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SOCIAL ISSUES IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S MYSTERIES: COUNTRY, CLASS, CRIME, CLOTHES AND CHILDREN

The works of Agatha Christie are now generally agreed to rise well above the level of entertainment and a good many scholars are prepared to take her art, the skill of devising fresh and insoluble puzzles, with the seriousness proper to a Joyce or James or Lawrence. T. S. Eliot once planned a great tome on the detective novel, with a whole swath devoted to her books. Apart from her pioneering work in the full-length novel of the detective genre, her puzzling plots, a whole range of exquisite characters, her famous and less famous sleuths, excellent comic relief with Watson-like and some cardboard figures, her pleasant and well-handled romance, or her own character and the instinct which made her work such a success, there is yet another area of interest: mystery writers tend to accumulate a surprising amount of accurate or at least very plausible information about everyday life, and because Agatha Christie's career spans so many decades, decades which have seen so many dramatic changes in British life, her books are thus a rich lode for social historians.

Agatha Christie's first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was published in the very first year of a new decade, the 1920s, and immediately here we have our first tastes of many things that are to come in what will prove to be a long and satisfying career. The time setting of the novel is during World War I, and the little detective, Hercule Poirot, is on hand because he is one of a small group of Belgian refugees brought to live in a rural English village situated in Essex. This is not the only connection with World War I: one of the female protagonists, young Cynthia, the protégée of an elderly lady and owner of the manor, works in the Red Cross Dispensary, which makes her more independent in a way similar to other upper-class girls who started to go out to work for the first time during this war. We are first introduced to Poirot's 'Watson' here, Captain Arthur Hastings, invalided from the Front and chancing to spend his recuperative leave with the family who own Styles Court, the scene of the crime. And a traditional Christie device first encountered in this novel and suc-

cessfully repeated many times is the setting of a crime in a large upper-class household with lots of servants available as possible suspects, witnesses, and even as victims or criminals, and plenty of family members, relatives and guests present to be used in these roles too, and, of course, all the aspects of the 'who--will-get-the-money-when-the-head-of-the-family-is-gone' motif. Christie is known for her continuous criticism of her characters' preoccupation with class and money – not to mention their prejudices regarding national origin. Being a well-bred, upper-class lady herself, she preferred to set her stories in the hushed elegance of upper-class tea parlours where a servant would always answer the bell-pull, unless they have been strangled. This perfectly conventional Englishwoman, the model of that peculiarly English kind of country lady with her fur coat and tweeds, her twin set and pearls, whom one sees serving tea on a green lawn, attending fêtes to raise funds for the local Conservative party, is far from expressing entirely conventional views on a number of vital issues.

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926), *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), and *Murder Is Easy* (1939) are just a few novels that supply us with details of what peaceful little English villages must have been like in the era between wars. *The Murder at the Vicarage* is one of the Christie landmark novels because it introduces Miss Jane Marple, that delightful and perceptive elderly lady detective. The tiny country village settings are always enriched with fine characterizations, depicting the people of a small English village, prior to World War II, e.g. in *Murder Is Easy* we have all the stock village characters: vicar, lawyer, doctor, local Very Important Personage, a full complement of elderly ladies, retired military man, and mischievous boy. The novel *A Murder Is Announced* (1950) portrays conditions in a quiet village in the years right after World War II. Later, notably in *The Mirror Crack'd* (originally published as *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side,* 1962), we are given a whole social study concerning village life. The first chapter alone is full to overflowing with references to the many changes in St. Mary Mead in the years that have intervened between *Murder at the Vicarage* and *The Mirror Crack'd.* The same little group of charming Queen Anne and Georgian houses is still there, but except for some elderly ladies, their owners have changed. The church and the vicarage are intact, so is the Blue Boar. However, only a few old shops remain in the village main street, as 'a glittering new supermarket – anathema to the elderly ladies of the village' now stands at one end of it:

> Packets of things one's never heard of ... All these great packets of breakfast cereal instead of cooking a child a proper breakfast of bacon and eggs. And you are expected to take a basket yourself and go round looking for things ... usually made up in inconvenient sizes, too much or too little. And then a long queue waiting to pay as you go out. Most tiring.
> (*The Mirror Crack'd*, pp.3–4)

