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The Haunting of Cultural Nostalgia: Gender and Crime in Agatha Christie's Christmas Stories

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Introduction: Crime fiction and the Christmas trope

What could be more Christmassy than a good murder mystery by the Queen of Crime? But why are crime and Christmas connected, and what is the relationship between Christmas, detective fiction, and cultural nostalgia? Crime fiction as a genre has long exploited this yearning for tradition and repetition, which Christmas embodies through its evocation of familial and social histories. My article argues that Agatha Christie's Christmas crime stories both perpetuate and challenge cultural nostalgia. I furthermore demonstrate that this cultural nostalgia reflects gendered, class-related, and racialized constructions of Britishness, which are specifically associated with Christmas. I investigate these issues in Christie's crime short stories, "A Christmas Tragedy" (1930), "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding" (1960), and her novels, *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938), and *Murder is Easy* (1939).¹ Linked to the topic of Christmas is romance, which is a key theme in the Christie texts examined in this article, whether as a motive for murder, crime of passion, suspense, or escapism.² As literary themes, both romance and Christmas are steeped in gendered, cultural, and racial stereotypes and problematic assumptions about shared values and traditions. As we shall see, Christie's crime fiction has a complicated relationship with these formulaic tropes. The fictions investigated here explore and expose those themes, subverting them with irony and satire, yet, at the same time, perpetuating a sense of nostalgia and yearning for the past which, I argue, is a form of cultural haunting. Cultural haunting is expressed, as Shaw asserts: "in the between-spaces that separate recognized boundaries; in doing so, it effectively draws attention to the limitations of such ontological categories" (10). My analysis here draws on critical discussions from hauntology and textual analysis,

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¹Matković and Badina also examine the representation of Christmas in British crime fiction, including Agatha Christie; however, my research extends theirs by advancing the concepts of haunting and cultural nostalgia in my interpretative lens.

²See also Alison Light's "Returning to Manderley" for an incisive discussion of crime fiction and romance as connected genres.

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using these discourses to investigate Christie's representations of Christmas, romance, and cultural nostalgia.

The power of Christmas: Cultural nostalgia and haunting

Cultural nostalgia and haunting are key concepts informing my analysis of Christie's texts and their engagement with Christmas. For the purposes of this article, it is necessary to examine cultural nostalgia and haunting through a dual perspective: as twenty-first century phenomena shaping our reading of Christie, and as Victorian Age discourses impacting Christie's own representations. Christmas crime as a contemporary twenty-first century phenomenon must be investigated because it affects the way in which we approach and read Christie's work now. Similarly, Christie's own conflicted and ambivalent feelings about the Victorian age and its representation of family and Christmas require further examination which will illuminate her representation of Christmas and nostalgia.

In order to investigate Christie's complex and frequently nostalgic representations of Christmas, it is necessary to contextualize the cultural construction of English Christmas and its historical basis in the Victorian age.³ Linking this discussion to cultural memory studies and its analysis of the meanings of individual and cultural remembrance, John Storey scrutinizes the origins of the Victorian construction of Christmas drawn on by Christie. He contends that "The 'traditional' English Christmas was invented between 1830s and 1880s. Its invention was directly connected to the processes of industrialization and urbanization and only indirectly connected to religion" (Storey 17). This specific historical moment situates the conceptualization of traditional English Christmas right at the heart of the Victorian age, a highly formative and influential period in British social, cultural, and literary history. The Victorian construction of Christmas was further promoted by the British Royal family as the prime symbol of the Victorian family. A picture depicting Queen Victoria posing with her husband and children around a Christmas tree was circulated by the media in 1848, a symbolic image which further heightened the public's interest in Christmas celebrations and traditions (Larsen 43).

William O'Barr summarizes the history of the cultural commercialization of Christmas, of which crime fiction plays a part. He states that: "At its core are the practices of families gathering and celebrating the holidays together and buying and giving gifts to relatives and close friends," but argues that from the late Victorian period onwards, commercialization through advertising has resulted to "the development of the mythology of Christmas itself"

³Storey and Larsen both provide a thorough examination of the historical, cultural, and religious roots of Christmas and its diverse traditions. However, my article focuses on Christmas as a Victorian cultural construction, and, due to scope, cannot expand on the evolution of Christmas through the ages.

(Advertising). Linking this discussion to cultural nostalgia, Larsen further pinpoints that the Victorian “domestication of Christmas” as a private family celebration taking place inside the home, rather than a communal outdoor celebration has fundamentally shaped representations of Christmas portrayed in popular culture (44–45). As cultural texts appealing to wide audiences, crime fiction narratives both exploit and reenact this “mythology of Christmas.” As we shall see, Christie’s crime fiction challenges this trope of the dignified bourgeois family Christmas promoted by the royal picture, calling out the patriarchal terror, scapegoating, and traumatic family dynamics often suppressed by such images.

