As depicted above, the general trend in the British society all the way from the interbellum era to the beginning of the 1960's was the decline of the upper class and the simultaneous rise of the middle and lower classes. In the beginning of *The Murder in the Vicarage* the reader is introduced to a world where everything is still as it used to be. St Mary Mead is described as "a stagnant pool" by Miss Marple's nephew (Christie 1930, 196). The characters in the novel possess the stereotypical traits of their class:

'How did Mrs Protheroe take it?' I asked.

'Well – she was very quiet – but then she always is.'

'Yes.' I said. 'I can't imagine Anne Protheroe going into hysterics.'
(Christie 1930, 53)

This is how Anne Protheroe, lady of the local manor house, is described after hearing the news of her husband's murder. The very stiff-upper-lip picture painted of Mrs Protheroe is in line with contemporary definitions of the character of the members of the upper classes. "Devil-may-care, dismissive manner of the well-bred who took nothing too seriously" is the way diarist James Lee-Milne described the way the British upper class behaved (James 2009, 368). Another upper class stereotype in *The Murder at the Vicarage* is the upper classes' association with India. Miss Marple and Griselda are talking of Mrs Protheroe's relatives and Griselda notes "'They all seem to be dead or in India.'" (Christie 1930, 199). Imperial government in India and other colonies was for the upper classes the last bastion of the good old world where they could escape when the social order in Britain was falling around their ears (James 357-361). The casual reference to the connection between India and the upper classes is a prime example of the kind of anecdotes which are central to the way New Historicists interpret literature (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 49). The mainstream historical research would not pay attention to it since it is trivial. Historians focus, according to Gallagher and Greenblatt (2005, 49), on things that can be generalised because consequently their historical significance can be easily proven. A connection between the upper classes and India made by Miss Marple cannot be generalised as a fact which states that there indeed was a special connection between the British upper classes and India. As a consequence such a remark is ignored by historians. To New Historicists, on the other hand, Miss Marple's remark is an anecdote which is not trivial in regards to historical study but an addition to it. As casual and irrelevant the remark may be, it gives a glimpse to the mindset of the upper classes of that time and as a result produces what Gallagher and Greenblatt (2005, 49) call "the touch of the real" to the objectivity of mainstream history.

The social order where the upper classes lay down the law to their social inferiors is still strictly adhered to in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. When Mrs Price-Ridley, a widow and a friend of Miss Marple, is in trouble, she turns to the lord of the manor, Colonel Protheroe: "'And she flounced away and, I gather, took her troubles to Colonel Protheroe.'" (Christie 1930: 4). Mrs Price Ridley's confidence on the fact that the lord of

the manor will sort out her problems is positively feudal and highlights the superior position the upper classes still had in the interbellum Britain. When the Colonel is later murdered in the Vicarage, the case raises ultimate curiosity because of the upper class persons and surroundings involved in it:

The inquest was held that afternoon (Saturday) at two o'clock at the Blue Boar. The local excitement was, I need hardly say, tremendous. There had been no murder in St Mary Mead for at least fifteen years. And to have someone like Colonel Protheroe murdered actually in the Vicarage study is such a feast of sensation as rarely falls to the lot of a village population. (Christie 1930, 168)

This was an era when celebrities such as film stars and sportsmen were just beginning to make headlines, and local notables, such as Colonel Protheroe, were considered celebrities. Again, Christie provides multiple anecdotes about the way lower classes showed their deference to the upper classes. These anecdotes do not provide historical evidence as such, but they complete the story of mainstream history.

The old-world deference to the upper classes shown by the lower classes is still present in *The Body in the Library*, personified in the character of Constable Palk:

'Yes, yes, Gossington Hall. Yes? Oh, good morning, sir.' Police Constable Palk's tone underwent a slight modification. It became less impatiently official, recognising the generous patron of the police sports and the principal magistrate of the district. (Christie 1942, 6)

and:

Outside the library door Constable Palk stood on guard. He intercepted Mrs Bantry with a show of authority.

'I'm afraid nobody is allowed in, madam. Inspector's orders.'

'Nonsense, Palk,' said Mrs Bantry. 'You know Miss Marple perfectly well.' Constable Palk admitted knowing Miss Marple.

'It's very important that she should see the body', said Mrs Bantry. 'Don't be stupid, Palk. After all, it's my library, isn't it?'

Constable Palk gave way. His habit of giving in to the gentry was lifelong. (Christie 1942, 10)

The conduct between the upper class Bantries and the working class police constable is a telling depiction of the centuries long relationship between the British upper and lower classes. The upper class expected deference and submission from their inferiors and received it (James 2009, 117). In return, the lower classes could rely on the upper classes to support them if need be.

A similar attitude of commanding deference is likewise exemplified by Mrs Bantry and Constable Palk in *The Body in the Library*:

There was the sound of a car scrunching on the gravel outside. Constable Palk said with urgency: 'That'll be the Inspector...'
True to his ingrained belief that the gentry didn't let you down, Mrs Bantry immediately moved to the door. Miss Marple followed her. Mrs Bantry said: 'That'll be all right, Palk.'
Constable Palk was immensely relieved.
(Christie 1942, 12)

Mrs Bantry is ready to use her social position to bend Constable Palk into her will but as a favour in return she makes sure the Constable will not get into trouble because of her actions. This a classic example of Noblesse Oblige, a belief of the upper class that a person of certain social rank is required to fulfil his or her responsibilities towards lesser beings (James 2009, 326).

The interaction between Mrs Bantry and Constable Palk demonstrates how texts such as Christie's novels interrupt the flow of history. The mainstream historical narrative, as stated above, maintains a picture of strict British social hierarchy and class-consciousness. To a certain extent Christie also adheres to this narrative. However, occasionally she differs from it and breaks the texture of the historical narrative. Gallagher and Greenblatt call this "exposing history" (2000, 50). The relationship between Mrs Bantry and Constable Palk is at first in accordance with the historical narrative: Mrs Bantry is the social superior and exercises her power on the Constable. Up to this point their relationship complies with the mainstream narrative but the way Mrs Bantry at the same time takes care that Constable Palk will not get into trouble, contradicts the narrative and produces something real. The outset of their relationship is something mainstream history can generalise: an upper class lady in the 1940's was superior in every way to a policeman. However, what mainstream history cannot

generalise, is the Noblesse Oblige attitude of the upper classes towards their social inferiors because references to it are usually found in texts such as Christie's. In short, Christie's depiction of the give and take relationship between Mrs Bantry and Constable Palk cannot be generalised to represent the relationship between their respective classes but it is however an evidence of the subtleties that there were in that relationship. These subtleties are what New Historicism wants to detect and with them complete the texture of mainstream historical narrative.

However, already in the first St Mary Mead novel, *The Murder in the Vicarage*, an encounter between the Vicar and Colonel Protheroe portrays the growing uneasiness experienced by the upper classes in the interbellum era:

I was just going home when I met Colonel Protheroe. He was in high good-humour, having sentenced three poachers, in his capacity as magistrate. 'Firmness,' he shouted in his stentorian voice. He is slightly deaf and raises his voice accordingly as deaf people often do. 'That's what needed nowadays – firmness! Make an example. That rogue Archer came out yesterday and is vowing vengeance against me, I hear. Impudent scoundrel. Threatened men live long, as the saying goes. I'll show him what his vengeance is worth next time I catch him taking my pheasants. Lax! We're too lax nowadays! I believe in showing a man up for what he is. You're always being asked to consider a man's wife and children. Damned nonsense. Fiddlesticks. Why should a man escape the consequences of his acts just because he whines about his wife and children? It's all the same to me – no matter what a man is – doctor, lawyer, clergyman, poacher, drunken wastrel – if you catch him on the wrong side of the law, let the law punish him.'

(Christie 1930, 37-38)

The attitude of Colonel Protheroe is a fine example of the manner in which the upper classes attempted to compensate for their waning influence in the British society. Newfound democracy and social equality and fairness were seen as weakness by the upper classes and they called for stronger measures against what they perceived as "too lax", as described by Colonel Protheroe. The upper classes were united by suspicion, nihilism and terror, brought on by their changing social circumstances and blamed their misfortunes on the undisciplined lower classes (James 2009, 371).

The class relations in Christie's novels and the change in them can also be looked at through the theme of snobbery. In Christie's earlier work snobbery could be

quite casual, such as the Vicar's wife Griselda describing a servant girl in *The Murder at the Vicarage*: "Not such a bad sort, really,' said Griselda, as the door closed behind her. 'Terribly common, of course, but one of those big, bouncing, good-humoured girls that you can't dislike.'" (Christie 1930, 90). In addition to Griselda's snobbery, this quote also shows the patronising attitude of the upper classes, which will be discussed later in this section.

Snobbery as a historical phenomenon is something that has to be examined through anecdotes. A classic case of British snobbery is displayed in *The Body in the Library* in a conversation between the Vicar and Mrs Price-Ridley, an upper class widow:

'I distinctly heard him tell the driver to go to – where do you think?'
Mr Clement looked inquiring.
'An address in St John's Wood!'
Mrs Price Ridley paused triumphantly.
The vicar remained completely unenlightened.
'That, I consider, proves it,' said Mrs Price Ridley.
(Christie 1940, 44)

As depicted by Ivan Reid in *Social Class Differences in Britain* (1977), his research on the nature of class differences in Britain, a person's social standing can be deduced by where he or she lives (Reid 1977, 158). In the above quote Mrs Price Ridley is convinced that since somebody goes to St John's Wood, a peculiar area by her standards, it proves their suspiciousness. The Vicar, being less snobbish than Mrs Price Ridley, fails to understand Mrs Price Ridley's reasoning. A historian would never consider such an interaction as historical evidence of class relations. New Historicists, however, regard that as something that opens the mainstream historical narrative. In New Historicist view the relationships between people and their attitudes can never be generalised. The mainstream narrative can describe the larger context but details, such as Mrs Price Ridley's snobbery, can only be found in anecdotes.

