

CHAPTER THREE

DETECTIVE FICTION:

DEFINITIONS, CONVENTIONS AND FORMULAE

When I began writing detective stories I was not in any mood to criticise them or think seriously about crime. The detective story was the story of the chase; it was also very much a story with a moral; in fact it was the old Everyman Morality Tale, the hunting down of Evil and the triumph of Good. At the time, the time of the 1914 war, the doer of evil was not a hero: the enemy was wicked, the hero was good: it was as crude and as simple as that.

Agatha Christie *An Autobiography*

“Murder is so crude,” he said. “I take no interest in it.”

That statement did not take me in for a moment. They say all the world loves a lover – apply that saying to murder and you have an even more infallible truth. No one can fail to be interested in a murder.

Agatha Christie *The Murder at the Vicarage*

1 INTRODUCTION

“Ours is a culture fascinated by crime” (Thompson 1993:1). Indeed, crime is part of our global experience. It features prominently in the media in numerous television programmes, movies, books, and in real life – “by any estimate, most contemporary films concern crime” (Thompson 1993:1). According to Symons, “[c]rime is almost certainly more widely read than any other class of fiction in the United States, the United Kingdom and many other countries” (1992:5-6), and is a genre enjoyed by all kinds of readers – the wealthy and the poor, academics and non-academics, professionals and tradesmen, men and women, children and adults, thus crossing many apparent barriers created by social conventions such as age, sex, culture, race, and religion. The popularity of detective fiction is reflected even in Christie’s own writing when, in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, she has the Vicar suggest that Lawrence Redding has been reading G.K. Chesterton (Christie [1930] 1972:99). Similarly, in the short

story collection *Partners in Crime* (1929) Christie parodies well-known literary detectives of the time in her stories, including G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Sherlock Holmes and her own creation, Hercule Poirot.

The decision to consider selected writing by Blyton and Christie necessitates clarification of what I consider, for the purposes of this study, to be detective fiction. Here, the term 'detective fiction' is used to denote a fictional work in which a crime is committed, a violation of the law takes place, and in which the plot centres on the investigation of the crime, the search for a solution to the problem and ultimately, the restoration of order. The theme of detective fiction, for my purposes, is "good versus evil, innocence versus guilt" in which "good *always* prevails" (Bargainnier 1980:190-191).

This study seeks to examine how the portrayal of discourses around the social, the political, the economic and the literary in the work of Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie is similar to, and different from, what was prevalent at the time in which they lived and wrote. Therefore, it is necessary to take into consideration contemporaneous definitions of detective fiction since these definitions would have shaped the horizons of expectation of Blyton and Christie, as well as those of contemporary readers. I present a brief survey of Golden Age detective fiction in this chapter so as to provide an overview of the definitions and conventions of detective fiction within which Christie and Blyton were working.

2 THE GOLDEN AGE OF DETECTIVE FICTION

Crime fiction was the dominant genre of fiction in Britain in the early twentieth century so it is unsurprising that this era became known as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. For David Glover this era stretched from 1913 to 1936 (Glover 2000:36), and from 1919 to 1939 for Gill Plain (2001:31). John Curran simplifies this by referring to the Golden Age as “roughly the period between the end of the First World War and that of the Second, i.e. 1920 to 1945” (2009:29). Symons remarks that during “these years the detective story reached peaks of ingenuity that have never since been attained and are now rarely attempted” (1992:109). In fact, the Golden Age could be said to have created a dominant discourse, as it were, of detective fiction by influencing the points of view which determined the definition of the genre of detective fiction in the first place.

During the Golden Age Agatha Christie first rose to prominence and published her first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). Even though “her books span a period from 1920 to 1976, Agatha Christie’s detective fiction is essentially of the type called ‘Golden Age’” (Bargainnier 1980:4) because she “continued writing the form after 1939” (Bargainnier 1980:16).

During the years after the First World War, Enid Blyton published a number of stories for children, and in 1938 she published her first full-length adventure story *The Secret Island*. This was also Blyton’s first step towards writing series fiction, which, in this case, fit the specific formula of child protagonists uncovering and solving a mystery.

Towards the end of the Golden Age many writers stopped producing series fiction. However, a number of writers of modern detective fiction now produce series fiction which is hugely successful. These include, for example, Patricia Cornwell's series featuring Kay Scarpetta, Peter Robinson's Inspector Banks series, the series featuring Rebus by Ian Rankin, and Temperance Brennan by Kathy Reichs, James Patterson's series featuring Alex Cross, and Jeffrey Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme series, to name but a few. According to Priestman (2000:50), the series is one of the two most prevalent fictional forms of our time, the other being TV serials.

2.1 A 'cosy' puzzle for the reader to solve

The type of detective stories most popular in Britain during the Golden Age are sometimes referred to as 'cosies' – in contrast to the 'hard-boiled' detective fiction preferred in the United States of America.

Two paradigms of detection were established in the interwar period. The first was the domain of the 'soft-boiled' British – quietly committed to a peaceful regime of poison and pokers, expertly wielded in the peaceful environs of their country vicarages. The second witnessed 'hard-boiled' Americans clubbing each other to death with empty bourbon bottles amid grim scenarios of urban decay.

(Plain 2001:30)

In cosies, an outsider or gifted amateur investigates a murder committed in a closed environment, with a limited number of suspects. "Christie is usually said to be the doyenne of the Cosy School" (Bargainnier 1980:7), in which she presents the reader with a complex puzzle to unravel. However, hard-boiled detective fiction even permeated Christie's own work and in *A Murder is Announced* Christie has Miss Marple refer to the American author of hard-boiled detective fiction Dashiell Hammett.

“I may have got the term wrong,” she murmured. “I am not very clever about Americanisms – and I understand they change very quickly. I got it from one of Mr Dashiell Hammett’s stories. (I understand from my nephew Raymond that he is considered at the top of the tree in what is called the ‘tough’ style of literature.)”

(Christie [1950] 1979:79)

The primary interest of the Golden Age detective story is the investigation of the crime and its solution. The detective story is “the result of plot arrangement. Instead of telling the story so that the perpetrator of a crime is known, the author arranges the incidents to allow that perpetrator to hide his act, and, therefore, there is a process of discovery” (Bargainnier 1980:7). It is through the plot arrangement and the investigation of the crime that the reader is presented with the puzzle of detective fiction.

The participation of the reader in solving the puzzle is a characteristic of detective fiction. Other than the intellectual challenge offered to the reader, the opportunity to test her or his wits against those of the author, and the desire to find out ‘who did it’, the participation and interaction of the reader with the text creates an opportunity for a relationship between the reader and the author. In this relationship, when it is considered in terms of the power relations I discussed in Chapter One of this study, the author – the “puppet-master” (Campbell 2005:13) – is in control. The author is responsible for “the shaping of a narrative, the careful parcelling out of information to the reader, mystification with the promise of eventual enlightenment” (Chernaik 2000:108). The author “will choose who is guilty, she will deceive with her bluff and double-bluff, she will show you just who’s in charge” (Campbell 2005:12).

The participation and interaction of the reader with the text can be discussed with reference to a number of psychological reasons that have been proposed to explain the popularity of detective fiction. The first of these is theological. According to this approach, human beings

are creatures of sin and, therefore, detective fiction “addresses our inborn sense of guilt” (Swales 2000:xii-xiii). This view of humans should be considered within the context of the role played by the dominant discourses in encouraging individuals to conform to specific beliefs and appropriate behaviour, and the non-coercive consensual control maintained and reinforced through institutions such as religion and education.