In terms of the twenty-first century, cultural nostalgia specifically associated with Christmas and crime is embodied by the growing contemporary commercial phenomenon of “Christmas crime,” in which Christie’s novels play a significant part. Paul French’s 2018 article, “Christmas Mysteries: A Tradition Revived,” traces the emergence of widespread popular interest in this subgenre. He states that:

The last few years have seen a new Christmas tradition emerge among crime readers in the UK, or rather re-emerge—Christmas murder mysteries. Thanks to a number of rediscovered and republished novels readers can now spend the holiday season indulging in a spot of murder from the 1930s “Golden Age” of crime fiction.

Looking further into the history of the Christmas murder mystery genre, French goes on to credit its buoyancy to crime author Martin Edwards’ discoveries. He explains that Edwards researched the British Library’s vast copyright holdings, in the process uncovering many 1930s Christmas murder mysteries (“Christmas Mysteries”). I argue that this revival has increased greatly in the years since 2018 and the publication of French’s article. The COVID pandemic and the periods of lockdown during the pandemic whetted audiences’ appetite for crime fiction, and Christmas mysteries form part of this new reading revival (“Contemporary Crime Fiction” 13).

Cultural nostalgia, and the marketing which exploits that, play a huge part in this exponential growth of the Christmas mystery, presenting through a series of stereotypical, culturally hegemonic tropes: the country house, snow, a roaring fire, mince pies and other specific seasonal foods, Christmas stockings stuffed full of presents, family gatherings, romance and kisses under the mistletoe. Advertisements market Christmas crime through headlines, such as “The 12 Crimes of Christmas 2025” (Britton), “British Library Christmas Crime,” and Waterstone’s bookshop’s promotional campaign “Crime at Christmas,” all playing an active part in constructing the Christmas murder mystery genre and boosting its appeal. A 2024 Guardian article lists Christmas crime texts nominated by leading UK crime writers, including Val McDermid, Ian Rankin, Sophie Hannah, and Bella Mackie.

Mackie's choice, the crime short story "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding," receives her ringing endorsement due to its iteration of familiar generic tropes: a country home, a "proper English Christmas," a "comforting and wholesome family scene" ("Perfect"). Mackie emphasizes how Christie subverts the cozy Christmas trope "with a warning not to eat the plum pudding, and a body found in the snow" which, she states, demonstrate Christie's adept handling of the crime genre ("Perfect"). Mackie concludes by reaffirming why crime fiction is so appealing at Christmastime, extolling the merits of reading a Christie mystery by the fire while eating a mince pie ("Perfect").

These sentiments appeal to the reader's sense of nostalgia, the perception of a collective common history and a shared hegemonic cultural, social, and national heritage: a problematic proposal, for, in a contemporary multicultural, diverse society, these nostalgia-heavy tropes may not be a commonly shared discourse among all its members. Defining the concept of nostalgia, which itself is complex and evolving, Ryan Lizardi states in his 2015 book *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media* that it "refer[s] to a yearning for the past or some past state, which results in the focusing in on the past or a past object to assuage this yearning and to reassure already held ideological positions" (4).⁴ Similarly, Lisa Hopkins argues that "Christmas crime is a genre engaged in negotiating the significance of the past" (*Burial Plots* 140–41). The crime texts examined here are all invested in their own celebration of past traditions, while also painting a more complex picture of Christmas beyond light-hearted merriment and nostalgia. Themes, such as betrayal, toxic masculinity, dysfunctional families, violence, and murder, all testify to the darker, sinister undercurrents simmering ominously underneath Christmas mysteries' surface veneer of seasonal cheer and merriment.

Literature and the arts have played a significant role in perpetuating a particular construction of English Christmas since the Victorian age. Evita Badina has analyzed the importance of literary and cultural representations in constructing and preserving the "Christmas myth," highlighting the Victorian period and its literary authors as playing a key part in promoting Christmas as a popular phenomenon. She traces this development back to the publication of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* in 1843 (Badina 63). Reflecting on the function of cultural nostalgia associated with Christmas, O'Barr also concludes that the imagery and ambience evoked in nostalgic Christmas depictions are indicative of the long shadow that the Victorian age continues to cast over popular constructions of Britishness and Christmas, including those which we see in Agatha Christie's crime fiction. Larsen adds that cultural nostalgia is especially meaningful in times of change and

⁴See also Eric Sandberg's illuminating discussion of nostalgia and crime narratives.

upheaval and that the cultural nostalgia around Christmas expresses “a desire to be reassured that change is tempered by continuity” (46). Shaw has it that popular culture often represents haunting “through a series of ‘persistences, repetitions, prefigurations’ that speak both to and of that particular cultural moment” (7).⁵ The repetition of Christmas and associated memories (and trauma) can thus be seen as an indication of cultural haunting and of time. Shaw argues that:

Time is central to the concept of hauntology. Haunting looks back to the past and points forward to the future from the moment of the present. In doing so, it signals towards a legacy as well as to a promise of something to come, drawing attention to the structuring role of absence. (11)

As we shall see later in this article, in several of the prefaces to texts examined, Christie evokes her own childhood Christmases and family members. In those recollections, she rehearses familiar Christmas imagery while indicating how her own sense of connection to the past evidently informs her fiction in complex ways.

