Death on the Roads: Motoring with Agatha Christie

Gill Plain
University of St Andrews
gp3@st-andrews.ac.uk

Biography: Gill Plain is Professor of English at the University of St Andrews. She works on mid-century British culture, war writing, crime fiction and gender studies. Her publications include *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001), *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (2013) and *Prosthetic Agency: Literature, Culture and Masculinity in the Aftermath of World War II* (2023). She is currently writing a very short introduction to Agatha Christie.

Abstract: Over the course of her autobiography, Agatha Christie makes some fascinating observations about cars, and what their growing ubiquity meant to a young woman transitioning from Victorian girlhood to interwar modernity. In her interwar novels, meanwhile, the car functions variously as a marker of status, an index of character and a symbol of female agency. However, this initially optimistic and straightforward embrace of motoring modernity began to change in the second half of Christie's career, with the result that the car would come to signify not just a changing relationship between gender and mobility, but also a transition in detective methodology. Exploring novels from the interwar, war and postwar periods – including *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* (1934), *The Hollow* (1946) and *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968) – I follow the car to map transitions in how, why, and what Christie detects.

Keywords: Agatha Christie; cars; gender; women detectives; modernity; war; psychogeography.

Death on the Roads: Motoring with Agatha Christie

> It was on that visit to Paris that I first became acquainted with the forerunners of the great mechanical age. The streets of Paris were full of those new vehicles called '*Automobiles*'. They rushed madly along (by present day standards probably quite slowly, but then they only had to compete with the horse), smelling, hooting, driven by men with caps and goggles and full of motoring equipment. They were bewildering. My father said they would be everywhere soon. We did not believe him.
>
> (Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*, 82)

Agatha Christie grew up with the car, and with the irresistible rise of motoring within British culture. Born in 1890, she was just 6 years old when the Locomotives on Highways Act removed the requirement for a man with a red flag to walk ahead of any motor vehicles on the road. After that landmark legislation, things sped up and by the turn of the new century, motoring was emerging as a volatile new cultural phenomenon – attracting both those in search of adventure, and those seeking the conspicuous display of status that such an expensive consumer artefact could provide. Naturally, wherever there is new technology, its position within the vectors of culture will be contested and gender and class were key components of early debates surrounding access to the car in Britain. Historians of automobility have demonstrated the horror with which early women motorists were greeted and mapped the diverse, frequently contradictory, rationalisations proposed for why women should not drive; they have also demonstrated the longevity of these prejudices and their pervasive cultural impact. By the mid-1960s, writes Sean O'Connell, 'only 13 per cent of women held a driving licence, in comparison with 56 percent of men' (43). Yet in the face of opposition and widespread media ridicule, women did drive, relishing the independence, power and pleasure that motoring could offer. The result was a series of representational contortions that saw the woman driver demonised at the same time as she was used to

advertise the joys of motoring, and the emergence of a culture in which control of the car – as object and symbol – could be contested and appropriated. Cars, argues Georgine Clarsen, were not 'value-free items … delivered fully formed by gender-neutral designers and manufacturers to a generic end user', they were rather 'malleable objects whose production continued long after they left the factory floor' (5). Christie's 55-year writing career, stretching from 1920 to her death in 1976, captures this ongoing process, and it potently mobilises the meaning-making of which the car was capable. Her writing also, however, reveals the car's impact upon structures of feeling and narrative form: across her oeuvre, motoring does not simply enable women's agency, it actively shapes the possibilities of the crime genre. Examining Christie's vehicular deployments across a fifty-year period can, in consequence, tell us just how far her writing travelled from the clue-puzzle conventions that made her name.

In mapping the car in Christie, I propose to focus largely on her women drivers, bringing discourses of gender into dialogue with existing critical work that posits the intersection of technology, modernity and detection. Across three phases of her long career, the car as object serves significantly different purposes, and in so doing exposes both Christie's sensitivity to cultural change and her ongoing formal innovation. Similarly, tropes of movement across her work are linked both to women's agency and plot development. As Alison Light has observed, 'it is the pleasures of travel that dominate her plots in the 1930s' (89) and, across her career, Christie was as likely to provide a corpse in transit or on holiday as to embed it within the domestic space. For every 'body in the library' there is a death on water, in the air or on a luxury express, and these murders in transit trouble the conventional juxtaposition of a static 'Golden Age' formula against the streetwise flow of urban investigative narratives.[1] Trains were particularly likely to mutate into crime scenes, so much so that Christie's biographer, Janet Morgan, argues for a particular sympathy between plot

and mode of transportation. Rail travel was, she suggests, 'both predictable and unexpected, dangerous and safe', a means through which conventional storytelling could encounter 'surprising, even frightening' territory (170). More recently, Chris Ewers has re-read the railways in Christie's work, proposing that 'she uses train travel in her fiction to modify and investigate the genre conventions of the whodunit' (98). Yet the car brings something extra – an independent relationship to mobility – a point trenchantly articulated by Enda Duffy, who figures motor vehicles as transformative machines with the capacity to change the subject's relationship to time and space. The car, he suggests, enables the individual 'to feel modernity in their bones: to feel its power as a physical sensation, through their sensing of speed' (4). Motoring makes the abstract accelerations of modernity perceptible; it effects a transition in which 'velocity, in itself a form of unproductive expenditure [becomes] the sign of a life lived more intensely' (134). Movement becomes 'a pleasure in itself' (267).[2]

