

Compromising Genre in Agatha Christie's South African Detective Novel, *The Man in the Brown Suit*

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Summary

Agatha Christie is so closely associated with the genre of the “whodunit” detective novel that her work is often invoked when the genre is defined. According to Tzvetan Todorov’s influential essay, “The Typology of Fiction” (1966), the generic innovation which often characterises great literature is not appropriate in detective fiction where rigidity of form is intrinsic to the satisfaction the work provides. This is related to the moral function of detective fiction; the identification of the villain and the execution of justice are crucial. It amounts to the expression of an ideology, which according to Michael Green celebrates the individualism of the middle classes and their ability to maintain an ordered society in which they can be psychologically and culturally at home. Christie’s only novel set in South Africa, *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924) uncharacteristically transgresses these hallowed conventions of the genre. It is my contention that this is the result of autobiographical and personal elements in the work as well as the intrusion of other genres provoked by the novel’s (South) African setting. While these elements jeopardise the success of the work as a whodunit, they have also prompted a narrative innovation which has largely been ignored by critics. When successfully subjected to the jealous demands of the genre in a later work by the same author, this innovation produced what has been acclaimed by some as the greatest detective novel of all, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926).

Opsomming

Daar is so ’n noue verbintenis tussen Agatha Christie en die genre van die speurverhaal, dat haar werk dikwels ter sprake kom wanneer hierdie genre gedefinieer word. Volgens Tzvetan Todorov, in sy invloedryke essay, “The Typology of Fiction” (1966), is die generiese vernuwing wat dikwels die kenmerk van groot literatuur is, nie gepas vir speurfiksie nie. Hier is ’n vaste patroon inherent tot die bevrediging wat die werk bied. Dit hou verband met

die morele funksie van speurfiksie: die identifisering van die skurk en die gelding van geregtigheid is deurslaggewend. Dit vorm die uitdrukking van 'n ideologie wat volgens Michael Green 'n viering is van die individualisme van die middelklas en van hul vermoë om 'n geordende samelewing waarin hulle sielkundig en kultureel tuis is, te handhaaf. *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924) is Christie se enigste roman wat in Suid-Afrika afspeel en, vreemd aan hierdie genre, oortree dit die gewyde konvensies van die genre. Na my mening is hierdie afwyking die gevolg van outo-biografiese en persoonlike elemente in die werk asook van die indringing van ander genres wat deur die roman se (Suid-)Afrika-milieu gesuggereer is. Hoewel hierdie elemente die sukses van hierdie literêre werk as 'n speurverhaal kompromiteer, het dit ook gelei tot 'n narratiewe vernuwing wat tot dusver grootliks deur kritici geïgnoreer is. Toe hiedie vernuwing in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), 'n latere werk deur dieselfde skrywer, suksesvol aan die jaloerse eise van die genre onderwerp is, het dit 'n werk wat deur sommige kritici as die heel beste speurroman ooit beskou word, opgelewer.

In 1924, Agatha Christie published *The Man in the Brown Suit*, her only novel to be set in South Africa. The novel was inspired by Christie's visit to the country with her first husband, Colonel Archibald Christie, in 1922. Colonel Christie was financial adviser to a British delegation which travelled to the dominions – South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Canada – in order to introduce and popularise the envisaged British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in London, planned for 1924. The novel was prompted by the mercurial Major Ernest Belcher, the leader of the expedition, who requested Christie to write a detective novel featuring Mill House, his home in England. She complied; the murder that sets the plot in motion takes place at Mill House, though the major part of the tale is set in South Africa and follows the itinerary of Belcher's expedition quite closely. It was only Christie's fourth novel and the first to be set in an "exotic" destination; many more would follow.¹ What distinguishes this novel from Christie's other works above all, is the strong autobiographical element in it; not only setting but incident and more significantly characters are drawn from Christie's experiences during the British Empire Exhibition tour of 1922. *The Man in the Brown Suit* is in many ways an interesting novel, not only as a representation of South Africa as perceived by the British imperial eye only twelve years after Union, but also structurally, the conventional whodunit plot associated with Christie's work being undermined by a number of elements to be discussed in this article. It is my contention that

1. *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *Death on the Nile* (1937) and *Evil under the Sun* (1941) are examples. As Michael Green (1997: 192-193) points out, these texts do not differ significantly from her English village whodunits in terms of ideology as Christie would simply transfer the main cast of upper middle class characters with their cultural values and characteristics to the particular exotic setting.

the disruption of the whodunit genre in this novel is caused in the first place by the personal and strong autobiographical element in it, causing different genres and traditions to jostle one another, threatening to displace the conventional “puzzle” at the heart of the mystery novel.

In his influential essay, “The Typology of Detective Fiction” (first published in 1966), Tzvetan Todorov discusses both the boundaries imposed by literary genre and their permeability, stating that the “major [literary] work creates, in a sense, its own genre and at the same time transgresses the previously valid rules of the genre” (1977: 43). He then carries on to claim, however, that this flexibility does not apply to detective fiction where the predictability of form and convention contributes to the pleasure and satisfaction of the reader. Todorov states: “Detective fiction has its own norms; to develop them is to disappoint them; to ‘improve’ upon them is to write ‘literature’ not detective fiction. The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them” (1977: 43). It is clear that the whodunit is usually regarded in critical terms as a narrow and formulaic genre. This appears to be a widely held view, not limited to Todorov.

