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Oppressive Gender Roles in Crime Novels

Abstract

Throughout history, women have been perceived as unequal or lower-class in comparison to men. This misogynistic opinion makes its way into movies, history books, politics, mass media, novels, music, and employment. Mystery novels are no exception. In this essay, I will specifically target British mystery novels that include these gender stereotypes. The works I chose to research were written by three of the “Queens of Crime” who were extremely famous and influential authors: *The Tiger in the Smoke* by Margery Allingham, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* by Agatha Christie, and *A Man Lay Dead* by Ngaio Marsh. This analysis determines that Allingham, Christie, and Marsh helped validate misogynistic views through their novels instead of pushing for gender equality.

Keywords: mystery, misogyny, gender, stereotypes, sexist

The British mystery novels of the twentieth century have more in common than just a murder, a mystery, a list of suspects, and a detective. *The Tiger in the Smoke* by Margery Allingham, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* by Agatha Christie, and *A Man Lay Dead* by Ngaio Marsh all present women in an extremely negative light. This allows readers of the twenty-first century to gain knowledge of the oppressive gender roles that were *unfortunately* common during this time. The misogynistic viewpoint that engulfed society is prevalent not only in the novels written by men, but those written by women as well. The four “Queens of Crime,” Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, and surprisingly, Margery Allingham, all at some point in their work implement gender stereotypes and validate misogyny instead of attempting to alter sexist views for the better. Even if they did not desire to take a feminist stance on the subject, they could have simply omitted the submissive roles of women or the domineering language men used to address women, for example. British crime novels of the twentieth century are not normally known for their implementation of an unequal male-dominated society. Through a deeper analysis of this genre, however, readers see these depictions in even the most famous writers like Agatha Christie. In their attempts to write mystery novels, Christie, Sayers, Marsh, and Allingham succeed but only while allowing rigid misogynistic views to dominate certain aspects of their novels.

The four “Queens of Crime” allow oppressive patriarchal views to make appearances in their novels. Agatha Christie, one of the most famous, if not *the* most famous, female mystery writer, seems to condone sexist attitudes toward women through her

work. Over time, Christie's novels have reached a broad audience that has possibly normalized the gender stereotypes against women presented in her work because her books have "sold billions of copies" (Warren, 2010, p.51). While it is important for the history of the oppression of women to be recorded, that place is not in a cozy mystery novel. Throughout many of her murder mysteries, the topic of gender is relevant to characters when discussing the murderer. In *And Then There Were None*, the character Lombard tells the judge, "I suppose you'll leave the women out of it" although "the murders on Indian Island require[d] no great physical strength to enact" and the "three women present, were already guilty of murder" (Warren, 2010). Here, Lombard presents a misogynist viewpoint that females are incapable of possessing the physical or moral strength to commit murder, thus expecting the judge not to consider any of them suspects.

Craig Warren argues in his essay "Gender and Moral Immaturity in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*," that Christie uses characters similar to protagonist Vera Claythorne to "create a narrative that persuades the reader, imperceptibly, to overlook the stigma of murder and to sympathize with a woman who had denied every maternal instinct and killed a child" (2010, p.55). Vera is not held accountable as a man would be in her position. It seems as if she is not punished as she should be because of the mindset that women cannot be dangerous. Similarly, in another of Christie's books, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, when Dr. Bauerstein is primarily under suspicion, detective Hercule Poirot's sidekick Arthur Hastings knows that the doctor must have an accomplice whom he thinks could possibly be Mrs. Cavendish. Later, Hastings reasons that it could never be her because he believes "no woman as beautiful as Mary Cavendish could be a murderess. Yet beautiful women had been known to poison" (Christie, 2013, p.145). According to Hastings, women cannot murder if they are attractive and, if they do commit murder, they are only capable of doing so with poison. Women should not be above suspicion just because they are considered to be "beautiful." It is unfair to limit women's abilities even when it comes to murder, as strange as it sounds. Hastings implies that the only way a woman is capable of killing is with poison because this requires no physical strength. If women were found to be guilty of murder, they typically were not held to the same standards of punishment as men. The obscured view of Vera can be linked to Poirot discounting Evie Howard as a murder suspect in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Howard seems to care deeply for her friend, Mrs. Inglethorp, which successfully fools every character except Poirot. Howard is the only character to "[cry] bitterly" or show any sorrowful emotion over the death of Mrs. Inglethorp (Christie, 2013, p. 69). Displaying feminine emotions of crying and caring removes Howard from the suspect list early in the novel. She is described as an older woman who worked for Mrs. Inglethorp for many years,

which benefits Howard in deciding she did not commit the murder. Near the end of the novel, the reader is told Howard is actually the accomplice to the murderer. Since she displays typical feminine behaviors, she is successful in fooling almost every character in the story, as well as the reader. Since she is the only character to show these emotions, she is assumed to be genuinely upset about the death of her friend. She is also disregarded because of her age, being the eldest female in the novel, which makes her seem even more incapable of murder.

