

INTRODUCTION

Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie were the most successful British women writers of their time. Their success in terms of income, as well as their enduring popularity and the fact that they remain household names today, is indicative of the vast popularity¹ and success of these two women. It is difficult to overlook the important contribution of their writing to the body of fiction produced in England in the early twentieth century, as well as to the greater body of popular literature. Both Christie and Blyton are listed in the top ten authors of a

UNESCO publication, the Index Translationum, [which] includes a “hit parade” of the world’s most translated authors for 1985-1995. Agatha Christie tops Walt Disney, the Bible, Lenin, Jules Verne, Barbara Cartland, Enid Blyton, Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, William Shakespeare, Isaac Asimov, Georges Simenon, Alexandre Dumas (the elder), Jack London, Arthur Conan Doyle.

(UNESCO)

Although the writing of Blyton and Christie differs in a number of respects – in particular that Christie wrote for adults and Blyton for children – there are also marked similarities in their work. This is hardly surprising since these women were contemporaries. Agatha Christie was born in 1890, and Enid Blyton was born seven years later in 1897. The conservative Victorian² and Edwardian³ environment in which they were raised would definitely have shaped their horizons of expectation. Their upbringing would have been characterised by a conservative and rigid class system, economic growth and industrialisation, as well as emergent social changes and an increased interest in socialism, the plight of the poor, and women’s issues would also have influenced their frame of reference.

¹ While I made every effort to consult a wide range of resources – the most recent research available, the Internet, bookstores and various media sources – I came to realise that like all authors the work on Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie is affected by academic and popular trends. Indeed, one of the reasons behind my choice of this topic was the dearth of material on these writers, particularly in relation to each other.

² The Victorian Era is the period of Queen Victoria’s reign in the United Kingdom, from 1837 until 1901.

³ The Edwardian Era followed: King Edward VII reigned from 1901 until 1910.

Both Christie and Blyton began writing at a young age and while their first literary attempts were rejected, both women persisted. Blyton had a poem accepted for publication by *Nash's Magazine* in 1917 while Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was published in 1920. Success spurred them on and they continued to write. Both Blyton and Christie lived through the First and Second World Wars and the influence of this political landscape on the dominant discourses in England to which Blyton and Christie were exposed cannot be overlooked. These influences included the imperialist attitudes and the colonialism that both promoted and resulted from the dominance of the British Empire.

Blyton and Christie were both shaped by the same dominant patriarchal discourses, and exposed to similar emergent and alternative discourses. Both women divorced their first husbands at a time when divorce was not considered acceptable, and both remarried. Both Blyton and Christie were independent women of independent means at a time when men were considered to be the breadwinners of the family. Moreover, they both wrote detective stories in the years between 1913 and 1936 which would later become known as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. In addition, they fit well within the context of popular literature and, therefore, to a great extent, popular culture. Enid Blyton "is a cultural reference point" (Rudd 2000: 37) while Agatha Christie "is part of a British cultural consciousness: everybody 'knows' something called an 'Agatha Christie'" (Plain 2001: 24). However, the commonalities between Blyton and Christie have received very little critical attention. In this study I take into consideration these similarities in an examination of the influence of discourses in their development of characterisation and their use of setting in their writing.

The writing of Blyton and Christie is examined and compared within the context of the time in which they wrote in terms of the differing degrees to which they show allegiance to, and

counter, the dominant patriarchal discourses of the British Empire in relation to gender, race, class, nationality, religion and ethnicity in the first half of the twentieth century. This study will link the theoretical framework to the biographical context of the life and times of these two writers.

Research question

In this study I seek to investigate how Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie include emergent, oppositional and alternative discourses in their writing while at the same time portraying the dominant discourses of the society in which they lived and wrote. I examine the contradictory portrayal of discourses of the time in the writing of Blyton and Christie, in particular discourses surrounding gender, race, class, nationality, religion and ethnicity. Given that detective fiction is the medium of this portrayal I examine, too, the discourses that informed this genre during the Golden Age.

Selection of texts

Christie is one of the most successful writers of all time. Over two billion copies of Agatha Christie's books have been sold worldwide and her fiction "has been translated into over 45 languages.... Agatha Christie wrote eighty novels and short story collections. She also wrote over a dozen plays" (<http://www.agathachristie.com/about-christie/>) as well as six romance novels under the pen name Mary Westmacott and is described by Bargainnier as "the most popular writer of the twentieth century" (1980:1). Bargainnier goes on to comment that the "very fact of that popularity, as well as critical disdain for the genre in which she wrote, has prevented her work from receiving much serious attention" (1980:1). Like Christie, Rudd remarks that "it needs to be asked, [why] has there been so little serious attention given to Blyton, the all-time bestselling children's author" (2000:1-2). According to Watson, Blyton is

“arguably the best-selling children’s writer of all time” (2001:91).⁴ Blyton wrote over 800 books in her lifetime.

Since Blyton and Christie were such prolific authors it is necessary to limit the number of texts I consider in this study. Close examination of Blyton’s texts is limited to the *Famous Five* series, in particular the first six books⁵ in the series of 21 because, according to Rudd (2000: 112), Blyton initially intended to only write six books in the series. However, I also refer to a number of other books in the *Famous Five* series, as well as to some of Blyton’s other works. My reason for choosing the *Famous Five* books lies in the fact that this series is one of Blyton’s most popular and best-known series. The manner in which Blyton has a group of children solve a crime or mystery is considered to fall within the contemporary definition of detective fiction and is juxtaposed against the role of the individual detective in detective fiction for adults. The characterisation of George in the *Famous Five* books, in particular, provides scope for the consideration of the portrayal of gender roles in Blyton’s writing. Furthermore, the relationship between and among the children and foreigners as well as people of different classes and races is considered.