The threat and thrill of this new velocity permeated pre-First World War debates around motoring and offered a new culture of adventure for the *male* imaginary. To see such a potent prosthetic power appropriated by women was, as I suggested above, rapidly recognised as problematic, and their disruptive potential was made safe through the car's evolution into 'a much-sought-after-commodity of status and display' (Chen, 166). Men were to be drivers, women passengers: used to sell cars, but not expected to own them. The First World War, however, would disrupt this conventional gendering, shifting the parameters of both motoring and crime fiction. Driven by an 'acute shortage of skilled drivers and mechanics', shops and businesses, government departments, voluntary services and ambulance units all recruited women drivers (Clarsen, 33). Women drove and maintained cars, and they changed their clothing to perform these roles with greater freedom. There was, inevitably, a backlash, but it was not immediate: although women were pressured into vacating jobs required by returning combatants, throughout the 1920s a fashion for competent

androgynous femininity remained – at least temporarily securing the association of 'modern' women with motoring. This was one legacy of the war; another was what Alison Light describes as a 'shift in the self-perception of the respectable reading public away from the notions of mastery and destiny which had so governed the idea of English character and with such disastrous consequences' (70). Imperial adventure and fictions of dominant masculinity were superseded by the frivolous, the parodic and the anti-sentimental. Clue-puzzle writers were 'making fun of heroes' (70) and Christie exemplified this trend, not just through her domesticated detective (73), but also by making so many of her young female characters the future-orientated vectors of a fast-paced modernity. The war changed detective fiction, it changed national identities, and it made it space for the woman driver.

Yet the impact of the car is not confined to drivers. For the passenger and pedestrian, the car assumes a more ambivalent role – particularly in crime fiction, where it is not infrequently used to kill – but even from beyond the driver's seat, the motor revolution emerges as integral to a new modernity. Writing suggestively of the challenge of *avoiding* automobiles, James Purdon explores the emergence of 'traffic-sense', a mode of modern consciousness 'alternately attentive and instinctive' (19). While Purdon's preoccupation is with the conjunction of stalled bodies and narrative flow – exemplified by Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* – the distinctively modern relationship between the attentive and the instinctive is integral to detective narrative, and an underexplored distinction in Christie's work. The relationship in her plotting between a structuring puzzle and the distractions of 'atmosphere' is embedded in her writing almost from the outset. It is also conspicuously gendered. 'Women', observes Hercule Poirot in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, 'observe subconsciously a thousand little details, without knowing that they are doing so. Their subconscious mind adds these little things together – and they call the result intuition' (195). Poirot is commenting on Caroline Sheppard, an early Marple prototype, but this is also a

methodology he relies on himself –another reason why he has been recognised as a 'feminine' detective agent (Light, 73). However, although the seeds were present from the outset, it would only be towards the end of her career, with the emergence of what might be seen as a distinctive late style, that Christie would fully commit to an 'atmospheric' detective methodology. What this might mean will be discussed in the final section of this essay.

In reading Christie's women drivers, then, I am exploring a four-way intersection of object, form, movement and gender, across three distinct historical periods. From interwar modernity to the cultural revolutions of the postwar avantgarde, the woman driver and the woman detective find common ground, while the 'instincts' that shape them both have an evolving relationship with the construction of Christie's detective narratives.[3] This is another instance of crime fiction's intimate relation to the contexts of its production – as is made clear by the media anxieties that frame the beginning of this story. In 1925, just a year before the publication of *Ackroyd*, John Prioleau published *Motoring for Women*, in which he argued that a good woman driver succeeds not because she understands mechanics, but because 'her instinct' tells her what to do (10). Prioleau is attempting, with somewhat clumsy chivalry, to defend the much-maligned woman motorist, and in so doing he invokes the same explicatory framework as Poirot. The woman driver has a feeling for the car; she is alert to the safety of others, and she possesses an 'ice-cold presence of mind' which she 'invariably displays when things become hectic' (7, 10). Such assumptions about gender, about how women have been trained to think, are integral to Christie's writing and they find form in her accounts of motoring. In turn, the car's ongoing presence in her work reveals how her understanding of women's detective agency changes over the years. In the sections that follow, I examine Christie's 'car sense', and what it might tell us about her capacity to move with the times.

