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‘What are words?’ symbolism and romance in Agatha Christie’s short stories ‘Within a Wall’, ‘The House of Dreams’ and ‘The Lonely God’

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## **Abstract**

This article explores three of Agatha Christie’s early non-crime short stories written in the mid-1920s. I examine Christie’s use of symbolism and key motifs to explore the representation of relationships through the prism of romance. I argue that Christie’s short stories serve as a highly significant creative site for her investigation of the relationship between genre, subjectivity and symbolism.

## **Keywords**

Agatha Christie

romance

popular fiction

middlebrow

modernism

genre

## **Introduction: ‘Difficult-to-Place’ stories**

With the phrase, ‘what are words?’, Isobel Everard, the femme fatale in Agatha Christie’s short story ‘Within a Wall’, questions the capacity of language to accurately convey the meaning and truth about relationships. In this article, I explore Christie’s use of symbolism to represent

identity, relationships and inner psychology in selected early short stories by Agatha Christie. Alongside modernism and its aesthetic experiments, popular fiction was also depicting symbolism and inner consciousness, albeit in more accessible ways. In the short stories examined here, Christie uses the conventions of romance fiction and the short story to explore the role of symbolism in portraying love and relationships. Christie also explored these themes in the novels that she wrote under the alias of Mary Westmacott (Lutkus 2002: 73).

Christie is famous for her crime fiction and charismatic detective figures such as Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, but her non-detective short stories have received less critical attention. This oversight is most likely due in significant part to the overwhelming success of her crime writing, which has somewhat overshadowed her other works. However, my article seeks to address this gap, both in Christie and short story scholarship, by employing three specific case studies, which demonstrate the creativity, power, innovation and emotional and literary range of her non-detective short fiction. Written in the mid-1920s, the short fictions by Christie examined here do not feature an actual crime motif. Instead, these short stories concern themselves more broadly with relationships, character studies, epiphanic moments of revelation or insight, psychological dimensions of existence and symbolism. Love, sacrifice and compromise are central themes in the stories examined in this article,<sup>1</sup> and symbolism is the key textual features of the romance genre bringing these themes together.

Drawing on critical perspectives on the modernist period and genre to inform my textual analysis, I argue that Christie's stories use symbolism to explore the dynamics of relationships and characters' psychology through the specific lens of romance. The short stories examined here have recently been republished in the collection *While the Light Lasts* (2003), as well as in stand-alone electronic text format compatible with kindle. These republications suggest a renewed appetite and widening readership for these most intriguing and 'difficult-to-place' Christie stories. This article examines how Christie's 'Within a Wall' ([1925] 2008a), 'The House of Dreams'

([1926] 2008b) and 'The Lonely God' ([1926] 2008c) experiment with textual techniques and genre, specifically symbolism (more regularly associated with high modernism and its aesthetic priorities), and explore themes such as identity and relationships. As we shall see, the stories present a compelling study of how Christie used the middlebrow and popular short story genre to create space for her work within the male-dominated literary mainstream.<sup>2</sup>

### **Literary contexts of Christie's short stories**

Both thematically and in terms of style, Christie's short stories are inextricably linked to the contradictions and tensions between high modernism, middlebrow writing and popular culture, resulting in genre fiction such as detective and romance literature being devalued in relation to the literary canon. The position of women writers in relation to those tensions is complex.

Christie's extensive crime fiction oeuvre has often been used to pigeonhole her as a formulaic author, trivializing her work and hamper serious critical examination. However, in recent years, significant Christie scholarship has emerged, which has changed this trend, examining her work in relation to gender and sexuality (Makinen 2006; Bernthal 2016), or focusing on Christie's contribution as a popular writer producing a range of middlebrow work (Porter 2018). Melissa Schaub, in her *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (2013), has explored Christie's fiction in light of British middlebrow traditions, and my analysis here draws on and extends this work.

1925 saw the publication of Christie's 'Within a Wall', but it was also a significant moment of high importance within modernism; the year Virginia Woolf's short novel *Mrs Dalloway* was published. Modernism as a term denotes both the period between 1910 and 1940, and an international movement of aesthetic and formal innovation in literature and the arts (Armstrong 2005: 24). The stories by Christie illustrate the versatility and diversity of the short story genre in