Gradually we are offered a more up-to-date look at the same strata of society – we learn about such down-to-earth things as food shortages, housing scarcity,

difficulty in getting domestic help, and the sudden influx of strangers to areas that had had stable populations for generations. The last item does not only concern the working class who came to live in the new residential addition to the village, called the Development, but also classless celebrities, film stars and various artists, who are interested in renovating huge houses like Gossington Hall here. Gossington Hall, the estate of Colonel and Mrs Bantry, had been sold by Mrs Bantry after her husband's death. The widow retained for herself just a small cottage and enough land for her beloved gardening. The house has had several owners since then. The newest owner is a famous film star. Much refurbishing and redecorating has been done to the house and grounds. Bathrooms have been added, a swimming pool has been built, and a good deal of money has been spent on plumbing, electric cookers, and dishwashers. And a Grand Opening is scheduled to give the local people a chance to see for themselves. It is to be a combination open house and fête with proceeds going to the St. John's Ambulance Corps. A real fête, this tradition of rural England, this time to raise money for restoration of the church tower is more fully described in *The Pale Horse* (1961), where there are fortunetellers, stalls for sale of handcrafted items, games for the children, refreshment booths, and the many willing women who seem to do most of the work.

There is an aura that emanates from the pages of her books the country homes, the chintz-covered furniture and the servants, who make up a substantial part of her descriptions, speculations and analyses. In the stories, where brains, sophistication and wealth are all the same thing – or appear to be – the servants are rarely seen as having enough intelligence or personality to be suspected of the dastardly deed itself and are doomed to the realm of the red herring. So no gardeners, housemaids, cooks, nurse-attendants, valets, butlers, nannies, tweenies and au pairs rank among the ruthless murderers. Paid companions, private nurses, governesses and masseurs form a more dangerous category, as is obvious from e.g. *Cards on the Table* (1936), *Sad Cypress* (1940), *After the Funeral* (1953), *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958), or *Endless Night* (1967). Even these, however, are easily fooled by their employers. Miss Marple demonstrates this at the very beginning of the before mentioned *The Mirror Crack'd* when she sends her obnoxious nurse-companion, Miss Knight, on useless errands in order to have an independent morning. After musing how 'devoted maidservants have gone out of fashion', Miss Marple makes a request:

> You might go into Longdon's and see if the curtains are ready. And perhaps another skein of the blue wool from Mrs. Wisley. And a box of black currant lozenges at the chemist's. And change my book at the library – but don't let them give you anything that isn't on my list ... And if it isn't too far for you, perhaps you wouldn't mind going as far as Halletts and see if they have one of these up-and-down egg whisks – not the turn-the-handle kind.
> (She knew very well they had nothing of the kind, but Halletts was the farthest shop possible.)

(*The Mirror Crack'd*, p. 8)

Miss Knight takes the bait of course, thinking she is lucky to have an excuse to shop and gossip. She hurries to make her 'abortive inquiries' just as the old dear, frail and foxy Miss Marple had planned.

The maids and butlers are also easily got rid of if they have seen too much, although they themselves never realize the importance or the danger of what they have witnessed and feel just a little uneasy or puzzled. Before they ask for advice (and if they do, they often choose a wrong person to help too, as they do not like to be mixed up with the police), they unfortunately become those of unplanned and inevitable victims. They also seem to know every little thing about their employers, which is clearly indicated e.g. in the short story, "Tape-Measure Murder" (1950):

> – You know that for a fact?
> – Everyone would have known if they have quarrelled! The maid, Gladys Brent – she'd have soon spread it round the village.
> The inspector said feebly, 'she mightn't have known -' and received a pitiful smile in reply.
>
> (*Miss Marple's Final Cases*, "Tape-Measure Murder", p.64)

Sometimes the servants rate suspicion especially if they walk noiselessly, drop coffee cups at wrong moments and have only been employed for a short time: an outsider is always under suspicion. Horbury, the valet from *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938), may serve as an example here:

> – I hate that beastly manservant.
> – Old Tressilian?
> – No, Horbury. Sneaking round like a cat and smirking.
>
> (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, p.72)

And of course Horbury has only been employed a year. The superintendent concludes that Horbury is either a thief and a murderer, or a thief and not a murderer.