The second psychological reason proposed for the popularity of detective fiction is that detective fiction is thanatological; it addresses our fascination with, and fear of, death. According to Freudian theory, humans have two primal instincts: eros, the desire for self-preservation or the life instinct, and thanatos, the desire for death which allegedly compels humans to engage in dangerous and self-destructive behaviour that could lead to their own death. This fascination with death is important to bear in mind when we consider detective fiction in relation to the *Famous Five* series and other children’s literature written in the early twentieth century in which death was a taboo subject. Blyton’s *Famous Five* books provide a safe avenue for children to interact with danger. The child protagonists are confronted with a number of crimes that violate the law and threaten the status quo, but they are not confronted with death. Enid Blyton believed that children’s authors should not deal with “murders, rapes, violence, blood, torture and ghosts [because] these things did not belong to the children’s world” (Stoney 1992:153).⁹

The third psychological reason proposed is cognitive-philosophical. In detective fiction rationality and logic do battle with the irrationality of psychological promptings (Swales

⁹ Curran highlights the use of nursery rhyme themes by Christie in her detective fiction, for example *Three Blind Mice*; *Ten Little Niggers*; *A Pocket Full of Rye*; *One, Two Buckle My Shoe*; and *Hickory Dickory Dock*, among others. Curran believes “[t]he attraction is obvious – the juxtaposition of the childlike and the chilling, the twisting of the mundane into the macabre” (2009:105-106).

2000:xii-xiii). There is a sense of urgency – the perpetrator must be discovered before more crimes are committed and the status quo is further disrupted. Thus, by solving the crime and restoring order, the detective is in fact restoring the status quo. According to Chernaik, “emotions are aroused in the reader in the course of a work in order to be purged at the end, restoring a sense of balance” (2000:106). When the reader is presented with the solution and order is restored, there is a form of catharsis. “Detective fiction is designed to raise emotions of both fear and pity only to assuage them through the agency of the sleuth who solves the mystery, captures the criminal, and restores order” (Klein 1995:4).

2.2 Escape to the world of the Golden Age

The detective fiction of the Golden Age is rhetorical and artificial in nature. The writing is not intended to be realistic, but is meant rather to entertain and to present readers with an opportunity to escape, and often to be challenged intellectually by being presented with a puzzle. The murders are seldom disturbing, violent or messy, or even described in much detail – in fact it is only the discovery of the body that indicates that murder has taken place. In the detective fiction of the Golden Age readers looked for “pleasurable excitement removed from the reality of their own lives” (Symons 1992:6). The escapist nature of this detective fiction contributed to its popularity at the time since many people wished to escape the depression of the First World War and its aftermath. Plain mentions that

the absence of violence within Christie’s interwar oeuvre is symptomatic of a state of national post-traumatic stress.... In the aftermath of the First World War, British society was unable or unwilling to engage with the all too familiar realities of death and destruction.

(2001:33)

However, even though typical detective stories of the Golden Age are “remarkably free from the realities of violence” (Symons 1992:12), detective fiction has death at its core. As

mentioned earlier in this chapter, detective fiction addresses our thanatological fascination with death, and thus it provides a safe opportunity for adult readers to interact with death.

Mark Campbell argues that Christie's

genteel murder mysteries were far more gripping precisely *because* they were so bloodless. Death stalked in broad daylight down some country lane, a person everyone hated would end up murdered in a conspicuous location, all the villagers would be suspected... it wasn't the blood that was scary, it was the paranoia.

(2005:12)

The feeling of paranoia is often accentuated by the creation of a claustrophobic setting in which the characters are isolated or trapped. To achieve this Christie often sets her stories in a closed environment, like a country house or a small village, where the cast is necessarily limited. The paranoia is heightened because the identity of the murderer is unknown. "[I]t could be anyone. And I mean *anyone*. And there's nothing cosy about that, is there?" (Campbell 2005:12). This calls into question the motives of all the characters and thus the "identification of the guilty person is a necessity for removing the pervasiveness: then evil is not longer 'everywhere,' but within a single individual" (Bargainnier 1980:191).

3 DEFINITION, RULES AND CONVENTIONS

3.1 The problem of definition

In any consideration of the definitions of detective fiction it is essential to remember that definitions have social importance – they designate the way that existing institutions organise and classify things. Definitions provide the parameters of socially institutionalised ways of thinking: they perpetuate the conventions of the society in which they operate. Therefore, the conventions of the genre of detective fiction, as determined by the definition of detective fiction, “are themselves subject to social pressures and social mediation. As society changes, formerly accepted conventions become unacceptable or are revised” (Cranny-Francis 1990:17). It is important to bear in mind that genres are social constructs: “[g]enres encode ideological information. They have a specific social function to perform as the expression of conservative ideological discourses” (Cranny-Francis 1990:17).

As a social construct that underpins a particular way of thinking, a definition of detective fiction outlines the conventions, the ‘formula’, of the genre. Definitions, as part of the dominant discourse, are internalised by readers, writers and critics, and in turn, they inform their horizons of expectation.

[C]lassical detective fiction has form. Because it does, the reader knows beforehand what to expect when he begins a detective novel or short story. He chooses to read it, because he has enjoyed previous ones and he knows, though perhaps unconsciously, that it will conform to the expected pattern. The author provides what is expected and, at the same time, wishes to ring as many changes as he possibly can within the limits of the pattern, even to exploit the reader’s expectations, to give his work distinctiveness.

(Bargainnier 1980:11-12)

However, as discussed in Chapter One of this study, by setting out rules and conventions that define detective fiction we are placing constraints and boundaries on it. Defining detective

fiction is in fact a means of controlling it. Dividing practices are then applied to texts that do not conform to the definition, and such texts are often rejected or isolated because of this.

3.2 Playing the game by the rules

During the Golden Age of Detective Fiction several critics outlined rules and conventions characterising what they defined as detective fiction. While definitions of detective fiction reinforced what society referred to as detective fiction, the rules expanded the control of the genre. The rules “set up an expectation that readers will have a real possibility of solving the mystery that the author has devised” (Glover 2000:37).

In 1928, Willard Huntington Wright, under the pseudonym of S.S. van Dine, published an article in *The American Magazine* entitled ‘Twenty rules for writing detective fiction’ in which he argues that

[t]he detective story is a kind of intellectual game. It is more – it is a sporting event. And for the writing of detective stories there are very definite laws – unwritten, perhaps, but none the less binding; and every respectable and self-respecting concoctor of literary mysteries lives up to them.

(Van Dine 1928)

Also in 1928, Ronald Knox published his ‘Decalogue’ of Detective Fiction in which he lists 10 rules for writing detective fiction:

1. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
2. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
4. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
5. No Chinaman must figure in the story.
6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
7. The detective must not himself commit the crime.
8. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.

9. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

(Knox 1928)

Other authors and critics also proposed rules: T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), lists a number of conventions that authors of detective fiction should avoid: “elaborate and incredible disguises”, “occult phenomena”, “mysterious and preposterous discoveries made by lonely scientists” (in Glover 2000:38). According to Eliot, the skills of the detective and the motives of the criminal should be “within the grasp of ordinary human consciousness”, the “motives of the criminal should be normal”, while the detective should be “highly intelligent but not superhuman” (in Glover 2000:38). Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) presents four viewpoints of detective fiction: the reader may be given only the detective’s external actions; the reader may be given what the detective sees but not what he observes; the reader may be given what he sees, and his conclusions; and the reader may be taken inside the mind of the detective (in Bargainnier 1980:179). Bayard proposes two rules: the truth must be hidden throughout the book; and “[w]hile being hidden this truth must be accessible to the reader, even in plain view” (2001:19-20).

The rules were apparently intended to ensure that authors give readers all the information necessary for them to be able to solve the crime, and not cheat them by leaving out necessary information or by relying on devices such as coincidence and the supernatural. However, “few books actually conform to [the rules]” because “these rigid classifications simply don’t work in practice” (Symons 1992:3). Glover reiterates that “in practice the development of detective fiction was never so straightforwardly linear nor so self-directed as this simplified picture of the Golden Age suggests” (2000:36). According to Symons, *The*

Murder of Roger Ackroyd fits some of the conventions of the genre of detective fiction: “[t]he setting is a village deep in the English countryside, Roger Ackroyd dies in his study, there is a butler who behaves suspiciously, but whom we never really suspect, and for good servant measure a housekeeper, a parlourmaid, two housemaids, kitchenmaid and cook” (1992:110). However, Christie does break some of the rules listed in Knox’s ‘Decalogue’, in particular the rule that the criminal “must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow”, and the rule that “[t]he stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts” because the villain is Dr Sheppard, who plays the role of the narrator and that of Poirot’s sidekick. Not only is the reader privy to some of Dr Sheppard’s thoughts because he is the narrator, but he also conceals some of his thoughts because he hides the truth. By breaking some of the rules, Christie undermines the conventions of the genre and challenges the horizon of expectations of the reader. (This aspect of Christie’s writing is examined in more detail later in this chapter.)

3.3 Confronting the monstrous in detective fiction for children

“By the 1930s, solving a mystery had become an established plot formula for both boys’ and girls’ series” (Mason 1995:15), and mirrors the popularity of detective fiction for adults in the 1920s and 1930s. Enid Blyton was becoming established as a writer at this time.

It is important to bear in mind that the definition of detective fiction applied in this study states that detective fiction refers to a fictional work in which a crime is committed and in which the plot centres on the investigation of the crime and the search for a solution. Thus, the *Famous Five* adventures can be said to fit into the genre of detective fiction because in the books the child protagonists encounter a mystery or a crime, and the children, for the duration of the book, search for a solution to this mystery or crime. This leads to the conclusion in which a

solution is reached and order is restored. Blyton's child protagonists solve the mystery through logical methods – they look for clues and gradually reach a solution.

In this study, I take into consideration Symons' perspective and propose that some of the writing of Enid Blyton, in particular the *Famous Five* series, is a variation on the detective story. "Historians of the detective story have been insistent that it is a unique literary form, distinct from the crime or mystery story, not to be confused with the police novel, and even more separate from the many varieties of thriller" (Symons 1992:1). However, Symons remarks that, "[f]or most critics the detective story has been taken as the central theme on which other crime stories and thrillers play variations" (1992:1). This idea is further reinforced by John Thompson's reference to the hybrid nature of genre fiction: "Conan Doyle's detective fiction, for example, is read as a hybrid of the adventure story, sensational literature, and the ratiocinative detective story formula defined by Poe" (1993:4).

"The form [of mystery stories for children] is borrowed from adult detective stories, and while children's mysteries, too, stress a strong sense of justice and social order, they aren't whodunits – for murders are taboo – but adventures" (Mason 1995:6). This argument is supported by Watson (2001) who believes that children's detective fiction is often an "adventure" story rather than a story revolving strictly around solving a crime. Plain refers to the ideological compatibility between the thriller genre and detective fiction with reference to Christie's thriller *N or M*: "the detective must identify the 'enemy within' and it matters little whether this enemy takes the form of a murderer or a traitor" (2001:44). In the same way there is ideological compatibility between the detective fiction of Agatha Christie and the children's literature of Enid Blyton: in Christie's detective stories the detective confronts the

enemy, the murderer; similarly, in the *Famous Five* series the children confront the enemy. However, rather than a murderer, the children are usually on the trail of thieves or smugglers. Children's detective stories take place in a simplified world within which there is a clear distinction between good and evil and in which the characters pursue a challenge in the battle between these two forces. "Crime fiction in general, and detective fiction in particular, is about confronting and taming the monstrous. It is a literature of containment, a narrative that 'makes safe'" (Plain 2001:3). In the *Famous Five* books and other series by Blyton directed at an older audience, such as the *Barney* series and *Adventure* series, the child protagonists sometimes travel away from home and are involved in dangerous adventures. In *Five Run Away Together* not only do the children run away to Kirrin Island where they live on their own, but they rescue a young girl who has been kidnapped, and hidden on the island, while in *Five Go off in a Caravan* the children undertake a caravan holiday without adult supervision. In addition, the children are threatened with violence in a number of the books. In *Five on Kirrin Island Again* George is threatened by a villain with a revolver: "there came a deafening crash, as the man pulled the trigger, and a bullet hit the roof somewhere in the passage" (Blyton [1947] 1967:148), and in *Five Go off in a Caravan* the thieves shoot at Timmy: "a shot rang out. It was Lou, shooting blindly at where he thought Timmy was" (Blyton [1946] 1967:174). Similarly, in *Five on a Treasure Island* Anne tells Aunt Fanny about their adventure "Oh, Aunt Fanny, the man had a revolver – and oh, he made Julian and George prisoners in the dungeons" (Blyton [1942] 1967:159).

Obvious questions arise about the plausibility of detective stories for children in which children outwit criminals and solve a crime committed by adults. Not only is this unlikely, but children are also restricted in their "lack of resources, physical strength, knowledge and experience" (Ray 1982:171). In addition, one has to question how the same children always

manage to land in situations where crimes have been committed and treasures are discovered. One way of overcoming the problem of the lack of plausibility of children solving crimes committed by adults is to allow the children to solve the crime by accident or as a result of their everyday activities. In Blyton's books this is usually the case. In *Five on a Treasure Island* the children discover hidden treasure while exploring Kirrin Island and thus discover that criminals are attempting to buy the island for far less than it is worth. The children are often on holiday when they encounter suspicious characters, such as the thieves Lou and Tiger Dan encounter in *Five Go off in a Caravan* because they happen to be camping in the same area. Similarly, the children witness suspicious events, as they do in *Five Go to Mystery Moor* when an aeroplane drops parcels in the vicinity of their camp in the middle of the night.

3.4 Characters

One of the criticisms of Golden Age detective fiction is the use of stereotypical and one-dimensional characters. However, Symons argues that during the Golden Age, "logical deduction was the heart of the detective story" (1992:2); hence there was "little room for any depth of characterization or any flourish of style". "The archetypal pattern underlying all of Christie's novels and stories does not allow for extensive psychological development of characters, for it would only impede the plot action" (Bargainnier 1980:38). While Golden Age detective fiction has generally been criticised for poor characterisation, the primary concern of such detective fiction is ascertaining the truth; hence, the plot centres on the investigation of the crime rather than character development. Symons argues that, in detective fiction "good people and bad people are clearly defined" (1992:10).