the modernist period, particularly when drawing on middlebrow and popular writing. The term middlebrow was used in a somewhat dismissive manner by some modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf in her essay 'Middlebrow', written in 1932, published posthumously. Conventionally, debates have tended to associate middlebrow literature with personal relationships, sentimentalism and the formulaic, rather than formal innovation and experimentation (Humble 2001: 26). Defining the term middlebrow, Beth Driscoll states, '[t]he word emerged to complicate the binary between highbrow and lowbrow in the early-to-mid twentieth century, a period when critics were confronted by both the emergence of Modernism and the increased production of mass culture'. Middlebrow sits uneasily between the two as a shifting classification, associated with the realm of the sentimental and emotional, accessible to a range of readers rather than preoccupied with formal experimentation (Driscoll 2016: n.pag.). This article, however, seeks to reclaim Christie's middlebrow romances, arguing for their importance both in her oeuvre and to short story scholarship generally. This is because genres such as romance and detective fiction served an important function for women authors striving to define their work and claim spaces for themselves outside of the male-dominated literary mainstream. Middlebrow writing provided this much-needed bridge. As Nicola Humble argues, middlebrow 'straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging [text] on the other' (2001: 11). Humble furthermore argues that terms such as 'modernism' and 'middlebrow' must be 'understood not as formal or generic categories, but as cultural constructs' (2001: 28). As Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder and Ruth Robbins suggest, '[t]he judgements made about genre fiction are often very harsh' (2011: 194). My article thus seeks to reclaim middlebrow writing as occupying an important position on the spectrum of literary production; more specifically, I aim to open up these engaging and speculative short stories by Christie to new critical assessment. My analysis of Christie's middlebrow short stories is grounded in engaging with their compelling use of

symbolism and search for a literary language with which to describe identity, relationships and subjective emotional experience.

My examination focuses specifically on two key formal dimensions of the Christie short stories discussed here: symbolism and romance. Christie's early short stories forge a thematic and textual connection between popular narrative forms, including the romantic or sentimental story, the fairy tale and the supernatural. This strategy reflects Ailsa Cox's observation that the literary and cultural influences on the short story 'lie as much in the oral tradition, in myth, fable and the tall tale, as with the literary avant-garde' (2011: 1). As we shall see, these mixed texts all play a part in influencing and inspiring Christie's short stories. The short stories in this article were all published in the period between October 1925 and July 1926, namely 'Within a Wall', first published in *Royal Magazine*, October 1925; 'The House of Dreams', first published in *The Sovereign Magazine* in January 1926 and 'The Lonely God', first published in *Royal Magazine* in July 1926. These magazines have been described as popular pulp magazines, which published mainly genre fiction, including mysteries and romance (Agatha Christie Wikia, n.d.). Like her early poetry (Bargainnier 1980: 104), Christie's early short stories draw on the romance genre's themes and storylines. John Cawelti's definition of romance suggests that, 'its organizing action is the development of a love relationship [as] the central line of development' (2014: 41). Cawelti further argues that 'the moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties' (2014: 42). The particular element of love overcoming difficulty is scrutinized and challenged in Christie's short stories, where she details the problematic aspects of romantic fantasy. Referring to Christie adaptations, Mark Aldridge's examination of Christie's portrayal of love and relationship is also useful in its focus on the theme of relationships and in the context of a discussion of her use of romance. The Christie texts examined here also at times reflect the move discussed by Cawelti, whereby what he terms 'more sophisticated love stories' end in the death of one or both of the lovers, rather than marriage;

however, the significant issue in the narrative is the life-changing and all-encompassing nature of the love relation portrayed (2014: 42).

Middlebrow and popular romance stories were an important element of women's writing in the modernist period. As Liggins, Maunder and Robbins point out, '[t]he primary reading choices of the general public in the 1920s and 1930s were the formulaic forms of genre fiction', including romance (2011: 195). For the purposes of my analysis here, I define romance in broad terms, including the representation of 'happy ever after' and what Catherine Roach calls, 'the trials and tribulation of romantic love and erotic desire' (2016: 6). David M. Earle argues that genre writing presented women writers with a means to claim a space for themselves within mainstream literature: '[w]hereas romance literature both uses beauty as a means to cement the feminine role as consumer and objectifies the subject, it also establishes a female based sphere of literature outside of the male dominant canon' (2009: 80). It is this important function, of carving specifically female-authored middlebrow literary niches outside the male-dominated high modernist canon, which both romance and detective fiction served for Christie. Christie herself embraced her position as a popular writer, as Earl Bargainnier recalls, 'Christie often told interviewers that "I'm a lowbrow", [but] she knew she was also a craftsman and that her craft had made her the most popular writer of the century' (1980: 19). It is striking that although by the 1920s, the Victorian code of conduct was breaking down for women, and the age of the flappers brought greater freedoms, Christie's stories here do not really convey those aspects in their portrayal of female characters (Earle 2009: 62). Instead, her stories portray conflicting dimensions of romance, relationships and sexuality (Ricker-Wilson 1999: 63).