The Interwar Car: Status and Mobility

> Looking back [to 1919], it seems to me extraordinary that we should have contemplated having both a nurse and a servant, but they were considered essentials of life in those days and were the last things we would have thought of dispensing with. To have committed the extravagance of a car, for instance, would never had entered our minds. Only the rich had cars. (Christie, *Autobiography*, 276)

> 'You don't mind, I suppose,' said Bundle after a minute or two, 'if I drive rather fast?' (Christie, *Chimneys*, 180)

In 1920, when Christie publishes her first novel, the car is still a luxury item for most people. Yet scarcely two years later, according to the unreliable chronology of the autobiography, she was buying her first car – a 'bottle-nosed' Morris Cowley. This purchase, made possible by *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), is figured as a fairy tale, a source of immense excitement comparable only to having tea with the Queen (331). The evidence of the autobiography suggests that Christie loved cars, and she waxes lyrical about the freedom they provided – 'to be able to go anywhere you chose; to places beyond the reach of your legs – it widened your whole horizon' (343). The Morris was the epitome of practical motoring, but Christie also relished driving her first husband's rather more powerful Delage, and the combination encapsulates the car's interwar potential as both an agent of freedom and a vehicle of gender transgression.

Given her delight in automobility, it is not surprising that cars feature regularly in Christie's early fiction. Cars enable the swift movement of her detectives, they offer new methods of murder and corpse management, and they act as a status symbol, signifying the aspirational desires of a new postwar generation.[4] *The Secret Adversary* (1922) – Christie's second novel – provides a succinct example. Tommy and Tuppence, the 'Young Adventurers', start the novel demobbed and disconsolate unable to find postwar employment.

Tuppence, who has, amongst other things, spent the war driving 'a trade delivery van, a motor-lorry and a general' (9), is swiftly established as the epitome of female modernity, and she is as keen as Tommy to find a 'joint venture' that will permit her to escape the confines of the parental home (11).[5] Yet, with two unemployed protagonists, the car can only be a fantasy, and in order for one to feature in the fiction, a fairy godfather is needed. Enter American millionaire Julius P. Herscheimmer who, when the situation demands, conjures up a Rolls Royce from thin air (117). This vehicle will enable a daring rescue sequence and will serve the more romantic purpose of affording privacy to young lovers. The car thus offers both speed and status, furthering the thriller and romance plots, and fulfilling in fiction the dual purpose it embodies in consumer modernity. In terms of enabling a specifically female agency, though, *The Secret Adversary*'s romance with the car is seriously hampered by a lack of cash. In later novels, Christie solves this problem by raising the class profile of her female investigators. While Tuppence can only be a passenger, Lady Eileen 'Bundle' Brent variously drives a Panhard and a Hispano-Suiza, the latter of which she is described as driving with 'skill and nerve', albeit at a speed that makes her father too scared to accompany her (*Seven Dials*, 67-68).[6]

These early examples are redolent of the 1920s' moment. The car functions as a desirable object, enabling detective mobility, and an assertion of at least some women's agency. But barely a few years later, in *Why Didn't They Ask Evans* (1934), the motoring landscape has changed, and the car's status as a luxury consumer object has become much less stable and easily read. On the surface, the novel presents a familiar class dynamic. Our plucky heroine, Lady Frances Derwent – Frankie to her friends – is a modern independent Bentley driver, and her father boasts a Chrysler; but her old childhood friend Bobby Jones, son of the local vicar, can only muster a motorcycle. Having had to leave his career in the Navy, he is now about to become a second-hand car salesman – going into business with his

well-meaning but utterly unreliable old chum Badger. When it comes to the business of detection, however, this career choice will prove invaluable. When Frankie and Bobby need to infiltrate a suspect's home, they do it by concocting a 'great accident party': a choreographed dance of second-hand cars that culminates in a fake crash, after which the supposedly concussed Frankie – perhaps the first Trojan motorist – is carried into the house.

A decade after *The Secret Adversary*, then, the car is no longer so straightforwardly readable. It could still connote privilege and financial substance – or it could have been bought from Badger for a tenner.[7] With a growing second-hand market and improvements in reliability, the car is no-longer the exclusive luxury of a wealthy elite – indeed, it might signify anything from the nouveau riche to the criminal classes, part of a performative presentation of social standing. Appropriately, the book explores the class mutability of its characters as well as its cars. When Bobby goes undercover as Frankie's chauffeur, his performance reveals a disturbing uncertainty as to exactly what sort of person a chauffeur might be. The upper-class Frankie is certain of their social invisibility (54); the less class-confident Bobby imagines the chauffeur as a cut above – the non-commissioned officer of the servant class – empowered by technological know-how and a quasi-military uniform. And the car itself exacerbates this uncertainty, its status – and its role in the presentation of gender – complicated by Frankie's strategic oscillation between driving and being driven.[8] What the car might mean, then, is changing and in its increasing ambiguity and growing ubiquity, it is losing its privileged position in the significations of modernity. As the book accelerates towards its conclusion, this loss of impetus is made clear. When the answer to the mystery turns out to reside not in Hampshire, but in the distant Welsh village where the plot began, the car is *not* sufficient. 80 mph isn't fast enough for the modern mechanised cavalry to reach their destination in time, and the two adventurers must hire an air taxi (177-178). By 1934, the car has become ordinary. Now available to the masses, its meanings in culture have

shifted – and, in the next phase of her career, Christie will put the experience of driving to quite different uses.