Similar criticism was levelled at the writing of Enid Blyton. However, Rudd (2000) believes that children read Blyton because of the safety offered by these stereotypes. Stereotypes offer the reader affirmations, they reinforce the horizon of expectations, and they confirm the reader's perceptions. Blyton's plots endorse certain dichotomies, including: "Englishness/foreignness, white/non-white ... 'Us'/'Them'" and these "dichotomies underlie the stereotyped and formulaic characterization" (Druce 1992:221). As in Golden Age detective fiction, in Blyton's works there are few characters and these are clearly defined as being either good or bad. When the children have to stay with Mrs Stick in *Five Run Away Together*, it is clear from the beginning of the book that she is bad. In the first description of Mrs Stick Blyton refers to her as a "sour-faced woman" (Blyton [1944] 1967:13). The negative image of Mrs Stick is reinforced when Blyton has Julian remark: "[s]he looks a real old stick. But all the same I hope she doesn't stick here for long. I hope Joanna comes back. I liked fat old Joanna, and she was nice to Timmy" (Blyton [1944] 1967:13).

In *Five Go off in a Caravan* the first description of the villain Tiger Dan is also negative:

The children stared at the chief clown, and thought that they had never seen anyone less like a clown. He was dressed in dirty grey flannel trousers and a dirty red shirt open at an equally dirty neck.

He didn't look as if he could make a single joke, or do anything in the least funny. In fact, he looked really bad tempered....

(Blyton [1946] 1967:14)

Blyton highlights Tiger Dan's negative characteristics by having Nobby explain: "[t]hey call him Tiger Dan because of his rages" (Blyton [1946] 1967:51). Tiger Dan's friend Lou is described as "a long-limbed, loose-jointed fellow with an ugly face, and a crop of black shining hair that curled tightly.... The children thought that he and Tiger Dan would make a good pair – bad-tempered, scowling and unfriendly" (Blyton [1946] 1967:51). The description of Lou's hair as "curled tightly" also has racist connotations. (I explore the reflection and subversion of

racist discourses in the writing of Blyton and Christie in more detail in Chapter Five of this study.)

The stereotypical child protagonists in the *Famous Five* series also represent a “personality type” (May 1995:90). Each child in the group has a specific role: George is a stereotypical tomboy; Anne a stereotypical girl; and Julian the stereotypical oldest male leader. Dick, the second male in the group, is the most nondescript character in the *Famous Five* stories. The different characters represented in the *Famous Five* books provide a greater opportunity for the reader to identify with a character in the story, and may reinforce positive feelings in the child reader that he or she, too, may be a hero.

3.4.1 The detective

By far the most important character in detective fiction is, of course, the detective around whose investigation the plot centres and who is responsible for restoring order. Standing in opposition to the social disorder represented by the crime, “the great detective moves untouched and incorruptible amidst the chaos of earthly existence, employing his intellect to conquer the chaos” (Bargainnier 1980:42).

In Christie and Blyton, the detectives operate “outside the officialdom of the law, but [are] on the same side as the law” (Bargainnier 1980:41); they are not police officers or professional detectives, but they work to maintain the status quo and reinforce the established social order. It is ironic that in Blyton and Christie’s writing the detectives, who act to enforce the current status quo, are in fact marginal figures in the society in which they operate. In a patriarchal heteronormative society children, women and especially elderly spinsters, and foreigners, operate on the fringes of society and are often disregarded as merely marginal

figures. As a result, they have “great personal freedom” (Bargainnier 1980:43) in that their activities are overlooked, making it easier for them to go about the business of detecting. In Blyton’s *Famous Five* adventures the children are free to roam about. In *Five on a Treasure Island* the children go to the island without Aunt Fanny because she conveniently has “some gardening to do” (Blyton [1942] 1967:49). In *Five Run Away Together* Aunt Fanny is taken ill and the children are left in the care of Mrs Stick, but the villainous cook seems hardly perturbed when the children run away together.

Binyon identifies three main classes of fictional detective: “the professional amateur, or private detective, such as Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot; the amateur amateur, or dilettante, such as Dupin or Dorothy Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey; and the professional, or policeman” (1989:6). Smith adds to this the “accidental detective” (1995), who becomes caught up by chance in solving the crime. “The essential difference between Poirot and Miss Marple is that he is a professional detective, while she is an amateur, if extremely effective busybody” (Cranny-Francis 1990:151). In the *Famous Five* stories, the role of the detective is “shared among a group of child protagonists who... may act in unison or as individuals” (Druce 1992:146). Like Marple, the children in the *Famous Five* series usually become involved in the crime by chance: they fit Smith’s definition of the accidental detective.

“Some critics have stated that readers do not identify with the detective because of his superiority and freedom” (Bargainnier 1980:43). Therefore, since this may indeed be the case, the author needs to create a connection between the detective and the reader. Bargainnier (1980) refers to three ways to create this bond. First, the author may use an amateur detective because it could well be easier for the reader to relate to an amateur than to an official or to a police officer. Symons agrees with this argument and claims that in a

story that has an amateur detective “the reader was able easily to put himself in the detective’s position” (1992:11). Second, the author may choose to include a sidekick ‘Watson’ character as an aide or friend of the detective. The ‘Watson’ character is “the reader’s surrogate, allowing [the reader] to be in continuous and close contact with the detective’s investigation (but without ever actually knowing his thoughts)” (Bargainnier 1980:43). In addition, the sidekick “is a character to whom the reader can feel superior” (Bargainnier 1980:43). (I investigate the use of the ‘Watson’ character in more detail later on in this chapter.) Third, the author may choose to give the detective personality traits “which make his intellectual and moral superiority less formidable” (Bargainnier 1980:44). This is particularly evident in Christie’s Poirot whose peculiar mannerisms “offset his immense intellect” (Bargainnier 1980:44). The author makes use of humour to soften the detective’s intellectual superiority and make him or her more ‘human’. (These idiosyncrasies are discussed in more detail later in this study with specific reference to individual detectives.)

The portrayal of power relations in Golden Age detective fiction is particularly evident in the ways in which the relationship between the detective and the criminal is presented. The detective novel places emphasis upon the contest between the detective and the murderer, rather than upon the actual deed and the victim. By committing the crime, and having knowledge about the details of the crime and how the crime was committed, the criminal is exerting power over both the detective and the society, in particular the individuals affected by the crime. Throughout the story, until the crime is solved and the identity of the criminal is revealed, the wrong-doer has the power because he or she has the knowledge and thus can exercise power and control over the rest of the characters in the book. In other words, the crime exacerbates fear and stimulates the search for answers. However, as the investigation proceeds, the detective begins to gain knowledge about the details of the crime and thus

knowledge about the criminal. This knowledge places the detective in a position of power, which ultimately results in the solution of the crime and the most obvious exercise of power – the restoration of order and the reinforcement of the status quo through the apprehension of the criminal.

3.4.2 The ‘Watsonesque’ sidekick

In detective fiction “often there is a friend, a helper, a trusted sidekick” (Swales 2000:xv) who accompanies the detective in his or her investigations and also often narrates the story. As discussed earlier, sidekick characters are slow to see the significance of clues, thus allowing readers to develop a sense of superiority over such characters. In addition, they act as a surrogate for the reader, ensuring that the reader is privy to the details of the investigation.