The short stories examined here are all organized around a central symbol. This crucial symbol encompasses the story's emotional and conceptual core and serves as a focal point for its thematic and formal exploration of the self, consciousness and relationships. I employ the term symbolism to indicate the ways in which objects or ideas can be made to allude to alternative meanings and

qualities. Echoing the modernist movement's preoccupation with symbols and symbolism, the search for meaning in these stories is closely related to the nature of the symbols themselves, which are complex and multidimensional. Christie's early short fiction demonstrates ways of using symbolism to call attention to the problems of reading and interpretation. In all three stories examined here, the central symbols represent a sense of fixity or containment and the compromised contentment they bring – egg, house, god. These symbols are associated with the private domestic sphere, with fertility and the family, and with love and relationships. These complex central symbols also serve as embodiments of Christie's social and cultural critique of the limitations and restrictions that traditional patriarchal institutions place on individual men and women, serving as a bridge between high modernist modes of representation and those of popular culture.

### **Compromising the creative self: 'Within a Wall'**

In 'Within a Wall' ([1925] 2008a), Christie uses symbolism to explore emotional dynamics of power, social status and sexual chemistry within relationships. Featuring a love triangle, 'Within a Wall' also traces the consequences for the artist of selling out and compromising their creative vision. 'Within a Wall' is told by an unnamed first-person narrator who confides in the reader an anecdote – almost a story within a story. The story is about a talented painter, Alan Everard, who is married to Isobel, a beautiful but selfish upper-class woman with expensive tastes. Jane Haworth, an old friend and godmother to his daughter, is the opposite of Isobel's materialistic egotism. She is unmarried and secretly in love with Alan. The story constructs a familiar dichotomy between the two women – one a 'plain Jane' (her name alluding to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and the Brontë sisters' home) who keeps him true to himself and who is his authentic muse. The other is Isobel, a seductive femme fatale who is presented as sucking Alan's artistic lifeblood out of him like a vampire. Alan abhors the idea of cynically using his talent to make



money by producing publicly celebrated and commercially popular artworks, such as flattering portraits of the rich and famous. He is resistant to compromising his talent in this way, wanting instead to paint more authentically and truthfully, if less popularly pleasing. Because of his moral weakness and cowardice, his family's dependence on his earnings and his wife's extravagance, Alan reluctantly accepts the requirement to produce commercially pleasing art such as portraits of his wealthy benefactors. Towards the end of the story, Alan rediscovers his earlier fervour for authentic expression in an old sketch he had done of Jane. However, Jane's untimely death robs him of the opportunity to reconnect with her and discover a truer and more worthwhile outlet for his artistic talent. Furthermore, Alan finds out that Jane's death from ill health was in no small measure due to her scrimping and saving, in order to give large sums of money to Isobel. Isobel has been frittering Alan's earnings away on herself, and neglected their young daughter Winnie's material needs, then asking Jane for money, knowing that loyal Jane would never refuse. In her portrayal of the love triangle between Alan, Isobel and Jane, Christie exposes how in patriarchal society, women are taught to compete with one another for male affection. Furthermore, her story exposes how the theme of female rivalry is a regular narrative convention in romance fiction, which the genre draws on repeatedly.

In his moral weakness, Alan compromises his artistic talent in order to gain commercial success, but blames both Isobel and Jane for his failings. The story investigates the processes of artistic creativity and the price an artist pays for compromise or lack of moral compass, by drawing on a motif repeatedly used in Christie's novels and short stories: painting and the visual arts. Christie's employment of the motif of painting highlights the artifice of representation, exploring dimensions of thought and experience through symbolic imagery to convey characters' subjective, emotional experience. Christie's preoccupation with the visual arts echoes Valerie Shaw's point in her book *The Short Story* that comparisons between the short story and the visual

arts are more than simply rhetorical (2014: 12–13). These points also apply to ‘Within a Wall’; indeed, to all the Christie short stories discussed in this article.

In ‘Within a Wall’, Jane’s relationship to objects is used symbolically to represent her emotional authenticity and ability to love unconditionally. Rather than collecting objects and artwork because they are valuable or conventionally beautiful, Jane collects knickknacks, which have an emotional meaning to her and which she has invested in authentically, rather than in a monetary sense. In contrast, Alan scorns and ridicules Jane’s collection of art, as he shares Isobel’s materialism and has no other perception of value. Representing the contrast to the selfless devotion shown by Jane, Isobel is portrayed as a seductive but selfish woman whose main interest in her husband’s art and creativity is monetary and narcissistic. In the story, Isobel is likened to white Persian cat, a symbol of a self-absorbed pampered predator. This description of the *femme fatale* reflects Stevie Simkin’s description of ‘the beautiful but lethal woman’ (2014: 5). The story’s closing scene describes an argument between Alan and Isobel. Alan makes horrible but truthful accusations against Isobel in the scene; she, however, remains very cool and controlled, which arouses Alan. He exclaims: ‘[y]ou want me as a slave? I’m to paint what you tell me to paint, live as you tell me to live, be dragged at your chariot wheels’. And Isobel replies, ‘[p]ut it like that if you please. What are words?’ (Christie [1925] 2008a). Her character illustrates widespread cultural anxieties during this period in relation to femininity, sexuality and power. Megan Hoffman has examined these anxieties, and she explains how:

The first half of the twentieth century saw significant changes in the construction of gender roles in the popular consciousness, social policies regarding women and, consequently, perceptions of femininity; the inevitable anxieties that accompanied these changes are evident in portrayals of women and femininity in popular culture. (2016: 1) These contradictions are evident in the story’s representation of Isobel and Jane, and the symbolism surrounding the two women. Female sexuality as a means of power and control is darkly alluded to in the story through its use of

symbolism. Matthew Bunson refers to 'Within a Wall' as 'a tale of love, of sacrifice, and of the many forms of slavery' (2000: 156). The idea of bondage (sexual, financial, symbolic) provides a useful key to the story's creative analysis of relationships and art within patriarchal society. The vampish overtones of Isobel's character can be seen as reflecting the construction of the femme fatale, as defined by Bram Dijkstra: '[by] 1900, the vampire had come to represent woman as the personification of everything negative that linked sex, ownership, and money' (1986: 351).

'Within a Wall' represents heterosexual relations as a form of symbolic bondage, evident in Alan and Isobel's struggle for supremacy in their marriage. The row between the two towards the end of the story illustrates the way in which they each use language as a means of gaining power and control over the other, but in different ways. Alan makes melodramatic but well-founded symbolic references to slavery and bondage – tropes that fit with Isobel's vampiric sadism. Isobel, however, uses her self-control to disarm Alan by telling him that words do not matter. The story's preoccupation with language and words echoes Christie's poem 'The Lament of the Tortured Lover' (1924) from *The Road of Dreams*. As Earl F. Bargainnier states, Christie's employment of the theme suggests that 'words can never fully express love' just as paintings struggle to capture the essence of a person (Bargainnier 1980: 106). This is a problem that Alan encounters in his attempt to capture Jane's personality and her yearning to please in his sketch of her.

'Within a Wall' investigates how language and representations can fix meaning by purporting to capture the essence of a person, an endeavour that inevitably proves elusive. The central symbol representing these ideas in the story is the egg. Alan is asked by his young daughter Winnie to guess the Mother Goose nursery rhyme riddle she tells him: '[w]ithin a wall as white as milk, within a curtain soft as silk, bathed in a sea of crystal clear, a golden apple doth appear' (Christie [1925] 2008a).<sup>3</sup> When asked, Alan absentmindedly suggests that the riddle refers to Isobel. When Winnie laughingly tells him it is an egg, he considers to himself, '[y]es, it did suggest Isobel to

him. Curious things, words' (Christie [1925] 2008a: n.pag.). The episode calls attention to the complexity of language and its multiple subjective meanings. Interestingly, the closing part of the nursery rhyme riddle has been left out of Christie's story, perhaps because it more decisively spells out the nature of the object in question, as well as detracting from the hypnotic, sensuous qualities of the enigma. Exploring the precarity of art and love, and the fleeting nature of sexual obsession, it seems entirely appropriate that 'Within a Wall' omits that which Alan is trying to repress – namely that 'thieves [can] break in and steal the gold' (Christie [1925] 2008a: n.pag.), shattering the illusion of possession. The episode between father and daughter serves to establish the enigma as the heart of the narrative, repeated again at the end. Here, Alan embraces his wife who is posing seductively in order to make him forget the death of Jane, his closest friend who he abused and belittled, but who unbeknown to him sacrificed her money and ultimately her life for him. He hears the words from the nursery rhyme again, this time comparing his wife's arms to a wall, trapping him in their firm embrace. Due to Alan's cowardice in resisting Isobel's demands and his own desire, his entrapment grows. At the story's end, Alan's rapture with Isobel shuts out any pain or ambivalence as he allows himself to be carried away in the escapism of their relationship. This epiphanic scene in 'Within a Wall' uses sensuous description and allusions to texture, colour and touch to embellish the symbol of the egg. In this disturbing short story, we thus see how Christie uses the egg as a central symbol, which encapsulates multiple meanings, at once a mystical fairy-tale like magical object, and a totem representing Alan's sexual ecstasy with Isobel.