The wartime car: fascist violence and feminist space

> Down the steep track into the village a car was coming. A car so fantastically powerful, so superlatively beautiful that it had all the nature of an apparition. At the wheel sat a young man, his hair blown back by the wind. In the blaze of evening light he looked, not a man, but a young God, a Hero God out of some Northern Saga. (Christie, *And Then There Were None*, 37)

In 1935 a driving test was introduced for the first time in Britain. According to Sean O'Connell, this may have 'encouraged many women to take up driving for the first time', in part because the consequent emergence of driving schools meant that women did not have to be taught by a 'male relation or boyfriend' (58). Needless to say, within a few years of the test's arrival, controversy had arisen over the possibility of female examiners being allotted to male candidates, leaving O'Connell to conclude that '[d]espite growing evidence of female competence at the wheel, the myth of greater masculine ability was not allowed to die. It was simply redefined whenever previous configurations grew inappropriate' (59). This is a telling observation, with significant implications for the car's role in popular fiction, not least because it suggests that the capacity of car driving to symbolise female agency did not go away as the car became regularised. However, while still possessing the potential to connote transgressive femininity, as the car became an increasingly familiar component of middle-class professional life, new significations emerged. In short, the car became a vehicle of heteronormativity: the family on wheels.

Historians of interwar women's lives record a transition in feminist politics from an emphasis on equality – supposedly resolved in 1928 by the advent of universal suffrage – to a

preoccupation with more conventionally private concerns, such as birth control and maternity. This refocusing both shaped and was shaped by cultural representations. Clarsen observes that 'women motorists increasingly came to be represented in advertisements as wives and mothers, usually occupying only the passenger seat of the family car' (45), while O'Connell turns to *Autocar* and *Practical Motoring* to illustrate that women's role in the vehicle is domestic, doing the 'humble jobs' that enable 'happy motoring' (53). The intensification of a traditional gender hierarchy within the sphere of motoring in this period would have consequences for both male and female drivers. While women were encouraged to make a home of and for the car, for men the machine evolved into a mode of 'prosthetic agency': it became an object enhancing perceptions of male capability.[9] As consumer choice increased, the selection of an appropriate vehicle became integral to male self-fashioning, an indicator of status alongside the other markers of success: home, wife and family. Alternatively, the car might simply and predictably symbolise male virility, as in one of Christie's bleakest novels, *And Then There Were None* (1939). The plot is well known: ten more or less unpleasant strangers, each one guilty of an unpunished crime, are summoned to an island to be murdered. The remorselessness of the book and its lack of redemptive possibility make it an unusually dark fiction, but in this it is typical of the more serious tone that emerged in British clue-puzzle writing in the late 1930s as the threat of a second war evolved.[10]

And Then There Were None introduces Tony Marston, Christie's new figuration of the male motorist. Enhanced by his 'fantastically powerful' car, he may look like a 'Hero God', but close-up, the reality is banal and unpleasant. He has killed two children with this machine and is utterly remorseless, seeing himself as an Übermensch set above England and her lousy roads. When the truth of his crime is exposed, his comment – 'beastly bad luck' – is correctly interpretated as referring to the temporary loss of his licence, not to the fate of the children.

Marston is in thrall to mechanised modernity, announcing 'Speed's come to stay' before complaining that 'English roads are hopeless, of course. Can't get up a decent pace on them.' (78). This is a further clue to his irredeemable corruption. Marston may look like an Englishman, but this love of continental motoring speaks to a disturbingly foreign sensibility. Seeking an autoroute or, even better, an autobahn, his affiliation with modernity is deadly and fascistic. The book does not dwell on this pathology – Marston will be the first to die – but the brief snapshot of his solipsistic relationship with the car suggests a gendered shift in the symbolic function of motoring from an optimistic encapsulation of female emancipation to a pessimistic indictment of hard-bodied male virility. But, given this transition, what becomes of the woman driver in Christie's darker wartime writing?

The answer is that she flourishes. This is most clearly manifest in Henrietta Savernake, protagonist of *The Hollow* (1945) and arguably Christie's finest female driver. The 1940s' car remains a symbol of power, but while the repellent Tony drove to dominate others, to possess the road, Henrietta's pleasure comes from dominating the machine. She experiences an almost erotic pleasure from handling the car, embodying Duffy's contention that speed, for the moderns, was 'a new kind of arousal' and that 'movement, instead of being a plotted leap from the pleasures of one identifiable place to the potential pleasures of another, would be a pleasure in itself' (267). Yet the car is more than simply fetish or thrill for Henrietta: it is also a means of self-realisation and a space of restoration – a therapeutic device that enables her to reconcile conflicting cultural demands and maintain her psychic integrity as an artist and a lover.