The crime texts examined in this article both echo and rescript these narratives about the past and the ambivalence and/or idealization associated with it, establishing a marked contrast to the stories’ violent and discordant present tense. Christie’s representations of Christmas are haunted by a sense of ambiguous longing for the past and the security of its social and cultural traditions and hierarchies. Yet at the same time, her Christmas portrayals also acknowledge that women were precariously positioned in patriarchal relationships and therefore vulnerable to male oppression, specifically aggression and violence. Haunting in this examination does not mean a literal representation of ghosts or specters; rather, the concept describes a more pervasive ambience of nostalgia for the authenticity of the imagined past and the trauma of the complicated present tense informing Christie’s use of the tropes of romance and Christmas. The emotional intensity of haunting, then, presents an unresolvable contrast to the stereotypical tropes typically used to evoke Christmas and romance. As we shall see, Christie’s crime stories work to navigate both conflicting responses.

To illustrate this analysis, Christie’s *Murder is Easy* serves as a key example of cultural nostalgia’s seductiveness. Unlike other texts examined in this article, this novel is not set at Christmas but instead uses Christmas as a key trope to evoke cultural nostalgia. *Murder is Easy* establishes a crucial symbolic connection between romance, violence, and Christmas, using its serial killer plot to caution against stereotypical cultural assumptions and blindly accepted nostalgia. This example demonstrates how Christie uses cultural nostalgia to bring tropes of gender and Christmas together, only to

⁵Shaw is citing Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*. Zero Books, 2014, 28.

brutally undermine them all. *Murder is Easy* features one-time sleuth Luke Fitzwilliam, a retired police detective who has returned to England after working in Asia under the British Empire. The story's nostalgic tone is established from the outset when Luke reflects on the fact that he now finds himself back in England, struggling to acclimatize and to navigate changes in British culture, yearning for its old familiar certainties.

Traveling to London on the train, he passes the time by speaking to an elderly lady in his compartment, Miss Pinkerton, who lives in Wychwood-under-Ashe, a traditional English village. Miss Pinkerton reminds Luke of his aunt Mildred and, reflecting nostalgically, he decides that little old ladies are "very cosy and English" (*Murder* 8). Comparing this nostalgic representation of old ladies to "plum pudding on Christmas Day and [...] open fireplaces with wood fires," Luke's reverie reflects his sentimental construction of gender, race, and class, and his yearning for quintessential English institutions such as cricket and country villages (8). Importantly, in this passage, Christmas and Christmas-related tropes are central to this nostalgic definition of identity and culture. However, the little old lady whom Luke associates with "cozy" Englishness and nostalgic ideas of Christmas ends up a victim of a serial killer. Upon learning of her death, Luke travels to the village to investigate.

Through Luke's investigations and discoveries, Christie shows that stereotypes and unconscious bias driven by nostalgia or gender assumptions cannot be applied to either English villages, little old ladies, or Christmas. For the serial killer turns out to be another little old lady, the spinster Honoria Wainflete, who is avenging herself on Gordon Whitfield, the man who thwarted her in her youth, by framing him for murder. Wainflete further pursues revenge by attempting to murder Luke's love interest, Whitfield's younger fiancée, Bridget. Thus, in *Murder is Easy*, little old ladies turn out to have murderous intentions and be capable of violent crime which defy both ageism and nostalgic gender stereotypes. So, too, Christie's representations of Christmas are shown to defy a one-dimensional celebration of idealized togetherness and joyful positivity. As with her display of the toxicity and transgressive emotions which shape and structure personal relationships, Christie's humorous and frequently vicious subversions of Christmas nostalgia transmogrify wholesome seasonal celebration into a crime scene.

Slaying the patriarch: *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*

Hercule Poirot's Christmas foregrounds the violent confrontation at Christmas between nostalgia and violence. Thematically, this novel focuses heavily on the sins of the father and intergenerational trauma, exacerbated by the continued power wielded by the Victorian patriarchal family and Victorian attitudes in general. The menace of this Christmas crime novel is further intensified by Christie's profound use of satire in the text. Her incisive family portrayal

demonstrates how, in her crime fiction, Christmas becomes the exact opposite of the royal family Christmas blueprint offered in the illustration of Queen Victoria and her family. The novel's preface and dedication offer an amusing insight into Christie's motivations for writing this particularly grim and excoriating portrait of a family at war with one another coming together at Christmastime. In the book's dedication, Christie addresses her brother, James, informing him that, due to his past criticisms of her crime novels not having enough violence and blood and gore in them, with this text she had endeavored to rectify this perceived shortcoming. Signing her dedication, "Your affectionate sister-in-law Agatha," Christie's words serve to highlight the theme at the heart of her novel: the Christmas family crime drama.