Agatha Christie (1890-1976), widely recognised as the best-selling novelist in history,² is so closely associated with the genre of the “classical detective novel” or “whodunit”, that her name is often invoked when the genre is defined. So, for example, the French critic Jacques Dubois (1992: 26) defines the “classical English [detective] novel” as responding to a few stable rules which only have to be applied with some ingenuity to ensure success and then cites Agatha Christie as having explored this form to its best possible limits. Arlene Teraoka (2009: 115) acknowledges two traditions in detective fiction, the British tradition of Agatha Christie (i.e. the whodunit) and the hard-boiled American fiction tradition of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, which she credits with a wider sociological frame than the whodunit. Constantino Maeder (2009) distinguishes three traditions, those of Agatha Christie, which he associates with “commonplaces and foreseeable plots” (263), Edgar Allen Poe, whose detective fiction at least “permits pondering about the limits of knowledge and the existence of any kind of values” (264) and Raymond Chandler, whose writing involves “sociological investigation” (264). It is clear again that he regards Christie’s genre as the most limited, where “the plot in itself is not interesting” (271) and where the “reader knows everything about how Poirot and Miss Marple investigate, even when they are withholding vital

2. Unesco estimated that by 1980 four hundred million copies of her books had been sold. Her turnover in the 1980s was also more than a million pounds a year and her popularity was still growing (Morgan 1985: 377). Michael Fleming (2000) suggests that these figures make her oeuvre the most successful or widely read published work after the Bible and Shakespeare.

clues. Their moral and ethical positions are not questionable” (273). This he sets in contrast to the American hard-boiled detective novel which often focuses on the moral dilemmas of the detective, usually a person with a dark side. Predictably, Todorov himself also turns to Christie to illustrate the limitations of the genre as he explains it above, by maintaining that we “cannot imagine Hercule Poirot ... threatened by some danger, attacked, wounded, even killed” (1977: 44-45), prefiguring the claim of predictability later raised by Maeder and quoted above.

From the above comments it can be seen that the moral function of the whodunit lies at the core of its structure. Dorothy L. Sayers already pointed out in 1946 that the classical detective novel resembled classical tragedy in its pattern of the social order being disrupted by an act of villainy, ultimately to be restored by the identification of the murderer and the imposition of justice (1980: 26). This must explain to some extent the enduring appeal of the genre in spite of the limitations that critics are so ready to point out. Stephen Knight (1980: 2) declares, “Major examples of crime fiction not only create an idea (or hope, or a dream) about controlling crime, but both realize and validate a whole view of the world, one shared by the people who become the central audience to buy, read and find comfort in a particular variety of crime fiction.” David Grossvogel also speaks about the “expectation of a solution” (1979: 41) in crime fiction. Suitable retribution is clearly an essential part of the satisfaction experienced by the reader of a whodunit. Christie scholar Mary S. Wagoner (1986) confirms that “the classic detective novel utilizes a highly formulaic structure and a predictable manner, and it satisfies particular cultural and psychological yearnings in its reader” (33) and maintains significantly that Christie “practiced [sic] the trade of writing classic, golden age, detective novels and *submitted to the discipline of that rigorously patterned form*” (33) (my italics).

Agatha Christie published her first book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in 1920. It is a perfect whodunit within the conventions of the genre, focusing on the death of a wealthy woman in a country house in England. The cast of suspects consists of members of the family, neighbours and people of the village. Hercule Poirot is introduced as the eccentric detective who solves the mystery and Major Hastings as the narrator. The novel and the role and character of the detective conform to the conventional requirements of the whodunit, which is not surprising as the novel was written as a response to a challenge by Christie’s sister, Margaret Watts, to write a novel in this genre, one which they both enjoyed to read (Morgan 1984: 77). Mary Wagoner gives a useful definition of the role of the detective in what she calls “classic detective fiction”, which she maintains “calls for cerebral, rather than physical, action” (1986: 33).³

3. Todorov (1977: 44) rather similarly states: “The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn”.

As explicator who solves all riddles and answers all questions in the end, a necessarily less dramatic role than that of policeman who sorts through suspects, the detective must show a mind coping with events and must effect a restoration of the social order. His performance must justify classic detective fiction's basic premise that reason can triumph, that events make sense. When the detective provides an explanation of the past event, he also isolates the agent of violence, the murderer, from society, thus demonstrating that human intelligence can promote justice.

(1986: 34-35)

Michael Green (with some reference to the work of Stephen Knight [1980: 111 et seq]), relates this individualistic restorative function to class, suggesting that the ideological significance of Christie's works is "their celebration of the collective individualism of the bourgeois class and its ability to solve its anxieties on its own terms and with its own abilities" (Green 1997: 191). The great contemporary mystery writer, P.D. James, echoes this notion from the inside, so to speak, in *Time to be in Earnest*, her autobiographical work, when she describes the appeal of the detective novel as "the bringing of order out of disorder, the reassurance that we live in a comprehensible and moral universe and that, although we may not achieve justice, we can at least achieve an explanation and solution" (2015[1999]: 13). Hercule Poirot is for many the iconic, definitive detective in this mould. According to her biographer, Janet Morgan, Christie was intent in *Styles* on finding "a riddle" (1984: 77), a plot that conformed to the strict formula of the genre yet would intrigue and puzzle her readers in an original way (1984: 77). The forging of such a puzzle is exactly where Christie's genius lay. *Styles* set the mould for the Christie whodunit. David Grossvogel comments on the lasting appeal of Christie's first work and cites innumerable editions and impressions of this first novel over the years (1979: 41). "After this book", he says "and for over half a century, she was the most popular purveyor of the genre" (1979: 40).

The Mysterious Affair at Styles was followed by *The Secret Adversary* (1922), the first Tommy and Tuppence Beresford mystery, and then by *Murder on the Links* (1923), another Poirot mystery. This was followed by *The Man in the Brown Suit* in 1924. While still subscribing to the broad category of "detective fiction", the novel deviates in startling ways from the safe and restrictive conventions of the whodunit which have ensured Christie's enduring success. The results of this deviation, though interesting, are not altogether fortunate in terms of its appeal as a detective novel. It is perhaps not surprising that the anonymous reviewer of the *Observer* (1924: 5) found it regrettable that Christie had dispensed with Hercule Poirot and stated unambiguously that the novel would "be something of a disappointment to those who remember *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*." He called the plot "rather confused" and lifted out "the plausibility of the villain" as problematic. Many years later Robert Barnard would concur: "... the plot

would probably not bear close examination, if anyone were to take the trouble” (1990: 196).