The Hollow, like so many of Christie's 1940s novels, refracts the political through the personal, and the book is permeated with displaced topical anxieties about power (Knight, 163). Here, though, it is not the ruthless and arrogant who are found culpable, but those who thoughtlessly worship them. At the heart of *The Hollow* is a critique of unthinking adherence

to ideology and, in particular, to gender ideology. In this context, the car becomes less of a weapon, and more a barometer of psychic health. The key players in the drama are a medical doctor, John Christow; his limp, ineffectual wife Gerda, and his lover Henrietta – a sculptor by profession. Over the course of the book, they all drive cars, or reflect on the process of driving, and the shift in symbolic labour is immediately evident. While Tony's aimless alcohol-fuddled arrogance turns the vehicle into a deadly weapon, John's professional arrogance makes him an attentive and focused motorist. Much the same can be said of Henrietta, for whom the car becomes an analogue of the independent route she is carving through the world:

> She shot away down the Mews, savouring the unfailing pleasure she always felt when setting off in the car alone. She much preferred to be alone when driving. In that way she could realise to the full the intimate personal enjoyment that driving a car brought to her. (82)

Henrietta may be John's lover, but she is very far from being subordinate to him or to her physical desires. After all, those are serviced quite adequately by her beloved Delage. Indeed, the physical pleasure she derives from motoring is enough to drive the egotistical John into a frenzy of jealousy:

> Henrietta loved cars. She spoke of cars with the lyrical intensity that other people gave to spring, or the first snow-drop.
>
> 'Isn't he a beauty, John? Doesn't he just purr along?' (For Henrietta's cars were always masculine.) 'He'll do Bale Hill in third – not straining at all – quite effortlessly. Listen to the way he ticks over.'
>
> Until he had burst out suddenly and furiously:
>
> 'Don't you think, Henrietta, you could pay *some* attention to me and forget the damned car for a minute or two!' (55)

The same independence of mind and desire cannot be attributed to Gerda who worships her husband to the point of insanity, and has no meaningful subjectivity to call her own. The more she subjugates herself to his will, the more he despises her, and her problems with the car symbolise, with almost comic crudeness, her failings as a wife. We are told that, over the years, both John and Henrietta have tried to teach Gerda to be a better driver, and to change gear smoothly:

> 'Stroke it in, Gerda, stroke it in,' Henrietta had pleaded once, years ago. Henrietta had demonstrated. 'Can't you feel the way it wants to go – it wants to slide in – keep your hand flat till you get the feeling of it – don't just push it anywhere – *feel* it.'
>
> But Gerda had never been able to feel anything about a gear lever. (97)

It's hard not to see a whole raft of *double entendres* here, but we might also read subliminal resistance and resentment, manifest as a desire to torment the delicate motoring sensibilities of her husband and his lover. After all, as the novel will go on to reveal, Gerda can absorb technical knowledge when she needs to, and will use it to do a perfectly good job of murdering John. However, when she confesses to Henrietta – having discovered her idol's feet of clay – Christie's preference for women drivers over women passenger-followers is made abundantly clear. Gerda is revealed as an embodiment of the dangers of 'blind devotion thrown back on itself, disillusioned, dangerous' (367).

Fortunately, before Gerda can kill again, Poirot intervenes and Henrietta is left alone to grieve – a dimension of the fiction that makes *The Hollow* an unusual novel within her oeuvre. It is a long-acknowledged (albeit over-stated) feature of clue-puzzle detection that the dead are seldom mourned. They are symbols of a temporary rupture in the social fabric, cyphers to be puzzled over and quickly forgotten. The emphasis on grief in *The Hollow* is then another element of the novel's refraction of its cultural moment. First published in 1945, it speaks to the compound losses of the past six years. It is as close a Christie comes to

acknowledging the psychic damage of war – a trauma largely inarticulable by the British middle classes. Henrietta, who will go on to build a statue of grief, negotiates her feelings via an emotional economy of things, and the car is part of this: as she tries to adjust to a life without John, we're told that driving 'soothed her' and 'gave her strength for the moment' (378). It is worth here revisiting my observation that the car in the 1930s is the normative family home on wheels. Here, in *The Hollow*, it has rather become 'a room of one's own': a private space in the midst of a period dominated by the white noise of propaganda and what Adam Piette terms the 'fabricated communal feelings' that 'aimed at transforming private imagination into public spirit' (2). Christie's wartime car, then, becomes a refuge, protecting the female agent from the irreconcilable demands of family, nation and career.