Hercule Poirot's Christmas is a classic Golden Age crime fiction novel set in Gorston Hall, an isolated country house at Christmas, a setting which foregrounds issues of social class, gender, power, legitimacy, and belonging. The novel uses the trope of the Christmas family quarrel to frame its murder mystery: the slaying of the patriarch. The novel opens with quote from William Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, in the epigraph which follows Christie's dedication: "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?," which draws attention to the symbolic and real significance of the patriarch's sacrifice, one of the novel's key themes. This passage from *Macbeth* demonstrates how Shakespeare's representations continue to wield power, haunting English popular culture and canonical literature alike. In Christie's novel, Simeon Lee, a toxic and cruel patriarch and father who lords over his adult children, is brutally and bloodily murdered on Christmas Eve. Having deliberately summoned his adult children to his country house, some of whom he has not seen for many years, he takes great enjoyment in watching them bicker and argue. He has devised a provocative, sadistic plan to generate discord and toy with his children's emotions, making them watch as he changes his will as a demonstration of his power over them. However, Lee never gets to carry out this act, as he is brutally murdered in a locked room, another formulaic crime fiction trope. Following Lee's murder, his children, servants, and other house guests are the key suspects when Poirot arrives on the scene to solve the mystery.

The reference to Shakespearean tragedy and bloodshed reflects the assertion by Hopkins that crime fiction incorporates, and often explicitly boasts, intertextual allusions or references similar to the link to Shakespeare incorporated in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (9). In her book on Shakespeare and crime fiction, Hopkins highlights Christie's references and their complex purposes (*Shakespearean Allusion* 8). Commenting on the purposes of such intertextual allusions in crime fiction and bridging the gap between popular culture and literary classics, she further argues that:

Shakespearean allusion serves a variety of purposes. First and most obviously, Shakespeare is an unimpeachable source of cultural capital, but at the same time one perceived as popular enough to be free of any connotations of elitism or inaccessibility. (*Shakespearean Allusion* 8)

Hopkins argues that Christie's Shakespearean references serve the purpose of emphasizing the gravity and significance of the crimes committed, and that referencing *Macbeth* in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* serves to establish the plot of patricide as a widely used cultural and literary trope (*Shakespearean Allusion* 10). The reference to Shakespeare is highlighted by the fact that the murderer themselves explicitly plays on the connection to the play *Macbeth* and the symbolic significance of blood. Here, blood has multiple meanings, as both the blood of the Lee family line and the blood as a trope of sin and evidence of guilt. By referencing *Macbeth* in her book's epigraph and echoing Shakespeare's play in the description of the murder, Christie makes a compelling case for her novel as a cross-over text which both features popular sentimental references to Christmas—albeit tongue-in-cheek—and weighty canonical literary themes and ideas.

Crime fiction is driven by particular crucial textual vehicles: namely, the search for truth, solving crime, and achieving justice for the victims of crime. *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* features all these narrative elements, which are ticking away underneath its Christmas setting, propelling the novel toward its resolution and closure. The themes of family and relationships provide introspective content for Christie's novel, problematizing the processes of crime solving. "Christmas crime novels also stress the horrors of a family Christmas," states Hopkins, thus demonstrating how the Christmas crime novel serves to foreground not just the nostalgic feelings associated with Christmases and traditions past, but also the complicated and contradictory emotions surrounding family dysfunction and conflict (*Burial Plots* 148). Thus, Hopkins adds, "Murder, especially the murder of a father, makes Christmas significant again, and one might almost say that the more children the victim has, the merrier the murder" (*Burial Plots* 151). *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, then, is a family drama which requires Poirot to unlock the hidden secrets and transgressions within the family's complicated history. The past continues to revisit and persist in the present for the Lee family at Christmas, revealing the emotional traumas and repressed passions.

Hercule Poirot's Christmas opens in a comparable way to *Murder is Easy*. Stephen, who has recently arrived from the colonies, travels on a train toward a thus far undisclosed British destination, feels apprehensive about his presence in the country, but then encounters a young woman on the train, Pilar from Spain, and their conversation changes his demeanor. Stephen is fascinated by her Mediterranean beauty, reflecting that she seems so out of place in England. Instead, he imagines her as a romantic heroine, passionate and

proud, in a grand setting instead of a crowded train compartment (*Poirot's* 1). However, in contrast to *Murder is Easy*, where Luke met a little old lady whose murder later changes the course of his narrative and of the novel, this chance encounter bears all the hallmarks of romance. The mutual attraction and chemistry between the two characters become apparent as the opening chapter goes on, and when Stephen realizes where Pilar is headed, the suspense of their encounter and their train journey together towards Gorston Hall intensifies. Stephen and Pilar's romance is not central to the plot in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, but their relationship does represent a significant love interest that is carried through to the novel's end. They also happen to both be tricksters and fraudsters, with false identities seeking financial gain, which complicates any straightforward representation of their romance. Toward the end, Pilar reveals that she is marrying Stephen, and they are going to live in South Africa, where he was born. Their geographical distancing thus underlines their Otherness.