In "The Case of the Perfect Maid" (1950), Miss Marple has a chance to reflect on the problem of servants, which is the main topic of conversation in her village, St. Mary Mead. It is generally agreed that 'if one has no domestic worries, it takes such a load off one's mind'. The perfect maid through Miss Marple's eyes resembles, except for the plumpness, one of the most famous British servants, P. L. Travers's Mary Poppins, which is suggested by the similarity of the name too:

> When Miss Marple next visited Old Hall, on the occasion of recruiting stall-holders for the vicarage fête, Mary Higgins opened the door. She was certainly a most superior-looking maid, at a guess forty years of age, with neat black hair, rosy cheeks, a plump figure discreetly arrayed

> in black with a white apron and cap – 'quite the good, old-fashioned type of servant', as Miss Marple explained afterwards, and with the proper, inaudible respectful voice, so different from the loud but adenoidal accents of Gladys.
>
> (*Miss Marple's Final Cases*, "The Case of the Perfect Maid", pp.100–101)

Mary Higgins, though she 'cooks nicely, waits beautifully and keeps the house scrupulously clean (mattresses turned over every day)', is an impostor and turns out to be a notorious thief in the end. Miss Marple's expertise in matters of young servant girls helps her see through her and get her fingerprints before she disappears into the blue.

Perfect maids aside, most servants are thought a bit uncivilized, even a bit 'wanting' or at least very simple, and definitely unreliable if not under regular control. It is generally believed that all those little Ednas and Gladyses, who are often village orphan girls, should be trained in domestic service first and later settle down in a good situation when they get one. The writer is genuinely sorry for all these young girls in places, e.g. in *The Moving Finger* (1942), and points out at their honesty, which is quite contrasting with her views on a more up-to-date kind of servants, au pairs, as can be seen e.g. in *Third Girl* (1966). As far as au pairs are concerned, to Christie's characters any foreigner, regardless of age, class or circumstances represents a threat. Occasionally, the writer's comments in relation to these prejudices, experienced even by Poirot himself e. g. in *Taken at the Flood* (1948), are highly ironic:

> Again Major Porter paused. His eyes travelled up from the patent-leather shoes – striped trousers – black coat ... and colossal moustache. Foreign, of course! That explained the shoes. Really, thought Major Porter, what's the club coming to? Can't get away from foreigners even here.
>
> (*Taken at the Flood*, p. 8)

In *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931) there is another remark worth mentioning here:

> – It's Captain Wyatt as could do with a spring cleaning ... That nasty native of his – what does he know about cleaning, I should like to know? Nasty black fellow.
> – Nothing better than a native servant. They know their job and they don't talk.
>
> (*The Sittaford Mystery*, p. 134)

The first opinion, by the way of a cleaning woman who is an old type of 'impassioned cleaner and turner out', reflects especially the lower classes' intolerant views on coloured people at the time. The writer, however, does not share this standpoint. She frequently shows a lot of understanding and can be a shrewd observer when comparing the British and the natives mainly outside

Britain, as e.g. in *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) or Appointment with Death (1938). Later, in *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958) the dark half-caste young woman that Mrs. Argyle had taken as a daughter into the family is shown in an extremely positive light. Anglophiles, however, are not alone in their preoccupation with prejudiced observations. Pilar Estravados e.g., about whom so much suspicion was cast in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938) because of her hot-blooded Spanish beauty, did not think much of her English relatives either:

> How very odd the English smelled... It was what had struck her so far most forcibly about England – the difference of smell. There was no garlic, and no dust and very little perfume. ...
>
> (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, p. 11)

The writer admires and praises Cherry Baker, a new type of daily woman from *The Mirror Crack'd* (1962). Cherry comes from the above mentioned Development, new council houses built on the former village green, with a character of its own and the people very much different from the older inhabitants of the village:

> She (Cherry) was one of the detachment of young wives who shopped at the new supermarket and wheeled prams about the quiet streets of the village. They were all smart and well turned out. Their hair was crisp and curled. They laughed and talked and called to one another. They were like a happy flock of birds. Owing to the insidious snares of instalment buying, they were always in need of ready money, though their husbands all earned good wages: so they came and did housework or cooking. Cherry was a quick and efficient cook, she was an intelligent girl, took telephone calls correctly and was quick to spot inaccuracies in the tradesmen's books. She was not much given to turning mattresses, and as far as washing up went, Cherry's method was that of thrusting everything into the sink together and letting a snowstorm of detergent on it.
> ... How different it had been in the past... All those nice little maids knew how to wash up old Worcester tea sets and how to make a bed. They had had skills rather than education. It was odd that nowadays it should be the educated girls who went in for all the domestic chores. Students from abroad, girls au pair, university students in the vacation, and young married women like Cherry Baker.
>
> (*The Mirror Crack'd*, pp. 5–6)

Cherry Baker seems in many ways far superior to the little maids from the orphanage who had been trained by Miss Marple in bygone days. And through Miss Marple's meditations the writer appears to take Cherry's side and does not mind her being deplorably remiss in proper dishwashing and mattress-turning skills.