After a prologue suggesting an international criminal organisation at work, the novel starts conventionally enough with the murder of an unknown, beautiful, presumably foreign woman at Mill House near Marlow in England. She had been followed into the house by the young man in a brown suit of the title, who is presumed to be the murderer. Anne Beddingfield, a young girl who has just been orphaned by the death of her anthropologist father, witnesses a second, related murder at an underground station in London and sees the same man behaving suspiciously on the scene. Her bold investigations into the case lead her to board the *Kilmorden Castle* on a voyage to Cape Town in pursuit of the puzzle.

As stated above in the introduction, the novel has numerous autobiographical elements. In January 1922, Agatha Christie departed England on the *Kildonan Castle* as an incidental member of the British Empire Expedition tour, of which the early part would form the backdrop to *The Man in the Brown Suit*. As it was an official delegation, the small party, consisting of Major Ernest Belcher, Colonel and Mrs Christie, a Mr Hiam, who was the agricultural adviser (travelling with his wife and daughter) and a Mr Bates, secretary to the mission, travelled in style. Janet Morgan already hints at the connection between Christie’s South African experience and the novel in her 1984 biography (1985: 109), but in 2012, Christie’s grandson, Mathew Prichard, published a combination of excerpts from Christie’s autobiography and letters (mainly to her mother), titled *The Grand Tour: Letters and Photographs from the British Empire Expedition*, which explicitly confirms to what degree the novel is inspired by Christie’s own experiences in South Africa. Moreover, in the introduction to the travel book, Prichard indicates that “unusually for [Christie], she included a direct portrayal of a real acquaintance [in the novel] – an impersonation of Belcher called Sir Eustace Pedler” (Christie 2013: 8). I would suggest that the Christies’ ambivalent relationship with the irascible and egocentric Major Belcher, head of the mission, is reflected in the novel, leading to the *Observer* reviewer’s ironically questioning the plausibility of the character based on him! Prichard – who describes Belcher as “a seriously eccentric and difficult man, whose unpredictability and inefficiency sorely tried my grandparents throughout the whole tour” (Christie 2013[2012]: 2) – indicates that this might well be “the only instance” of Christie’s basing a character substantially on a real person (in Christie 2013[2012]: 8).

The novel instigated by the very Major Belcher’s requesting a novel about himself and his house was originally to be called “The Mystery of the Mill House” (Morgan 1985: 109) after Belcher’s home in England. Christie planned to make him the victim of the murder (somewhat understandably as he often made her and her husband’s lives a misery on the tour) but when he protested she made him the villain instead. Her husband suggested giving

him a title in the novel as he knew Belcher would like that (Morgan 1985: 109). In her memoirs and letters, Christie moderately states at the outset of the tour that Major Belcher's petty behaviour in Cape Town gave her an "inkling that travelling with Belcher might not be as pleasant as it had seemed at our dinner-table ... a month before" (2013[2012]: 47), but later on she describes him as a "wild man" (124) and a "megalomaniac" (157). He ruthlessly abused his possibly imaginary physical ailments to blackmail his travel companions to indulge his every whim (57). In a more extended assessment of his personality, Christie writes:

If anything put him in a bad temper he was so impossible that one loathed him with a virulent hatred. He behaved exactly like a spoilt and naughty child. The disarming thing was that when he recovered his temper he could display so much *bonhomie* and charm that somehow we forgot our teeth-grinding and found ourselves back on the pleasantest terms. When he was going to be in a bad temper one always knew, because he began to swell up slowly and go red in the face like a turkey cock. Then, sooner or later, he would lash out at everybody. When he was in a good humour he told lion stories, of which he had a large stock.

(2013[2012]: 236)

Unlike Major Belcher, whose great achievement appears to have been landing senior government jobs in spite of dubious ability, Sir Eustace Pedler, his alter ego in *The Man in the Brown Suit*, is a highly successful millionaire and Member of Parliament. Nobody appears to be quite sure how he made his money originally but it transpires eventually that he is a master criminal running an international operation and that he has pulled off several rewarding criminal coups, always using others to do the dirty work and by skilful manipulation providing a credulous scapegoat to take the blame every time. Belcher's petty egotistic behaviour and manipulations are therefore extrapolated to an international criminal sphere for the character based on him.

As Wagoner (1986: 35) points out, the fact that most of the characters in a classical whodunit remain suspects until the denouement takes place at the end, limits the depth of characterization. Only very limited access to the minds of the characters can be given. The result of this is that "characterization of most figures must be externalized. Their identities must be defined in speech, gesture, and other publicly observable details" (Wagoner 1986: 35). Christie herself suggested that she garnered characters by, for example, observing strangers:

Sure enough, next day, when I was sitting in a tram, I saw just what I wanted: *a man with a black beard, sitting next to an elderly lady who was chatting like a magpie*. I didn't think I'd have *her*, but I thought *he* would do admirably. Sitting a little beyond them was a large, hearty woman, talking

loudly about spring bulbs. I liked the look of her too. Perhaps I could incorporate her?”

(Quoted in Wagoner 1986: 38; italics in original)

Characters in traditional whodunits are therefore “essentially caricatural types” (Wagoner 1986: 39). Some of the minor characters in *The Man in the Brown Suit* bear the same kind of external resemblance to their originals as described here. So for example, Sir Eustace Pedler describes his secretary, Guy Pagett, as having “the face of a fourteenth-century poisoner – the sort of man the Borgias got to do their odd jobs for them” (Christie 2002[1924]: 72). Pagett is also described by the protagonist, Anne Beddingfield as “tall and dark” with “a sinister type of countenance” (89) and “secretive heavy-lidded eyes” (90). In her account of the tour, Agatha Christie describes Major Belcher’s actual secretary, Mr Bates, clearly the model for Pagett, as having “the appearance of a villain in a melodrama, with black hair, flashing eyes and an altogether sinister aspect” (2013[2012]: 24). On the actual ship the empire expedition travelled on to South Africa, the *Kildonan Castle*, Christie befriended among the passengers a Mrs Blake whom she found “most amusing” (2013[2012]: 36, 43) while in the fictitious trip on the *Kilmorden Castle*, Anne Beddingfield befriends a Mrs Blair, who is the centre of social attention on the ship. While Christie obviously makes use of Guy Pagett’s looks (garnered from the real-life Mr Bates) to make him a suspect in the novel, he eventually turns out to be merely a very dedicated secretary, as both Sir Eustace Pedler reveals Pagett to be in the novel and Christie does Mr Bates in the travel account. While Mrs Blake is likely the inspiration for Mrs Blair, she is referred to very seldom in the travel account while Mrs Blair becomes an important character in the novel. It is therefore clear that Christie uses her normal *modus operandi* described above with regard to the people on the tram, to use some of the real people she encountered on the trip as the “caricatural types” (Wagoner 1986: 39) with which she normally populates her novels.