According to Kinsman, “[t]he origins of the sleuth and the assistant device can be traced back to Poe’s 1840s ‘chevalier Dupin’ stories... the blueprint of an abiding structural convention of the formula: the superhuman sleuth assisted by a trusted, but less able sidekick” (2000:158). Poe was followed by Arthur Conan Doyle and many of the sidekick characters are modelled on Sherlock Holmes’s sidekick, Dr Watson.

In common with the fictional Watson, the reader ‘sees’ things differently from the detective. By contrast with the sleuth’s superior reasoning powers, the dazzled friend’s diligent questions and guesses, slower and more mundane but at the same time illustrative of intuition and imagination, include the reader.

(Kinsman 2000:160)

Christie portrays the sidekick-detective relationship in that existing between Hercule Poirot and Captain Arthur Hastings. Hastings appears in eight novels and 26 short stories and he narrates all the stories in which he appears. Hart emphasises that

the importance of Hastings in the history of detective literature should not be underestimated. Besides his contribution as Poirot’s must [*sic*] trusted advisor on the English, Hastings set a style in recording the great detective’s achievements

that has addicted readers ever since. Poirot himself perceived him as a major influence and counted him as his dearest friend.

(1990:132)

Poirot and Hastings's close friendship is illustrated by the fact that Poirot refers to Hastings as "mon ami" in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (Christie [1920] 1969:21). As Poirot recalls:

"Always, when I have had a big case, he has been by my side. And he has helped me – yes, often he has helped me. For he had a knack, that one, of stumbling over the truth unawares – without noticing it himself, *bien entendu*. At times, he has said something particularly foolish, and behold that foolish remark has revealed the truth to me! And then, too, it was his practice to keep a written record of the cases that proved interesting."

(Christie [1926] 1974:196)

Christie takes advantage of the reader's expectations about the conventions of the genre of detective fiction and the stereotypical detective's sidekick to mislead the reader in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

In Blyton's *Famous Five* adventures, Anne, the youngest of the children, plays the role of the sidekick and reader's surrogate. Explanations offered to Anne ensure that the child readers understand the details of the mystery. In addition, Anne is slow to see the significance of clues so younger readers who do not understand might then not feel stupid, while older readers might not feel that Blyton and the other characters are talking down to them by explaining terms and concepts that they already understand. In fact, readers who do not require clarification are invited to feel superior to Anne. Blyton has various characters explain words and terms to Anne with which readers might not be familiar:

"Ingots!" said Anne, puzzled. "What does that mean? I've never heard that word before."

But the two boys had. "Ingots!" cried Dick. "Why – that must be the bars of gold. They were called ingots."

"Most bars of metal are called ingots," said Julian, going red with excitement.

(Blyton [1942] 1967:89)

“What are kidnapers?” said Anne.

“People who steal away children or grown-ups and hide them somewhere till a large sum of money is paid out for them,” explained Julian. “It’s called ransom. Till the ransom is paid, the prisoner is held by the captors.”

(Blyton [1944] 1967:158)

“...scientists are V.I.P.!”

“What’s V.I.P.?” asked Anne.

“Very Important People, baby!” said Julian, with a laugh.

(Blyton [1947] 1967:64)

“What’s a cart-wheel?” said Anne.

“What that boy’s doing over there,” said Dick. “Look.” He pointed to a boy who was turning cart-wheels very quickly, going over and over on his hands and feet, turning himself like a wheel. It looked easy, but it wasn’t, as Dick very well knew.

(Blyton [1946] 1967:11)

Blyton also hints at taboo subjects, such as death, when she has the other characters explain things to Anne:

“Well, don’t step off the road,” warned the driver, stopping the car. “And don’t you let that dog out, Miss. Once he runs off the road and gets into the marsh he’ll be gone for good.”

“What do you mean – gone for good?” said Anne, her eyes wide.

“He means the marsh will suck down Timmy at once,” said Julian.

(Blyton [1945] 1967:32)

“What are catacombs?” asked Anne, with a vague picture of cats and combs in her head.

“Winding, secret tunnels in the hill,” said Sooty. “Nobody knows them all. You can get lost in them easily, and never get out again. Lots of people have.”

(Blyton [1945] 1967:52)

Like Hastings, Anne also has “a knack, that one, of stumbling over the truth unawares’ (Christie [1926] 1974:196).

“And then Anne found the entrance! It was quite by accident. She was tired and sat down to rest. She lay on her front and scabbled about in the sand. Suddenly her fingers touched something hard and cold in the sand. She uncovered it – and lo and behold, it was an iron ring! She gave a shout and the others looked up.”

(Blyton [1942] 1967:115)

Timothy the dog and the fifth member of the *Famous Five* can also be described as a sidekick character because he provides additional information to the reader. In *Five go Adventuring*

Again Timothy's dislike of the tutor Mr Roland on their first meeting is a signal of things to come when Mr Rowland is later revealed to be the villain. Blyton's message to the reader is clear: trust Timothy.

Then, very slowly and deliberately, Timothy turned his back on Mr Rowland and climbed up into the pony-trap! ...

"He doesn't like you," said George, looking at Mr Rowland. "That's very queer. He usually likes people. But perhaps you don't like dogs?"

(Blyton [1943] 1967:31)

3.4.3 The Villain

In Blyton's *Famous Five* series villains "range from comic and cowardly foreigners to thieves and kidnappers, 'mad' scientists, circus hands, gipsies, untrustworthy servants, and other members of the unregenerate criminal and working classes. They are bullies, cowards, their behaviour is stupid, their accents vulgar or ludicrously foreign" (Druce 1992:222). (The depiction of foreigners and lower class characters as villains is explored in Chapter Five of this study.)

One of the most important characteristics of the villain in detective fiction is that it could be one of us.

For Christie, as her characters must always realise with alarm, the criminal is first of all *one of us*, someone who for nine-tenths of the novel must carry on seeming successfully to be just that....The most innocent (the least likely) person may turn out to be the criminal.... It is within the charmed circle of *insiders* that the criminal must be sought.

(Light, in Chernaik 2000:105)

The villain conceals his or her true nature and attempts to act normally. Bargainnier remarks that the murderer "is nearly always from the same class as his victims – the dead and the suspected – he can hide behind the accepted and expected social pattern of that class" (1980:119-120). Thompson believes that a requirement of detective fiction is that it

call into question the identity of every individual within the circumscribed boundaries of the community in which the crime takes place... the identity of the murderer is always in question since it could plausibly be just about anyone. Thus the formal English novel of detection operates on the premise that the individual's claim to a certain identity is false... appearances are not necessarily commensurate with reality.

(1993:130)

In a Christie novel, there is a “closed circle of suspects – a strictly limited number of potential murderers” (Curran 2009:37). No one can be trusted because “each character is both a potential murderer and potential victim” (Chernaik 2000:105). “*Anyone* may be the murderer” (Bargainnier 1980:121) and the identity of the murderer is never obvious. In the *Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Christie allows Poirot to remind her readers that “[i]t is always wise to suspect everybody until you can prove logically, and to your own satisfaction, that they are innocent” (Christie [1920] 1969:109). This idea is repeated in *The Murder at the Vicarage*,

“Ah!” said Miss Marple. “But I always find it prudent to suspect everybody just a little. What I say is, you really never *know*, do you?”

