

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRODUCTION OF A TEXT:

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BLYTON AND CHRISTIE

1 INTRODUCTION

As I have already indicated, I believe that a text cannot be examined in isolation; the social, political and economic principles and opinions that influence the production of a text must be considered in relation to two perspectives. We have to consider, first, the narrow context of the author's own horizon of expectation and the potential influences of the individual author's life experiences on the text, and, second, the broader context of the time in which the text was written and the dominant body of beliefs of the society at that time.

Therefore, 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. In the first half of the twentieth century, when Blyton and Christie first became established as authors, many changes were beginning to take place in Britain, and the rest of the world, and new systems of thought gathered momentum as emergent discourses. These changes included economic and social changes in relation to both gender and class, and represented the effects of the continued influence of the industrial revolution on all aspects of life. It is important to bear in mind that no one is a true product of one particular discourse. As I pointed out in Chapter One of this study, systems of thought are constantly fluctuating and individuals are influenced simultaneously by a number of emergent and dominant discourses.

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, since this study discusses the social, political and economic environment that affected Blyton and Christie, and the acceptance or rejection of these systems of thought in their writing, this chapter will provide an overview of some of the opinions and perspectives of the early twentieth century to which these writers were likely to have been exposed, and will offer some insight into Blyton and Christie's own lives in relation to these viewpoints, taking into consideration the creation of a public persona by both women.

2 BLYTON AND CHRISTIE: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

2.1 Growing up

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller, the youngest of three children, was born on 15 September 1890 at Ashfield, in Torquay, Devon, to an American-born father, Frederick Miller, and a British mother, Clarissa (known as Clara). In the same year, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published his second detective fiction novel featuring Sherlock Holmes *The Sign of Four* an indication of the growing popularity of detective fiction in the years around the turn of the century and a possible portent of things to come. Seven years later, on 11 August 1897 Enid Mary Blyton, the eldest of three children, was born at Lordship Lane, East Dulwich, London, to Theresa and Thomas Carey Blyton. Christie was born at Ashfield – her childhood home, “a large comfortable villa in two acres of grounds” (Wagstaff & Poole 2006:8) – and Blyton was born in a small flat above a shop; Christie’s father was a gentleman of leisure while Blyton’s father worked first as a cutlery salesman and then at a clothing warehouse. While both Blyton and Christie could be considered middle class, it is evident from their circumstances that Christie would have been considered upper middle class. However, regardless of this class status, life was not always easy for young Agatha Christie: her father squandered his inheritance and the family suffered a number of financial difficulties.

In her autobiography Christie describes her childhood as “very happy” (Christie 1993:13) and, according to Laura Thompson, she had a “sense that her parents’ marriage was serene and stable” (2007:14). While she loved her father very much, Christie had a very close relationship with her mother; according to Rowland, “Christie adored her mother” (2001:6). This idea is reiterated by Thompson who claims that Clara’s “influence upon Agatha – both by omission and involvement – was almost absolute.... She was also, probably, the love of Agatha’s life”

(2007:8). Christie's close relationship with her mother may have been reinforced by the death of her father when she was 11, leaving her and her mother at home with just each other for company; following Frederick's death "Clara depended largely on Agatha for companionship and amusement" (Morgan 1985:35). "Agatha spent much of her early childhood without the companionship or competition of other children" (Morgan 1985:23) – she was 11 years younger than her sister, Madge, and 10 years younger than her brother, Monty. Being so much younger than her brother and sister meant that Christie was much more like an only child, one who was often left to entertain herself. When Christie was growing up, "if there was no one whose business it was to play with children then the child had to play by itself" (Christie 1993:59).

In contrast to Christie, Blyton and her mother had a very difficult relationship. Blyton was very close to her father, and he encouraged her love of reading and her interest in the arts, and in nature, and taught her to play the piano. But what is most interesting here is her father's influence in relation to the significance of nature and the importance of animals. We can see evidence of this influence in her writing in the important roles played by animals, in particular that of Timothy, or as he is sometimes called Timmy, the dog, known as the fifth member of the *Famous Five*. In *Five Go to Smuggler's Top* George is told that she may not take Timothy with her to Smuggler's Top, but she disobeys her parents and has the driver stop *en route* to pick up Timmy so that he can go with her. For Blyton, possibly as a result of her father's love of animals and her close relationship with him, the love of animals is important and she justifies George's disobedience when she has the other children show their support for George.

"Well," said the driver, doubtfully, "I don't know if you're supposed to take that dog in, Miss. Your father didn't say anything about him."

“It’s all right,” said George, her face red with joy. “Quite all right. You needn’t worry. Start the car again, please.”