The case is more complicated with regard to Sir Eustace Pedler, however. On the surface, there are many similar small instances and incidents that relate him to his original: Major Belcher won first prize for fancy dress on board the *Kildonan Castle*, just as Sir Eustace Pedler does on board the *Kilmorden Castle*; Christie relates in her account of the tour how Major Belcher bounced peaches on the floor of the Mount Nelson Hotel in Cape Town to demonstrate his dissatisfaction with their state of ripeness (Christie 2013[2012]: 47) and Sir Eustace does the same in *The Man in the Brown Suit*:

“Did you see Sir Eustace? He’d had some bad fish or something and was just telling the head waiter about it, and he bounced a peach on the floor to show how hard it was – only it wasn’t quite as hard as he thought and it squashed”.

(2002[1924]: 185)

Such instances still largely subscribe to the techniques of what Wagoner calls “externalized characterization”. However, deliberately depicting a person the author knows well as a central character in a detective novel of this kind sets different challenges to him or her. This is especially so when the characterisation is done at the request of the person in question and where he is a social or professional superior to the author’s husband. What is more, the narration in the novel switches between the first person account of Anne Bedding-field, the protagonist, and diary entries by Sir Eustace Pedler, making him one of the two narrators in the novel. It is here where Christie reveals one of her startling innovations in the novel, one which has largely been missed by critics.

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926) is possibly Christie’s most famous novel, famous because of the ingenuity by which she reveals the narrator of the novel, Dr Sheppard, who works with Hercule Poirot, to be the murderer in the end. The original anonymous reviewer of the *Scotsman* (1926) aptly stated: “The tale may be recommended as one of the cleverest and most original of its kind” (2). In 2013, the Crime Writers Association of Britain voted *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the best crime novel ever (Brown 2013). Earl Mountbatten of Burma is famously credited for suggesting the idea to Christie. He wrote to her in March 1924 to suggest a novel in which the narrator, working with Poirot, would turn out to be the murderer. Christie acknowledged that Mountbatten had suggested the idea to her and she also inscribed his copy of the novel to that effect (Morgan 1985: 120-121). In her autobiography Christie states that the idea had also been suggested by her brother-in-law, James Watts (Morgan 1985: 120). However, it is not mentioned that by the time Christie received Mountbatten’s letter in March 1924, she had already submitted the manuscript of *The Man in the Brown Suit* – in which she demonstrates the same technique, only perhaps less dramatically – to her publishers (in late 1923) (Morgan 1985: 109). Christie uses the technique, also used in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where words articulated by the narrator/murderer require a different meaning in hindsight once his actual role has been revealed at the end. One of many examples is where Sir Eustace employs Harry Rayburn as a second secretary, apparently on the advice of the British secret service. Sir Eustace’s response that “it was better to have this fellow with me” (79) appears to refer to the sagacity of following this advice, but with hindsight the reader eventually realizes that Sir Eustace considers it better to have the young man close to him, so that he can keep an eye on him. When in the same scene, Sir Eustace asks the young man’s name; the latter replies ambiguously that “Harry Rayburn seems quite a suitable name” (79), signalling to both the reader and Sir Eustace that this is probably not his real name. The reader later discovers that he is, in fact, Harry Lucas, one of Sir Eustace’s earlier scapegoats, and gradually that Sir Eustace is probably aware of this identity, only to discover right at the end that he is in fact

neither Harry Rayburn *nor* Harry Lucas but John Harold Eardsley, surprising Sir Eustace, Anne Beddingfield and the reader equally. If one takes into consideration that Harry Rayburn/Lucas/Eardsley is the romantic hero of the story, with whom our more reliable narrator, Anne Beddingfield, absolutely trusted by the reader, is head over heels in love and whom she trusts with her own life, one gets an idea of how deep the narrative deceptions in the novel run.

What makes it more interesting is that Sir Eustace playfully hints to the reader that he is an unreliable witness, suggesting a playful problematising of the reliability of text long before this would become a fashionable literary preoccupation. Pedler reveals his own unreliability as narrator in the very diary in which he writes up his memoirs and which forms part of the main narrative. When Colonel Race, who is suspected of working for the secret service, chaffs him about his diary, suggesting that it will reveal his indiscretions one day, Pedler responds:

My dear Race I venture to suggest that I am not quite the fool you think me. I may commit indiscretions but I don't write them down in black and white A diary is useful for recording the idiosyncrasies of others – but not one's own.

(128)

More significantly, when he discovers that Anne Beddingfield is a correspondent for *The Daily Budget*, covering the murder case, he writes in his diary:

... but she's now very busy cabling home: "How I journeyed out with the Murderer", and inventing highly fictitious stories of "what he said to me", etc. I know how these things are done. I do them myself in my Reminiscences when Pagett will let me.

(233)

He admits that he manipulates the written text, which forms part of the novel's text that the reader has to rely on to untangle the plot, for his own ends. The reader, with privileged access to Sir Eustace's thoughts as expressed in these diaries, an access the other characters do not have, tends to believe that he or she is an initiate to Sir Eustace's private thoughts and that these possible deceptions hinted at will be wrought on other characters in the novel, only to find in the end, that it is he or she who has been duped in spite of the warnings that Sir Eustace himself had issued.