Another classic case of snobbery in British culture is language and word choices. *The Mirror Crack'd* provides an example of that:

It was like Cherry Baker who always called Miss Marple's old-world overcrowded drawing-room the 'lounge'. Miss Marple corrected her gently, 'It's the drawing-room, Cherry.' And Cherry, because she was young and

kind, endeavoured to remember, though it was obvious to her 'drawing-room' was a very funny word to use – and 'lounge' came slipping out. She had of late, however, compromised on 'living-room'. (Christie 1962, 6)

After the Second World War the so-called U and non-U debate engulfed the British society (Sandbrook 2005, 35). It was started by the author Nancy Mitford, an upper class woman herself, who claimed that the English language could be divided in two: U English, which was the correct, upper class way of speaking English, and non-U English, which was spoken by the rest of the society (Sandbrook 2005, 35). Vocabulary, in Mitford's view, became the most revealing factor in deciding a person's class. Examples included U English-speakers saying "How'd you do?" whilst non-U English-speakers said "Pleased to meet you." U English uses "napkin", non-U "serviette". And, as in the above quote, U English-speakers, such as Miss Marple, say "drawing room" and non-U English-speakers, such as the working class girl Cherry, say "lounge" (Sandbrook 2005, 35).

In *The Body in the Library* snobbery is reflected by Miss Marple herself:

'The sensible thing to do would be to change into trousers and a pullover, or into tweeds. That, of course (I don't want to be snobbish, but I'm afraid it's unavoidable), that's what a girl of – of our class would do.'

'A well-bred girl,' continued Miss Marple, warming to her subject, 'is always very particular to wear the right clothes for the right occasion. I mean, however hot the day was, a well-bred girl would never turn up at a point-to-point in a silk flowered frock.'

'And the correct wear to meet a lover?' demanded Sir Henry.

'If she were meeting him inside the hotel or somewhere where evening dress was worn, she'd wear her best evening frock, of course – but outside she'd feel she'd look ridiculous in evening dress and she'd wear her most attractive sportswear.'

'Granted, Fashion Queen, but the girl Ruby –'

Miss Marple said: 'Ruby, of course, wasn't – well, to put it bluntly – Ruby wasn't a lady. She belonged to the class that wear their best clothes however unsuitable to the occasion.'

(Christie 1942, 158-159)

Here Miss Marple is openly admitting her own snobbery and at the same time revealing how in the class-conscious society of Britain a person's class could be deduced by what he or she was wearing to a particular occasion. Pugh (2008, 95) writes that after the

First World War “by taking advantage of the cheap but fashionable clothes manufactured from rayon and artificial silk young women managed to emulate film stars, and, as a new colour or style was launched each year by the fashion industry, they found it possible to follow the dress of the wealthy for the first time.”

Accordingly the character of the dance girl Ruby in *The Body in the Library* has managed to follow the fashions of the upper classes but because of her own lower social standing she does not know the correct way to use those fashions and subsequently reveals her own class to Miss Marple. “‘Anyone of that type sticks out a mile round here.’ (Christie 1942, 29) is also noted by Inspector Melchett in *The Body in the Library*, referring to the way a murdered girl is dressed. This is a vast difference to that good old world of Miss Marple and Inspector Melchett where “everyone had a place, knew it, kept it, and dressed accordingly” (Kyzlinkova 1997, 123). Snobbery is also reflected by Mrs Bantry in *The Mirror Crack’d*: “‘I’d been taken into the house’, said Mrs Bantry. ‘Snob status.’” (Christie 1962, 67). She realises she has been given special treatment because of her social standing and because her hosts have been eager to rub shoulders with a local gentlewoman. It is notable how Christie’s characters’ casual snobbery in *The Murder at the Vicarage* transforms into the characters themselves becoming aware of their own snobbery in *The Body in the Library* and *The Mirror Crack’d*.

The idea that “birds of a feather flock together” was common among the British upper class and it is very clearly present in *The Body in the Library* where characters react with disdain when they learn that the elderly millionaire Conway Jefferson is planning to adopt Ruby, a dance girl at a hotel. “‘If the old boy wanted to adopt someone, why didn’t he pick upon a girl of his own class?’” (Christie 1942, 88) says Inspector Harper, the police officer investigating the case. “‘If she’d only been a girl in his own rank of life – a friend’s child –’” (Christie 1942, 100) is for his part the opinion of Sir Henry Clithering, a friend to both Jefferson and Miss Marple. Although during the interbellum era the classes began to mix, the upper classes could no more be so easily separated from the middle classes and the class mobility upwards increased, the reactions of Inspector Harper and Sir Henry tell a story of stagnant and rigid social order. Although opportunities to move upwards in the social scale increased considerably compared to the pre-First World War days, it did not change the people’s

way of thinking as swiftly. This is again a good example of the way mainstream historical narratives ignore the underlying historical truths that can be found in anecdotes. The mainstream narrative maintains that during the interbellum era the social hierarchy began to change and social mobility increased. What the mainstream narrative fails to take into account is the way people reacted to that change. The reason for that ignorance is that in this particular case people's reactions did not change the course of history. The reactions of people such as Sir Henry Clithering disapproved of the change but could not reverse it. Nevertheless, their reaction is part of that historical phenomenon and should not be ignored. Through these sort of anecdotes one sees the broader picture of the event and not only the ultimate outcome.

Snobbery is also present in the actions inside the classes, not only between them. When the body of a beautiful young girl is found in the library of Colonel and Mrs Bantry in *The Body in the Library*, they are promptly considered persona non grata by the local society because of the hint of scandal involved:

'How did the Radfordshire Council meeting go?'

'I – well – as a matter of fact I didn't go.'

'Didn't go? But you were taking the chair?'

'Well, as a matter of fact, Dolly – seems there was some mistake about that. Asked me if I'd mind if Thompson took it instead.'

'I see,' said Mrs Bantry.

[...]

'Did you go to the dinner with the Duffs on Thursday?'

'Oh, that! It was put off. Their cook was ill.'

'Stupid people,' said Mrs Bantry. She went on: 'Did you go to the Naylor's yesterday?'

'I rang up and said I didn't feel up to it, hoped they'd excuse me. They quite understood.'

'They did, did they?' said Mrs Bantry grimly.

(Christie 1942, 195-196)

The conversation between Colonel and Mrs Bantry demonstrates how the upper class was quick to close their ranks if something or someone threatened their reputation and, as a consequence, their superior standing in society. Such historical phenomena can almost exclusively be studied through anecdotes. The Bantries' conversation does not

contradict any mainstream narrative but it adds to the narrative of the decline of the upper class showing how stagnant in their opinions the upper classes had become.

In Christie's three St Mary Mead novels there can be detected a distinct portrayal of the evolution that took place between the 1930's and the 1960's in the dynamics between the upper and lower classes. In *The Murder the Vicarage* the patronising attitude of the upper classes towards the lower ones is distinctly present:

'She's practically a half-wit, as far as I can make out.'
'That's merely the camouflage of the poor,' I explained. 'They take refuge behind a mask of stupidity. You'll probably find that the old lady has all her wits about her.' (Christie 1930, 179)

The conversation between the Vicar and Lawrence Redding shows first the patronising attitude of the upper class Redding and then the Vicar's explanation shows how the lower classes responded to the upper classes' patronising. The change in these dynamics is personified in the character of Miss Hartnell, a local upper class spinster who feels it is her duty to help the poor: "'The lower classes don't know who are their best friends,' said Miss Hartnell. 'I always say a word in season when I'm visiting. Not that I'm ever thanked for it.'" (Christie 1930, 239).

Miss Hartnell's patronising attitude is described in more detail by the Vicar:

On my way home, I ran into Miss Hartnell and she detained me at least ten minutes, declaiming in her deep bass voice against the improvidence and ungratefulness of the lower classes. The crux of the matter seemed to be that The Poor did not want Miss Hartnell in their houses. My sympathies were entirely on their side. I am debarred by my social standing from expressing my prejudices in the forceful manner they do. (Christie 1930, 126)

Charity, administered by the upper classes to the lower ones, had long been the core of the British social welfare system but with the development of national healthcare system and the improving living standards of the working class after the First World War, charity soon became secondary (Pugh 2008, 38-39). As depicted in the above quote, this was not easily accepted by the upper classes. This change in the social welfare system in Britain significantly lessened the lower classes' dependence on their

social superiors as a consequence. The effect was finalised by the implementation of the National Healthcare Service in 1948 (Sandbrook 2005, 54-55). Deference performed by the lower classes was not automatic anymore: "And four of my poorer parishioners declared open rebellion against Miss Hartnell, who came to me bursting with rage about it." (Christie 1930, 37).

In *The Body in the Library* the situation has not changed: "Miss Hartnell had a deep bass voice and visited the poor indefatigably, however hard they tried to avoid her administrations." (Christie 1942, 40). In *The Body in the Library* the class struggle is also present in the relationship between Colonel Bantry and Basil Blake, a film maker living in St Mary Mead. Blake describes the Colonel Bantry: "Damned pompous old stick, always looking down his nose, sneering at me as artistic and effeminate. Serve the pompous old brute right, I thought." (Christie 1942, 190). For the upper classes these artistic types, such as people involved in film making, were something of a red rag to a bull (Bennett 1986, 22). This will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis in a section concerning popular culture.

In *The Mirror Crack'd* the change in the class dynamics is even more present. The decline in the upper classes' fortunes and the improvement of the lower classes' living standards resulted in bitterness on the upper classes' part:

'Of course, it's all very well for the people from the Development -'
At this point she stopped. Because, as was now usual, the sentence came to an end here. The Development, Period, as they would say in modern terms. It had an entity of its own, and a capital letter.
(Christie 1962, 4)

This is how the upper class characters, such as Miss Marple, refer to the lower classes living in a new building development in St Mary Mead. The lower classes' rise in the social scale combined with their improved living conditions caused resentment in the upper echelons of the society, who in turn were at the time forced to give up their way of life.

To the upper classes the lower classes' advancement in the world represented something alien and even frightening, as exemplified by Miss Marple:

Of course Miss Marple had seen the Development from the Market Basing Road, that is, had seen from afar its Closes and rows of neat well-built houses, with their television masts and their blue and pink and yellow and green painted doors and windows. But until now it had only had the reality of a map, as it were. She had not been in it and of it. But now she was here, observing the brave new world that was springing up, the world that by all accounts was foreign to all she had known. It was like a neat model built with child's bricks. It hardly seemed real to Miss Marple. (Christie 1962, 13)

All the modern things and fashions, which represented the way the lower classes' position in the society had bettered are a case of bewilderment and scorn to Miss Marple's generation and class. This sneer, again, stemmed from the decline of Miss Marple's own class. The changing dynamics of the British class structure were a source of terror for the upper classes (James 2009, 371). Christie's description of the improving position of the lower classes complies with the mainstream historical narratives but once again the mainstream narratives often ignore the people's reactions to this particular phenomenon. The mainstream narrative sees the improving position of the lower classes as a positive thing which improved the society as a whole, which of course is true, but at the same time it ignores the fact that this improvement was not approved by everyone. To the upper classes the improving conditions of the lower classes meant the definite extinction of the old social order and the lowering of their own position in society. In Christie's novels Miss Marple and Mrs Bantry's disapproving of the Development tells the other side to this phenomenon. Since the disapproving upper classes did not change the outcome of this social change, it is of no consequence to the mainstream historical narratives.