“You *are* a monkey!” said Julian, half-annoyed with George, and half-pleased because Timmy was with them after all. “Mr. Lenoir may send him back, you know.”

“Well, he’ll have to send *me* back too,” said George, defiantly. “Anyhow, the main thing is we’ve got Timmy after all, and I am coming with you.”

“Yes – that’s fine,” said Anne, and gave first George and then Timmy a hug. “*I* didn’t like going without Tim either.”

(Blyton [1945] 1967:29)

George and the other children, with the help of Sooty, who lives at Smuggler’s Top, smuggle Timothy into Sooty’s bedroom via a secret passage and arrange for a place to hide him. George also shows responsibility in terms of caring for Timmy by pointing out that the children “must arrange to feed him and exercise him” (Blyton [1945] 1967:53). Conversely, characters who dislike animals, and those who are cruel towards animals, such as Lou and Tiger Dan in *Five Go off in a Caravan*, are usually revealed to be the villains in Blyton’s stories. When they first meet these children Lou tries to kick Timmy (Blyton [1946] 1967: 53), while later in the book they try to poison him;

“Who threw him the poisoned meat, do you think?” said Anne, in a small voice.

“Who do you suppose?” said George, in a hard scornful voice. “Lou and Tiger Dan!”

(Blyton [1946] 1967:102)

An exception is Sooty’s father Mr Lenoir in *Five Go to Smuggler’s Top*. Mr Lenoir does not like dogs and this causes the children to suspect that he might be a villain. However, at the end of the book it is revealed that he is not evil, and he even makes an attempt to be pleasant to Timmy:

Timmy looked at Mr Lenoir out of his big brown eyes. He trotted straight up to him, and held up his right paw politely to shake hands, as George had taught him.

Mr Lenoir was rather taken aback. He was not used to good manners in dogs. He couldn’t help putting out his hand to Timmy – and the two shook hands in a most friendly manner....

“Well – he doesn’t seem like a *dog!*” said Mr Lenoir, in surprise.

(Blyton [1945] 1967:185-186)

In line with the widespread opinions on appropriate gender behaviour of British society at the turn of the century, Theresa Blyton “believed strongly in the prevailing motto that a woman’s place was in the home. Women were to be domesticated, grow up, marry and have children; that was their sanctioned role” (Greenfield 1998:2-3). Blyton’s mother “felt it was her duty to bring up her daughter to manage a home and family” (Baverstock 2000:9), hence occupations like reading and going to school were not part of the acceptable activities for a young girl to follow. In addition to training her daughter for what she considered to be the only proper future for a girl – marriage, home and children – Theresa felt that Blyton should help about the house and spend more time learning to cook and sew. However, “Thomas naturally defended his daughter, of whose growing accomplishments he was enormously proud” (Greenfield 1998:3) and aggravated the situation by supporting his daughter’s “resistance to Theresa’s disciplining” (Stoney 1992:19). The influence of Blyton’s relationship with her mother and that of her father in his opposition to her mother can be seen in the stark contrast between her own mother and the mother figures portrayed in her books, as well as in the positive feelings that the children have towards these maternal characters. In *Five Run Away Together* the children are described as being “fond” of their Aunt Fanny and Blyton describes her as “gentle and kind” (Blyton [1944] 1967:11). This sentiment is re-iterated in *Five on Kirrin Island Again*:

Aunt Fanny was at the station to meet them in the pony-trap. The children flung themselves on her, for they were very fond of her. She was kind and gentle, and did her best to keep her clever, impatient husband from finding too much fault with the children.

(Blyton [1947] 1967:19)

In addition to being described in positive terms, the mother figures portrayed in Blyton’s books also always ensure that the children have more than enough to eat.

“Well, I’ll soon get fat at Kirrin Cottage, don’t you worry. Aunt Fanny will see to that. She’s a great one for trying to fatten people up. It will be nice to see your mother again, George. She’s an awfully good sort.”

(Blyton [1945] 1967:8)

In *Five Go Adventuring Again* Mrs Saunders, the farmer's wife, offers the children "some new shortbread baked yesterday" (Blyton [1943] 1967:36), while in *Five Go Off in a Caravan* the farmer's wife is

a fat, round-cheeked woman, whose little curranty eyes twinkled with good humour. She made them very welcome and gave them hot buns from the oven and told them to help themselves to the little purple plums on the tree outside the old farm house.
(Blyton [1946] 1967:67)

In 1910 Blyton's father left his wife for another woman. Blyton experienced a great sense of rejection; Baverstock claims that she was "shattered to hear that her father had taken someone else into his life" (2000:12). Again, we can see the influence of this emotional response in her writing. For example, the conflict between Blyton's parents contrasts with some of the parental relationships portrayed in her writing. In *Five Go to Smuggler's Top*, for example, Uncle Quentin comforts Aunt Fanny after a tree falls on their house: "[t]hen [Uncle Quentin] calmed down, seeing that Aunt Fanny was really shocked and upset, very near to tears. He put down his cocoa and slipped his arm round her" (Blyton [1945] 1967:19-20). Similarly, in *Five Run Away Together* when Aunt Fanny is taken ill Uncle Quentin shows concern for his sick wife and stays with her at the hospital.