### **The madness within: 'The House of Dreams'**

Christie's 'The House of Dreams' ([1926] 2008b) is a tragic romance story, which centres on a single central powerful symbol. As the story's title illustrates, the story uses the house trope as its central symbol, associated with dreams and the unconscious to explore the inner psychology of its

central character. The story's protagonist is John Segrave, a young office clerk who struggles with social expectations regarding masculinity and conformity. He comes from an old family of landowners who have squandered their wealth and property, leaving him with no inheritance. John has had to make his own way in the world, working as an office clerk in London and living in a bedsit. He lacks the traditional masculine assertiveness, which would enable him to establish a position for himself in twentieth-century mass culture in which he struggles to find a place. With eyes described as 'elf-like' (Christie [1926] 2008b), John is like a fish out of water in city life. He has a recurring dream about a beautiful house, which he yearns to go inside. His boss' daughter, Maisie Wettermann, has her eye on him and uses her position to engineer a romantic relationship with him. However, having invited John over for dinner, Maisie's plan fails and a love triangle develops, as John falls in love with her friend Allegra Kerr who has come to stay. Maisie is a spoiled young woman used to getting what she wants, whereas Allegra's family background is troubled. John and Allegra are both described as struggling to conform to modern mass culture due to their vulnerability psychologically and in terms of social class – John has been unmoored from his family's status, and Allegra has no financial reserves. When Allegra's mother dies in an asylum, Maisie confesses to John that there is incurable hereditary insanity in the former's family, which means that, although attractive, she can never marry. John already saw signs of Allegra's mental health problems the night he came to dinner. In his despair, he decides to go to Africa to seek his fortune, a move that angers Maisie as she realizes that John never cared for her. While in Africa, Maisie informs John that Allegra has died in the same asylum where her mother previously passed away. After Allegra's death, John stops dreaming about the house and is unable to find his way back to it. Only at the end of the story, suffering from a feverish delirium in the harsh African climate is John able to repeat the dream and enter the house as he dies.

Christie's story uses symbolism to convey characters' inner psychology, enhanced by techniques to enhance these textual features. Such textual strategies are, as Samantha Walton states, 'comparable with the neurotic characters that conveyed modernist subjectivity in much contemporary poetry and prose' (2015:174). The connection between Christie's preoccupation with the psychological realm of existence and its representation links her work to modernism, although her formal devices and strategies are different from those used by more avant-garde modernist authors. Told through an omniscient narrator, 'The House of Dreams' ([1926] 2008b) explores notions of the unconscious, using the house of dreams as a symbol of the secret self. This trope of a hidden complicated dimension of the self applies to all the story's three main characters – for John, it represents his escapism and the self-destructive streak that prompts him to undertake his ill-fated sojourn to Africa; for Maisie, it is her egoism and narcissism and for Allegra, it is her inability to perform social and gender expectations of demure femininity and resulting disassociation. In the story, John increasingly finds himself escaping into a recurring dream about a beautiful idealized house, which fascinates him deeply even though he has never been inside. Symbolizing Clare Cooper's notion of 'the house-as-self' (1974: 139), in Christie's story, the house serves as a mirror of John's psychological self and remains an ambiguous symbol until the story's end. As Cooper argues, '[t]he house [...] reflects how man sees himself, with both an intimate interior, or self as viewed from within and revealed only to those intimates who are invited inside, and a public exterior [...] the self we choose to display to others' (1974: 131). At first, the house pulls him in, seducing him through its beauty. Later, however, after speaking to Allegra, the house turns out to have a terrifying demon inhabiting it, an encounter that appals him: 'a Thing so vile and loathsome that the mere remembrance of it made him feel sick' (Christie [1926] 2008b: n.pag.). Whereas in 'Within a Wall', transcendence can be achieved through sexual connection with others, in 'The House of Dreams', the characters are trapped within the walls of claustrophobic social roles and expectations. These restrictions mean that, in

this story, the ‘house of dreams’ more often than not is the house of bad dreams, the stuff of nightmares.

The trope of the house is used to allude to one of the story’s central themes, insanity. The story uses two central symbols, the House and the Thing, which represents both polar opposites and two aspects of the same reality. This evokes the idea of irreconcilable mental and linguistic instability. Due to the stigma surrounding insanity and mental illness at this time, insanity is depicted in highly negative terms as an alien and repellent otherness. ‘The House of Dreams’ explores the meanings of incurable insanity, a theme also treated in other works by Christie, including her 1933 short story ‘The Red Signal’. During this period, James Zembo reflects, “‘insanity’ in the family was still a serious subject in popular literature [...] in which people who were in love were afraid to marry if there was “insanity” in their family history because they might produce “insane” children’ (2016: 230). Christie’s ‘The House of Dreams’ not only reflects this belief, but uses it as a textual device to demonstrate the consequences of social exclusion, for Allegra who is a victim of social stigma. The story furthermore suggests the inner self and the subconscious as unknowable and terrifying in their complexity and meaninglessness. Not knowing her predicament, when John makes a humorous remark about madness, Allegra is understandably upset and drops a glass on the floor. The insanity issue is referred to both explicitly and indirectly by all the characters involved in the love triangle. Maisie uses it to try and put John off Allegra who is her rival. Sensing John’s interest in Allegra, Maisie sets her friend up for a fall (although the story does not say whether this is a deliberate move on Maisie’s part or not). Maisie asks Allegra to play the piano after dinner in the drawing room, knowing that at such times when she is required to perform for and be judged by others in a social setting, Allegra’s mental health problems come to the fore. Expressing her subconscious resistance to performing submissive femininity, Allegra’s playing at the piano grows increasingly unpredictable, strange and wild. Later, after her mother’s death in the asylum, Allegra confesses