Pitted against the evil in the tale is Anne Beddingfield, the young adventuress who plays the role of the detective in terms of the original "Mystery of the Mill House" whodunit plot, the pursuit of which takes her to Africa and adventure. Mathew Prichard suggests that Anne Beddingfield may have "a marked resemblance to the young and adventurous Agatha"

(2013[2012]: 9), proposing a further autobiographical element in the novel. Certainly in her account of her actual journey to South Africa as part of the British Empire Exhibition Expedition, Christie suggests that she saw the trip as an opportunity for adventure: "I longed to see the world and it seemed to me highly probable that I never would" (15). She was a young married woman with a small child. Her husband would have to give up permanent employment for a temporary position. It appears that a sense of adventure, like that displayed by the character Anne Beddingfield, propelled Christie and her husband:

"I think you're right', I said. It's our chance. If we don't do it we shall always be mad with ourselves. No, as you say, if you can't take the risk of doing something you want, when the chance comes, life isn't worth living." We had never been people who played safe. We had persisted in marrying against all opposition, and now we were determined to see the world and risk what would happen on our return.

(Christie 2013[2012]: 16)

Christie here admits to being guided by a sense of adventure, such as is demonstrated in a more uninhibited fashion by her heroine, Anne Beddingfield:

I yearned for adventure, for love, for romance, and I seemed condemned to an existence of drab utility. The village possessed a lending library, full of tattered works of fiction, and I enjoyed perils and love-making at second hand, and went to sleep dreaming of stern silent Rhodesians and of strong men who always "felled their opponent with a single blow".

(Christie 2002[1924]: 18-19)

This suggests an autobiographical element in the characterisation of Anne Beddingfield, at least in that she is propelled by a sense of adventure like her creator. The plot of the novel, following Anne's travels through South Africa in a bid to solve the mystery of the Mill House murder, follows the trajectory of Christie's travels through Southern Africa, landing at the Cape, travelling north by train, visiting Pretoria and Johannesburg during the 1922 industrial uprising and then moving further north to the then Rhodesia, and many of the details of the journey in the novel reflect the details given in Christie's autobiographical account and her letters e.g. particular towns visited, multiple wooden animals bought as souvenirs, being regaled on tales concerning the techniques of diamond smuggling and so forth.

Some incidents are clearly repeated in the novel for their humorous effect. In her account of the actual journey, Christie comments on the intense seasickness that she suffered:

I continued to groan and feel like death, and indeed look like death; for a woman in a cabin not far from mine, having caught a few glimpses of me

through the open door, asked the stewardess with great interest: “Is the lady in the cabin opposite dead yet?”

(2013[2012]: 25)

She repeats the experience and the joke – slightly transformed – in *The Man with the Brown Suit*, where Anne Beddingfield confesses: “I remained groaning in my cabin for three days. Forgotten was my quest. I had no longer any interest in solving mysteries” (2002[1925]: 81). “It was on the fourth day that the stewardess finally urged me up on deck. Under the impression that I should die quicker below, I had steadfastly refused to leave my bunk” (83). When she does go on deck, Mrs Blair remarks: “You did look ill yesterday. Colonel Race and I decided that we should have the excitement of a funeral at sea – but you have disappointed us” (86).

The novel also contains some in-jokes which could only be fully appreciated by the members of the British Empire Exhibition tour. This is indicated in the dedication of the novel to “E.A.B.” (Major Belcher), “in memory of a journey, some lion stories and a request that I should some day write the ‘Mystery of the Mill House’” (Christie 2002[1924]: 5). As mentioned before, Belcher liked to tell lion stories when in a good mood, and this inclination is shared by Sir Eustace Pedler, his alter ego. In the historical account of the trip, Belcher is recorded as telling one of these on the Australian leg of the tour about

the man who, rather fuddled, wondered why his team of mules was going at such a splendid pace, and discovered when they broke that [in the dark] he had inspanned two lions as the wheelers! Belcher had told this story many times, sometimes getting a hearty laugh, sometimes a feeble one, but this time the man merely stared with horror in his eyes and demanded in a hoarse whisper: “Good God, who un’arnessed ‘em’?”

(Christie 2013[2012]: 213)

This incident is recounted only slightly more dramatically in the novel, only now the credulous listener is a member of the South African Labour Party (Christie 2002[1924]: 130) and not as in the original, a member of the Australian Labour Party.

Cape Town certainly made an impression. In her recollections, Christie states:

My memories of Cape Town are more vivid than of other places. I suppose because it was the first port we came to, and it was all so new and strange. Table Mountain with the queer flat shape, the sunshine, the delicious peaches, the bathing – it was all wonderful.

(Christie 2013[2012]: 47)

These sentiments are echoed, more expansively, by Anne Beddingfield in *The Man in the Brown Suit*:

I don't suppose that as long as I live I shall forget my first sight of Table Mountain. I got up frightfully early and went on deck We were just steaming into Table Bay. There were fleecy white clouds hovering above Table Mountain, and nestling on the slopes below, right down to the sea, was the sleeping town, gilded and bewitched by the morning sunlight.

It made me catch my breath and have that curious hungry pain inside that seizes one sometimes when one comes across something that's extra beautiful. I'm not very good at expressing these things, but I knew well enough that I had found, if only for a fleeting moment, the thing that I had been looking for ever since I left Little Hampsley. Something new, something hitherto undreamed of, something that satisfied my aching hunger for romance.

(Christie 2002[1924]: 180)

The psychological impact that Cape Town made on Christie can probably be measured by the fact that when she suffered her famous nervous breakdown and disappeared for ten days in December 1926 on discovering that her husband wanted to leave her for another woman, she booked into a hotel under the name of her husband's mistress, but gave "Cape Town" as her address. Perhaps she instinctively longed to be the woman her husband loved, and found a psychological address in a beautiful city of which she had extremely happy memories of bathing and surfing with her handsome husband on sunlit beaches in idyllic circumstances.