The decline of the British upper class is described in St Mary Mead novels in more detail through the characters of Colonel and Mrs Bantry. They are the lord and lady of the local manor house, Gossington Hall. In *The Body in the Library* the reader is treated to a description of a traditional English country house:

Somewhere in her inner consciousness was an awareness of the usual early-morning noises of the household. The rattle of the curtain-rings on the stairs as the housemaid drew them, the noises of the second housemaid's dustpan and brush in the passage outside. In the distance the heavy noise of the front-door bolt being drawn back. (Christie 1942, 1)

In *The Body in the Library* the status quo is still as it used to be with the Bantries served by an army of domestic staff. In *The Mirror Crack'd* the situation has completely changed:

When her husband, Colonel Bantry, had died some years ago, Mrs Bantry had sold Gossington Hall and the considerable amount of land attached to it, retaining for herself what had been the East Lodge, a charming porticoed little building replete with inconvenience, where even a gardener had refused to live. Mrs Bantry had added to it the essentials of modern life, a built-on kitchen of the latest type, a new water supply from the main, electricity, and a bathroom. This had all cost her a great deal, but not nearly so much as an attempt to live at Gossington Hall would have done. (Christie 1962, 22)

In the above quote Christie describes with exhaustive accuracy a phenomenon which became extremely common in the interbellum Britain and even more so after the Second World War. Punitive death duties caused to the upper classes by the enormous losses in both world wars, collapsing land value, problems in agriculture and dismal rise on income tax made it impossible for many upper class families to maintain their ancient country houses and the staff required to run them (Pugh 2008, 349). Hundreds of country houses were sold, some even demolished (Pugh 2008, 351).

The time when great country houses were the centre of life and the main employer in the countryside was over. This is reflected also by the character of Mrs Bantry in *The Mirror Crack'd*:

Suddenly the house felt to Mrs Bantry old, worn-out and highly artificial. In spite of its new gleaming paint, its alterations, it was in essence a tired old Victorian mansion. 'I was wise to go,' thought Mrs Bantry. 'Houses are like everything else. There comes a time when they've just had their day. This has had its day. It's been given a face lift, but I don't really think it's done it any good.'
(Christie 1962, 53)

The same phenomenon is already touched upon in *The Body in the Library*, in a conversation between Raymond Starr and Sir Henry Clithering:

He turned to Sir Henry.
'You come from Devonshire, don't you, sir? From Stane? My people lived down that way. At Alsmoston.'

Sir Henry's face lit up.

'Are you one of the Alsmonston Starrs? I didn't realize that.'

'No – I don't suppose you would.'

There was a slight bitterness in his voice. Sir Henry said awkwardly: 'Bad luck – er – all that.'

'The place being sold up after it had been in the family for three hundred years? Yes, it was rather. Still, our kind have to go, I suppose. We've outlived our usefulness.'

(Christie 1942, 161-162)

Outliving one's usefulness was the general feeling amongst the upper classes after the First World War and the feeling became even stronger after the second one. The British upper classes have, however, always been known for their "fluidness" (James 2009, 367). The secret to their survival has been their ability to adapt to the surrounding circumstances. In *The Body in the Library* this is exemplified by Raymond Starr, a scion of an upper class family turned into a hotel dance cavalier: "'I'll say it's hard to get a job nowadays when you've nothing to say for yourself except that you've had a public school education! Sometimes, if you're lucky, you get taken on as a reception clerk at an hotel. The tie and the manner are an asset there.'" (Christie 1942, 162)

The anecdotes about the Bantries and the Starrs once again add that "touch of the real" to the mainstream narratives even if they do not contradict them. Of course, one must always bear in mind that all things are relative. Even though the loss of their respective country houses must have been tragic to the Bantries and the Starrs, there were more tragic losses happening in the society at the time which is why the tragedies of the upper class house owners have not warranted a more prominent place in the mainstream historical narrative.

In *The Mirror Crack'd* Miss Marple realises that the world is changing and there is nothing to be done about it, no matter how irritating it may be for the upper classes: "The Development. And why not? Miss Marple asked herself sternly. These things had to be. The houses were necessary, and they were very well built, or so she had been told. 'Planning,' or whatever they called it." (Christie 1962, 6) Of all the social changes that happened in Britain between the 1930's and the 1960's the altering dynamics between the upper and lower classes, and especially the decline of the upper classes are described in most detail in Christie's St Mary Mead novels. However, in regards to the change in class relations I would not describe Christie's novels as

counterhistory. Christie does not contradict the mainstream historical narratives even though there are plenty of historical anecdotes to be found in her text. Instead of contradicting the mainstream history, Christie's anecdotes add to them and, indeed, bring that "touch of the real": opinions and feelings of private individuals which cannot be generalised as historically significant and thus included in the mainstream narrative of history. Nevertheless, there are features of counterhistory in Christie's texts. Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 60) note that one of the principal attributes of counterhistory is to pay "attention to those forces resisting the process of modernization". There can be no better way to describe Christie's novels than that they pay attention to the forces which resist modernisation. In that sense Christie's St Mary Mead novels are counterhistory. In her novels she writes of people who tried but failed to stop the change. Because of their failure their story never made it to be a part of the mainstream. The mainstream historical narratives describe how the British class society evolved. Christie's counterhistory describes how the upper classes attempted to prevent it.

3 'We had housemaids then, you know.' Change in domestic service

The reason that in this section I pay particular attention to the change that occurred in domestic service in the 20th century Britain is that servants featured in Christie's novels often reflect the position they also had in real life: supporting characters. The famous phrase "Perhaps the Butler Did It" hardly ever came true in Christie's writings. Christie certainly maintained the traditional idea that a good servant was one who was neither seen nor heard, and adheres to that in her novels. This holds true in the St Mary Mead novels: there are numerous servants about, but not one of them has a prominent role in the storyline. In the St Mary Mead novels the change in domestic service is also reflected. Whereas in *The Murder at the Vicarage* every main character has servants, in *The Mirror Crack'd* the number of servant characters is greatly reduced and the servantless state of affairs even becomes something of a theme in the novel.

Another good reason to dig deeper into the role of domestic service in Christie's novels in this thesis is that the way domestic service evolved in the period covered in the St Mary Mead novels had a considerable effect on the shaping of the British social identity in all classes, as Lucy Delap writes. She stresses that during that period, from the interbellum years all the way to the 1960's, "the decline in numbers employed in domestic service over the period ironically brought this broad significance into sharper focus, as many who might have been accustomed to having servants during their childhood or early adulthood had to adjust to the condition of servantlessness." (2011, 98). She adds that "many men and women were extremely unwilling to relinquish the lifestyle and identity of being servant-keepers" (2011, 98). From this point of view I'm going to examine in this chapter how "the condition of servantlessness" affects Christie's characters and can Christie's novels be regarded as an accurate historical portrayal of this momentous change in the British way of life.

In the first half of the 20th century domestic service was the biggest employer of women in Britain. As a social phenomenon and a carefully structured hierarchy domestic service probably reached its all-time high in the Edwardian age 1901–1910 (James 2009, 331). Throughout the first half of the 20th century having servants was by no means a prerogative of the upper class. A servantless home was much rarer than one with at least one servant. "Domestic service was extraordinary

prominent”, says Delap (2011, 1) as servants and their position often dominated not only conversation in middle-class households but state policies, daily press and culture from music halls to cinemas and literature. In the rigidly structured British class system domestic service was perhaps the most widely shared socio-cultural experience.

The percentage of those employed in domestic service slightly decreased during the First World War, 1914–1918, when women were offered better-paid war work in factories with better hours. However, this interval was not to disturb the status quo permanently (Pugh 2008, 87). When the war was over and men returned home and to their jobs, the number of women in domestic service increased back to the pre-war level. In fact, it was only after the war that domestic service became regarded as a real profession and a cause of pride for both the servants and their masters. Indeed, in the interbellum Britain the term “servantless” was considered something apocalyptic associated with slum dwelling and lowering standards. Servantless homes evoked both horror and panic. (Delap 2011, 99-101)

James notes (2009, 296) that social change in Britain was a dawdling and irregular development with the rural areas lagging behind the urban (an important point to remember since the St Mary Mead novels are set in the rural universe). This is seconded by Pugh as he recounts the upper classes’ unwillingness to give up without a good fight:

As late as the 1930’s the staff comprised a comptroller, a groom of the chambers, a butler and an underbutler, three footmen, Lady Londonderry’s footman and piper, a nursery footman, an odd-job man, a nightwatchman, the head housekeeper, cook, head kitchen maid, two kitchen maids, the nursery maid, the schoolroom maid, several daily women to clean the house, a travelling head housemaid to go ahead of the family, a telephonist, a hospital nurse, Lord Londonderry’s valet, her ladyship’s maid, another maid for her daughters, a governess and four chauffeurs. (Pugh 2008, 350)

What Pugh means with “the upper classes’ unwillingness to give up without a good fight” is the somewhat escapist attitude of the upper classes when they refused to accept the realities of the changing world. In the above quote is listed the personnel that comprised the household of the Marquis and Marchioness of Londonderry, prominent socialites in the 1930’s Britain. Considering the economic situation in the country and the

transforming labour market at the time, the Londonderry staff was fantastically disproportioned and out of tune with the times.