While I make reference to several of Agatha Christie’s novels and a number of her short stories, I consider four texts closely in this study. Christie’s first detective novel to be published, and the first novel to feature the detective Hercule Poirot, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, is examined. I also examine another novel featuring Poirot, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. These texts provide an opportunity for me to consider Christie’s manipulation of the

⁴ Watson’s description of Blyton as the “best-selling children’s writer of all time” was made prior to the success of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter phenomenon and the publication of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga.

⁵ The following are the first six titles in Blyton’s *Famous Five* series: *Five on a Treasure Island*; *Five Go Adventuring Again*; *Five Run Away Together*; *Five Go to Smuggler’s Top*; *Five Go off in a Caravan*; and *Five on Kirrin Island Again*.

traditional formula of the detective novel, with particular reference to her use of the detective's sidekick and her use of the narrator. Poirot's nationality also provides me with an opportunity to contemplate Christie's representation of foreigners, and to explore, further, her treatment of race and class. The first Miss Marple novel published by Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage*, and *A Murder is Announced* are the two Miss Marple novels I examine closely in the study. In particular, these texts allow me a close reading of Christie's portrayal of gender roles in society. In addition, the choice of texts covers a period from 1920 to 1950 and allows for an examination of the overlapping, at times, of discourses in Christie's writing as well as her sometimes monolithic use of dominant discourse.

Summary of chapters

In the first chapter of this study I provide the theoretical framework. I explain the concepts of 'discourse', 'hegemony' and 'horizon of expectation' as used in the study in terms of how they relate to each other, and their relevance to this study. In this framework I refer to the work of Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci, as well as Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hans Jauss. Dominant discourses on gender, race, class, nationality, religion and ethnicity most often manifest in asymmetrical power relations between individuals in which one individual is dominated or oppressed by the other. I reflect on the portrayal of power relations and the way in which traditional, stereotypical power relations are both echoed and opposed in detective fiction by Blyton and Christie. This chapter provides the theoretical foundation upon which this portrayal of discourses is examined in this study.

Before offering a detailed examination of Blyton and Christie's writing, it is necessary for me to contextualise these writers in relation to the period in which they lived and wrote, and the influences of this society on them so as to examine how they both subvert and reflect the

body of beliefs and systems of control of their time in their writing. An awareness of the dominant discourses of the society in which Blyton and Christie lived and wrote and how hegemony and its practices operated is essential to my purpose. Dominant discourses concerning, among other issues, sex, gender, race, class, nationality, and the treatment of foreigners of the time informed their horizons of expectation and are reflected in their writing. Furthermore, emergent, oppositional and alternative discourses are also echoed in their novels and stories. In Chapter Two of this study I contextualise the lives and times of Christie and Blyton and examine some of the dominant viewpoints that may have shaped their world views as they lived and wrote. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive history of the early twentieth century, or a detailed biography of Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie. Rather, it will provide an overview of some of the opinions and perspectives of the early twentieth century to which Blyton and Christie were likely to have been exposed, and will offer some insight into Blyton and Christie's own lives in relation to these viewpoints.

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. 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. In Chapter Three of this study I examine the conventions and definitions of detective fiction at the time of writing. I also offer a brief survey of Golden Age detective fiction to provide an overview of the definitions and conventions of detective fiction within which Christie and Blyton were working, and to make available a platform from which to indicate how Blyton and Christie reinforce and subvert these conventions.

In Chapter Four I specifically examine the representation of gender relations in the writing of Agatha Christie and Enid Blyton. Both Christie and Blyton wrote and published fiction in a society dominated by patriarchal heteronormative discourses in which gender stereotyping defined the role and acceptable social and cultural behaviour of women. In this chapter I explore the complex relationship of Blyton and Christie to the dominant heteronormative discourse of their time. Blyton and Christie appear to both endorse and reinforce some of the dominant discourses of the time, while simultaneously offering opposition to these discourses and presenting alternative discourses. In the chapter I discuss this contradiction and the difficulty of establishing with certainty how Blyton and Christie reacted to the social expectations relative to the appropriate gender roles of the time.

Like women in a society dominated by men, individuals who are of a different race, class, nationality, religion and ethnicity are regarded as 'other' in relation to the dominant group and are often marginalised and less valued by society. This leads to and, in turn, reflects the manifestation of asymmetrical power relations between dominant and marginalised groups. I examine the manifestation of power relations between and among individuals of different racial groups, classes and nationalities in Chapter Five. I discuss widespread social changes in Britain in the early twentieth century in relation to the dominant shared beliefs and practices of the white English-speaking middle class. While Blyton and Christie portray the intolerant attitudes and prejudices of their time in their writing, they also offer alternatives to this pervasive point of view. Hence, in this chapter I consider the difficulty of determining whether Blyton and Christie endorse and reinforce this dominant discourse that discriminates against individuals who are of a different race, class, nationality, religion and ethnicity, or whether they challenge this discourse by exposing stereotypes and, in turn, offer alternative ways of thinking and being.