In an obvious way, her journey to South Africa thus provided Christie with experiences that she could draw upon for a novel set in the subcontinent. However, as we have already seen with the characterisation of Sir Eustace Pedler, the autobiographical elements have a more profound resonance than merely that. Celeste Schenck (1988) suggests that autobiographical writing is historically an important means for women to become empowered. For many women it was "a way to come to writing" and afforded an opportunity for subjective self-expression when the possibilities for such expression were limited by patriarchal traditions (287). Interestingly, the respected Anglo-Irish novelist, Elizabeth Bowen, a contemporary of Christie's, declares that for her a novel is a "prose statement of a poetic truth", a truth found in subjective personal experiences transformed by the author; she calls her own writing "transformed biography" (Dunleavy 1983: 38). These ideas throw some light, I believe, on the fact that *The Man in the Brown Suit*, where the autobiographical impulse is demonstrably stronger than in Christie's other writings, does tussle to some extent with the equivocal position of women in society in the 1920s. However, as I shall indicate, the demands of other genres would again intervene to distort the impulse and to moderate the impact of these contemplations.

Christie hints at the limitations encountered by an intelligent, independent-spirited young woman (like herself) in a world where women had just been given the vote in the United Kingdom but were universally assumed to be the weaker vessel. When the young, resourceful Anne Beddingfield has been

orphaned by the death of her penniless anthropologist father, she is confronted by the paternalistic concern of her father's lawyer:

Without conscious hypocrisy, I found myself assuming the demeanour of a bereaved orphan. He hypnotized me into it. He was benignant, kind and fatherly – and without the least doubt he regarded me as a perfect fool of a girl adrift to face an unkind world. From the first I felt that it was quite useless to try and convince him of the contrary.

(26)

Christie cleverly demonstrates the helplessness of the intelligent young woman to deal with the paternalistic male gaze and shows her playing along with it in a cunning way to achieve her own ends, yet by doing so colluding with the patriarchal view of women. When her kindly benefactor invites her to move in with his family, his wife is less than enthusiastic, remarking to her husband in an acid voice: "I agree with you! She is certainly *very* good-looking" (29, italics in original). Anne remarks knowingly: "It is really a very hard life. Men will not be nice to you if you are not good-looking, and women will not be nice to you if you are" (29). When a steward on the ship helps her to gain a new cabin against the fierce opposition of two other (male) candidates, she "permitted [her] eyes to tell him what a hero he was" (94), colluding again.

While exposing the thoughtless arrogance of conventional men, she is certainly scathing about the vacuity of the conventional women of her society:

Mrs Flemming [the wife of her benefactor] and her friends seemed to me to be supremely uninteresting. They talked for hours of themselves and of the difficulties of getting good milk for the children and of what they say to the dairy when the milk wasn't good. Then they would go on to the servants, and the difficulties of getting good servants and of what they had said to the woman at the registry office and of what the woman at the registry office had said to them. They never seemed to read the papers or to care about what went on in the world. They disliked travelling – everything was so different to England. The Riviera was all right, of course, because one met all one's friends there.

I listened and contained myself with difficulty I think now, looking back, that I was perhaps a shade intolerant. But they *were* stupid – stupid even at their chosen job: most of them kept the most extraordinarily inadequate and muddled housekeeping accounts."

(33-34)

And once she is in Africa with the romantic hero of the tale, Anne voices her anthropological views on the origins of gender:

But Papa always said that in the beginning men and women roamed the world together, equal in strength – like lions and tigers They were

nomadic, you see. It wasn't till they settled down in communities, and women did one kind of thing and men another, that women got weak. And of course, underneath, one is still the same – one *feels* the same, I mean
(248-249, italics in original)

This fairly astute expression of the state of gender relations in 1922 as opposed to her notion of an ideal or “natural” state of equality, views generated by her own experiences at the time and her interest in anthropology,⁴ is, however, compromised by Christie's pandering to the expectations of her readers – rather like Anne's inevitably playing down her independence in accordance with the paternalistic expectations of the lawyer. In spite of hints of early feminism, Christie fails to write boldly, to create, “in a sense, [her] own genre and at the same time [to transgress] the previously valid rules of the genre”, as Todorov would have put it (1977: 43) on this issue. Instead of trying to find a “prose statement of a poetic truth”, instead of providing a sociological insight into British society, she diminishes her insights through conforming to the expectations of her readers and the requirements of genre, though not in this case primarily the genre of the detective novel.

Anne Beddingfield's declaration of her longing “for adventure, for love, for romance” (18) and her dream of “stern silent Rhodesians and of strong men who always ‘felled their opponent with a single blow’” (19), and her paeon to Cape Town in the early morning as “something that satisfied my aching hunger for romance” (180) all suggest the intrusion of two other genres into Christie's original whodunit structure. The one is the tale of exotic adventure, most popular during the 1880s and 1890s, when Christie was growing up, and which probably suggested itself for a tale set in Africa in the early twentieth century. While Joseph Conrad represents the literary high end of this genre, H. Rider Haggard (1856-1929) was the most popular purveyor with bestsellers like *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), *She* (1886) and *Allan Quartermain* (1887), stories of adventure in the hitherto undiscovered (to European eyes), romantic world of the African interior. Haggard was still writing in the 1920's and in the same year as Christie's *The Man in the Brown Suit*, 1924, *Heu Heu*, a novel featuring Allan Quartermain in a tale about a Rhodesian monster, appeared from his pen. According to the reviewer in the *Brisbane Courier* of 19 April 1924, this book demonstrated

4. In a letter to her mother, Christie gives an account of a visit to the Museum in Cape Town and a guided tour with extensive anthropological commentary by the head of this institution. She was clearly fascinated and declared it “altogether one of the best afternoons I have ever spent” (Christie 2013[2012]: 69-71). Pre-history would remain an enduring interest of Christie's and would eventually lead to her meeting with and happy second marriage to the respected archaeologist, Sir Max Mallowan.

that Haggard was “still the incomparable master in the romantic school of fiction in which we first met Allan Quartermain and Captain Good” (18).

Probably in response to the popularity of this genre and because the African setting suggested it, Christie makes of Anne Beddingfield an “adventuress” (31) and endows her with a series of adventures ranging from the metropolitan and urbane (witnessing a murder in London, almost thrown overboard on an elegant ocean liner, being gagged and imprisoned in a house in Cape Town) to the African rural (pushed over a cliff near the Victoria Falls and living with a tanned lover on an island in the Zambezi).