Female authors of popular British crime novels of the twentieth century have received mass amounts of criticism because of the way they presented women characters in their novels. Agate Nesaule Krouse and Margot Peters argue in their essay “Women and Crime: Sexism in Allingham, Sayers, and Christie” that Christie presents her female characters as “garrulous, talking inconsequentially and at length about irrelevancies” (1974, p.149). This criticism encompasses many female characters in many of Christie’s novels. Even today, women are often referred to as talkative which is perceived as a negative characteristic. When females are in a position to articulate change and they conform to the usual social beliefs, change will not occur. The misogyny in this genre makes these authors seem like cruel human beings for including this mindset when they were not forced to. If there are young females present in a novel “they are often stupid, blonde, red-fingernailed gold diggers without a thought in their heads except men and money” (Krouse and Peters, 1974, p. 149). How Christie presented her female characters suggests that she shared the same misogynistic views that dominated her society. She had a huge platform that she could have potentially used to share a feminist outlook on oppressive gender roles. Warren suggests that the misogynist views presented in Christie’s books are due to her “wartime experiences with gender inequity, and with alarmingly immature men” (2010, p.59). Clearly her experiences impacted her greatly. Christie could have taken neither a feminist nor misogynist viewpoint at all in her mystery novels. It would have been better to be indifferent on the subject, rather than to show her support for patriarchal norms because of the multitude of people she influenced through her writing.

Female characters in mystery novels of the twentieth century are often stereotyped as having feminine qualities that are offensive. Miss Marple, another detective in other popular Christie novels is known as a spinster, who was an “object of ridicule... [and] has been a recurring icon in British literature” (Mezei, 2007, p. 2). The spinster also correlates to Evie Howard who was a character in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Why would the detective hero be used to mock? The obvious answer is that she is a female. No male detectives in other mystery novels are ever mocked. They are typically held to higher standards than most characters. Howard, and other female

characters similar to her, are considered spinsters and regarded “as lonely, superfluous, and sexually frustrated” (Mezei, 2007, p. 2). These women are branded by the term “spinster,” suggesting that they are unmarried and unimportant. This is used in a negative connotation regarding these women because it implies that if they are not married that means they must be lonely and sexually frustrated. This is obviously not true and just an unfortunate stereotype of this time period. Spinsters often use “self-deprecating adverbs meant to reassure... patriarchy” (Mezei, 2007, p. 4). Howard is a perfect example of a woman who conformed to the gender stereotypes of the twentieth century. She seems to be a direct reflection of Christie who also, through her writing, normalizes the male-dominated view of society. Christie presents her primary female detective’s success “chiefly to intuition and nosiness” while her primary male detective “looks upon crime rationally” (Krouse and Peters, 1974, p. 151-2). The spinster is presented with no real talent. Only Christie’s primary male detective is allowed knowledge in order to solve the crime. Many women in texts read this semester also fit the description of a spinster. Evie Howard is a considerable reflection of the definition of a spinster. She is an old, unmarried woman who takes care of Mrs. Inglethorp daily without pay. Howard practically devotes her life to Mrs. Inglethorp and receives nothing in return.

In *A Man Lay Dead*, Angela also represents the typical character of a spinster. She is the dependent niece of her Uncle Hubert and is unmarried as well. In the first few pages of the novel, Angela apologizes to Nigel by saying, “I hope I haven’t completely unmanned you... by my driving I mean” (Marsh, 2011, p. 5). Women typically, even today, apologize when no apology is necessary. She even apologized for her driving and women are already stereotypically horrible drivers. In *The Tiger in the Smoke*, Campion’s wife Amanda represents the spinster for this novel. Her primary duty is to take care of her husband and do what he asks of her. She is an extremely obedient wife who ensures that patriarchy is the basis for her relationship with Campion. At one point in the novel, Campion screams that she acted silly, but “Amanda was too experienced a wife to take the outburst as anything but a compliment” (Allingham, 2010, p. 132). This quote shows that Amanda accepts her place as a wife who plays a submissive role in her relationship. No one should take their spouse yelling at them as a compliment. Allingham shows Amanda being outrageously submissive in her relationship with Campion because she never talks back to him and she usually waits on him like a servant. This relationship should not have been presented in this novel because many young, easily influenced girls of this time period were reading this genre. Nothing positive can come from relationships that are verbally and emotionally abusive. In *The Tiger in the Smoke*, Mary gives away items that she should not have and Avril calls her a “silly old [woman]” (Allingham, 2010, p. 118). The term “silly” is

used condescendingly to describe female characters in the genre during the interwar period. Women were assumed to behave and look a certain way; Miss Warburton, for one, “remained what she was bred to be, very feminine” (Allingham, 2010, p. 111). Although it is accurate to describe this character as feminine, Allingham went so far as to say that she was born to be feminine. This is an unfair description for any female because all females are not destined to act feminine. It is acceptable for women to act any way they want, even if that is the opposite of how men believe they should act.