In *4:50 from Paddington* (1957), Agatha Christie invented a figure of an absolutely faultless female servant, efficient and much more intelligent than

merely the smug and snobbish people. Lucy Eyelesbarrow is clearly the heroine of the novel and the writer succeeded in making her real and comprehensible especially for a Czech female reader. How could the writer have known about all the domestic duties of a university educated married Czech socialist woman, apart from her own job, and of course, apart from hunting high and low for a corpse? Although Lucy is unmarried and housework is her only job, and a very-well-paid one, it is the efficient, speedy and appropriate approach to the domestic problems that resembles most socialist women's expertise and capabilities in this area from the Czech perspective: certain things simply must be done and so they are done, quickly and well, and in contrast to Lucy, without any pay or holiday. For an English reader this fine female character creation must be hilariously funny (not so much for a Czech reader), at least in places, even if domestic service enables Lucy a very profitable way of life. The initial description of hers may seem a bit far-fetched, but she gradually comes to life. Lucy Eyelesbarrow, who can be considered a part-time detective here too, 'had taken a First in Mathematics at Oxford, and was confidently expected to take up a distinguished academic career, but had, in addition to scholarly brilliance, a core of good sound common sense':

> Lucy Eyelesbarrow could not fail to observe that a life of academic distinction was singularly ill rewarded. She had no desire whatever to teach and she took pleasure in contacts with minds much less brilliant than her own. In short, she had a taste for people, all sorts of people – and not the same people the whole time. She also, quite frankly, liked money. To gain money one must exploit shortage and she hit at once upon a very serious shortage – the shortage of any kind of skilled domestic labour. To the amazement of her friends and fellow-scholars, she entered the field of domestic labour.
> ... The point of Lucy Eyelesbarrow was that once she came into a house, all worry, anxiety and hard work went out of it. Lucy Eyelesbarrow did everything, saw to everything, arranged everything. She was unbelievably competent in every conceivable sphere. She looked after elderly parents, accepted the care of young children, nursed the sickly, cooked divinely, got on well with any old crusted servants there might happen to be (there usually weren't), was tactful with impossible people, soothed habitual drunkards, was wonderful with dogs. Best of all she never minded what she did. She scrubbed the kitchen floor, dug in the garden, cleaned up dog messes, and carried coals!
> ... A fortnight was her usual period – a month at most exceptional circumstances. For that fortnight you had to pay the earth! But, during that fortnight, your life was heaven. You could relax completely, go abroad, stay at home, do as you pleased, secure that all was going well on the home front in Lucy Eylesbarrow's capable hands.
>
> (*4:50 from Paddington*, pp.28–29)

Only very occasionally do we come across examples of really devoted and faithful servants. These are usually quite old specimens, who have lived with the family for their lifetime, often experiencing their fathers or mothers in the same positions and remembering their present employers as children. These old-fashioned servants cannot understand why some younger people in the family try to treat them as their equals. They are perplexed, displeased or even angry, as e.g. Partridge in *The Moving Finger* (1942). Again, they know everything about all the family members although they do not realize the crucial aspects of their knowledge and would rarely admit anything if they did. The main aim of their faithful service is to shield their employers and protect them from any unnecessary worries to make their life happier. This holds true e.g. for the unobtrusive Gudgeon from *The Hollow* (1946), who quietly replaces ruined kettles whenever Lady Angkatell lets the water boil dry, or the faithful Florence, that grenadier of a parlourmaid, who is casually mentioned in several books and appears in flesh in *The Moving Finger* (1942). Old Tressilian, whitehaired and slightly bowed, the headbutler from *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938), is of the same category:

- Dear old Tressilian. What a standby he is! I can't imagine what we should do without him.
- He is one of the old school. He's been with us nearly forty years. He's devoted to us all.
- Yes. He's like the faithful old retainer of fiction. I believe he'd lie himself blue in the face if it was necessary to protect one of the family!