The Postwar Car: Memory and Disruption

> In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there…
>
> But the dérive includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities. (Debord, 50)

As the previous sections have indicated, Christie's writing is not a constant form: it responds to cultural and political change, and to shifts in structures of feeling. These transitions are not just a matter of content – the arrival of supermarkets and housing estates, politics, demobilisation, the Welfare state – they are also formal in character. The way in which Christie plots her novels undergoes a transformation as she enters the last fifteen years of her life. On the one hand, we might attribute this to age: a growing preoccupation with memory,

a tendency to reflect on change that results in a more digressive mode of fiction.[11] In comparison with the crisply plotted dialogue-driven work of the interwar period – and the darker but still tightly organised fiction of the 1940s – there are many more monologues in Christie's late work. Her characters go on at length; they, and the novels, repeat themselves. And while this is, in some respects, frustrating, it also suggests a transition in what Christie thinks the crime novel might do. Recent scholarship has brought welcome recognition of Christie's shifting preoccupations, with Fiona Peters, for example, examining the changing valence of evil in Christie's post-Second World War work. This thematic transition is matched, she notes, by a 'looser narrative' (133) which enables late novels such as *Endless Night* (1967) to present a more 'nuanced' and disturbing analysis of motivation and agency (134). Peters sees Christie's handling of evil as a response to the changing world around her; the same can be said of the structural shifts her writing undergoes. Christie was evidently neither an anarchist nor a psychogeographer, but her increasingly unconventional crime narratives and her changing representation of the spaces of detection, at times unexpectedly resonate with a disruptive politics she would never have acknowledged. The car, once again, is an integral enabling feature of this development.[12] Crime fiction in the 1920s was supposed to function as a puzzle; in the mid-century it emerged as a stylised form of social realism, a middlebrow means of registering cultural change. In the 1960s, at least as far as Christie was concerned, it mutates into a mode of dérive: becoming a 'transient passage through varied ambiances', an activity aimed both at 'studying a terrain' and at 'emotional disorientation' (Debord, 50, 52).

Having started this exploration with Tommy and Tuppence, it seems appropriate to end with *By the Pricking of my Thumbs*, published in the revolutionary year of 1968. The novel welcomes back Christie's 'Young Adventurers', who have now reached the latter end of their sixties. Yet, despite the couples' advancing age, *Thumbs* begins much as their

previous adventures, with Tuppence bored and craving excitement. Sitting at the breakfast table, she and Tommy contemplate the unwelcome duty of visiting Tommy's irascible Aunt Ada, a prospect Tuppence tries to make more appealing through fantasy:

> 'We might be in a railway accident on the way there,' said Tuppence, brightening up a little.
>
> 'Why on earth do you want to be in a railway accident?'
>
> 'Well I don't really, of course. It was just –'
>
> 'Just what?'
>
> 'Well, it would be an adventure of some kind, wouldn't it? Perhaps we could save lives or do something useful. Useful and at the same time exciting.'
>
> 'What a hope!' said Mr Beresford. (11-12)

This is the fourth book in which Tuppence has chafed against the gendered limitations imposed upon her, and the second in which those frustrations have been exacerbated by age. She is desperate for a role, but is instead caught within the spectacular configurations of middle-class respectability and age-appropriate behaviour. The Beresfords look old, but they feel young – and while Christie stresses their quiet enjoyment of their life together (4), the limits of this enjoyment are made abundantly clear by Tuppence's desire for the chaos of a train crash. Fortunately, the visit to Aunt Ada brings unexpected stimulation, as Tuppence encounters a mysterious resident who unexpectedly asks her, 'was it your poor child?' When next they visit the home, the old lady has disappeared, leaving behind a painting of a house that looks vaguely familiar. From these improbable beginnings, a narrative will emerge embracing grave-robbing, gangs, jewel heists, the spectre of paedophilia, misplaced female devotion, and a child-murdering madwoman in the attic.

What is of note, though, is how the 'plot' develops. As usual, Tommy has a role in the public sphere and departs to a conference leaving Tuppence frustrated at home. Obsessed by the disappearing old lady, her cryptic words, and her uncanny picture, she decides that she

will look for the house depicted and sets off on a dérive. She drops all her usual habits and the stay-at-home behaviour expected of middle-aged femininity, gets in her car and drives around the countryside until she finds the house. Which turns out to be split down the middle, leaving one half empty and haunted, and the other occupied by a 'friendly witch'. Whatever this is, it is not ratiocinative detection. It is happenstance, coincidence, misadventure and meandering. Tuppence departs on her 'investigation' bearing an ABC and railway map, plus a whole list of place names residing in the 'triangle' she imagines might contain the house. This, however, is how her voyage proceeds:

> As in most of the rural districts of England, signposts were plentiful, bearing names that Tuppence had never heard of, and seldom seeming to lead to the place in question. There seemed to be a certain cunning about this part of the road system in England …
>
> The day wore on and Tuppence became more and more baffled. Occasionally she came upon a farm adjacent to a canal but the road having led to the farm insisted on having nothing more to do with the canal and went over a hill and arrived at something called Westpenfold …
>
> From there when disconsolately pursuing a rutted road which seemed the only way out of Westpenfold and which to Tuppence's sense of direction (which was now becoming increasingly unreliable) seemed to lead in the opposite direction to anywhere she could possibly want to go, she came abruptly to a place where two lanes forked right and left. There was the remains of a signpost between them, the arms of which had both broken off. (74-75)