to John that when she plays the piano, ‘those others come and take hold of my hands’ (Christie [1926] 2008b: n.pag.) (emphasis Christie's). The reader is made to see Allegra as deranged, as she seemingly believes herself to be controlled by imaginary people. The reader willingly accepts that for John, the house is a metaphor; however, when Allegra refers to her hands being taken by ‘the others’, it is presented as though she means this literally and as a dangerously irrational pathology. The story thus uses the house of dreams as its central trope for interrogating fantasy as private dreams and dangerous pathological delusions. In her portrayal of female rivalry, Christie once more exposes how, in patriarchy, women are portrayed as competing with one another for male approval, thus exposing the misogyny of the conventions of romantic narratives. In ‘The House of Dreams’, Christie thus explores the role and function of the subconscious in producing dreams (and nightmares), which, through their potent and affective symbolism, illustrate the characters’ unacknowledged desires.

At the story’s end, John transcends into another sphere of consciousness, his death a euphoric trance, which sees him finally restored to the beautiful white house of his recurring dream. The narration shifts towards the end, to interior monologue, in order to focus exclusively on John’s experience and inner mental state, denoted through the lack of punctuation such as speech marks, rendering the narration entirely subjective and interior. The effect of this on the reader is to generate a process of introspection and creative imagining, which opens up the symbol of the enclosed house to the reader’s exploration of their own mind. With this story, Christie demonstrates her fascination with the links between symbolic representation and the self. The story’s house of dreams becomes a prison of the mind, from which the self cannot escape as John and Allegra experience, albeit in different ways. Paradoxically, the house also denotes a liberation of sorts, as John, unable to marry Allegra refused to settle for a safe relationship with Maisie, finally reaches the house.



### **British Museum encounters: 'The Lonely God'**

Christie's 'The Lonely God' highlights the way in which symbolism can be used in short fiction to draw attention to innovations in narrative perspective. Playfully subverting ideas of divine power and authority as a small obscure statue of a god stowed away in a corner assumes influence to determine lives and loves, Christie portrays the British Museum as the ultimate middlebrow chat-up place. Like the other two stories examined here, 'The Lonely God' is told from a male perspective; however, not from the point of view of the male involved in the romantic plot. Instead the narrative perspective is taken by an inanimate object, a small neglected exotic statue of an unknown god in the British Museum, the god of romantic love.

The tone in 'The Lonely God' is light-hearted and humorous, in contrast to the intense emotionality of 'Within a Wall' and 'The House of Dreams'. However, the story's playful narrative tone masks its themes of loneliness and fear of rejection; emotions that haunt the male and female protagonists in the story. Now in his forties and single, Frank Oliver has recently returned from Burma; however, although he has been all over the world, he now finds himself an outsider in London without a network of friends or connections. Visiting the British Museum during the day becomes a pastime for him, and he becomes fascinated by a small statue in a box, which he finds hidden away. Looking at the little god in his box, he immediately feels a strong affinity with the statue. Oliver reflects that, whereas once the god had been revered and important, it is now unceremoniously placed on a high shelf out of reach. So, too, has he: having worked abroad in various parts of the British Empire, it is equally likely that Oliver was used to being looked up to and feared as part of the White British ruling class – whereas now he has been discarded. Too old to do a soldier's job, and not able to advance far enough in the ranks to command a senior position, Oliver is now cast out and anonymous in the heaving metropolis. His masculinity threatened, he seeks company and solace in the British Museum, where exhibits such as the lonely god can remind him of his former status and greatness. Oliver meets a second

museum visitor, a woman who like him pays regular special visits to the lonely god. She is much younger than him, and her apparent shabby clothing and non-threatening demeanour make a favourable impression on him, as he begins to think of her as ‘little lonely lady’ (Christie [1926] 2008c). The story describes their growing friendship and eventual declarations of love; however, there is a mystery at the heart of the story. In a self-reflexive move, the characters’ speculations about the statue’s meaning mirror the reader’s own attempt at puzzling out what the god represents. This puzzle or riddle element in the story is reminiscent of both crime fiction and poetry, Christie’s self-reflexive strategy concealing the sophistication of the deceptively straightforward story. The strategy suggests instead that, like in a museum, the reader must pursue their own imaginative and subjective lines of enquiry whatever inspires them, rather than slavishly follow a linear and preordained route. Echoing the theme of mystery, the female character with whom Oliver has fallen in love insists that he must not know her name, nor she his – that, instead, they shall retain an element of mystery and distance in their relationship. The reader gradually begins to suspect that she has reasons for being secretive and looking strained. After confessing their feelings to each other, she rushes away and then vanishes, sending him a letter that explains she can never marry him.