In conjunction with the tales of exotic adventure, the popular genre of the colonial romance also intrudes into the *whodunit* structure and compromises Christie’s depiction of gender relations. While a minor theme of romance is often present in detective fiction, also by Christie, and Anne Beddingfield perfectly fits the requirement that the “principal character of the love-detective story is invariably a young independent woman who successfully copes with the problems and difficulties she has to face” (Weststeijn 2009: 168), Christie goes much further than that in *The Man with the Brown Suit*. Modern readers would probably find the very early reference by the heroine, Anne Beddingfield, to the ideal romantic hero as a “stern and silent Rhodesian” (24) somewhat puzzling, considering how small the colonial population of Rhodesia was in 1922 and would probably interpret it as a kind of symbolic or psychological predictor of the African plot which is yet to unfold at this stage. It is a largely forgotten fact that two of the most successful authors of popular romance novels in English in the early years of the twentieth century were Rhodesian women, Cynthia Stockley (1872-1936) and Geraldine Page (1873-1922). Both wrote many romantic novels set in Rhodesia and the South African sub-continent. Page published eighteen novels between 1902 and 1922 and is estimated to have sold just short of two million copies (Walton 1997: 36). Stockley’s career spanned the years 1903 (*Virginia of the Rhodesians*) to 1936 (*Perilous Stuff*) and she was no less prolific. Her most popular novel, *Poppy*, went into twenty-seven reprints (Walton 1997: 17) and several of her books were turned into films (Walton 1997: 18). According to Marion Walton, Page’s heroes, invariably British born, scorn the limitations of life in metropolitan Britain for the glorious imperial adventure of its African colonies (Walton 1997: 150):

Strength, aristocratic features, grooming, physical mobility, moral purity and directness of gaze recur throughout Page’s fiction as characteristics of her heroes and positively portrayed characters.

(Walton 1997: 151)

Likewise, Stockley’s heroes, “despite their reprobate appearance and pioneer lifestyle, contain an essentially noble core of incorruptible boyish innocence and purity” (Walton 1997: 157).

Harry Rayburn in *The Man in the Brown Suit*, steps right out of the pages of the romances by these two authors. Handsome, masculine, his noble features enhanced by a romantic scar, he emerges as a mysterious and troubled but essentially noble figure. He turns out to be the only son and heir of a millionaire baronet, but has been maligned, disgraced and deprived of his inheritance through the evil machinations of Sir Eustace Pedler and his band of criminals. Once his honour is restored with the help of Anne Beddingfield, he chooses like Page's heroes to eschew his father's fortune and the sophistication of London to live happily with Anne on an island in the Zambezi in the primitive, edenic conditions of the colonial African sunshine.

However, to fit the intelligent, independent, proto-feminist Anne Beddingfield into the paradigm of the Page/Stockley African romance with this rugged, noble, colonial hero is no easy task and the novel suffers in coherence and credibility. Some token gestures are made to Anne's independence in that it is suggested that her strength and independence will also be accommodated more easily in Africa than in metropolitan England – approaching the “original” equality intimated by the late Professor Beddingfield's anthropological vision – but the claims of the romance genre are too powerful and Anne finds herself helplessly being saved in a traditional patriarchal way by the heroic, manly, Harry, when they are attacked: “His answering fire was more deadly than theirs He caught me close with his left arm and kissed me once savagely before he turned to the window again” (297). He carries her for miles “slung across his shoulder like a sack of coals” (299) and she cannot but come to the conclusion that “Men are very wonderful” (300)! The autobiographical impulse to render the position of a clever and independent-spirited woman in the man's world of the 1920s becomes displaced or at least subverted and distorted by the generic requirements of the popular adventure story and above all the colonial romance, all jostling for place in this unusual work. Wagoner suggests that “Agatha Christie tried mixing detective novel and romantic thriller formulas [in this novel] with a result hardly fitting to either category (1986: 41).⁵

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5. In Todorov's typology, three forms of the detective novel are distinguished: the whodunit (already discussed), the thriller, where we “are no longer told about a crime anterior to the moment of the narrative, the narrative coincides with the action” (Todorov 1977: 47) and developing from these two forms, the suspense novel: “It keeps the mystery of the whodunit and also the two stories, that of the past and that of the present; but it refuses to reduce the second to a simple detection of the truth ... Its chief feature is that the detective loses his immunity, gets beaten up, badly hurt, constantly risks his life, in short he is integrated into the universe of the other characters, instead of being an independent observer” (50-51). According to this typology, *The Man in the Brown Suit* would probably be a “suspense novel”, rather than a

History also complicates the formulaic whodunit plot. It was purely coincidental that the British Empire Exhibition tour visited South Africa during the revolutionary uprising of white mineworkers in 1922. The uprising started in January 1922 as a strike under the leadership of mainly English-speaking union leaders but with a fair number of Afrikaners also involved. They objected to salaries being cut as a result of the reduced profitability of mines and the race barrier among workers being diluted to allow the employment of black workers at cheaper rates than the semi-skilled white workers would command (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 246). By March the strike had turned violent with sabotage and vandalism rampant (247) under the leadership of a militant Council of Action consisting of a combination of Afrikaner nationalists (still unreconciled to the British Empire twenty years after the Boer War) and Marxists Socialists, supported by the South African Communist Party (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 249). General Smuts, the Prime Minister, declared martial law on 10 March and sent in government forces supported by air strikes, artillery and tanks to subdue the uprising. The death toll was high (153 people killed and 650 injured). Eighteen of the leaders were sentenced to death but fourteen of these were reprieved (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 247).

In her letters to her mother from South Africa, Christie gives an account of the uprising. On 15 March 1922, she writes to her mother that the strike has turned “into a young revolution. They hoisted a red flag and declared a Soviet Government” (Christie 2013[2012]: 101). An interesting perspective in the light of the later Afrikaner-dominated South African government’s long crusade against communism is provided by Christie’s acquaintance, Miss Wright, who teaches at the Transvaal University College (now the University of Pretoria): “Mainly all her students are Dutch and being Nationalists, in sympathy with the strikers” (Christie 2013[2012]: 101).