In the early twentieth century, divorced women of the middle classes were often pariahs and Theresa Blyton did not see why she, the 'innocent party' should become a social outcast so she refused to divorce her husband. Nonetheless, while Thomas Blyton "continued to support his family and pay for his children's education" (Greenfield 1998:3) he moved out. In an effort to prevent a scandal, Theresa Blyton did her utmost to keep up appropriate appearances after Blyton was forbidden to discuss the matter of her parent's separation with anyone. Blyton and her mother engaged in subterfuges and made excuses to members of the community in

which they lived, in an attempt to explain Thomas Blyton's absence, thus creating additional stress in the relationship between mother and daughter.

As a child, Agatha Christie had no formal schooling. But she began to learn to read, as do most children, by asking available adults, in her case, her nurse, questions about words she saw written above shops or on signs. The decision not to send her to school was not particularly unusual at the time since the importance of formal education, especially for female children, was not stressed, but it was odd that her older sister was sent to school, and that she did not have a governess (although the Millers' financial difficulties might account for this). According to Thompson, Christie's lack of formal education

was probably the making of her. Agatha was one of those auto-didacts who go on learning and reading all their lives and whose minds, therefore, develop in the way most suitable to them.

(2007:19-20)

This is evident in the reflection of a number of different areas of expertise in her writing – the most obvious of which are her use of poison as a method for murder (knowledge of which she gained working in a dispensary during the First World War), and her inclusion of archaeological detail and information about the Middle East (of which she learned during her marriage to archaeologist Max Mallowan). These are discussed in more detail later in this chapter. From about the age of 13, Christie attended Miss Guyer's school in Torquay two days a week where she learned some grammar, arithmetic and composition. Thereafter, Christie attended a number of 'finishing' schools in Paris. Unlike Christie, in 1907 Blyton began to attend a local school, St. Christopher's School for Girls in Beckenham, when she was 10 years old.

After school Blyton began to train as a teacher. This is significant when we consider that that she wrote books for children and her training as a teacher is likely to have helped her pursue this career. Blyton claimed that she chose to follow a career in teaching since she wanted to write books for children and “because she believed that this would provide a useful background to her writing” (Ray 1982:11). According to Stoney,

[q]uite suddenly, she knew what she must do – become a teacher. In that way she could carry on with her writing and if she were with children all day long – something that now appealed to her greatly – she would be able to study them closely and then, perhaps, learn how to write about and for them.

(1992:31)

However, this account is questionable because Blyton did try to write for adults, but all her attempts to do so were rejected, thus she might have claimed to have a desire to write for children to cover her failure as an author of books for adults. Therefore, her statement that she studied teaching with the intention of writing books for children should be considered in relation to Blyton’s creation of a persona, which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

2.2 Writing as a career

Both Blyton and Christie began writing poetry at a very young age. However, while Christie’s family encouraged her to write, Blyton’s mother scorned her writing.

Christie’s “earliest surviving poem is carefully inscribed in an exercise book and dated April 1901” (Thompson 2007:41) and her first appearance in print was a poem about electric trams published in an Ealing newspaper when she was 11 years of age. Christie was sick in bed with influenza as a young girl when her mother encouraged her to write a book and thus she completed her first novel, *The House of Beauty*, which was never published. However, when Christie mentioned that she would like to try to write a detective novel, her sister was “dismissive” of the idea (Christie 1993:217), but Christie would prove her wrong; during the

First World War Christie worked in a hospital dispensary, and during quiet periods at work she began working on her first detective novel. In her autobiography Christie explains: “[i]t was while I was working in the dispensary that I first conceived the idea of writing a detective story. The idea had remained in my mind since Madge’s earlier challenge” (1993:261).

The story would eventually be published as *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Christie’s first attempts to have this novel published were unsuccessful and it was published only in 1920.

According to Binyon, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was a “landmark”;

Poirot was an original character; the writing has life and sparkle; the narration is short and succinct; and the method of murder – bromide is added to a tonic containing strychnine, thereby precipitating the strychnine and making the last dose fatal – is ingenious.