As Tuppence succumbs to serendipity, the novel anticipates Jack Halberstam's suggestion, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, that we might embrace the benefits of getting lost; and if getting lost facilitates the chance discovery, then this might be seen as an alternative mode of detection, bizarrely proximate to the network-orientated crime solving by inadvertent investigators favoured by early feminist writers.[13] Tuppence talks to vicars, landladies and

estate agents; she gets knocked on the head and forgets 40 years of her life, and recovers, only to stumble accidentally on the truth that, buried behind all this whimsy, is a horrible story about the murder of 'unimportant' children. At one point in a long and confusing history of the local landed gentry and their affairs, a character observes that all the stories are meaningless in comparison with the 'REAL things' that went on (119). She is referring to a spate of child murders never solved by the police, and in the plot's denouement we find out why: nearly everyone Tuppence has met has been playing a role to protect a murderer, covering over the rupture generated by a woman's failure to achieve reproductive futurity. Assisted by the stalwart women of the community, the Lord of the Manor has sequestered his madwoman wife away in a range of comfy attics, successfully putting an end to her child-killing, but not doing much to stop her whittling away at other non-productive demographics (she moves onto killing old ladies). It is not a new delinquent generation to blame for the 'real' of crime, but the supposed pillars of a semi-feudal society, exploiting class structures still powerful beneath the superficial changes of the 1960s. In *Thumbs*, then, Christie gives us, on the one hand, the fantasy of an unchanging 'rural England' – far from the madding motorway (97) – and on the other reveals it to be no different from an urban industrial modernity built upon the exploitation of bodies that, in a Butlerian sense, really do not matter.

But what, in all this, has become of the car? Quite simply, the car makes it all possible – and at the same time reveals its own transformation. In 1922, Tuppence wanted a Rolls Royce; in 1934 Frankie drove a Bentley; in 1945, Henrietta was in love with a Delage. In 1968, Tuppence just has 'the car'. The object has become generic, something to be looked through rather than at, a normative means of moving through space. The once spectacular woman motorist has achieved at least a degree of invisibility, and the car is now a mode of stealthy, potentially subversive, detective agency. No-one suspects an elderly woman pootling along country roads, but it is through Tuppence's drive – her willingness to be

drawn in by ‘the attractions of the terrain’ and follow a less purposeful dérive – that the myths of rural England, and of impotent old age, are exposed.

The reconfiguration of detective plotting as speculation, digression, the encounter with new terrain and the calculation of its possibilities would continue throughout Christie’s final years. In *Nemesis*, for example, we see Miss Marple plucked from her enveloping clouds of pink wool and dispatched on a coach tour to investigate she knows not what. She is sent on her mission by a dead man, who does not specify what she is supposed to be doing. As the coach drives off, she discretely surveys her fellow passengers – retired military types, professors, teachers, spinsters, a voluble foreigner and even a student anarchist – and tries to quantify their potential as murderers, criminals or victims. This bears little resemblance to the conventions of golden age detection: there is no initiating act beyond the receipt of a letter and a consequent change in Miss Marple’s routine. We do not know who to suspect or why, we wait 100 pages for a corpse and, at the end of the investigation, Miss Marple makes a devastating confession: ‘[i]t wasn’t really, you know, logical deduction. It was based on a kind of emotional reaction or susceptibility to – well, I can only call it atmosphere’ (277). This has not been a puzzle the reader can straightforwardly examine: we have rather been expected to follow Miss Marple’s intuition, her ‘feel’ for evil and her appreciation of the spirit of place, a journey enabled by a meandering discursive drive through an assortment of Christie’s pleasures and prejudices. In the long anticipation of murder which this restructuring generates, we might also unexpectedly see a transition from the comforts of order to the pleasures of suspense, ironically bringing Christie into belated alignment with what Duffy characterises as the the narrative speed of modernity. These late novels, then, have travelled a very long way from the neat compartmentalisation of ‘classic’ Christie, and recognising this is a route to a more nuanced understanding of how and what she wrote.

[1] The damaging assumption, dating back to the 1920s, that the crime genre is 'static and lacking in originality, depth and autonomy' (3) is persuasively challenged by Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King and Alistair Rolls' *Criminal Moves: Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction*. A similarly robust argument for the value of close textual analysis is found in Rolls and Gulddal's 'Reappropriating Agatha Christie' (*Clues*, Vol. 34, No.1).

[2] Duffy's *Speed Handbook* is a richly suggestive text exploring the psychic impact of automobility, but his engagement with the crime genre is primarily focused upon the transition from imperial adventure to the emergent urban thriller form. Christie's writing operates at a tangent to this lineage: while the clue-puzzle form engages suspense, it also demands the consideration of detail. The adrenalin-fuelled reader may enjoy the text but risks losing the plot (Duffy 147-151).

[3] The value Christie places on the 'instinctive' is also noted by Ewers (114).