Typically in crime novels, women’s appearances are almost completely determined by how men perceive them. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, for example, Poirot says that Evie Howard “is a woman with a head and heart too... Though the good God gave her no beauty!” (Christie, 2013, p. 69). This is an extremely negative comment to say about her regardless, but especially because he implies that she is intelligent as well. Why should her level of attractiveness overshadow her intelligence? Why can’t a female have both beauty and brains? Each of the British crime novels under discussion here presents and normalizes the same unnecessary misogynistic beliefs. In this genre, men comment on women’s physical attractiveness which, for them, determines the value of each woman they make remarks about. Howard seems to be the female who is terrorized the most by more than one man throughout the novel. When John tells Hastings about Howard, he describes her as a “Jack of all trades [and] a great sport” although she’s “not precisely young and beautiful” (Christie, 2013, p. 2). John describes her as being a helpful person, yet it is also important for him to note that she is old and not beautiful according to his standards. This quote displays the sexist attitude that the value of women was determined by their age and their attractiveness. Poirot describes Howard one final time near the end of the novel after he reveals that she is the accomplice to the murderer. Howard was able to impersonate her cousin, Mr. Inglethorp, because she was “of good height, her voice [was] deep and manly... and there [was] a distinct resemblance between” them (Christie, 2013, p. 201). The word “deep” is not necessarily a negative statement regarding her voice because some voices are simply deeper than others. However, the description by Poirot becomes sexist when he calls her voice “manly.” He also implies that Howard looks like Mr. Inglethorp and not the other way around in his statements about Howard’s height and manly voice.

Krouse and Peters argue that the “juxtaposing of Christie’s male and female characters reveals her prejudice against women” (1974, p. 150). Even cursory readings reveal that men and women are portrayed in completely opposite ways in most narratives. The men are usually independent and intelligent while the women are only good for being subordinate wives or looking pretty. These misogynistic descriptions persist in Allingham’s *The Tiger in the Smoke*. Meg is called “beautiful” and “fragile” many times

throughout the novel. The word beautiful is used to let the reader know that she is not a spinster; she belongs to a more desirable type of female. These descriptions categorize women based on appearance, but there seem to be no parallel categories for males. The word “fragile” makes Meg seem dependent and not capable of taking care of herself. Although she may be petite and female, this does not mean she should be described in a derogatory way as weak. What’s more, Amanda is seemingly not compatible with her husband in terms of intelligence. Rather, he makes her seem that way because of the condescending comments he makes to and about her. Krouse and Peters rightly say that “Campion looks upon Amanda as childlike and in need of protection” (1974, p. 146). It is obvious from reading only one book in this famous Allingham series that this is true. Campion’s demeaning manner toward his wife in nearly each interaction is heartbreaking to read. When he finds out that Amanda did not do what he wanted in one scene, he refers to her as “[his] addlepatented girl” and in his next sentence, calls her an idiot (Allingham, 2010, p. 132). She is referred to as a “girl” by Campion multiple times, which is proof that he does look at her as a child that he must take care of. To Campion, Amanda is incompetent. Why would he talk to his wife, whom he supposedly loves, with such hatred, condescension, and prejudice? Plain describes Campion as having a “protective clothing of patriarchal masculinity” that was “so integral to his personality” (Allingham, 2010, p. 66). Clearly Campion feels the need to be in control at all times. He has an overbearing tone that is crucial to acknowledge regarding his relationship with Amanda and his character in general.

Although the detective genre is not as popular as it once was, it is still influential to readers of the twenty-first century. Society has grown past many of the pejorative attitudes illustrated in these novels that reflected prevalent gender stereotypes of the mid-twentieth century. Yet there are many other prejudices that women still face resulting from attitudes similar to those depicted in popular mystery novels. These authors could have used their platforms in order to speak out against misogyny and present both sexes as equal. Successful female writers like Allingham, Christie, and Sayers present many “familiar sexist attitudes toward women” that the reader “might otherwise expect these women writers to avoid” (Krouse and Peters, 1974, p. 144). By allowing rigid patriarchal views to make appearances in their novels, these women have done all women an injustice. These females may have been great authors who helped to shape a literary phenomenon through their writing, but ultimately they failed to bring light to social issues that were prevalent during the mid-twentieth century.

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