(1989:34)

During March 1917 Blyton had a poem accepted for publication by *Nash’s Magazine* – “the first recorded publication of an Enid Blyton work” (Greenfield 1998:9). Like Christie, many of Blyton’s early attempts at writing were rejected, but it “was her determination and driving ability, coupled with the encouragement of her best friend, Mabel Attenborough, that kept her writing” (Greenfield 1998:6). Over time she built a name for herself in the book world, and in “1921 and 1922 some of her short stories and poems appeared in the *Saturday Westminster Review*, the *Bystander*, the *Londoner*, *Passing Show*, and other magazines of the period” (Greenfield 1998:11). Her first book, a collection of poems called *Child Whispers*, was published in 1922 and her first novel, *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair* was published in 1937. Blyton’s first full length adventure story, *The Secret Island*, was published in 1938 and reflects her use of the series, and of formula writing (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three of this study).

In October 1912 Agatha met Archibald Christie, a second lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery and they were married on 24 December 1914. During the First World War Archie Christie went to war as a member of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) while Agatha Christie worked as a volunteer in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), first as a nurse and then in the pharmaceutical dispensary. While Christie does not discuss the events of the war directly in her writing, she does mention the effect of the war on ordinary people. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* Christie has Mrs Inglethorp remind the reader that “...one must set an example of economy. We are quite a war household; nothing is wasted here” (Christie [1920] 1969:13). Christie also comments on the decrease in the number of gardeners: “Only three now, sir. Five, we had, before the war, when it was kept as a gentleman’s place should be.... Ah, these are dreadful times!” (Christie [1920] 1969:48), and in *The Murder at the Vicarage* she remarks that “[e]ver since the war there has been a loosening of moral fibre” (Christie [1930] 1972:78).

Christie also used her experiences of life during the First World War to enrich her writing and characters. Like Christie, Cynthia Murdoch in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* is a member of the VAD and works in the local hospital dispensary (Christie [1920] 1969:12-13). In the short story, *The Blue Geranium*, Christie has Miss Marple claim “I have done a little nursing myself” (Christie [1929] 2008:428), while in *The House of Lurking Death* Tuppence Beresford remarks: “I happened to work in a hospital during the War” (Christie [1924] 2008b:121). It was while working in the dispensary that Christie gained a knowledge of poisons which feature in a number of her books and, according to Binyon, her use of poison in her novels is always “technically sound” (1989:34). “The original idea for *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was a method for murder. It came from Agatha’s dispensing work and could not have come to her otherwise, because it entirely depends upon a knowledge of poisons” (Thompson 2007:103).

As Christie remarks, “[s]ince I was surrounded by poisons, perhaps it was natural that death by poisoning should be the method I selected” (Christie 1993:261). Bargainnier reiterates this point and comments that “poison is Christie’s favourite weapon for murder” (1980:157).

Christie’s detective Hercule Poirot, who first appears in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), was also conceived as a result of circumstances brought about by the First World War. The character of Poirot, a retired detective from the Belgian Police Force, was inspired by the influx of Belgian refugees into Britain as a result of the war. (I discuss the discourses of the time as they related to xenophobia and the treatment of foreigners in more detail in this study in Chapter Five.) In addition, Captain Hastings, Poirot’s sidekick, had been “invalided home from the Front” (Christie [1920] 1969:5), again reflecting the circumstances of the time of writing.

During the First World War Enid Blyton was studying to become a teacher. Her poor relationship with her mother necessitated her leaving home to find a job; at the time teaching and nursing were two of the few options available to women to earn a living. When Blyton left home, in an attempt to prevent the embarrassment associated with having a daughter leave home to follow a career, her mother told people that Blyton had joined the Women’s Land Army. Blyton’s decision could be described as brave and it definitely ran counter to the norm at the time. Following her qualification as a teacher Blyton began working as a junior teacher at Bickley Park School in 1919, where she taught for a year, before taking up a position as a nursery governess to children. She continued to write while teaching and, after a few years,

her output of literary work was becoming so prolific that she began to keep an account book. This shows that during 1923 alone, her writing earned her well over £300 – the price of a small suburban house at the time.

(Stoney 1992:50)

During the early twentieth century it was very unusual for a young woman to be earning such a large sum of money so her financial success and the resultant independence was directly opposed to the contemporaneous beliefs and opinions about appropriate behaviour and status for a young woman.

Agatha and Archie Christie had one daughter, Rosalind (born 5 August 1919). However, in contrast to her relationship with her own mother, Christie was not always around for Rosalind and, in further contrast to the discourses that encouraged women to stay at home and raise children, Christie's career "helped to make Agatha the absent mother she undoubtedly was" (Thompson 2007:435).