(Christie [1930] 1972:101)

The idea that the murderer could be anyone echoes Campbell's argument, observed earlier in this chapter, that Christie's works create a sense of “paranoia” (2005:12) among the characters and in the readers. The isolated setting, such as a country house or small village, and the fact that the killer is unknown creates a situation in which the characters feel trapped, and this heightens their feelings of paranoia and fear. According to John Thompson, Christie is concerned with exploring the “effects of the criminal transgression on the individuals involved” (1993:124). As I mentioned in the discussion of how hegemony works in Chapter One of this study, individual members of society internalise the values, attitudes and beliefs of the dominant class and, consequently, these systems of thought come to be regarded as natural and normal. Individuals seek to perpetuate the status quo, and are threatened when criminal transgression jeopardises this.

3.5 The crime: a threat to the status quo

“One of the most marked features of the Anglo-American detective story is that it is strongly on the side of law and order” (Symons 1992:10). By committing an act that is deemed unacceptable by society, the villain in detective fiction stands in opposition to society, and therefore the villain threatens the social order because any violation of the law must include a violation of the established social, political and economic policies, since the law is shaped by these perspectives. Dennis Porter, quoted in Thompson, contends that

a crime implies the violation of a community code of conduct and demands a response in terms of the code. It always depends on a legal definition, and the law, as both Gramsci and Althusser make clear, is a key element of the superstructure in ensuring the reproduction of existing power relations in a society. As a result, in representing crime and its punishment, whether evoked or merely anticipated, detective novels invariably project the image of a given order and the implied value system that helps sustain it. By naming a place and by evoking, however glancingly, the socio-economic order that prevails within it, they confirm, in fact, that there can be no transgression without a code, no individual crime act without a community that condemns it.

(Porter, in Thompson 1993:124)

According to Bedell (in Bargainnier 1980:10), the traditional function of the detective is to restore the social and moral status quo. This makes it permissible to refer to detective fiction as an agent of hegemony, as an institution which encourages people to exercise bio-power, conform to the norm and maintain the status quo of the society in which they operate. As John Thompson contends, Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective fiction did not simply affirm the values of the time in which he lived and wrote, but “it helped to produce them. His fiction, that is, helped to define the kinds of beliefs to which a reasonable, educated Victorian or Edwardian gentleman might subscribe” (1993:76). “On the social level, then, what crime literature offered to its readers for half a century from 1890 onwards was a reassuring world in which those who tried to disturb the established order were always discovered and punished” (Symons 1992:11).

The subject of typical Blyton and Christie novels is “the unexpected violence which manifests itself... in the most apparently secure of places, family life’, as in the course of the narrative, ‘a safe, known world’, familiar in its contours, is suddenly thrown out of kilter” (Light, in Chernaik 2000:105). In the *Famous Five* adventures everyday events – such as meals and household chores – form a “realistic background for unlikely events” (Fisher 1985:273) such as interaction between smugglers, villains and thieves. In Christie’s fiction disorder, violence, and behaviours believed to be socially aberrant such as theft, adultery, drug abuse and illegitimate children are concealed behind the façade of everyday events, the rituals and activities, the social conventions and formations that define acceptable behaviour, thoughts and actions. In detective fiction the *unheimlich* – not the ‘uncanny’ but rather that which is supposed to be concealed, or kept secret – is inadvertently revealed.

The “domesticisation of crime” (Light, in Mezei 2007:105) by Christie – her location of crime and evil in a domestic setting – reflects a moral disorder and dysfunction hidden beneath the veneer of a seemingly orderly hierarchical society. Rowland remarks that the Golden Age “located crime at home. It is to be found amongst the colonels, spinsters, minor gentry, middle-aged businessmen, impecunious relatives and young feckless socialites” (2001:68). In *The Murder at the Vicarage* Christie has a number of characters contribute to the domestic disorder: the incompetent servant Mary; the abandoned daughter Lettice, the abusive Colonel Protheroe, the adulterous Mrs Protheroe, the ailing Mrs Lestrangle, the thieving Mr Hawes, and the impostor posing as Dr Stone. These characters offer an opportunity for Christie to pass comment on the dysfunctional society in which she lived, in which all is not as it seems: “[c]ivilization may house barbarity within its walls” (Mezei 2007:110). The crime presents an opportunity for the real truth about the society to be revealed – without the crime no one would have known about all the corruption under the surface.

3.6 The search to restore order

3.6.1 Formula

Sheila Ray makes the point that “children read Blyton for the same reasons that adults read Agatha Christie when they want to dip into something well ordered and predictable” (Ray 1982:103). For some readers the pleasure of escape literature “may lie precisely in this ‘timelessness’ and in a repetitiousness which offers instant access to a familiar cast of characters and situations” (Druce 1992:114). The repetition of the formula in the different books creates a set of expectations in the reader; the readers know what to expect when they pick up a novel by Blyton or Christie, and thus will not be disappointed. The readers know that a solution will be reached and that order will be restored. Christie points out in her autobiography that when one is writing a certain type of fiction it is important to take the market, the intended reader, into consideration, and that an author needs to conform to the conventions of the genre.

You have got to do something you feel you can do well and that you enjoy doing well, and you want to sell it well. If so, you must give it the dimensions and appearance that are wanted.... If you want to write a book study what sizes books are, and write within the limits of that size. If you want to write a certain type of short story for a magazine you have to make it the length, and it has to be the type of story, that is printed in that magazine.... You must submit to the discipline of form.

(Christie 1993:345)

As already discussed, both Blyton and Christie enjoyed a great deal of commercial success and significant financial benefits from their writing. Druce highlights some of the commercial benefits for writers like Blyton and Christie who write series and formula fiction. These include “[a]dvertising [which] can be aimed at a known, relatively well-defined audience”, and “a more generous budget” (Druce 1992:111) which would be based on the sales of previous books in the series. Writers of series have the opportunity to exploit their readers’ brand loyalty. Stories with predictable structures guarantee the fulfilment of expectations because readers

“not only [recognise] the formula on which fictions were built, they also [expect] it” (Klein 1995:4). To meet the expectation of readers of detective fiction the stories should conform to the predetermined conventions of the genre.

Detective fiction has a strict linear plot structure with a clear beginning, middle and end. The detective story usually starts with the violation of the law, or in some cases the discovery that a crime has been committed before the story even begins. The beginning of the story, in which the objective is stated, is usually short compared to the middle in which the investigation takes place because the plot centres on the investigation of the crime. In the conclusion the perpetrator is revealed and order is restored. Dorothy Sayers argues that Golden Age detective fiction “possesses an Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle, and end” (Sayers, in Chernaik 2000:108). According to Binyon, this attempt to link detective fiction to Aristotle is an obvious “attempt to establish its intellectual respectability and defend it against the accusation often levelled that it is cheap, sensationalist trash with no literary value whatsoever” (1989:2). It is an attempt to legitimise detective fiction by placing it within the acceptable boundaries about what is good literature. In other words, it is an attempt to conform to society’s expectations of what good literature is, as defined by the dominant discourse.

Blyton and Christie perfected the series formula “in which individual books, while regularly offering an immediately recognisable *cluster* of characters – recurrent protagonists, identical settings, or plots which repeat a familiar formula” (Druce 1992:112) have little or no chronological relationship with any other books in the series. The children in the *Famous Five* books often claim to be one year older:

“Golly, you’ve grown.”