This crisis in South African history inevitably also enters into the fictional narrative. It becomes quite an important part of the plot. It determines some of the movements of the characters and forms the background to the *denouement*, when Anne is trapped in a building in Johannesburg, then liberated by Harry and Colonel Race. During these scenes, Sir Eustace is finally identified as the villain of the tale, not only as the perpetrator of the murder at Mill House in England and as the man who tried to throw Anne overboard on the *Kilmorden Castle*, but also as the evil genius behind the South African uprising! In one of the passages in Sir Eustace’s diary, pregnant with double meaning, Sir Eustace is confronted by a South African government official who states:

“thriller”. However, Wagoner is astute in identifying the generic discomfort engendered by the novel.

It is not the strikers themselves who are causing the trouble. There is some organization at work behind them. Arms and explosives have been pouring in, and we have made a haul of certain documents which throw a good deal of light on the methods adopted to import them

More than that, Sir Eustace, we have every reason to believe that the man who runs the whole show, the directing genius of the affair, is at this minute in Johannesburg.

He stared at me so hard that I began to fear that he suspected me of being the man. I broke out in a cold perspiration at the thought, and began to regret that I had ever conceived the idea of inspecting a miniature revolution at first hand.

(313-314)

Of course, the government official has no idea that Sir Eustace is indeed the power behind the uprising, nor would any but the most perceptive reader, but that is indeed what he is revealed to be. The entire uprising turns out to be a scheme for profit through the sale of explosives and arms for Sir Eustace and his gang. (His name, Pedler, is an indication of his real motivation: money.) Any authentic insights into South African history that Christie may have developed in her personal observation of this significant moment in South African history is compromised by her need to tie up the ends of her detective novel in a crucial scene at the end in terms of the structure of the traditional whodunit. In *Novel Histories* (1997), his investigation of the relationship between history and South African fiction, Michael Green remarks significantly:

Thus criminality in *The Man in the Brown Suit* must ultimately be a matter of individual perversity, not social complexity or structural malfunction. Only in this way can an event such as the Rand Rebellion be accommodated within the classic detective story of the period; only in this way can history give way to the ideological stasis at the heart of this version of the form.

(201)

The opportunity to encapsulate in fiction some historical or sociological insights or perceptions are sacrificed to the inflexible generic demands of the classical detective story. Ironically, however, Christie then promptly ignores one of the most significant requirements of this genre, namely the re-establishment of the order by the imposition of justice: Sir Eustace is allowed to escape. This serious deviation from the form is of course attributable to the personal relationship of and power relations between Christie and Major Belcher, who, as indicated earlier, had been her husband's superior professionally and who instigated the writing of the novel. Just as the Christies found it impossible to keep up their resentments at the unreasonable behaviour of Major Belcher, as "when he recovered his temper he could display so much bonhomie and charm that somehow we forgot our teeth-grinding and found ourselves back on the pleasantest terms"

(2013[2012]: 236), so Anne Beddingfield finds it difficult not to think of Sir Eustace as “other than our amusing, genial travelling companion” (2002[1924]: 345). While his escape riles her “stern Rhodesian” lover, she declares herself

rather pleased. Never to this day have I been able to rid myself of a sneaking fondness for Sir Eustace. I dare say it’s reprehensible, but there it is. I admired him. He was a thorough-going villain, I dare say – but he was an amusing one. I’ve never met anyone half so amusing since.

(367)

In these lines there is again a private joke, a wink, a little personal tribute to the man who led their exciting overseas adventure and to whom the novel is dedicated. But with this joke not only the conventions of the genre, but also the ideology behind these conventions – that the upper middle classes are able to maintain a world that conforms to their own sense of justice – are betrayed. While Christie successfully extrapolates the mean pettiness of the chair of the Empire Expedition to the machinations of an international criminal, her personal relations to this man, including the fact that he was her husband’s boss, make her turn all this into a joke, letting her villain escape because of his being “amusing”. So while historicity is compromised by the inflexible demands of the detective genre, the detective genre is compromised by the personal, autobiographical elements behind the creation of the novel. The lightness with which this is done, as well as the apparent excess with which elements of the adventure and romance genres are incorporated into the whodunit plot, makes the reader sometimes suspect that there is a satiric element in the writing (Josephine Phail calls the plot “parodic” [2012: 96]), which in itself would undermine the genre requirements of the whodunit plot and its ideology. Some of this may reflect the discomfort of the author herself, trying to merge a light-hearted approach, which she had developed as her way to cope with the difficult personality of Major Belcher for whom the novel was being written, with the requirements of her chosen genre.

This unusual, unruly novel speaks of a failure to seize opportunities: the opportunity to transcend the restrictive genre of the classical detective novel or *whodunit* by exploiting the interesting personal and historical elements behind its creation and yet at the same time a failure alternatively to discipline the personal material to the jealous demands of the genre in order to create a successful vehicle for that genre. The unforgiving demands of the whodunit, which, according to Todorov, does not countenance transgression and obliges conformity, are compromised by the personal and autobiographical elements that instigated and propelled its creation and by the alternative genres of the adventure story and colonial romance suggested by its setting; on the other hand the historical account that lies behind the novel is compromised by the generic demands of the whodunit. Nobody wins.

Christie herself regarded *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), another novel suffering from generic ambiguities, as her least successful novel (Wagoner 1986: 45), but in my opinion it retains more coherence than *The Man in the Brown Suit*, which I suspect she exempted from this judgment for the very personal reasons that undermined its success. Its unruliness and the many, perhaps irreconcilable, elements which have gone into its creation nevertheless make it a very interesting novel, captivating as a British colonial vision of South Africa (using language which would now be condemned as grossly politically incorrect) and introducing in Sir Eustace Pedler the kind of power-hungry, greedy, manipulative international villain which would later become the staple of James Bond thrillers. It is perhaps only through the space and scope generated by this unruliness that Christie hit upon a narrative innovation that, when subjected to the discipline of the genre she was the consummate master of, would produce what has been hailed by some as the greatest detective novel of all. The difference between *The Man in the Brown Suit* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* appears to confirm Todorov's assertion, "As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre" (1977: 43).

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