Nevertheless, the First World War marked the beginning of a change in domestic service which would in the long run alter the numbers working in that field as well as the content of servants' work and the relationship between masters and servants. The economic plight of the 1930's which engulfed the whole of society made domestic service scarcer. Even though most households would not dispense with servants altogether, their number was diminished. Few were all the same unwilling to let the standards slip, so in essence what was in the past managed by two servants was now expected to be achieved by one. Although the post-First World War years are often portrayed as an era when formal rituals of the Edwardian age were dispensed with, in reality the formality of the British home life was by no means diminished. On the contrary, lesser households were now adapting to the ways of their social superiors. Lawrence James writes (2009, 296) that the old world with its hierarchical patterns of human relations "in which buxom milkmaids curtsied and apple-cheeked yokels touched their forelocks to kind-hearted squires" not only survived the war but thrived after it. If anything, the interbellum Britain was, in regards to domestic service, all about keeping up the appearances of the pre-war world with considerably fewer resources (Delap 2011, 115-121).

As the Second World War broke out in 1939 the effect to domestic service was similar to that of the First World War. Women were needed for war work and more to the point, few people could afford servants anymore in the reduced circumstances brought on by the war. Contrary to the end of the First World War, the end of the Second World War meant a more permanent change in the social order. Nonetheless, right after the war there was great desire for the reinstallation of the pre-war households with servants. In the end private domestic service was forced to give way to institutional jobs and the British households were faced with "these servantless days" (Delap 2011, 128). Gradually being servantless became socially acceptable and even those still retaining domestic help often settled for au-pair girls or daily help (Delap 2011, 127-137).

Partly this great and somewhat abrupt shift in domestic service after the Second World War can be attributed to modernisation, both in people's way of thinking and in technology. Before the war many British households had refused to modernise

their homes, some even regarding gas and electricity as vulgar. This quickly changed after the war and by 1948, eighty-six per cent of British homes had electricity. The building boom after the war did not favour servants either: the new houses simply did not have room for live-in service. Whereas in the past large basements and attic rooms were considered a necessity for servants' lodgings, now they were thought of as expensive and trouble (Pugh 2008, 70). With the arrival of fridges, vacuum cleaners and dish washers servants were fast becoming redundant. Doing for oneself became the trend. The kitchen substituted the drawing room as the imaginary heart of the British home. Cooking became not only acceptable and enjoyable but even an elevated pursuit. The identity and, more importantly, the ideal of a British housewife was born. Housewife soon became the embodiment of class-crossing feminine identity. Whereas after the First World War housework was elevated to a craft exercised by domestic service professionals, after the Second World War it became a virtue for women of all backgrounds. This change in people's way of thinking quickly attributed to the extinction of domestic service as it was understood before the war (Delap 2011, 99).

In short, domestic service suffered a significant transformation between the 1930's and the 1960's. This was due to reduced financial circumstances throughout the society, transform in labour market, rapid modernisation in technology and fundamental change in people's way of thinking and way of living, mostly caused by the trauma of the Second World War. By the 1960's Britain had permanently arrived to these servantless days which still continue to this day.

In the first of Christie's St Mary Mead novels, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, written and set in 1930, servant characters are in abundance; they are never main characters or essential to the plot but still hovering in the background all the time. There's the household of Colonel Protheroe with its full staff complete with "a very correct butler ... with just the right amount of gloom in his bearing" (Christie 1930, 70). Miss Marple and the other ladies of the village all have their own maids. And then there's Mary, the incompetent and rude maid at the Vicarage. Purposefully or not Mary becomes the image of what was called "the servant problem" in the interbellum Britain as she is described in the novel in negative terms by her employer: "You know how little we can afford to pay a servant. If once we got her smartened up at all, she'd leave. Naturally. And get higher wages. But as long as Mary can't cook and has those awful manners – well,

we're safe, nobody else would have her." (Christie 1930, 92) In the above quote Griselda, wife of St Mary Mead's vicar, sums up the main problem faced by domestic service in the 1930's: people were extremely unwilling to let go of the lifestyle they had been living before the First World War but did not really have the resources anymore to keep it resulting in questionable arrangements such as the hopeless Mary's employment at the Vicarage. The vicar and his wife cannot afford proper servants but just for the sake of employing one they settle for an incompetent maid who does more harm to them than having no servant at all. In the interbellum British society for a couple of social standing of a Vicar and his wife, a disastrously inept servant is a better choice than descending to that apocalyptic condition of servantlessness. "She burst into the room, her cheeks red and her eyes shining, and addressed us with her customary lack of ceremony" (Christie 1930, 54), she is described but nevertheless tolerated.

Indeed, when later in the novel Mary threatens to depart from their service, the Vicarage is thrown into turmoil:

When I got back to the Vicarage I found that we were in the middle of a domestic crisis. Griselda met me in the hall and with tears in her eyes dragged me into the drawing room.

"She's going."

"Who's going?"

"Mary. She's given notice."

I really could not take the announcement in a tragic spirit.

"Well", I said, "we'll have to get another servant."

It seemed to me a perfectly reasonable thing to say. When one servant goes, you get another. I was at a loss to understand Griselda's look of reproach.

"Len, you're absolutely heartless. You don't care."

I didn't. In fact, I felt almost light-hearted at the prospect of no more burnt puddings and undercooked vegetables.

"I'll have to look for a girl, and find one, and train her", continued Griselda in a voice of acute self-pity.

(Christie 1930, 187)

In this humorous scene the Vicar and his wife are faced with the horrendous possibility of becoming servantless. Actually the Vicar can't even contemplate such an idea. He laments: "When one servant goes, you get another" (Christie 1930, 187) and his wife is ready to go through the tribulations of finding a replacement rather than doing for herself. They demonstrate what Delap (2011, 97) calls "the deep sense of the lack of

alternatives for servant-keeping” in the twentieth century Britain. She continues that “other forms of domestic organization were rarely taken seriously because to do so was to abandon core features of a self-identity of privilege” (2011, 97). This is fundamentally what the Vicar’s wife is thinking of in the above scene.

The ghastly condition of servantlessness is also explored through the character of Mrs Lestrangle, a new resident in the village. She has only one maid which is remarked upon by a police inspector: “You have only one maid I think.” (Christie 1930, 140). Then Mrs Lestrangle goes on to explain how difficult it is to manage with only maid when trying to avoid visitors: “If your maid is in, she can say not at home. If one is alone and does not happen to want to see callers... well, the only thing to do is let them ring.” (Christie 1930, 141). Here Christie demonstrates the common difficulty faced in the interbellum Britain by those who in the past had got used to employing multiple servants but were then forced to manage with fewer at the same time unwilling to change their habits and way of life.

Mary the Vicarage maid, as faulted as she was, serves also as a good example of another common phenomenon in domestic service. “There’s Mary Hill. Giving herself airs, she is, on account of being in service there.” (Christie 1930, 168) This is how Mary is described by other villagers in the novel when she boasts about the body found in the vicarage. That is a very good example of how servants, despite the evident inequality between them and their masters, often adopted the ways and opinions of their employers. In the novel Mary is thought of as “giving airs” for being in service in the Vicarage and thus replicating the behaviour of her employers. According to Delap (2011, 62) this was very common and large numbers of servants thought “there was no difference between us” when talking about their employers. Respect and friendship were often hallmarks of the relationship between upstairs and downstairs. Evidence of this can also be found in Christie’s second St Mary Mead novel, *The Body in the Library*. Most of the action in that novel is set in the traditional English country house of Colonel and Mrs Bantry. They employ a large staff (Christie 1942, 5) and the respect and friendship in the Bantries’ relationship with their servants is obvious when police is implicating that one of them could be mixed up with a body found in the Bantries’ library. Colonel Bantry quickly dismisses such an idea: “I don’t believe it. They are all a most respectable lot. We’ve had them for years.” (Christie 1942, 20). Such certainty can

only be a product of most familiar and trustworthy relationship. Delap (2011, 61) describes this as servants and their employers being emotionally dependent upon each other.

Other than Mrs Bantry's unwavering trust in her servants, *The Body in the Library* offers little in regards to change in domestic service. Servants play a minimal role and are not even supporting characters but background characters. This may well be to do with the time frame the novel was written and set in: the Second World War. As stated by Delap in the previous paragraph, the Second World War saw the number of those employed in domestic service decrease significantly. Young men were off to the frontlines and women were needed once again for war work such as making ammunitions. This could explain the lack of servants in the novel plausibly. The few servant characters there are in the novel are mostly stereotypes. I will discuss servant stereotypes and their use as a way of conveying nostalgia in Christie's works later in this chapter.

On the other hand the third St Mary Mead novel, *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side*, written and set in 1962, proves a fountain of material about the change that occurred in domestic service between the 1930's and the 1960's. The novel begins with Miss Marple reminiscing:

How different it had been in the past... Faithful Florence, that grenadier of a parlour maid – and there had been Amy and Clara and Alice, those nice little maids arriving from St Faith's Orphanage to be trained and then going on to better paid jobs elsewhere. (Christie 1962, 7)

The Mirror Crack'd is all about the British society's fundamental change and Miss Marple's generation trying to adjust to that, and the change in domestic service becomes one of the novel's main themes. One of the major changes the Second World War brought to domestic service was the extinction of live-in staff. Accordingly, Miss Marple does not have a live-in parlour maid anymore but daily help in the form of Cherry Baker:

Cherry was a quick and efficient cook, she was an intelligent girl took telephone calls correctly and was quick to spot inaccuracies in the tradesmen's books. She was not much given to turning mattresses, and as far as washing up went Miss Marple always now passed the pantry door

with her head turned away so as not to observe Cherry's method which was that of thrusting everything into the sink together and letting loose a snowstorm of detergent on it. (Christie 1962, 6-7)

Then Miss Marple makes a comparison to the maids of the old:

They had not been very good with the telephone, and no good at all at arithmetic. On the other hand, they knew how to wash up, and how to make a bed. They had had skills, rather than education. (Christie 1962, 7)

With her assessment of her previous maids having "skills, rather than education" Miss Marple makes an astute notion of how domestic service had changed over the decades. The background of those in domestic service was completely different to those before the Second World War as described by Miss Marple: "Students from abroad, girls au pair, university students in the vacation, young married women like Cherry Baker, who lived in spurious Closes on new building developments." (Christie 1962, 7-8)

According to Delap (2011, 133), the concept of au pair girls and students on summer jobs had widely replaced the Edwardian system of domestic service by the 1950's. It was seen as at least a temporary solution for the near-extinction of traditional servants. This was by no means a return to the good old days for the upper and middle class servant-keepers. According to a Ministry of Labour survey undertaken in 1957, more than eighty percent of those in domestic service were classed as middle class themselves (Delap 2011, 134). This changed the dynamics between the servant and servant-keeper completely. This is also acknowledged by Miss Marple in *The Mirror Crack'd*: "It was odd that nowadays it should be the educated girls who went in for all the domestic chores." (Christie 1962, 7). Delap writes (2011, 134), that in this new situation both the servants and their employers "found the class ambiguities of their position hard to negotiate."