Inspired by a fairy tale he read in a magazine, and in despair over his lost love, Oliver takes up painting. The trope of the painter recurs in echoes throughout Christie’s short stories – in the Mr Quin story ‘The World’s End’,<sup>4</sup> ‘Within a Wall’ and this story. Portraying the painter at work, the artist pursuing their inspiration and creative enthusiasm, is another example of Christie’s use of self-reflexivity to illustrate the notion of fiction as artifice. In ‘The Lonely God’, Oliver paints a motif from a fairy tale, which he imbues with layers of symbolic meaning. Fairy tales are specific texts that are made to carry symbolic messages through their use of colour, tropes and motifs, stereotypical characters and situations and references to elemental emotions and passions. In his painting, Oliver depicts an exoticized fairy-tale princess using rich Middle-Eastern

symbolism. In Oliver's painting, the princess takes no interest in the exuberant party going on around her or all her worshipping suitors. Instead, she devotes all her attention to the small statue. Oliver's painting becomes an overnight sensation. At the story's end, the two lovers meet again in the museum, in front of the little statue. She admits that she is actually wealthy but had concealed her true identity until now by dressing in her maid's clothes, and was too ashamed to admit her deceit to him. She also discloses that she was the author of the melancholy fairy tale, which served as the inspiration for Oliver's powerful painting. At this crucial point, the story's narrative perspective changes to that of the little statue, who watches his two 'worshippers' walk away together (Christie [1926] 2008c). The story thus provides a light-hearted ironic twist at the end, as the lonely god watches the happy couple, knowing that he has sacrificed his power and lost the only two worshippers he had. Through this mock-romantic ending, Christie's story questions the ability of religion, authority, class, gender, age to compete with, let alone conquer, love in any and all of its forms.

The little god bears important similarities to the 'insignificant' or 'invisible' characters often portrayed in Christie's fiction (Bishop 2016): '[t]here was no inscription to tell the land whence he came. He was indeed lost, without honour or renown, a pathetic little figure very far from home. No one noticed him, no one stopped to look at him' (Christie [1926] 2008c: n.pag.). In Christie's Mr Quin story, 'The Bird with the Broken Wing', the murderer turns out to be one such invisible man, who kills a woman just because he can, and almost gets away with it, had it not been for the detective Mr Satterthwaite, who possesses exceptional insight and intuition.<sup>5</sup> Mr Satterthwaite is the character whose narrative position and gender representation most resembles the little statue's. However, in 'The Lonely God' the 'insignificant' character does not utilize invisibility as a cover for murder, but for promoting and inspiring love and relationships. Although masculine, both Satterthwaite and the little statue appear outside conventional gender stereotypes, both are isolated observers who are on the side of the star-crossed lovers and who are

keen to rectify wrongs and see justice be done, in order to prevent the suffering of their fellow men and women. They are both benevolent male authorities, outside the realm of romantic involvement themselves. The little statue is thus a convenient narrative ploy for including subjective commentary on characters and events in the story, providing a point of observation and subversion.

The little statue, the museum exhibit and central symbol in 'The Lonely God', calls attention to cultural appropriation by modernist artists and authors, both through the central symbol of the little statue, and through the imagery used in the female protagonist's fairy tale. The story's British Museum setting highlights the exoticized and fetishized function of cultural museum exhibits. The museum itself is a middlebrow locus imbued with particular cultural and political meanings. The discourses presented in museums are never neutral. The fact that the little statue, around which this story is built, is stood on top of a cabinet deprived of a context or narrative to explain its identity and origins, points up several important themes for contemporary readers of the story today. Firstly, it suggests a blasé treatment of artefacts from other cultures; and secondly, the loss of context and specificity reflects a more general disdain in modernist writing for mass culture and the anonymity that the metropolis perpetuates (Armstrong 2005:48). This modernist anxiety about mass culture and the precarious position of the individual within such a culture are at the heart of the romance plot in 'The Lonely God'; complex issues that even the story's seemingly happy ending cannot resolve. The museum location in 'The Lonely God' highlights the idea that both people and objects are there to be observed, scrutinized, categorized and judged. As a short story, the openness of the ending in 'The Lonely God' is a feature of the genre that Christie exploits masterfully. She reminds the reader of the untruths, performances, concealments, rewritings of personal history, which are part and parcel of love and romance, as well as the compromises, which are part of establishing relationships. 'The Lonely God' uses a complex narrative perspective, which includes a personified inanimate object's viewpoint,