They all had. They were all a year older and a year bigger than when they had had their exciting adventures on Kirrin Island.

(Blyton [1944] 1967:10)

However, there is little actual change in their age over the 21 *Famous Five* titles. In addition, reference to earlier episodes is vague and does not have any impact on the events of the current story. As Druce reminds us, “the clock and the calendar are both reset to zero at the commencement of each story, and Georgina remains thirteen and Anne ten years old twenty-one years after their first appearance” (1992:114).

Even though Christie changed some elements of her work over time, “the basic form of her fiction did not change. Each new ‘Christie for Christmas’ could be counted upon to be another surprising variation on the general pattern” (Bargainnier 1980:4). There is no need to read the books featuring Poirot or Marple in a particular order because each story stands alone within the series. While Christie wrote novels in which she has both Marple and Poirot die, these books were written several years before their publication and do not have an impact on the reader’s enjoyment of her other stories.

The Secret Island (1938) was Blyton’s first application of the series formula in which the actions of a recurrent cast of characters are featured. “Once she had begun a series, it was Enid Blyton’s unvarying practice to sit down and write a new volume each year” (Druce 1992:16). Blyton made few changes from book to book, and she reworked “material for different age groups, different markets, and different word-length requirements’ (Rudd 2000:157). In 1942 she began writing the *Famous Five* series. Initially intended to consist of only six books, Blyton eventually published 21 books in the *Famous Five* series.

The predictable pattern used by Blyton is characteristic of formula fiction: during a school holiday a group of children become involved in an adventure in which they uncover a crime and help to apprehend the criminals. As in Golden Age detective fiction, plot is essential here and “must be unfolded in a way which attracts and holds the reader’s interest” (Ray 1982:128). Blyton’s cliff-hanger chapter endings contain the promise of excitement and help to keep the reader’s attention. In *Five Go Adventuring Again*, Chapter Three ends with a cry of surprise as George cries: “Look! Mrs Sanders, come and look!” (Blyton [1943] 1967:37). Since the following chapter heading is ‘An exciting discovery’ the reader is encouraged to read further to find out more about the discovery. In addition, Blyton maintains the reader’s attention by the use of allusions to the coming mystery in her books – the reader is constantly reminded that “something is going to happen” (Cullingford 1998:104). In *Five Have a Wonderful Time* Blyton allows Dick to hint of the coming adventure:

“Did I hear something about an adventure? Are you looking for one already?”
“Good gracious no!” said Anne. “It’s the last thing I want! And the last thing we’ll get into too, in this quiet little place, thank goodness.”
Dick grinned. “Well, you never know”

(Blyton [1952] 1968:22)

The secret of Blyton’s success is that she encourages her readers to turn over the page and keep reading. Like Blyton, Christie was able to “make readers continue from the top to the bottom of the page and then turn that page; and the make them do that 200 times in the course of any, and in her case, every, book” (Curran 2009:35).

One of the essential elements of Christie’s formula is misdirection and concealment of the truth through a multiplicity of meanings, as she has Miss Marple point out in *The Moving Finger*. “[m]isdirection, you see – everybody looking at the wrong thing” (Christie [1942] 1971:154). Christie uses a number of methods to misdirect the reader in an attempt to outwit her readers and prevent them from working out the solution. These include large numbers of

suspects, a second murder later in the story, the concealment of the murderer's identity, and so on. The author can also use the reader's expectations of detective fiction to misdirect the reader by not conforming to the conventions of the genre.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Christie disguises the murderer to misdirect the reader. Christie presents Dr Sheppard as the village doctor. "[K]nown and respected by everyone, he attracts less attention than a servant" (Bayard 2001:31). As I have already noted above, Christie further disguises him by using him as Poirot's sidekick and as the narrator, playing on the reader's expectations that because Hastings, Poirot's usual sidekick and narrator, is trustworthy, Dr Sheppard will also be. The reader's perception is constrained by her or his expectations of the sidekick character in conformity with the rules of the formula. She reinforces the role of the sidekick by allowing Dr Sheppard to point out that "[he] played Watson to [Poirot's] Sherlock" (Christie [1926] 1974:124), and by having Poirot refer to Sheppard as "[m]y friend, Dr Sheppard" (Christie [1926] 1974: 67). We can see that this association with Hastings protects Dr Sheppard from suspicion. Christie reinforces this association between Hastings and Dr Sheppard through a number of comments by Poirot that highlight the similarities between them:

"Indeed," said the little man cheerfully, "this has not been a wasted morning. I have made the acquaintance of a man who in some ways resembles my far-off friend."
(Christie [1926] 1974:22)

Poirot lingered about until the inspector had gone back towards the house. Then he looked at me.
"You must have been sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings," he said, with a twinkle.
(Christie [1926] 1974:81)

"You and I, M. le docteur, we investigate this affair side by side. Without you I should be lost."
(Christie [1926] 1974:91)

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the viewpoint of the narrator further assists in disguising Dr Sheppard as the murderer because he does not tell us about himself. Christie has Poirot contrast Sheppard's account of the events in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to similar accounts produced by Hastings in which Hastings refers to his own thoughts about the crime – something that Sheppard does not do:

“Not so did Hastings write,” continued my friend. “On every page, many, many times was the word ‘I’. What *he* thought – what *he* did. But you – you have kept your personality in the background; only once or twice does it obtrude – in scenes of home life, shall we say?”

(Christie [1926] 1974:198)

When Dr Sheppard asks Poirot what he thinks of the doctor's version of the events surrounding the death of Roger Ackroyd, Poirot describes it as

“[a] very meticulous and accurate account,”... “You have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly – though you have shown yourself becomingly reticent as to your own share in them.”

(Christie [1926] 1974:198)

Sheppard tells the truth, “but he does not tell *the whole* truth’ (Bayard 2001:37). The lie by omission is a clever technique used by Christie in this work.

“You see now why I drew attention to the reticence of your manuscript,” murmured Poirot. “It was strictly truthful as far as it went – but it did not go very far, eh, my friend?”

(Christie [1926] 1974:208)

Blyton also misdirects her readers by manipulating stereotypes. In *Five Go to Smuggler's Top* the children are particularly suspicious of Sooty's stepfather, Mr Lenoir. Moreover, as I have already mentioned above, Mr Lenoir does not like dogs – a common characteristic of the villains in Blyton's books. Throughout *Five Go to Smuggler's Top* the readers are led to believe that he is the possible villain. Blyton even has Dick remark: “I'm sure Mr Lenoir is at the bottom of all this” (Blyton [1945] 1967:137), only for them to discover that he is innocent.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, detective fiction calls into question the identity of every character. Everyone is a suspect. Not only does this underline the mayhem concealed behind the façade of the ideal middle class life, but it also allows authors of detective fiction to distract readers from the truth and the actual perpetrator by attracting their attention to several possible suspects. Among those present some have a secret that they wish to conceal, and as a result of this they “falsify information to protect themselves” (Bargainnier 1980:132). In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Christie has Poirot tell Dr Sheppard:

“...You will find, M. le docteur, if you have much to do with cases of this kind, that they all resemble each other in one thing.”

“What is that?” I asked curiously.

“Everyone concerned in them has something to hide.”