[4] See *The Big Four* (1927), *Murder is Easy* (1939) and *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925). A little later, in *Crooked House* (1949), the car offers a mode of extra-judicial execution.

[5] Appropriately, Tuppence's maiden name is Cowley.

[6] Given the cost of cars, and their wartime association with women's independence, it is reasonable to conclude that if a female character is driving a car in interwar detective fiction, a statement about her personality, relationship to gender norms, economic power and social status has already been made. We might also note the cosmopolitanism of Bundle's car choices – her French and Spanish vehicles suggest a transnational economy of automotive pleasure.

[7] His vehicles look 'very smart' but their worth is calculated in miles before inevitable breakdown (55-56).

[8] The ambiguous status of the chauffeur, and the 'eroticized class crossings' enabled by the car – albeit in the very different context of postwar Paris – are discussed in Andrea Goulet's fascinating account of mobility in the fiction of Léo Malet (135-136).

[9] Cars, argues O'Connell, were 'central to the display of a variety of masculine identities' (71); they also act as a prop for vulnerable masculinities.

[10] The obvious example is Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey who, in *Gaudy Night* (1935), stopped being a silly ass and started working for the foreign office, but a change of mood is also evident in Margery Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938), and in Christie novels such as *One, Two Buckle My Shoe* (1940).

[11] It has been suggested that Christie might, in the 1970s, have been suffering from Alzheimer's (Worsley, 333-334).

[12] Sarah Martin has also turned to psychogeography as a means of analysing Christie, focusing on Tuppence's interwar detective agency.

[13] Maggie Humm suggests that 'indecisive' detectives – such as Barbara Wilson's Pam Nilsen – represent a 'deflationary and disruptive contrast to … traditional detective absolutes' (185). The same might be said of her later detective, the translator Cassandra Reilly. In *Blanche on the Lam* (1992), Barbara Neeley's accidental investigator similarly disrupts narrative convention by being simultaneously on the run and trapped within the country house, using the telephone to access information via a network of family and friends. Both writers parody genre norms and destabilise conventional resolution.

Works Cited

Chen, Eva (2020), 'Pretty Women Don't Drive: Early Women Motorists and the Taming of the Motor-Car', *Women's Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 149-179.

Agatha Christie (1977/1993), *An Autobiography*, London: Collins.

_____ (1922/2015), *The Secret Adversary*, London: HarperCollins.

_____ (1926/2002), *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, London: HarperCollins.

_____ (1929/2001), *The Seven Dials Mystery*, London: HarperCollins.

_____ (1934/1968), *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?*, London: Pan.

_____ (1939/2007), *And Then There Were None*, London: HarperCollins.

_____ (1946/2002), *The Hollow*, London: HarperCollins.

_____ (1968/2015), *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, London: HarperCollins.

_____ (1971/2016), *Nemesis*, London: HarperCollins.

_____ (1977/1993), *An Autobiography*, London: Collins.

Clarsen (2008), *Eat My Dust: Early Women Motorists*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Debord, Guy (1956), 'Theory of the Dérive' in Knabb, 1981, pp. 50-54.

Duffy, Enda (2009), *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Ewers, Chris (2016), 'Genre in transit: Agatha Christie, Trains, and the Whodunit', *Journal of Narrative theory*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Winter, pp. 97-120.

Goulet, Andrea (2020), 'Burma's *Bagnoles*: Urban Modernity and the Automotive Saccadism of Léo Malet's *Nouveaux mystères de Paris* (1954-1959), in Gulddal et al. (2020).

Gulddal, Jesper, Stewart King and Alistair Rolls (eds) (2020), *Criminal Moves: Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020.

Halberstam, Jack (2011), *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Humm, Maggie (1991), *Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Knabb, Ken (ed.) (1981), *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets.

Knight, Stephen (1995) 'Murder in Wartime', in Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (eds), *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Light, Alison (1991), *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*, London: Routledge.

Martin, Sarah (2023), 'Psychogeography and the Flapper Sleuth', in Mary Anna Evans and J. C. Bernthal (eds), *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Agatha Christie*, London: Bloomsbury.

Morgan, Janet (1984/1997), *Agatha Christie: A Biography*, London: HarperCollins.

O'Connell, Sean (1998), *The Car in British Society: Gender, Class and Motoring 1896-1939*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Peters, Fiona (2022), 'Agatha Christie: Evil, Love and Desire', *Crime Fiction Studies*, 3.2, 124-139.

Piette, Adam (1995), *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry, 1939-1945*, London: Macmillan.

Prioleau, John (1925), *Motoring for Women*, London: Geoffrey Bles.

Purdon, James (2017), 'Modernism's traffic-sense', *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4.

Rolls, Alistair and Jesper Gulddal (2016), 'Reappropriating Agatha Christie', *Clues*, Vol. 34, No. 1.

Worsley, Lucy (2022), *Agatha Christie: A Very Elusive Woman*, London: Hodder & Stoughton.