And there the similarity with *Murder is Easy* stops. *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* is a Christmas crime novel—and with that comes the adherence to particular textual tropes and themes. One of those tropes specific to Christmas crime fiction is a ritual murder. Lisa Hopkins argues that:

In Christmas crime [...] there is a strong sense of the sacrificial. In contrast to the usual structure of the golden age detective story, where a likely suspect in the first murder often becomes the victim of the second murder, there is generally only one victim in Christmas crime. (*Burial Plots* 151)

Hercule Poirot's Christmas only has one murder victim, namely the slayed Lee family patriarch who has been terrorizing his children and their partners and who drove his meek wife, Adelaide, into an early grave. Christie portrays Adelaide as a submissive partner in an unhappy marriage, who tolerated her husband's infidelity and aggressive dominance toward her, having no other options due to women's precarious financial position in early twentieth-century patriarchy. The narrative, the entire Lee family, and Christmas itself are thus haunted by the presence-in-absence of Adelaide. She is the victimized, now deceased, mother who lives on through her youngest son David's insistent idealization of her memory and his loathing of his father, an emotional turmoil exacerbated by the whole family spending Christmas together. Through this depiction, Christie's novel demonstrates how memories and intergenerational trauma intermingle at Christmas to generate a pervasive haunting which goes far beyond nostalgia. The sacrificial murder of Simeon Lee provides the narrative resolution to this haunting as, shortly after his father's murder, David finds himself able to move on from the emotional paralysis in which he has been trapped since boyhood. When old Simeon Lee mockingly tells his family: "Grand old institution, Christmas. Promotes solidarity of family

feeling,” his statement seems almost grotesque given the hostility among his children toward one another and toward their father (*Poirot's* 41). When Lee finally insults his children shortly before he is killed, his words cut right through all of the ritual niceties of Christmas. He emasculates his sons, mocking what he perceives to be their weakness and crowing that he may well have fathered a more manly illegitimate son from one of his extra-marital affairs. These savage and hurtful insults fly in the face of the nostalgic harmony and family togetherness typically associated with Christmas. In contrast, in its portrayal of the Lee family, Christie reveals the patriarchal family to be a symbolic crime scene, haunted by the sins of the father and the arrogant aggression Lee has passed on to his prodigal son, Harry.

Christie has produced a highly satirical portrayal of what seems, on the surface, a traditional family Christmas in a traditional setting. In the novel, Poirot becomes the voice for articulating the hypocrisy he observes in the family and pointing out the grave consequences of denial and repression. An important exchange of opinion takes place between Poirot and police detective Johnson. When commenting on the sentimentality of the British toward Christmas, police detective Johnson protests, defending the old traditions. However, Poirot's interrogation of Christmas goes further than simply accepting tradition for tradition's sake. He asserts that Christmas traditions can lead to overindulging in food and drink and, with that, disagreements and arguments can happen as a result. Poirot goes on to spell his point out to Johnson, and this explanation at the same time helps the reader to see the dangerous family dynamic Christmas may generate. Poirot explains how the effort families make to get along with one another at Christmas gatherings can put an enormous amount of pressure on everyone, when the reality is that they do not get along at all. This pressure must eventually find a release in conflict and violence. Such destructive animosity is taboo, as the nostalgic, “acceptable” image of Christmas erases all discord and conflict. However, these ambivalent emotions persist and return to haunt the Lees. In thus speculating, Poirot demonstrates to Johnson (and to the reader) how a family Christmas gathering can lead to violence and murder (*Poirot's* 49–50) (See also Hopkins *Burial Plots* 141–42).

Commenting on Poirot's observation, Hopkins explains: “Poirot's diagnosis is acute. Food and festivities feature in many Golden Age Christmas crime novels, but at the heart of almost all of them are families, and particularly the murder of one family member by another” (*Burial Plots* 142). She concludes that:

the murder plot is not just a fantasy of escape or revenge calculated to appeal to the reader irritated by his or her own family: it is in fact a way of reinvesting Christmas with a significance it is felt to have lost. (Hopkins, *Burial Plots* 142)

In a formulaic climactic scene toward the end of the novel, Poirot demonstrates that everyone in the house had a motive for murdering Lee. He investigates the individuals' circumstances, dismantling their alibies and/or showing their potential guilt and motivations, to then go on to reveal the identity of the murderer at the end. Such confrontational closure scenes are a stock trope in Christie's crime fiction. They serve the function of heightening suspense and, in the case of *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, placing all the characters together, not for Christmas merriment but for the serious purpose of apportioning guilt for the patriarch's murder—the patriarch who had taken much pride in his many sexual conquests, and whose sexual prolificness and predatory exploitation are mirrored in his past role as a colonial adventurer and crook in South Africa. Poirot reveals that Superintendent Sugden is the killer, the illegitimate son who is revealed as Lee's murderer. The murder of the patriarch by the illegitimate son echoes Arthur Conan Doyle's masterpiece *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, where it is also the illegitimate son, this time from South America, who murderously lays claim to the Baskerville country estate and the family fortunes.

Similarly to Poirot, Pilar, another cultural outsider, comments on English Christmas traditions and her wish to experience them. She yearns to taste the plum pudding and Yule log, and to experience all the merriment she has learned to associate with a traditional English Christmas from books (*Poirot's* 146).⁶ These features are, of course, reinforced by cultural nostalgia, and, through Pilar's reflections, Christie's novel highlights the significance of literature and cultural texts in constructing and promoting this nostalgia-drenched representation of Christmas. This representation, then, succeeds in promoting both a specifically white Anglo-centric version of English cultural traditions and in aligning this version with "Englishness." At the end of the novel, Lydia, the wife of one of the Lee sons, makes a promise to Pilar that she can return to Gorston Hall to experience the "real" "true" traditional Christmas she wanted so badly—but this time, one hopes, without the murder, mayhem, and mystery. *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* thus ends on a note of affection—for romance, and for Christmas. This is the conventional closure which both the cozy Golden Age crime novel, and the contemporary Christmas movie, dictate. Yet, through the symbolic and actual slaying of the Victorian family patriarch and with the revelation of the extent of his cruelty and egotism, any nostalgia associated with the Victorian era is thoroughly destabilized. Similarly, the suggestion that Simeon Lee's submissive, bullied wife Adelaide also played a part in reinforcing damaging family dynamics by manipulating her youngest son, challenges the construction of the "Angel in the House"⁷ and exposes the misogyny of the

⁶Hopkins also discusses Pilar and her role in the novel in *Burial Plots* 142.