(Christie [1926] 1974:71)

This point is reiterated later in the same novel,

“But – just that, monsieur. Every one of you in this room is concealing something from me.” He raised his hand as a faint murmur of protest arose. “Yes, yes, I know what I am saying. It may be something unimportant – trivial – which is supposed to have no bearing on the case, but there it is. *Each one of you has something to hide.* Come now, am I right?”

(Christie [1926] 1974:117)

Christie uses crimes and secrets unrelated to the murder – affairs, skeletons in the closet – to distract the reader from the truth. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Mrs Ackroyd confesses to Dr Sheppard that she has rung up a large amount of debt:

“Those dreadful bills. And some I didn’t like to show Roger at all. They were things a man wouldn’t understand. He would have said the things weren’t necessary. And of course they mounted up, you know, and they kept coming in.”

(Christie [1926] 1974:127-128)

Mr Raymond reveals that he was also “in debt, badly” (Christie [1926] 1974:137), Parker is exposed as a blackmailer (Christie [1926] 1974:151), Miss Russell confesses to having an illegitimate child (Christie [1926] 1974:180), and Poirot discovers that Ursula Bourne is secretly married to Ralph Paton: “[i]t is not Ursula Bourne, is it, my child – but Ursula Paton? Mrs Ralph Paton” (Christie [1926] 1974:189). In *The Murder at the Vicarage* the vicar

discovers that Lawrence Redding is having an affair with Mrs Protheroe (Christie [1930] 1972:21), and the individual who is thought to be the archaeologist Dr Stone is exposed as an impostor by Miss Marple's nephew Raymond:

“But, my dear fellow – that wasn't Stone.”

“Not Stone?”

“Not the archaeologist. I know him quite well. The man wasn't Stone – not the faintest resemblance.”

(Christie [1930] 1972:127-128)

Mrs Lestrangle not only turns out to be Lettice's mother, but Christie also reveals that she is dying: “Didn't you ever guess? Mrs Lestrangle is my mother. She is – is dying you know. She wanted to see me and so she came down here under an assumed name” (Christie [1930] 1972:186), and Mr Hawes is exposed as a thief responsible for “the misappropriations of the church funds” (Christie [1930] 1972:182).

Bayard observes that “several characters lie on minor points, promoting the reader's distrust” (2001:32) – if a character lies about one thing it is easy to assume that they might lie about having committed murder. “One of Christie's greatest skills is the spreading of motive, means, and opportunity among those involved in such a manner as to make any statement by any character suspicious or worse” (Bargainnier 1980:132).

Another way that Christie uses the reader's expectations of the formula of detective fiction to misdirect the reader is by placing the murderer in plain sight, and sometimes even having him or her confess to the murder. Bayard contends that “the reader is inclined to think that if the writer is introducing them with such ostentation, they must be innocent” (2001:28). In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Christie misleads readers by manipulating the widely held assumption that the murderer would never give himself up when she has Lawrence Redding

confess that he is the murderer. In addition, the reaction of the other characters on hearing about his arrest casts further doubt on his guilt.

“Would you believe it? The baker’s just told me. They’ve arrested young Mr Redding.”

“Arrested Lawrence,” cried Griselda incredulously. “Impossible. It must be some stupid mistake.”

“No mistake about it, mum,” said Mary with a kind of gloating exultation. “Mr Redding, he went there himself and gave himself up. Last night, last thing. Went right in, threw down the pistol on the table, and ‘I did it,’ he says. Just like that.”

(Christie [1930] 1972:38)

In fact, in *The Murder at the Vicarage* following Lawrence Redding’s confession (Christie [1930] 1972:38), his lover, Anne Protheroe, also claims to have killed her husband: “it was I who killed my husband” (Christie [1930] 1972:49) thus misdirecting the reader even more. In fact, following his discovery of Anne Protheroe’s confession, the vicar describes Lawrence Redding’s confession as a “heroic self-accusation” (Christie [1930] 1972:47).

3.6.2 Closure

The detective story traditionally ends with the identification of the criminal and the restoration of order and therefore collaborates with conservative social forces. As part of the formula, the conclusion is “preordained” (Chernaik 2000:106).

At the narrative’s inevitable, carefully foreshadowed conclusion, the mysteries are solved, the elements of fear, suspicion and doubt are banished, order is restored: readers come to detective fiction expecting to find reassurance, to have their formal and ideological expectations confirmed.

(Chernaik 2000:104)

The reader knows that order will be restored since the goal of detective fiction is to ascertain the truth and to ensure that the status quo is preserved. The knowledge that a resolution will be reached drives the reader to keep reading. Therefore the *denouement*, while often a very short part of the story as a whole, is an essential part of the plot. Throughout the story the

perpetrator and the method are concealed from the reader. The *denouement* is the ‘at-last’, the ‘ah-ha’ moment in which the reader can breathe a sigh of relief at the revelation.

One of the conventions of Christie’s detective fiction is the *denouement* in which Christie has the characters gather together in a type of reunion during which the detective reconstructs the crime and unveils the truth. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* Poirot asks Mary Cavendish for her permission “to hold a little *reunion* in the *salon*? It is necessary for everyone to attend” (Christie [1920] 1969:167). After reconstructing the events of the murder, Poirot melodramatically reveals the murderer: “*Messieurs, mesdames*,” said Poirot, with a flourish, “let me introduce you to the murderer, Mr. Alfred Ingelthorp!” (Christie [1920] 1969:177). In *A Murder is Announced* Christie has the characters gather around Miss Marple, like children listening to a story, as she unravels the events leading to the arrest of Miss Blacklock.

Miss Marple sat in the tall arm-chair. Bunch was on the floor in front of the fire with her arms around her knees.

Reverend Julian Harmon was leaning forward and was for once looking more like a schoolboy than a man foreshadowing his own maturity. And Inspector Craddock was smoking his pipe and drinking a whisky and soda and was clearly very much off duty. An outer circle was composed of Julia, Patrick, Edmund and Phillipa.

“I think it is your story, Miss Marple,” said Craddock.

(Christie [1950] 1979:199)

The conclusion is also an important element in fiction for children, especially fiction in which a mystery is to be solved. As Gavin and Routledge point out, “to leave a child reader in uncertainty [is] pedagogically wrong” (2001b:2). Closure and a predictable pattern play an important role in the psychological development of the child; children are secure in their enjoyment of the dangerous elements of the story because they know that good will triumph and that the child protagonists will escape unharmed.

4 CONCLUSION

Golden Age of detective fiction influenced the dominant opinions which determined the definition of the genre of detective fiction. In fact, the Golden Age was pre-eminent “in establishing still-current definitions of the detective novel” (Klein 1995:95) so the Golden Age could be said to have created a dominant discourse of detective fiction. In addition, the repetitive formula of detective fiction creates a set of expectations in the reader. However, regardless of her status as a writer of Golden Age detective fiction and member of The Detection Club, Christie did not always conform to the conventions of detective fiction. She broke the rules of the age in her writing, subverted the dominant discourse and manipulated the reader’s horizon of expectations.

Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five* series does not strictly conform to the definition of detective fiction but in the early twentieth century some elements of detective fiction, in particular death, were not considered suitable in literature for children. As indicated in this chapter, in this study I take the point of view that Blyton’s *Famous Five* books are a variation on the detective fiction genre because, like detective fiction, the stories focus on the solving of a mystery, the restoration of order, and the maintenance of the status quo.