In the early 1920s Archie Christie struggled to find a job and the couple was under some financial strain. At this time, Christie's writing provided money to support her family, although over time Archie Christie found employment and his income became more stable and he began earning well. Like Blyton, Christie's financial success challenged ways of thinking that insisted on giving men responsibility for the financial security of the household. Christie began to publish more regularly and she engaged the services of Edmund Cork, a literary agent, and signed a three-book contract with Collins Publishers at the beginning of 1924. Christie's first novel for Collins, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, was published in 1926. These developments marked the start of her career as a writer but "she really did not see it that way at the time. Her life now was with Archie and Rosalind. She was a wife and a mother with a home to run. She would remain an amateur, writing for fun" (Thompson 2007:120). Even though Agatha Christie's success "had gone beyond what either of the Christies had expected – and she still put Archie first, even if he did not think so. Her marriage was by far the most important thing in her life" (Thompson 2007:163). It is evident that the contemporaneous discourses that

encouraged women to remain at home and play the roles of wife and mother informed Christie's thinking and her own expectations of how she, as a woman, should behave. Christie was to some extent shaped by the social conventions of her time which put marriage before a career for a woman. However, emergent discourses, especially those related to her earning potential and financial success, are also clearly reflected in her life choices.

In 1923 Enid Blyton met Major Hugh Alexander Pollock. Pollock was the editor of the Newnes book department which had published two of her books that year. Pollock was married at the time but his wife had left him for another man while he was serving during the First World War. His divorce went through in spring 1924 and on 28 August 1924 the couple was married. According to Greenfield, there is "little doubt that Hugh expedited her career" (1998:33). "He encouraged her writing, and was very helpful over contracts and royalties" (Baverstock 2000:21). Blyton's "marriage made no difference to her prolific writing output" (Stoney 1992:66); she became more productive and was soon earning "probably as much as, perhaps more than, Hugh's salary from Newnes" (Greenfield 1998:14). Like Christie, Blyton's financial success countered popular opinions that men should be the primary, if not the sole source of income in an early twentieth century household.

While Blyton experienced some difficulty falling pregnant, she eventually conceived and she and Pollock had two children, Gillian (born 15 July 1931) and Imogen (born 27 October 1935). Like Christie, it is also fair to describe Blyton as an 'absentee' mother. "The births of her daughters were not allowed to disrupt her regular writing and editing commitments" (Druce 1992:13).

In 1989, Imogen published a memoir entitled *A Childhood at Green Hedges* which was widely serialised and which contained a poignant portrait of a neglectful mother and a consequently miserable child. Ironically, it seemed, the woman who opened

her arms to the world's children and offered them her love was too busy doing so to allow time for a kiss and a hug for her younger daughter... Gillian, though, describes her mother in retrospect as loving and attentive.

(Greenfield 1998:55)

Not only is Blyton's portrayal of mothers in her writing quite different from what she experienced with her own mother, but it is also significantly different from her own behaviour as a 'neglectful' mother. The mothers portrayed in Blyton's writing are often ideal in terms of then current dominant discourse: loving, caring, kind-hearted women who stay at home, in spotless homes, and make sure that their husbands and children are well fed – they always have something baking in the oven.

By the mid-1920s Archie and Agatha Christie began drifting apart. "Agatha's earnings were giving her the appearance of an independent being. The Christies shared a home and a child, but in other ways their lives had become quite separate" (Thompson 2007:166). Then, on 5 April 1926 Agatha Christie's mother died. As I mentioned earlier, Christie and her mother were very close so her mother's death must have been a considerable emotional strain for her. Christie went to Ashfield after her mother's death to sort through the house, but her husband remained in London. The physical distance had a further bad impact on their strained relationship and towards the end of 1926 Archie Christie told his wife that he had fallen in love with another woman and asked her for a divorce. In 1926 "[o]btaining a divorce was difficult and shaming; the only admissible ground was adultery, which had to be proved" (Morgan 1985:132). It was around this time that Christie infamously disappeared for 11 days, but, taking into consideration the emotional strain she had experienced during 1926 it is likely that she might have been somewhat emotionally unstable. Christie blamed herself for Archie's decision. She said,

[i]f I had not gone to Ashfield and left him in London he would probably never have become interested in this girl. Not with this particular girl. But it might have

happened with someone else, because I must in some way have been inadequate to fill Archie's life.

(Christie 1993:362-363)

"After her divorce Agatha never again took communion in church. Always she felt shame and guilt, especially towards her daughter, for having 'given in' to Archie's demands for a divorce" (Thompson 2007:263). These feelings of shame and guilt echo the established notions about how scandalous divorce was thought to be. This seems to be reinforced in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in which Christie has Dorcas, Mrs Ingelthorp's maid, refer to the scandal associated with divorce when she repeats her employer's comment that "[s]candal between husband and wife is a dreadful thing" (Christie [1920] 1969:46).