(*Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, p.22)

Tressilian is, however, used by the writer in a slightly different way. She makes him very sensitive and capable of noticing things. He is one of the prominent characters of the book despite his advanced age and failing sight. His thoughts are immensely valuable for the reader, showing his shrewd experienced mind dwelling on the unusual behaviour of his people or criticizing the gowns of the ladies 'as he circles around the table, decanter in hand':

> In his way Tressilian was a connoisseur of ladies' dress ...
> Mrs Alfred, he noted, had got on her new flowered black and white taffeta. A bold design, very striking, but she could carry it off, though many ladies couldn't. The dress Mrs George had on was a model, he was pretty sure of that. Must have cost a pretty penny. He wondered how Mr. George would like paying for it! ... Mrs David now: a nice lady, but didn't have any idea of how to dress. For her figure, plain black velvet would have been the best. Figured velvet, and crimson at that, was a bad choice. Miss Pilar, now, it didn't matter what she wore, with her figure and her hair she looked well in anything. A flimsy cheap little white gown it was, though. Still, Mr Lee would soon see to that!

> Taken to her, wonderful, he had. Always was the same way when a gentleman was elderly. A young face could do anything with him!
> ... Tressilian went round with the soufflé. It struck him ...that everyone was very silent tonight..
>
> (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, p. 56–57)

Tressilian's speculations provide such vivid pictures, that one can understand how easy it must have been to make detailed stage directions just out of similar remarks.

Rarely do we come across the working class in general in Christie's mysteries, and if we do, there are to be found features which closely correspond to those of the servants. The working class seems quite childish, naive, and honest in the Christie plots. They are unsure of themselves and fawning before their 'betters', e.g. in "Three Blind Mice" from the collection *Three Blind Mice and Other Stories* (1950). However, especially in the later novels there are a few examples of smart working class criminals, e.g. Michael, the taxi driver from *Endless Night* (1967), and a very few prominent characters of 'decent' and intelligent working class people, e.g. Jane Grey, the little hairdresser from *Death in the Clouds* (1935), or Ginger Corrigan, a young artist from *The Pale Horse* (1961).

Ginger, who is even allowed to wear 'skintight trousers', is one of the rare examples which can be seen much later in Christie's career. In her earlier works, all her younger characters are basically traditionalists, and although her favourite young heroines are sophisticated and often outspoken, wearing ostentatious clothes or heavy make-up would simply never occur to them. Clothes were taken quite seriously by much of British society until recently. Even today, in certain circles, dress may 'give one away'. In spite of the fact that Agatha Christie did admit occasional variations then, she was happiest when everyone had a place, knew it, kept it, and dressed accordingly. Miss Marple in *The Body in the Library* (1942) knows:

> The sensible thing to do would be to change into trousers and a pullover, or into tweeds. That, of course – I don't want to be snobbish, but I am afraid it's unavoidable – that's what a girl of our class would do ... A well-bred girl ... is always very particular to wear the right clothes for the right occasion. ... Ruby, of course, ... wasn't a lady. ... She belonged to the class that wear their best clothes, however unsuitable to the occasion.
>
> (*The Body in the Library*, p 118–119)

The extract describes the conventional norms of the late 1930s or early 1940s. It will perhaps be interesting to present another working girl here, this time from the 1960s, who appears in *Third Girl* (1966):

> His visitor was a girl of perhaps twenty-odd. Long straggly hair of indeterminate colour strayed over her shoulders ... She wore what were

> presumably the chosen clothes of her generation. Black high leather boots, white open-work woollen stockings of doubtful cleanliness, a skimpy skirt, and a long and sloppy pullover of heavy wool.
>
> (*Third Girl*, p.7)

And yet she belongs: Norma is the daughter of a rich businessman but as she prefers like most girls at the time to live away from their families, she chooses a life of her own. We meet a number of people in their twenties in the novel and the writer quite unexpectedly seems to favour those long-haired, either shabby or decorative mods rather than traditionalists, e.g. represented by always neat, efficient and a bit over-effusive Claudia, the secretary. Even here, however, Christie spells out the caste system as clearly as she describes the chosen weapon.

Nothing is valued as highly as keeping the wealth in the thin fingers of upper-class relatives. So all outsiders and foreigners are also regarded as proverbial gold diggers. A young female is a real fear in this role since such a woman could easily latch on to a wealthy, elderly man and endanger the legacy of an entire proper English family, e.g. Rosaleen from *Taken at the Flood*, Pilar from *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, Ruby from *The Body in the Library* or Sonia from *Third Girl*. Coming from the 'wrong' side of the tracks could get you into a lot of trouble. Suspicions overflow when it is remembered that the murdered Helen in *Sleeping Murder* (written in the 1940s, published in 1976) was once involved with a seedy and shifty fellow who, of course, was not her class at all. Later her brother explains why he discouraged his beloved, misguided sister from dating the boy:

> I'm old-fashioned, young man. In the modern gospel, one man is as good as another. That holds morally, no doubt. But I am a believer in the fact that there is a state of life into which you are born – and I believe you are happiest staying in it.
>
> (*Sleeping Murder*, p.144)

The rigid social system is found everywhere despite the fact that Carrie Louise from *They Do It with Mirrors* (1952) realizes that 'old barriers and class shibboleths were gone or at any rate were going' – a frequent belief of the times right after World War II. Preoccupation with class is not a clue but a subplot in the tale as it blinds the upper crust from seeing the truth – until it is too late. They fail, ever so often, into the trap of assigning guilt by social position, their social prejudices shrouding not only the motive for murder, but the identity of the guilty party as well.