Miss Marple also reflects on the difficulty of finding servants at all those days: "But it's not so easy to find the right person. Young people have their own lives to live, and so many of my faithful old servants, I am sorry to say, are dead." (Christie 1962, 253). In Delap's estimation (2011, 137) this was due to more diverse labour markets and improvement in women's position in general. People had now the opportunity to be selective when it came to working hours and wages. There was also a change in how

domestic service was viewed. If in the interbellum Britain being servantless was considered a taboo, after the Second World War being a servant soon became one. Delap confirms (2011: 134) Miss Marple's view of young people having their own lives which do not entertain the idea of entering into domestic service: "They think of themselves as students, as typists, as glamour girls, but not as domestic workers."

Fantasies of perpetuating domestic service nevertheless prevailed far into the 1960's. In *The Mirror Crack'd* this is personified by Mrs Bantry who frequently harkens back to the old days:

'The housemaid came in in the morning', said Mrs Bantry, 'with early morning tea. We had housemaids then, you know.'
'I know', said Miss Zielinsky, 'wearing print dresses that rustled.'
'I'm not sure about the print dress', said Mrs Bantry, 'it may have been overalls by then.'
(Christie 1962, 42-43)

and:

'She was the kind of woman who in the old days if you'd seen her approaching the front door, you'd have hurried out to say to your parlour maid – which was an institution we had in those days, and very useful too – and told her to say 'not at home' or 'not at home to visitors', if she had conscientious scruples about the truth.' (Christie 1962, 86)

Mrs Bantry is a splendid example of how servants remained a lingering presence in the British society and a continued reference point for the British way of life. By the 1960's Mrs Bantry has been forced to sell the great country house she and her now-dead husband once occupied and live in a cottage on the grounds. Such was very common in the post-Second World War Britain and according to Delap (2011, 130) the change to doing for oneself was for most people a traumatic and confusing one.

The change that occurred in domestic service between the 1930's and the 1960's is very evident in Christie's St Mary Mead novels, especially when comparing *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *The Mirror Crack'd*. Both novels include prominent historical phenomena that are associated with the way domestic service transformed during that

period. *The Mirror Crack'd* in particular can be read as a contemporary account of domestic service.

From the New Historicist point of view the most important question in regards to domestic service in these novels is: can Christie's St Mary Mead novels be read as a reliable contemporary account of domestic service in that era? Can they be read as history of domestic service? The answer is obviously yes. As all the novels are set in the same time frame in which they were written by an upper middle woman who herself employed domestic servants, one should have no doubt that these novels really are, in addition to being murder mysteries, reliable contemporary accounts of how domestic service was seen by the upper and middle classes. In the previous chapter there are multiple examples of the novels including phenomena that later historical research has deemed crucial to the transformation of domestic service in Britain. Nevertheless, New Historicism takes into account how the wider historical context has affected a work of literature and thus it is necessary to examine how Christie's personal background and belief as well as the environment she was surrounded by may have affected the way she wrote about servants.

As pointed out many times earlier in the previous section, servants never play an integral part in Christie's stories but are always supporting or background characters. There is Mary, the comic relief in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, and there are countless reminiscences by Miss Marple and Mrs Bantry about former servants and how things used to be better. These are all anecdotes, possibly from Christie's own life, that she uses in the novels to draw a picture of how she perceived domestic service. Through the characters of Miss Marple and Mrs Bantry she manifests the opinion that the shift that has happened in domestic service is for the worse creating a nostalgic image of the good old days. In comparison, historical studies on domestic service, such as Delap's *Knowing Their Place*, argue that more flexible labour markets and job opportunities were an improvement to the traditional domestic service. Of course the initial setting in Christie's novels where servants are supporting characters and more upper class characters take the centre stage is in itself at odds with the prevailing historical narrative where the story of the common man is as credible as the story of a Prime Minister.

In the previous chapter I concluded that Christie's depiction of the changing class society could not be deemed as counterhistory because it does not contradict the mainstream historical narratives. The case of servants is different. As pointed out above, Christie's portrayal of domestic service is far more positive than later research claims and it ignores the hardships and tribulations of those who were employed as servants. In *The Murder at the Vicarage* she even makes fun of those hardships with the character of Mary. In *The Mirror Crack'd* Christie succumbs to pure nostalgia when it comes to domestic service. Nonetheless, even if Christie's view on domestic service and the way it is presented in her novels may be contrary to the mainstream historical narratives or the experience of a former servant, it does not make her view any less true. The anecdotes of a servant-keeper, which Christie was, enrich the historical narrative of domestic service although in some ways counters it. Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 62) claim that according to historians such anecdotes should not be taken into account because "those elusive and enigmatic episodes could never be explicitly recorded".

As noted, especially in *The Mirror Crack'd* Christie's views on domestic service are coloured by nostalgia. Because of this, even New Historicists cannot take Christie's anecdotes as absolute truths about domestic service. Christie's personal background clearly influences her views on this matter. It is possible that Christie was not even aware of the negative sides of domestic service. Thus this counterhistory of domestic service cannot be considered entirely reliable. However, even if Christie's St Mary Mead novels do not provide a reliable account of domestic service in Britain between the 1930's and the 1960's as a whole, they still provide a remarkable account from the point of view of a servant-keeper. Consequently Christie's novels offer valuable insight into the way the upper classes viewed domestic service.

4 'Cheap, tawdry, and flamboyant.' Change in manners and morals

In *The Mirror Crack'd*, Miss Marple estimates how her home village and its residents had changed over the decades:

One had to face the fact: St Mary Mead was not the place it had been. In a sense, of course, nothing was what it had been. You could blame the war (both the wars) or the younger generation, or women going out to work, or the atom bomb, or just the Government – but what one really meant was the simple fact that one was growing old. Miss Marple, who was a very sensible lady, knew that quite well. It was just that, in a queer way, she felt it more in St Mary Mead, because it had been her home for so long. (Christie 1942, 3)

As Miss Marple exemplifies in the quote above, the change that happened in the timespan of Christie's St Mary Mead novels was momentous. The Victorian moral codes and strict behaviour protocols of the Edwardian age became a thing of the past, as new manners and morals gained ground. Pugh (2008, 2) writes that the interbellum era saw "a decline of morals in Britain. The elderly saw the young people behaving badly, men feared that women were emulating their own behaviour, and the higher social classes thought the workers were taking advantage of the scarcity of their labour."

Women's fashion was one area which underwent drastic changes after both the world wars. After the First World War gone were the whalebone corsets and cotton petticoats (Pugh 2008, 2). The use of cosmetics such as powder, rouge, lipstick and eyebrow paint became increasingly common (Pugh 2008, 95). Hairstyles became shorter as did the length of skirts (Pugh 2008, 172).

For the old guard, such as Miss Marple and the Bantries, the more relaxed fashions represented general loosening of morals. In the quote that follows Miss Marple is surveying the body of a young woman found in the library of Colonel and Mrs Bantry in *The Body in the Library*. Her notions concentrate on the girl's figure, backless dress and make-up:

The flamboyant figure of a girl. A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening dress of white spangled satin. 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, the scarlet of the lips looking like a gash. The fingernails were enamelled in a deep blood-red and so were the toenails in their cheap silver sandal shoes. It was a cheap, tawdry, flamboyant figure – most incongruous in the solid old-fashioned comfort of Colonel Bantry’s library. (Christie 1942, 11-12)

True to her generation’s and her class’s values, she deems the dead girl grotesque, cheap and tawdry on the basis of her appearance. In the countryside the opinions were naturally even more judgemental, as noted by Mrs Bantry: “‘People say,’ Mrs Bantry continued, ‘that it doesn’t matter what you wear in the country. I never heard such nonsense. It’s just in the country that everyone notices’” (Christie 1942, 16). When it comes to manners and morals, it is clear from the beginning that Christie is on the old-fashioned, judgemental side.

Christie describes the new fashions and the way young people behave with disapproving touch. Of course, here one is faced with the problem when interpreting an author’s text: does the author, in this case Agatha Christie, channel her own attitudes through her main character, in this case Miss Marple, or does she make fun on her main character? Be that as it may, Christie aptly, even if disapprovingly, describes how the fashions and manner changed from the interbellum era to the Sixties. In *The Mirror Crack’d* there are three particular, separate cases where the narrator pays considerable amount of attention to women wearing trousers:

- (1) She then gave her attention to a young woman in tight trousers and a sail-cloth jersey who wanted plastic material with crabs on it for bathroom curtains. (Christie 1962, 12)
- (2) The trousered young women, the rather sinister-looking young men and boys, the exuberant bosoms of the fifteen-year-old girls. Miss Marple couldn’t help thinking that it all looked terribly depraved. (Christie 1962, 13)
- (3) She had long straggly fair hair and was wearing tight black pants and an orange sweater. (Christie 1962, 229)

Women wearing trousers was still in the 1960's an anathema to the more conservative circles such as Miss Marple's. Her view of it all looking terribly depraved was the view of the Establishment to new modes and fashions also after the Second World War. In Christie's novels fashions change in tune with the times but the main characters' reactions to them remain the same. Should one then conclude that Christie agreed with the Establishment, of which she was a part? Had these novels been written by someone who approved the new fashions and more relaxed manners, the tone of the novels would surely be different. Thus Christie confirms the mainstream historical narrative in which changing fashions were disapproved by the older generation.

In addition to the change in women's fashions, the position of women in society in general underwent a radical transformation between the 1930's and the 1960's. The emancipation of women, which had begun during the First World War when women were needed for war work and to substitute for the men who were on the front, continued through the interbellum era and the Second World War all the way to the beginning of the 1960's, during which began a social revolution of its own.