In 1928, Christie was due to travel to the West Indies on holiday. However, after attending a dinner party where she sat next to a man who had just returned from Baghdad, she changed her ticket so as to take the Orient Express to Baghdad – perhaps the inspiration behind *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). This decision changed her life. In Baghdad, Christie met and stayed with renowned archaeologist Leonard Woolley and his wife, Katherine, who were working on an archaeological dig at Ur in Iraq. On her second visit to the Woolleys in February 1930, Christie met Woolley's assistant Max Mallowan, and in September 1930 she and Mallowan were married. She chose to keep Christie as her surname for public recognition since she was already a popular author, but in private she referred to herself as Mrs Mallowan. "On the dig she was not 'Agatha Christie', she was not even 'Agatha': She was 'Mrs Mallowan', wife of the man in charge" (Thompson 2007:316) – even her grave stone reads 'Agatha Mary Clarissa Mallowan". As I mentioned earlier, the powerfully dominant discourses that encouraged women to remain at home and play the role of supportive wife and mother seem to have informed Christie's thinking and her own expectations of how she,

as a woman, should behave. This discourse is clearly reflected in comments in Christie's autobiography:

I don't think, even then, that I considered myself a bona fide author. I wrote things – yes – books and stories. They were published, and I could count upon them as a definite source of income. But never, when I was filling in a form and came to the line asking for Occupation, would it have occurred to me to fill it in with anything but the time-honoured 'Married woman'. I was a married woman, that was my status, and *that* was my occupation. As a sideline, I wrote books.

(Christie 1993:445)

Her devotion to her role as wife reflected in her behaviour relating to her marriage to Max Mallowan – she travelled extensively in the Middle East with Mallowan to archaeological digs. A number of Christie's novels are inspired by these travels: *Death Comes as End*, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Appointment with Death*, *They Came to Baghdad*, and *Death on the Nile* among others.⁷ In *The Murder at the Vicarage* Dr Stone is an archaeologist – *The Murder at the Vicarage* was published in 1930 and the publication date corresponds with Christie's early experiences in the Middle East.

“By the outbreak of war in 1939, Blyton had published some sixty-nine titles with fourteen publishing houses” (Druce 1992:13). During the Second World War paper for printing was strictly rationed: the paper shortage meant that non-essential publications were reduced. However, these restrictions provided Blyton with an advantage over other authors in two ways: because “she was respected by her publishers... for her punctiliousness in meeting a deadline” (Druce 1992:14-15) and they were confident that she would produce material for publication; and because she “spread her wares” (Greenfield 1998:28) among fourteen different publishers, she increased the likelihood that her work would be published.

⁷Christie's writing reflects her love of travel and, in addition to those books set in the Middle East, a number of her books have foreign settings, for example, *The Caribbean Mystery* (fictional island of St Honore), *The Man in the Brown Suit* (South Africa), *Murder on the Links* (France), among others.

Despite the shortage of paper, she had no difficulty in obtaining further commissions for her work, for the publishers had long since realised that a book by Enid Blyton was usually guaranteed to sell almost as soon as it left the presses. But the accolade for the most enterprising idea for making use of her talents and what little paper was available during those early war years, must surely go to Brockhampton Press... to use previously scrapped off-cuts... to produce child's hand-size cartoon booklets.... She suggested, at their meeting in bomb-scarred London, that a mouse might provide a good central character and within a few days had completed outline stories. By late 1942, ten thousand copies of *Mary Mouse and the Dolls House*, printed in two colours and selling for a shilling each, were on the market.

(Stoney 1992:129)

By the end of 1945, Blyton had published “one hundred and sixty-seven titles” (Druce 1992:15).

While the *Famous Five* series was published after the end of the Second World War, the discourse of war – secrets, spies and the safeguarding of the Empire – remained in the public consciousness and this is reflected in Blyton's writing. In the *Famous Five* books there are several references to Uncle Quentin “working out a secret theory ... [that] will be used for the good of the country” (Blyton [1943] 1967:14). Readers are also often reminded of the importance of being able to keep secrets, and Anne is frequently reprimanded by the other characters because she is not very good at doing so. In *Five Go Adventuring Again* Anne is about to tell Mr Roland about the piece of linen they found that has directions to a ‘Secret Way’;

“It's a - ” began Anne, and all at one all the others began to talk, afraid that Anne was going to give the secret away.”