⁷I am referring here to Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem, "The Angel in the House," and its portrayal of idealized Victorian femininity.

Victorian period. Thus, the price of closure is exposed by the ambivalent ending of this most un-Christmassy of Christmas crime novels.

Toxic Christmas: “A Christmas Tragedy”

“A Christmas Tragedy” features another of Christie’s beloved detective figures, the elderly but irrepressible and emotionally intelligent people-watcher Miss Marple. First published in 1930 in the linked short story collection, *The Thirteen Problems*, this text features Miss Marple’s regular friendship group, who gather on Tuesdays to tell one another about true crime cases that have never been solved, to reexamine those crimes and find the solution. “A Christmas Tragedy” forms part of this collection of murder mysteries where, predictably, Miss Marple is always the one to figure out the truth. Sitting in her armchair whilst knitting, her age and gender lead criminals and others to repeatedly underestimate her, thereby giving her the perfect cover or camouflage for crime-solving. Just like the complexity of Christmas is erased by cultural nostalgia and sentimentality, so the stereotype of the “little old lady,” previously discussed in this article’s examination of *Murder is Easy*, serves to belie the acuity of Miss Marple’s intelligence. ‘Lot of old women sitting round talking scandal,’ is how Miss Marple is referred to by Colonel Bantry, one of her friends (“Tragedy” 5). As we know from Christie’s work, no one should underestimate the power of older women to either commit or solve crime.

In “A Christmas Tragedy,” Miss Marple is the storyteller, and she refers to the narrative as “a tragedy.” The story’s title plays on associating Christmas with Victorian-age imagery of marriage and family sanctity but negates those tropes, instead exposing Christmas as a violent and exploitative manifestation of gaslighting and femicide. In this radical realignment of seasonal clichés, Miss Marple’s crime story connects with the subgenre of the marriage thriller, a suspense-driven psychological narrative specifically about male-female relationships, typically in marriage, which focuses on the suspicion that the husband is seeking to murder his wife. Such relationship fears overshadowing Christmas present another dimension to the erased, negated dark underbelly of Christmas, so graphically illustrated in the gory murder of family patriarch Simeon Lee in *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas*. “A Christmas Tragedy” concerns the Sanderses, a married couple spending the pre-Christmas period at a hotel. Watching Mr. Sanders’ behavior, Miss Marple strongly suspects him of harboring plans to murder his wife. Meanwhile, Sanders’ unsuspecting wife has no idea about his murderous plotting. However, Miss Marple observes his demeanor and perceives intuitively and instantly that something is wrong and that he intends to murder his wife. But although Miss Marple suspects him, she has no evidence and is powerless to stop him, which adds to the rising suspense in the story. Miss Marple

explains to her listeners that husbands murdering their wives is a commonly seen crime because of the power men hold in patriarchal society which means that such femicide can easily be made to look like an accident ("Tragedy" 8). She also states that Mr. Sanders realized that she suspected him. However, he was too impatient to rid himself of his wife to delay any longer. Instead of making her death look like an accident, he deliberately staged it as a murder but sought to exonerate himself ("Tragedy" 10).

Proving Miss Marple's point, four days before Christmas, Mr. Sanders commits the murder in a highly calculated manner. Being away from home and staying in holiday accommodation places Mrs. Sanders in further jeopardy, making her more vulnerable by offering a prime opportunity for her homicidal husband to strike. Under the auspices of going Christmas shopping and asking if there is anything he can bring back from the shops for the ladies, Mr. Sanders uses Christmas generosity as a cover-up for his grim objective. Through a detailed and very intricate strategy of body-swapping and deception, Mr. Sanders succeeds in murdering his wife, with Miss Marple powerless to stop him. Miss Marple explains that Mr. Sanders is a highly calculating man who, through his method, has orchestrated an alibi for himself which appears to rule him out of contention. However, whereas *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* focuses on the murder of the patriarch, "A Christmas Tragedy" uses the Christmas season setting to scrutinize patriarchal marriage and the construction of toxic masculinity. The story merges the marriage thriller with the Christmas mystery genre to interrogate the potential of the short story genre in representing these concerns. Christie's use of the genre reflects Rebecca Gibson's assertion that "The Christmas short mystery genre brings a cozy Christmas ambience together with violence, burglaries, and corpses, and wraps everything up in festive packaging" (222).