Although during the war women were encouraged to get themselves employed to support the war effort, in the interbellum era the attitudes towards women earning their own living was looked upon as undesirable (Pugh 2008, 177). This is also the case in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, where Miss Cram, an assistant to an archaeologist, is recounting her encounter with Lettice Protheroe:

'She's too high and mighty for the likes of me. Fancies herself the county, and wouldn't demean herself by noticing a girl who had to work for a living. Not but what I did hear her talking of earning her living herself. And who would employ her, I should like to know? Why, she'd be fired in less than a week. Unless she went as one of those mannequins, all dressed up and sidling about. She could do that, I expect.' (Christie 1930, 87)

Lettice is an upper class girl and apparently looks down on Miss Cram who has to work for a living. Thus she is deemed unsuitable company by Lettice. Miss Cram recognises the prevailing attitude, where the preferable "occupation" for a woman between the wars was a homemaker (Pugh 2008, 177). The emancipation of women and their thriving for independence provoked outrage all over the society (Pugh 2008, 178). The attitude towards independent women was altogether hostile (Pugh 2008, 182).

In *The Murder at the Vicarage* hostile attitudes towards independent women are represented by Inspector Slack: “She’s a woman, and women act in that silly way. I’m not saying she did it for a moment. She heard he was accused and she trumped up a story. I’m used to that sort of game. You wouldn’t believe the fool things I’ve known women do.” (Christie 1930, 94) Later he remarks: “Women cause a lot of trouble.” (Christie 1930, 236). The outrage at women gaining independence was especially usual amongst the middle classes, a representative of which Inspector Slack is. The highly conservative mindset of the interbellum middle classes saw the change in women’s traditional position in society as moral decay and derogation of traditional family values (Pugh 2008, 185).

After the Second World War the situation didn’t change that much. Once again during the war women were needed for war work but after it they usually returned to their homes. In the 1950’s only one in five women had permanent employment in Britain (Sandbrook 2005, 388). Motherhood was deemed the most suitable occupation for women. Indeed, when adolescent delinquency increased in Britain during the 1950’s and the 1960, the blame was put on mothers who went to work and therefore neglected their children (Sandbrook 2005, 388-389). Woman’s place was at home to serve her husband and children. *The Mirror Crack’d* offers two very traditional views to women’s position in 1962:

She carefully lifted the frying pan from the stove, then neatly shot its contents on to two plates, one rather fuller than the other. She placed the fuller one before her husband.

‘Mixed grill,’ she announced.

Jim looked up and sniffed appreciatively.

(Christie 1962, 195)

and:

‘Wonderful wives there must have been in your young days,’ said Dermot Craddock.

‘I’m sure, my dear boy, you would find the young lady of the type you refer to as a very inadequate helpmeet these days. Young ladies were not encouraged to be intellectual and very few of them had university degrees or any kind of academic distinction.’

'There are things that are preferable to academic distinctions,' said Dermot. 'One of them is knowing when a man wants a whisky and soda and giving it to him.'

(Christie 1962, 238-239)

The first quote shows a very traditional young couple, Cherry and Jim, at their dinner table. The fact that Cherry's role is to be the homemaker is highlighted by her serving the food and also eating the smaller portion. In the second quote a conversation between Miss Marple and Inspector Craddock shows that the Inspector has very old-fashioned and chauvinist views on what a good wife should be like. He is, however, rebuked by Miss Marple. Through Miss Marple Agatha Christie underscores the unequal situation of women in society and reveals something of her own thinking on the subject. Whereas Christie's views on class and domestic service, as described in previous sections, sometimes counter the mainstream historical narratives, her views on women and their position in society are in tune with the mainstream. At the time of the novels' writing Christie might have been even ahead of her day and age in her views.

After the First World War the strict Victorian morals about sex and sexuality began to be challenged (Pugh 2008, 149). Signs of sexual freedom were greeted with enthusiasm by the younger generation, but the old guard saw this once again as a mark of decline and decay, as demonstrated by Mrs Bantry in *The Body in the Library* when she is recounting the adventures of a local rake to Miss Marple:

'He does have parties. People came down from London and from the studios – you remember last July? Shouting and singing – the most terrible noise – everyone very drunk, I'm afraid – and the mess and the broken glass next morning simply unbelievable – so old Mrs Berry told me – and a young woman asleep in the bath with practically nothing on!' (Christie 1942, 17)

In *The Body in the Library* the signs of sexual freedom have arrived to St Mary Mead in the form of Basil Blake and his numerous girlfriends. Mrs Bantry's account in the quote above about Blake's obscene parties exemplifies the attitude of the older generation to the decaying moral standards. The contradiction between generations about morality is also reflected by the character of Basil Blake in *The Body in the Library*:

Colonel Melchett cleared his throat.

'I understand, Mr Blake, that last weekend you had a visitor – a – er – fair-haired young lady.'

Basil Blake stared, threw back his head and roared with laughter.

'Have the old cats been on to you from the village? About my morals? Damn it all, morals aren't a police matter. You know that.' (Christie 1942, 24)

To the more old-fashioned the decline of morality was proven by statistics showing that forty-three per cent of women who married in the interbellum era had experienced pre-marital sex. Before the First World War the number was nineteen (Pugh 2008, 160).

The more revealing fashions, especially in swimming wear, were also deemed depraved by moral guardians (Pugh 2008, 172). This is demonstrated by Miss Hartnell in *The Body in the Library* when she is speaking of Basil Blake's girlfriend: "That terrible peroxide blonde?" Miss Hartnell was slightly behind the times. She had not yet advanced from peroxide to platinum. "The one who lies about in the garden with practically nothing on?" (Christie 1942, 41).

Marriage was highly valued by the Establishment and the majority of the British believed it was a holy institution (Pugh 2008, 142). The vow "till death do us part" was to be taken literally. Mrs Bantry confirms this attitude in *The Body in the Library*: "There is a prejudice in old-fashioned country districts against people living together who are not married." (Christie 1942, 186) However, in the post-war Britain attitudes to marriage had become more lenient: "No good marrying a chap just because a baby's on the way," said Cherry. "He didn't want to marry her, you know. He's not a very nice fellow." (Christie 1962, 199). Of course it must be taken into account that Cherry represents younger generation. The generation of Miss Marple and Mrs Bantry would not take such a relaxed attitude to marriage, let alone to babies born out of wedlock. "A bad husband is better than no husband" was the opinion of the pre-First World War generation (Pugh 2008, 142).

By the 1960's the attitudes to sex had alleviated considerably. Although this may not be so evident in the way Christie's characters behave in *The Mirror Crack'd*, it is obvious by Christie's writing and choice of words: "She wasn't what you'd call the sexy kind." (Christie 1962, 92). The word "sexy" is not something Christie's characters use in her earlier works. There are also sexual undertones in *The Mirror Crack'd*, which are

absent from the two previous St Mary Mead novels. An example of this is a conversation between a London photographer and his model whom Inspector Craddock goes to see:

'I can't see what you want to go taking photographs of my behind for,' said the girl called Elsie rather sulkily.
'It's a lovely behind, dear. It looks smashing,' said the photographer.
(Christie 1962, 181)

It would have been too much for Christie, in her old days, to write her characters in risqué scenes, but with scenes such as in the quote above she clearly shows she was not out of tune with the changing times of the 1960's. The way the changing manners and morals are described in St Mary Mead novels is somewhat ambiguous. When it comes to new fashions or the younger generation's lack of manners, Christie's tone is disapproving. On the other hand her views on women's position and sex are comparatively modern. I think this proves what New Historicists claim about historians' obsession to generalise history. The mainstream historical narratives show how fashions, manners and morals all evolved but what it fails to show is that there were many contradictory opinions about that evolution. Christie herself is contradictory, first disapproving one thing and then approving another. This strengthens the New Historicist argument that there is no unitary history. The generalised mainstream narratives of history only scratch the surface. Anecdotes, such as Christie's, reveal many more layers to the narrative.

5 'He's a producer - or do I mean a director?' Change in popular culture

Pugh (2008, 326) notes that the interbellum era was “not noted for opera, achievements and innovations in literature, poetry, theatre, ballet, radio and cinema”. The gulf between high culture and popular culture became wider than ever, the divide usually forming between generations and classes. The elderly and the upper classes looked down upon the more popular culture, as demonstrated by the Vicar in *The Murder at the Vicarage*:

I cannot say I have at any time had a great admiration for Mr Raymond West. He is, I know, supposed to be a brilliant novelist and has made quite a name as a poet. His poems have no capital letters in them, which is, I believe, the essence of modernity. His books are about unpleasant people leading lives of surpassing dullness. (Christie 1932, 195)

Raymond West, the nephew of Miss Marple is a novelist famed for his detective stories. The interbellum era was the golden age for British detective fiction but still regarded as cheap literature by the Establishment (Pugh 2008, 338). Christie, herself a product of that time, knew only too well the prejudice experienced by the detective novelists of the era and channelled her own experiences through the character of Raymond West. This is an interesting anecdote since it counters the mainstream narrative of detective fiction's golden age with Christie's own experience of the upper class prejudice. It is a prime example of how an anecdote can open history for new interpretations.

The mass media was a new and growing phenomenon between the wars. Many thought that “the advance of popular culture and the retreat of intellect” was caused by this new media (Pugh 2008, 327). The early steps of paparazzi culture is witnessed in *The Murder at the Vicarage* when Colonel Protheroe is murdered: “There were next the reporters armed with cameras, and the village again to watch the reporters” (Christie 1930, 205). For the country people of St Mary Mead reporters are a novelty, something to be gaped at. They and their working methods are clearly something people were not accustomed to, as again exemplified by the Vicar: “I noticed a few reporters hanging about Old Hall when we arrived there. They accosted me with various queries to which I gave the invariable answer (we had found it the best), that, ‘I

had nothing to say” (Christie 1930, 205). Here again Christie uses her own experience as an anecdote. In the 1920’s, approximately ten years before *The Murder at the Vicarage* was published, Agatha Christie disappeared without a trace creating such a media frenzy Britain had never witnessed before (Cade 2006, 7-9). After a few days she was found in a hotel in perfectly good health. She never publicly explained her disappearance but it is believed Christie disappeared because of a mental breakdown caused by her imminent divorce (Cade 2006, 7-9). In *The Murder at the Vicarage* she uses her own experience to describe how the press behaves. According to Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 54) the author’s own experiences are the best way to expose history and to create the touch of the real.