(Blyton [1943] 1967:49)

When the children are alone again Dick reprimands Anne and she is suitably ashamed of her slip-up. Here we see the enduring emphasis on the importance of keeping secrets.

“You nearly gave our secret away, you silly,” said Dick to Anne. “I didn't think,” said the little girl, looking ashamed of herself.”

(Blyton [1943] 1967:50)

Anne learns from this experience and later in the same book, when she is pressured by the adults to reveal what she knows about the camphorated oil found in the study, she refuses to do so. In this instance, Julian and the other children support Anne's decision not to tell, even though they do not even know the truth, and in doing so Blyton again emphasises the importance of keeping secrets:

“Don't bother Anne,” [Julian] said to the grown-ups. “If she thinks she can't tell you, she's got some very good reason.”

(Blyton [1943] 1967:111)

“During the thirties Agatha Christie produced, year after year, puzzle stories of varied ingenuity and constant liveliness” (Symons 1992:136). Like Blyton, Christie's output during the Second World War was substantial; the years between 1937 and 1945 were Christie's most productive. Christie was alone for much of the war because Mallowan was away serving his country and “she spent much of her free time writing” (Campbell 2005:17). In her autobiography Christie reflects on the number of books that she wrote during the Second World War: “[i]t is only now that I fully realise, looking back over my wartime output, that I produced an incredible amount of stuff during those years” (Christie 1993:527). But, as Thompson comments, Christie

was under intense pressure to produce books throughout the war. Her financial situation had changed and, for a time, she was effectively living hand-to-mouth. Yet this does not fully explain the insatiable creativity of her middle years: the brilliance of these books produced under duress.

(2007:306-307)

This highlights the fact that for Christie writing had become a profession – a significant development at a time when women usually stayed at home, managed the household and cared for the children and seldom pursued a career.

Bargainnier highlights the fact that in most of the works that Christie produced during the Second World War, she does not mention the war itself, but

the after effects of the war on day-to-day life is clearly presented in the novels of the late 'forties and 'fifties. Rationing, the black market, the difficulty of obtaining eggs, butter or sugar, weed grown gardens, reduced staffs, identity cards, unemployed and restless veterans, women performing formerly masculine jobs: these are all there

(1980:36)

As she does in her portrayal of the First World War, Christie focuses on the effect of the Second World War on ordinary people. This post-war setting is evident in *A Murder is Announced*, which was published in 1950. Christie points to the effect of the war years on the country estate, Dayas Hall:

Dayas Hall had certainly suffered during the war years. Couch grass grew enthusiastically over what had once been an asparagus bed, as evidenced by a few waving tufts of asparagus foliage. Groundsel, bindweed and other garden pests showed every sign of vigorous growth.

(Christie [1950] 1979:58)

Christie reflects the patriotism of the post-war era by including the character of Phillipa Haymes whose husband was a deserter. Mrs Haymes lies to the police about her husband, highlighting not only the humiliation she feels about his lack of patriotism, but also her desire to conceal his actions from the community. This speaks to the dominant viewpoint in Britain in the years following the Second World War – deserters were regarded with scorn at the very least.

“I think you told me, Mrs. Haymes, that your husband was killed fighting in Italy?”

“Well?”

“Wouldn't it have been simpler to have told me the truth – that he was a deserter from his regiment.”

He saw her face grow white, and her hands close and unclosed themselves.

She said bitterly:

“Do you have to rake up *everything*?”

(Christie [1950] 1979:154)

Her shame at her husband's actions is again emphasised in her desire to protect her son, Harry, from finding out about his father's desertion: "my son, he doesn't know. I don't want him to know. I don't want him to know – ever" (Christie [1950] 1979:155).

In 2004 a box of Agatha Christie's notebooks and two previously unpublished manuscripts were discovered at her former home, Greenway. This led to the publication of *The Capture of Cerberus*, the first Poirot tale to be published since 1975. According to Paul Harris (2009), the dictator August Hertzlein in *The Capture of Cerberus*, originally submitted for publication in 1939, bears a "thinly disguised resemblance to Adolf Hitler". Even though their initials are the same, John Curran remarks that while "the similarities to Hitler are quite clear in the story, there is no mention of the actual name" (2009:431). However, Curran goes on to point out that in Christie's Notebook 62, in which she sketched the outline for the story, she refers to "Herr Hitler" (2009:431). It is possible to speculate that in 1939 as a result of the sensitive political milieu and the threat of war the publishers may have considered the subject matter too sensitive for publication. Even Christie describes the atmosphere as "a very disturbed state – every nation alert and tense. At any minute the blow might fall – and Europe once more be plunged into war" (Christie, in Curran 2009:433).