It is interesting to note that Agatha Christie has seldom written about children in her books up to *Crooked House* (1949). Children and youngsters are present now and then, but only on the sidelines. In *Evil under the Sun* (1941) Linda Marshall, a teenager, is one of the principal characters but only until we get to *Crooked House* and later, can we find other young people sharing the limelight.

Christie seems very much concerned with the young. Carrie Louise, a sweet old lady, puts it in the following way:

> Young people belong to their generation. We may think they're unwise in many of their doings, but we have to accept their decisions.
>
> (*They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 35)

The novel, though surprisingly from the early 1950s, contains frequent comments on young delinquents:

> There are hundreds of boys like that everywhere – no money and no profession.
>
> (*They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 35)

Wally Hudd, the young American, thinks the English overdo their philanthropic ideas and schemes in this area and Mrs Van Rydock seams to share his view, while her sister, Carrie Louise, is apparently one of the enthusiasts:

> – Well, there's a fashion in philanthropy too, just like there is in clothes. It used to be education ... but that's out of date now. The State has stepped in. Everyone expects education as a matter of right – and doesn't think much of it when they get it! Juvenile Delinquency – that's what in the rage nowadays. All these young criminals and potential criminals ... The whole place has been turned over to this new idea. It's a training establishment now for these juvenile criminals, complete with psychiatrists and psychologists and all the rest of it. And all the place stiff with occupational therapists and teachers and enthusiasts, half of them quite mad. ...
> – Steve runs our dramatic branch. We have a theatre, you know, and plays – we encourage all the artistic instincts. ... So much of this juvenile crime is due to exhibitionism, most of the boys have had such a thwarted unhappy home life, and these hold-ups and burglaries make them feel heroes. We urge them to write their own plays and act in them and design and paint their own scenery.
>
> (*They Do It with Mirrors*, pp. 15–16, p.36)

Miss Bellever, who is introduced as being everything to her employer, 'the nurse, dragon, watchdog, secretary, housekeeper and very faithful friend' is far from a meek, unassuming and taking-everything-for-granted servant and voices her opinions freely and loudly and the writer appears to agree to her outbursts as she is obviously in favour of this character:

> ... nothing's thought of or considered here except a lot of whining boys and young men who want to live easily and dishonestly and don't care about the idea of doing a little hard work. What about the decent boys

> from decent homes? Why isn't something done for them? Honesty isn't just interesting to cranks like Mr Serrocold and Dr. Maverick and all the bunch of half-baked sentimentalists we've got here. My brothers and I were brought up the hard way, and we weren't encouraged to whine. Soft, that's what the world is nowadays!
>
> (*They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 59)

It is easy to compare *They Do It with Mirrors* (1952) with another one from the same decade, *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958). Both are based on a complex family structure and philanthropic ideas, both question the importance of roots and background, upbringing and environment. In the latter novel, an heiress of immense wealth marries a man who, like herself, is interested in sociological study, particularly helping the disadvantaged through money. Their marriage is a childless one, but they eventually accumulate a large family through adoption. During World War II their home, Sunny Point, was converted into a refuge for London children, a place where children could be sent to get away from the blitz. Several of these, unclaimed after the war, remained with them. The local doctor's view as regards to these children's upbringing is clear: They were 'pampered and spoon-fed and fussed over' and it did not do them any good.

It is sometimes difficult to sort out from under the pile of attitudes just when Dame Agatha had her tongue in her cheek and when she was slipping in signs of her own opinions. She remains faithful, with a few exceptions, to the pattern she started with in the 1920s: It is the 'nice' people of the upper crust, trapped in the web of prejudice and misdirected blame, that fret about the outsider and in doing so miss the bloodied fingers of their nearest and dearest curling ever so delicately around the finest china teacup.

NOTE:

All dates in brackets refer to the first published edition of the novel. Other references and citations refer to editions listed in the sources (in order of mention in the article).

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