The greatest change in the British cultural life after the First World War was the expansion of cinema (Pugh 2008, 229). Approximately 23 million people went to cinema weekly at the end of the 1930’s (Pugh 2008, 229-9). Cinema was also at first regarded as cheap entertainment by the upper classes but before the Second World War broke out, it had gained universal acceptance. The rousing interest in regards to cinema, film making and movie stars are key plot points in *The Body in the Library* and *The Mirror Crack’d*. The novels also describe very aptly the way people’s attitudes towards this comparatively new form of entertainment. In *The Body in the Library* when there is a raucous party in the village, people automatically associate it with the people from the nearby film studios: “I suppose they were film people.” (Christie 1942, 17) is Miss Marple’s verdict, as if film people were the cause of all that is depraved. Nevertheless, even if these film people are disapproved in St Mary Mead, they also provoke utmost curiosity:

Lively interest had been aroused in St Mary Mead when news went around that Mr Booker’s new house had been bought by a film star. Eager watch was kept for the first appearance of the legendary creature in the village, and it may be said that as far as appearances went Basil Blake was all that could be asked for. Little by little, however, the real facts leaked out. Basil Blake was not a film star – not even a film actor. He was a very junior person, rejoicing in the title of about fifteenth in the list of those responsible for Set Decorations at Lemville Studios, headquarters of British New Era Films. The village maidens lost interest, and the ruling class of censorious spinsters took exception to Basil Blake’s way of life. (Christie 1942, 22)

In the above quote the British class-consciousness is also present in the form of villagers losing interest when it turns out that Basil Blake is not a film star after all.

In *The Mirror Crack'd* St Mary Mead is host to actual film stars when Mrs Bantry sells Gossington Hall to an American film star by the name of Marina Gregg and her husband Jason Rudd. They cause extreme curiosity amongst the villagers, instead of disapproval. This is exemplified by Mrs Bantry and her interest in moving picture world:

'What a lot you know,' said Miss Marple. 'About the private lives of films stars. Did you learn it all in California?'
'Not really,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Actually I get it from the extraordinary magazines I read at my hairdresser's. Most of the stars I don't even know by name, but as I said because Marina Gregg and her husband have bought Gossington, I was interested. Really the things those magazines say! I don't suppose half of it is true – probably not a quarter.' (Christie 1962, 25)

Mrs Bantry, an upper class lady, has completely boxed the compass when it comes to film stars. In *The Body in the Library* she disapproves of Basil Blake, "young fellow connected with the film industry" (Christie 1942, 21) but in *The Mirror Crack'd*, twenty years later, she is in awe of film stars moving into her former home. The general interest in film stars living in St Mary Mead has not waned at all:

But the preponderant attraction was undoubtedly the enormous local curiosity to know exactly what these film people had done to Gossington Hall. The most extravagant assumptions were entertained. The swimming pool in particular caused immense satisfaction. Most people's ideas of Hollywood stars were of sunbathing by a pool in exotic surroundings and in exotic company. That the climate of Hollywood might be more suited to swimming pools than that of St Mary Mead failed to be considered. (Christie 1962, 45)

The world of film making captivated the imaginations of the British public and by the 1960's "going to the pictures was the country's principal extra-domestic leisure activity, and in the degree to which it was practised in England had no peer" (Sandbrook 2005, 119).

Although Christie never underplays the popularity of cinema, there is certain contempt in the way she describes films and especially film stars:

'These theatrical and picture people have the most curious lapses in their intelligence. Sometimes it seems to me that the more of an artistic genius you are, the less common sense you have in everyday life.' (Christie 1962, 122)

'I'm not often shocked, you know, but this does shock me a little.'

'What, the private lives of films stars?'

'Oh no,' said Miss Marple, 'not that! That all seems to be most natural, given the circumstances and the money involved and the opportunities for propinquity. Oh, no, that's natural enough. I mean the way they are written about. I'm rather old-fashioned, you know, and I feel that that really shouldn't be allowed.'

'It's news,' said Dermot Craddock, 'and some pretty nasty things can be said in the way of fair comment.'

'I know,' said Miss Marple. 'It makes me sometimes very angry.'

(Christie 1962, 136)

A similar sentiment is expressed by Mrs Bantry: "I suppose they can't help it really,' said Mrs Bantry vaguely. 'With the kind of lives they have to live. So public, you know.'" (Christie 1962, 24) The way Miss Marple and Mrs Bantry both speak of film stars betrays their class. Even though cinema culture has been around for decades by the 1960's when *The Mirror Crack'd* takes place, for the upper class film stars always represented something rather tacky. With Christie's own background in mind it is easily deduced she is channelling her own feeling about moving picture world through her main characters.

Jason Rudd describes Hollywood to Miss Marple in *The Mirror Crack'd* thus: "In our world, the moving picture world, marriage is a fully occupational hazard. Film stars marry often. Sometimes happily, sometimes disastrously, but seldom permanently." (Christie 1962, 113) This picture Christie draws of cinema and film stars is not a flattering one. As noted above, between the 1930's and the 1960's cinema became hugely popular leisure activity in Britain. Christie depicts this phenomenon in accordance with the mainstream historical narratives, but with slightly contemptuous undertones. These undertones of slight contempt can be interpreted as Christie's and her class's old-fashioned ideas about what culture should be. Although these anecdotes do not constitute an actual counterhistory, Christie depicts a nostalgic last hurrah for the upper classes and their ideals. Perhaps self-ironically she concludes her thoughts about moving picture world in *The Mirror Crack'd* thus: "There are rural pockets where acting is considered to be one of the devil's weapons.' (Christie 1962, 232)

6 Conclusion

In the beginning of the thesis I posed three questions: How reliable a depiction texts such as Christie's St Mary Mead novels convey of the era they were written in? How do these novels present the era they were written and set in? What sort of an effect did the era they were written in have on the novels?

In my view Christie's St Mary Mead novels are a reliable depiction of the era they were written in. The novels do not contradict any major historical phenomena of the time and present the social change that happened during that period in accordance with the mainstream historical narratives such as Pugh (2008), Sandbrook (2005) and James's (2009). Nonetheless, Christie's novels are by no means a neutral overview of the period. And why should they be? Fiction has no reason to serve history accurately. From the New Historicist point of view Christie's St Mary Mead novels can, however, be read as an accurate portrayal of the upper class of that time. Christie herself belonging to that class provides a commentary from the upper class perspective on the historical phenomena of the period: fashion, morality, attitudes and social position. The St Mary Mead novels are a reliable account of the social change that occurred in Britain between the 1930's and the 1960's as the upper classes experienced them. Especially detailed and accurate is the description of the decline of the upper classes. On the other hand, the way Christie depicts for example domestic service is conspicuously constrained and coloured by her own attitudes and background. Again, the novels can be perceived as an upper class account of domestic service but not as providing the whole picture.

Although Christie never deflects from the mainstream narratives noticeably, I would describe her texts as an upper class counterhistory. This is supported by Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 60) according to whom one of the key attributes of counterhistory is to tell the stories of those who resist the mainstream. The upper classes of the period, Agatha Christie among them, most certainly resisted the mainstream modernisation that took place in Britain from the interbellum era to the Sixties. Through anecdotes Christie reminds the reader that, although her novels are not alternative history they, there are more than one side to each story. This, in my view, is the central point of New Historicism.

More advanced New Historicist research would make use of original material, such as letters, diaries and newspaper articles, too, but in regards to this thesis such research was not possible because of limited resources and time. Nonetheless, I managed to compile an overview of Christie's St Mary Mead novels' historical attributes. Comparing Christie's texts to professional historical research of Pugh, James, Sandbrook and Delap worked well in my experience. On the basis of thesis it can be claimed that Agatha Christie's stories provide an accurate, even if nostalgised in places, portrayal of the spirit of the times. Christie never altered historical truths but occasionally omitted certain things, sometimes perhaps knowingly but often because of the natural ignorance for things beyond her own class and way of life. Owing to her huge popularity Christie's portrayal of the British society has certainly shaped the way people view history and in its small way Christie's literature has become part of the mainstream historical narrative.

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APPENDIX 1: FINNISH SUMMARY

Pro gradu -tutkielmassani pohdin miten Agatha Christie kuvaa Britannian luokkayhteiskunnan muutosta Neiti Marple -romaaneissaan *The Murder at the Vicarage* (*Murha maalauskylässä, 1930*), *The Body in the Library* (*Ruumis kirjastossa, 1942*) ja *Tuijottava katse* (*The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side, 1962*). Christien tuotanto on kirjoitettu yhteensä viidellä vuosikymmenellä ja tuon viiden vuosikymmenen aikana Britannia koki joitain historiansa suurimmista yhteiskunnallisista muutoksista. Valitsin edellä mainitut kolme kirjaa siksi, että ne sijoittuvat kaikki neiti Marplen kotikylään St Mary Meadiin. Tällöin yhteiskunnallista muutosta on helpompi tarkkailla. Tutkin yhteiskunnallista muutosta neljästä näkökulmasta: yhteiskuntaluokka, palvelusväen asema, tavat ja moraalit sekä populaarikulttuuri.

Sovellan tutkielmassani uushistorismin kirjallisuusteoriaa. Uushistorismin tavoite on ymmärtää historiaa kirjallisuuden kautta ja kirjallisuutta historian kautta. Tutkimuksessani kysyn, onko Christien luoma ajankuva neiti Marple -romaaneissa luotettava historiallinen kuvaus tuosta aikakaudesta. Tutkin myös millaisen kuvan romaanit luovat tuon ajan Britanniasta ja millainen vaikutus ympäröivällä yhteiskunnalla oli Christien tuotantoon. Uushistoristisen teorian soveltamiseen käytän Catherine Gallagherin ja Stephen Greenblattin kirjaa *Practicing New Historicism* (2000).

Aikakauden yleistä historiaa esitelläkseni käytän päälähteinä Lawrence Jamesin kirjaa *Aristocrats: Britain's Great Ruling Classes from 1066 to the Present* (2009), Martin Pughin kirjaa *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (2008) sekä Dominic Sandbrookin kirjaa *Never Had It So Good: A history of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (2005). Esitelläkseni Agatha Christien taustaa käytän Lydia Kyzlinkovan artikkelia "Social Issues in Agatha Christie's Mysteries: Country, Class, Crime, Clothes and Children" (1997) sekä Jared Caden kirjoittamaa elämäkertaa *Agatha Christie* (2006).