thereby illustrating that something or someone whose perspective is conventionally disregarded does have a voice and a perspective. Robbed of their historical context and information relating to their cultural and religious significance, museum artefacts taken from the Global South and East become fetishized and exploited. The sole purpose, which the small statue now fulfils, is as a romantic prop in a light-hearted short story. However, the figure itself resists being trivialized in this way, through its insistence on a narrative perspective of its own.

### **Conclusion: Christie's symbolism**

The Christie texts analysed here demonstrate the central importance of symbolism to her portrayals of and character studies and relationships. In 'Within a Wall' and 'The House of Dreams', Christie uses the romance genre to explore relationships and their contradictions through the use of contrasting characters and plotlines, encouraging the reader to engage in the texts through processes of interpretation. In 'Within a Wall', 'The House of Dreams' and 'The Lonely God', Christie uses male protagonists and focalizers as a means of portraying symbolism and subconscious realms of representation and experience. Using creativity as a way of critically analysing masculinity and its construction, Christie's short stories reflect the preoccupation in modernist literature and wider cultural realms with identity and the unconscious. These restrictions regarding conduct and expectations are heightened by the conflict between the need for creative and artistic fulfilment and the pragmatic compromises required by patriarchal society. The male protagonists in 'Within a Wall', 'The House of Dreams' and 'The Lonely God' all struggle with the masculine role as defined and determined by conventional patriarchal normativity. The female characters they encounter represent opposing values and characteristics; however, they often present irreconcilable differences, which illustrate the contradictions of femininity. In 'Within a Wall', old friend/flame Jane is presented as unselfish, loyal and submissive, caring and nurturing, not preoccupied with status or fashion. In opposition, the

selfish, vain, sexually alluring, Isobel threatens to consume her husband and destroy his creativity with her demands. In 'The House of Dreams', the female characters are once again split into two contrasting figures confronting the male protagonist, one in the role of friend and would-be lover, the other holding sexual attraction but the threat of insanity. However, Isobel in 'Within a Wall' exploits Alan, while Allegra in 'The House of Dreams' responsibly refuses to marry and therefore exploits John. These representations reflect the time of the story's publication, and the cultural and literary contradictions of femininity and its embodiment prevalent in the modernist period.

'Within a Wall' and 'The House of Dreams' reflect cultural anxieties regarding sensitive but weak men and charismatic but threatening and/or mentally unstable women. Christie's short fictions explore psychoanalytic facets and dimensions of her characters, using the short story to further her textual experimentations into more reflexive and speculative types of writing. In contrast, in 'The Lonely God', Christie uses the romantic genre's conventions to explore themes of loneliness and agency. This light-hearted, witty, affecting story does not dwell on the sexual or darker dimensions of the characters' relationship. Instead, the story focuses on the fictions the characters make up about one another, the fairy tales they write and exotic imagery they construct, in order to bridge the gap between them. Christie uses the symbolism of the 'lonely god', a neglected and overlooked exhibit in the vast British Museum collections, as a central symbol, which serves to open up the text's interrogation of relationships, class, cultural appropriation and creativity.

'Within a Wall', 'The House of Dreams' and 'The Lonely God' all end with the male protagonist experiencing a moment of heightened awareness and/or an exalted state of consciousness related to either creativity, sex or death, leading to a momentary obliteration of self. This narrative structure builds up to an element of revelation, which coincides with the moment the self is erased. As Bargainnier puts in, these short stories present Christie writing 'like a poet' (1980: 110), exploring symbolism and form within an accessible literary style and format. Using the

short story's concentrated form, Christie explores her preoccupation with controversial themes such as mental illness, sadomasochistic relationships and colonialism, and their meaning and impact on representing love and relationships. Christie's early short fictions thus provide rich and intriguing material for scholars wishing to explore crossovers between high and popular culture, and her willingness to test the boundaries of popular and middlebrow literature through complex representations of love and romance and 'the black ingratitude of human nature' (Christie [1926] 2008c: n.pag.).

## Notes

1. See also Aldridge (2012) for his astute examination of Christie's treatment of the theme of love.
2. An early version of this article was given as a conference paper; see Beyer 2019.
3. See also *The Jessie Willcox Smith Mother Goose* ([1914] 1991), p. 128.
4. See my examination of 'The World's End' in Beyer 2016.
5. See my discussion of 'The Bird with the Broken Wing' in Beyer 2016.

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