However, as befits the story and its insistence on the tragic dimension of Christmas, there is no festive wrapping in "A Christmas Tragedy." Rather, this story uses Christmas as the occasion to shine a knowing light on the darker, hidden violence of traditional heterosexual marriage, as represented by the Victorian family and Christmas. With "A Christmas Tragedy," then, we have a crime text which uses the subgenre of the marriage thriller to scrutinize patriarchal marriage and its concealed violence against women. Miss Marple's reflections on the widespread phenomenon of violence against women in traditional patriarchal marriage and the deliberate timing of Christmas in the story demonstrate the point also made in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* that the seasonal festivities have a dark underbelly of violence, trauma, and murder.

"A Christmas Tragedy" is called a "tragedy," even though Miss Marple states at the end of the story that she was glad to have played her part in bringing Mr. Sanders to justice. The tragedy element, however, is linked not

to the actual physical murder of Mrs. Sanders or its unfolding but to the symbolic death to the dream of the “happy ever after” - the annihilation of the romantic dream of the happy marriage and Christmas harmony. Miss Marple explains that, for Mrs. Sanders, dying innocent, not having understood her husband’s murderous plans and true feelings toward her saved her from living a life of disillusionment (20). However, for Mr. Sanders, Marple does not mince her words: she states explicitly that she had no misgivings about having played her part in convicting him and seeing him receive the death penalty for his crimes. Equally, the story serves as a haunting warning to women to resist the seductive myth of romance and marriage and instead open their eyes to patriarchal violence. As such, the story heralds the traumatic death of female innocence, borne by the harsh necessity of insight. When hauntology is employed in reading this story, its portrayal of Mrs. Sanders in her ignorant bliss reflects Gina Wisker’s assertion that “women investing in such romances are culturally haunted by the promises they offer: of eternal undying love, economic stability, and [...] domestic bliss” (40). “A Christmas Tragedy” thus draws on the tragic genre to underpin its investigation of cultural haunting by negating the imagery of heterosexual Christmas romance and kisses under the mistletoe, instead emphasizing the violent erasure of women in patriarchy.

Consuming crime at Christmas: “The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding”

Christie’s “The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding” was published in 1960 and is thus more recent than the other Christmas-themed mysteries I have discussed in this article, as well as more light-hearted, whimsical, and sentimental in tone. The story is based on the theme of Christmas food and seasonal delicacies, with the title comparing the consumption of Christmas foods to reading murder mysteries, thus playing on the compulsive or addictive aspect of crime fiction. Christie opens the short story collection with a preface describing her fond recollections of her childhood Christmases. In the book’s Foreword, she calls the book “The Chef’s Selection,” emphasizing the theme of traditional Christmas foods and activities, such as stockings and presents, church, dinner, and the tree. In the story, a Foreign Office official named Jesmond requests that Poirot spend Christmas at Kings Lacey, an English country house, to assist with crime solving. Jesmond insists to the reluctant Poirot that “Christmas in England is a great institution,” stressing that this will be an “old-fashioned” English family Christmas celebration, with snow and featuring all the traditional foods and activities, such as pulling Christmas crackers (“Adventure” 1). The mystery which Poirot has been asked to solve, however, contrasts strongly with English traditions and institutions. It evokes

postcolonial tensions: a stolen gemstone of immense symbolic and financial value has been stolen from an Asian prince visiting London before his wedding. While in London, the prince dated a number of young women and one of these women stole the priceless ruby, jeopardizing the prince's reputation and his wedding, threatening an international scandal. The portrayal of the philandering Asian prince foregrounds Ilaha Guliyeva's point that "By portraying non-English characters and colonial landscapes as dangerous, chaotic, or morally ambiguous, Christie reinforces a vision of England as rational, just, and civilized" (54). Being a white male Westerner, Poirot represents the "acceptable" face of the foreign Other. The Orientalism in Christie's description of the prince further serves to contrast the old-fashioned nostalgic English Christmas which Poirot is promised, with the foreign, racialized Other whose sexual transgressions are at the heart of the crime plot.

As usual, Poirot gets caught up in the romantic drama and intrigue and finds himself listening to the conversations and gossip by everyone staying in the country house over Christmas: the elderly couple who own the country house, their granddaughter Sarah, her boyfriend Desmond, and a couple of other friends of hers, their teenage grandson, his niece, and his friend ("Adventure" 10). The story reveals conflicts within the Lacey family between Sarah and her grandparents. This discord is deliberately escalated by Desmond who seeks to alienate Sarah from her family and exploit her, as she will come into a sizable inheritance soon. These conflicts between Sarah and her grandparents remind us that in Christmas crime narratives, as Gibson asserts, "Family can be a refuge ... or a site of conflict and strife" (223). This later mystery short story differs from *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* and "A Christmas Tragedy" through its rich, evocative, detailed description of Christmas capers and the sumptuous Christmas feast. During the Christmas dinner itself, when the Christmas pudding is served, the party is suddenly interrupted when Mr. Lacey bites down on something hard concealed inside the pudding. He fishes a large red piece of what looks like glass out of his mouth; Poirot seizes the red object, which turns out to be the stolen ruby. Poirot speculates that all the guests and Mr. and Mrs. Lacey had opportunity to put the gemstone into the pudding. As Hopkins states, the use of this particular kind of hiding place is a classic Christmas mystery trope, arguing that, "Christmas crime novels are often whatdunnits, featuring weapons or places of concealment such as mistletoe which are found in houses only at Christmas time" (*Burial Plots* 10). In contrast to the other mystery short story examined in this article, "A Christmas Tragedy" which stresses the tragic dimensions of the death of innocence and a Christmas without the magic of romance, "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding" employs a comedic element to create a light-hearted tone and ambience.