Tutkielmani on jaettu kuuteen osaan: ensimmäisessä osassa esittelen primäärilähteeni, pääasialliset sekundäärilähteeni, käyttämäni kirjallisuusteorian sekä tutkimani kirjailijan taustan. Toisessa, kolmannessa, neljännessä ja viidennessä osassa tutkin uushistoristisia konsepteja käyttäen miten Agatha Christie kuvaa luokkayhteiskunnan, palvelusväen aseman, tapojen ja moraalin sekä

populaarikulttuurin muutosta Britanniassa 1930-luvulta 1960-luvulle. Kuudennessa osassa esittelen tutkimukseni lopputulokset ja päätelmät.

Teoria

Uushistorismin pääväite on, että ei ole yhtä yhtenäistä historiaa. Catherine Gallagher ja Stephen Greenblatt väittävät kirjassaan *Practising New Historicism* (2000, 5), että ammattimainen historiantutkimus ei ole koskaan absoluuttinen totuus, vaan jokaista kirjallista lähdettä on tutkittava kirjoittamisajankohtansa historiana. Heidän mukaansa (2000, 9) ammattimainen historiantutkimus muodostaa historiantutkimuksen rungon, mutta muut tekstit, kuten fiktiiviset tarinat, syventävät historian tulkintaa. Uushistorismin mukaan kaikki kirjalliset lähteet kertovat oman aikakautensa tarinaa ja vaikuttavat näin ollen ammattimaisen historiantutkimuksen kaanoniin. Gallagherin ja Greenblattin (2000, 12) mukaan vähäisempänä pidetty kirjallinen tuotos voi joissain tapauksissa jopa horjuttaa tärkeämpinä pidettyjen historiallisten lähteiden asemaa tai vaihtoehtoisesti korostaa niiden roolia historiantutkimuksessa. Uushistorismin tavoitteena ei ole kyseenalaistaa perinteistä historiantutkimusta, vaan laajentaa historiantutkimuksen kenttää uusien, vähemmän tunnettujen tekstien kautta.

Sovellan tutkielmassani kahta uushistorismin käsitettä: vastahistoria (counterhistory) ja anekdootit (anecdotes). Vastahistoria pyrkii haastamaan perinteisen historiantutkimuksen. Uushistorismin näkökulmasta vastahistoriat luovat vaihtoehtoisia kronologioita (Gallagher ja Greenblatt 2000, 53). Vastahistoriat ovat usein luonteeltaan omaelämäkerrallisia ja tästä syystä perinteinen historiantutkimus ei yleensä ota niitä huomioon. Uushistorismi puolestaan uskoo, että juuri omaelämäkerrallisuus pystyy syventämään perinteistä historiantutkimuksen tulkintaa (Gallagher ja Greenblatt 2000, 58). Eräät koulukunnat näkevät, että kaunokirjallisuus kokonaisuutena on yksi iso vastahistoria, koska vastahistoriat usein kertovat henkilöistä, jotka tavalla tai toisella vastustavat valtavirtaa.

Vastahistoriat koostuvat usein anekdooteista. Perinteisessä historiantutkimuksessa anekdootit jäävät usein huomiotta, koska perinteisen tutkimuksen tavoite on luoda kaanon ja anekdootit toistuvasti hankaloittavat tätä tavoitetta. Uushistorismi puolestaan uskoo, että anekdootit rikastavat historiaa, sen

sijaan, että yrittäisivät radikaalisti muuttaa sitä (Gallagher ja Greenblatt 2000, 49). Anekdootit kertovat todellisuudesta, joka on erilainen verrattuna hyväksytyyn, perinteiseen historiankirjoitukseen.

Kirjailijan tausta

Uushistorismin mukaan tutkimuksessa on aina pidettävä mielessä kirjailijan oma henkilökohtainen tausta, koska se vaikuttaa ratkaisevasti hänen kirjoituksiinsa. Agatha Christien tausta oli ylemmän keskiluokkainen. Christie käytti omaa elämäänsä usein pohjana tarinoissaan: yläluokkainen tapahtumapaikka, jossa on paljon palvelijoita sekä vieraita loi runsaasti mahdollisia uhreja, silminnäkijöitä ja epäiltyjä suljetussa tilassa. Tärkeintä tietysti oli, että Christie itse tunsi yläluokkaisen elämän varsin hyvin. Brittiläsen yläluokkainen miljöö tapoineen ja tottumuksineen oli Christielle helppo lähtökohta tarinoissaan. Tämä on tietysti johtanut siihen, että Christien kirjat ovat usein hyvin konservatiivisia ja hahmot perinteikkäitä. Vaikka Christie on kuuluisa itseironisesta huumoristaan, jolla hän pilkkasi aikalaistensa pakkomiellettä luokkayhteiskunnan hierarkioihin, luokkauskollisuus ja -tietoisuus ovat näkyvissä myös hänen omissa teksteissään (Kyzlinkova 1997, 116).

Erityisesti tapa, jolla Christie kirjoittaa työväenluokasta, on kuvaavaa. Yhdessäkään Christien lukuisista teoksista ei ole työväenluokkaista päähenkilöä. Kaikki merkittävät työväenluokkaiset henkilöt ovat useimmiten palvelijoita. Tämän lisäksi työväenluokkaiset sivuhenkilöt ovat usein luonteeltaan ”hölmöjä, lapsellisia ja loputtoman lojaaleja ylemmille luokille” (Kyzlinkova 1997, 123). Samalla tavalla Christien kirjojen nuoret hahmot on kuvattu usein hyvin konventionaalisiksi: nuoresta iästään huolimatta he ovat käytökseltään vanhanaikaisia ja näkemyksiltään perinteisiä. Lydia Kyzlinkovan (1997, 123) mukaan Agatha Christie oli onnellisimmillaan, kun ”kaikilla oli paikkansa ja tiesivät sen, pitivät sen ja pukeutuivat sen mukaisesti”.

Analyysi

Tutkittaessa Christien teoksia uushistorisesta näkökulmasta, tärkeintä on pitää mielessä kaksi näkökulmaa: miten kirjoittamisajankohta on vaikuttanut Christien teoksiin ja

miten Christien oma henkilökohtainen taustansa on vaikuttanut hänen kirjoituksiinsa. Tutkielmassani pohdin miten yhteiskunnallinen muutos Britanniassa 1930-luvulta 1960-luvulle on kuvattu Christien teksteissä ja millaisia vastahistorioita nuo kuvaukset muodostavat.

Yksi suurimmista muutoksista brittiläisessä yhteiskunnassa edellä mainittuna aikana oli luokkien välisten dynamiikoiden muuttuminen. Jo maailmansotien välisenä aikana luokkien välit selvästi tulehtuivat. Ensimmäinen maailmansota oli pahentanut alaluokkien taloudellista tilannetta ja heidän automaattinen kunnioituksensa yläluokkia kohtaan väheni huomattavasti (Pugh 2009, 86). Työväenluokat muodostivat ammattiliittoja ja työväenpuolue nousi suurten puolueiden joukkoon (Pugh 2008, 86). Niin keskiluokkaiset ja työväenluokkaiset naiset siirtyivät kodeista työelämään (Pugh 2008, 185). Toisen maailmansodan jälkeen alaluokkien asema parani huomattavasti ja 1960-luvulle tultaessa Britanniassa oli käytännössä täystyöllisyys.

Christien teoksissa kaikkein yksityiskohtaisimmin kuvataan yläluokan aseman muuttumista. Yläluokat kärsivät ensimmäisessä maailmansodassa suuria tappioita ja seurauksena joutuivat maksamaan valtavia perintöveroja. Tämä johti monien vanhojen aateliskartanoiden myyntiin tai purkuun. Romaaneissaan Christie kuvaa tätä muutosta eversti ja rouva Bantryn sekä hotellin tanssikavaljeerina itsensä elättävän Raymond Starrin henkilöiden kautta. Raymond Starr on myös hyvä esimerkki brittiläisen yläluokan muuntautumiskyvystä. Kun hänen vanha sukukartanonsa on myyty ja rahat loppuneet, hän elättää itsensä hienostuneena tanssikavaljeerina. Rouva Bantry puolestaan joutuu myymään kartanonsa miehensä kuoleman jälkeen, koska hänen rahansa eivät riitä sen ylläpitoon. Anekdootit Bantryjen ja Starrien kohtaloista ovat yksi esimerkki siitä miten Christie syventää perinteisen historian tutkimuksen tulkintaa, silti kyseenalaistamatta sen pääviestejä. On tietysti muistettava, että kaikki on suhteellista ja vaikka vanhojen sukukartanoiden menetys saattoi olla tragedia rouva Bantryn ja Raymond Starrin kaltaisille henkilöille, Britannia oli noina aikoina täynnä paljon traagisempiakin ihmiskohtaloita. Siksi tällaiset tapaukset ovat jääneet vähemmälle huomiolle perinteisessä historian kirjoituksessa. Christien kirjoituksissa taas tällaiset tapahtumat saavat suuren huomion, koska hän itse eli yläluokkaisessa ympäristössä ja tämänkaltaiset tragediat olivat läheisiä hänelle ja hänen lähipiirilleen.

Tämä on loistava esimerkki siitä miten kaunokirjalliset tekstit rikastavat ammattimaista historiantutkimusta.

Loppupäätelmä

Näkemykseni mukaan tässä tutkielmassa käsitellyt Christien romaanit ovat luotettava kuvaus yhteiskunnallisesta muutoksesta, joka tapahtui Britanniassa 1930-luvulta 1960-luvulle. Christien tekstit eivät kyseenalaista perinteistä historiantutkimusta ja Christie kuvaus aikakauden historiallisista muutoksista täsmää Pughin (2008), Sandbrookin (2005) ja Jamesin (2009) tutkimusten kanssa. Siitä huolimatta Christien tekstejä ei voi pitää neutraalina esityksenä aikakauden muutoksista, eikä siihen myöskään ole tarvetta. Fiktiolla ei ole mitään velvoitetta kertoa historiallisia totuuksia. Uushistorisesta näkökulmasta Christien tekstit ovat kuitenkin paikkaansa pitävä kuvaus tuon aikakauden yläluokasta. Christie, joka itsekin kuului yläluokkaan, kommentoi aikakauden historiallisia muutoksia oman yhteiskuntaluokkansa näkökulmasta. Näin ollen voidaan todeta, että tutkielmassa käsitellyt romaanit ovat luotettava kuvaus Britannian yhteiskunnallisesta muutoksesta 1930-luvulta 1960-luvulle yläluokan kokemuksena. Erityisen tarkkanäköistä ja yksityiskohtaista on kuvaus yläluokan muuttuvasta asemasta.