Poirot solves the mystery by ingeniously putting on a performance which forces the criminal's hand. He exposes the calculating, class hierarchy-disrupting cad Desmond and his female accomplice, who is also one of the Lacey's house guests. Finally, Poirot succeeds in recovering the priceless exotic ruby, thereby sparing the prince from the imminent scandal which would have engulfed his forthcoming nuptials. At the same time as recovering the ruby, Poirot prevents Sarah from being exploited by Desmond, thereby saving the traditional family from the generational rupture that threatened to fracture it. Even Poirot himself participates in a romantic scene: at the end of the story, he receives a kiss under the mistletoe from a young female houseguest, highlighting this story's rom-com ambience compared with the other Christmas crime texts examined in this article. Keeping the tone whimsical and witty, merging romance with comedy and just a touch of suspense, Christie's "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding" thus seems the ultimate Christmas feelgood story⁸ [95]. In part, this is because there is no murder in "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding," contesting Gibson's assertion about the Christmas crime genre that "one thing is certain: there will be a corpse for Christmas" (222).

"The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding," then, is as much a story about romance as it is about mystery and crime. Light-hearted yet serious in its observations of people, relationships, and the consequences of their actions, the story is haunted by cultural nostalgia, poised as it is on the cusp of a historical period of momentous change. The story precedes the 1960s with the countercultural rebellion, the beginnings of second-wave feminism, social justice movements for socially marginalized groups, and sexual liberation. All of these disruptions to the status quo are yet to happen, while "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding" openly celebrates the nostalgia and feel-good factor of an old-fashioned Christmas. With the crime solved, the long-haired exploitative boyfriend gets his comeuppance, and the Asian prince returns to his home country with his riches and where a traditional patriarchal marriage awaits him, "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding" insists on the restoration of the traditional British racial, gender, and class hierarchy. As Turnbull reminds us, "In both the popular romance and the crime story there is a quest for knowledge and closure through the restoration of order" (75). With British colonial domination and social order restored, Poirot's secret mission is successfully accomplished. Having "survived" an English country house in the freezing winter snow, Poirot somewhat sentimentally savors the Christmas spirit. It is as though, for Christie, the more distant the Victorian construction of Christmas is historically, the more sentimentalized the depiction. The

⁸See also Rebecca Gibson's discussion of "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding" (227–228).

dark underbelly of the Victorian and early twentieth century patriarchal family, which we saw in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, is erased in favor of romanticized nostalgia. Instead of the patriarchal family and its toxic dynamic, the focus of criminality has shifted to the racialized foreign Other and the white sexually “deviant” playboy, both of whom are threatening to invade British institutions and disrupt the traditional race, class, and gender hierarchies upheld by the Victorians.

Conclusion: Antidote to Christmas nostalgia

As we have seen, Christmas crime has grown exponentially in popularity, particularly the cozy variety which aligns with contemporary rom-coms and feelgood Christmas films in reproducing a certain cultural construction of the season. This article has investigated cultural nostalgia through an examination of Christie's complex use of the themes of romance and Christmas. Her crime texts both perpetuate and contest this construction of Christmas because, as Badina argues, the use of Christmas as a setting and trope in crime fiction brings innovation and intrigue to the genre. She has it that “in detective fiction, the festive time is first of all time for creating a peculiar atmosphere that helps the authors intrigue a reader, be unusual and original in the frames of detective fiction canon” (Badina 66). This is certainly the case in Christie's crime fiction, which treats the subject with great complexity. Her fiction knowingly references traditional aspects of Christmas celebrations, implicitly and explicitly linking these to a particular sentimental and nostalgic construction of Englishness, which echoes Rupert Brooke's 1912 poem “The Old Vicarage, Grantchester” with its pastoral vision opposing the twentieth century's terrors. As shown in *Murder is Easy*, this haunting construction of national identity is associated with particular concepts of Englishness, gender, race, class, and tradition. The season of Christmas thus emphasizes the violent contrast between past and present, between Victorian sensibility and modernity's mass culture. Christie's detective fiction highlights those tensions and the unacknowledged conflicts and emotions which are exacerbated by seasonal traditions of social gatherings and nostalgic rituals. To answer my opening question, it would indeed appear that there is nothing more Christmassy than a good murder mystery by the Queen of Crime. However, engaging with said murder mystery does not merely emulate the warm, fuzzy feeling of Christmas nostalgia; it also creates an outlet for unacknowledged or repressed emotions (Lizardi 6). Christie's crime fiction thus takes a knowing, sideways look at Christmas: with their shrewd plots, suppressed passions, vengeful villains, and dysfunctional relationships, the Queen of Crime's mysteries offer a powerful antidote to Christmas sentimentality.

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