By 1939 Enid and Hugh's marriage was under strain. In 1941 Blyton met Kenneth Fraser Darrell Waters, a London surgeon. In the meantime, Pollock had become "romantically involved with Ida Crowe" (Stoney 1992:133). Blyton found out about this and asked him for a divorce. He "agreed to be the 'guilty party' (a requirement for divorce in those days) provided he had regular access to his two daughters" (Greenfield 1998:32). On 20 October 1943 Blyton and Darrell Waters were married. However, Greenfield claims that Blyton did not comply with her arrangement with Pollock "and he never saw Gillian or Imogen again" (1998:33). In

addition, Blyton had her daughters' surname legally changed to Darrell Waters and "encouraged them to accept Kenneth as their 'father'" (Greenfield 1998:57).

Enid Blyton's response to her divorce from Hugh Pollock stands in contrast to Blyton's mother's attitude towards divorce: while Theresa Blyton refused Thomas Blyton's request for a divorce, Enid Blyton divorced Hugh Pollock without much ado. However, Blyton's divorce is not mentioned in her autobiography. Druce describes her as having been "silent about her first marriage and divorce" (1992:14). Common knowledge of her divorce might have tainted her public persona as an educationalist and would have caused her to lose some of the moral high-ground on which she placed much importance.

Following her divorce, Christie began to write to make money; she observes that "[t]hat was the moment when I changed from an amateur to a professional. I assumed the burden of a profession, which is to write even when you don't want to" (Christie 1993:369). She had become a professional writer and her work gave her financial security. Thompson comments that Christie "was tough when it came to selling her work" and "very rarely could she be prevailed upon to do something for love rather than money" (2007:150). In addition, she had strong opinions about her work and "she always stood her ground on issues like blurbs and book jackets" (Thompson 2007:152).

Blyton also had "an amazing capacity for hard work and a shrewd business acumen" (Stoney 1992:185). Like Christie, she was involved in all aspects of the publication of her books, and insisted on being consulted over "the choice of type face and size, the page layout, the dustjacket and the proposed illustrator" (Greenfield 1998:52-53). It seems likely that she had learnt a lot about the publishing industry from Hugh Pollock and the various other publishers

with whom she worked throughout her career; she was therefore certainly able to make informed decisions about her books. In addition, the

same business acumen which had led to the adoption of her holograph signature as her personal 'trademark' had prompted her to integrate her name into the title of at least sixty-two of her books published before 1949 (and at least one hundred and twenty-six books published thereafter.

(Druce 1992:18)

In essence, Blyton created a "brand name" (Rudd 2000:30).

Both Blyton and Christie were prolific writers as well as very astute business women and were much involved in the publication of their books. In addition, they were both published in a number of then current popular magazines. This was, quite clearly, a contributing factor to their success and popularity.

3 THE WRITER'S PERSONA

Both Blyton and Christie presented themselves in a manner constructed to reinforce their public image. In their apparent attempt to gain the consent of society at large, they created public personae that appeared to conform to the popular opinions of the time regarding the ideal author of children's stories or detective fiction, and the behaviour thought appropriate to women. Blyton and Christie attempted to portray a public image that conformed to the expectations of society, as shaped by the dominant social conventions at the time. In the patriarchal heteronormative society in which they operated Blyton and Christie were not only women, but also career women and writers. Blyton and Christie seem to have internalised the norms of the society which classified how both women and writers of books in their genres should typically behave, and then sought to conform to these expectations by exercising self-regulation without the show of force – what, as I have discussed earlier in this thesis, Foucault refers to as “bio-power” (Foucault, in Rudd 2000:14).

Throughout her career Agatha Christie promoted herself as a shy person. Janet Morgan believes that “[i]n her quiet childhood she grew up to be a listener” and was easily “overcome by nervousness” (1985:27). She often shunned the public eye, and she “refused countless requests throughout her career to broadcast on either radio or television” (Curran 2009:98). In the preface to her biography of Agatha Christie, Janet Morgan (1985:xi) emphasises the value of privacy to Christie: “[s]he rarely gave interviews and never put herself on display.... Her reputation, she believed, should stand or fall by her work.” She referred to herself as a “terribly shy person” (Christie 1993:125) in her autobiography, further reinforcing this image. This is in contrast with Curran's claim that she “happily posed for photographs” (2009:174) with guests at the launch of her fiftieth title, *A Murder is Announced*. However, regardless of

whether she was genuinely shy or not, this behaviour and the image of being secretive maintained the public perception that a writer of detective fiction is mysterious and thus it served to reinforce Christie's persona. Agatha Christie "encouraged the image of the 'Queen of Crime', the 'Duchess of Death'" (Thompson 2007:363) and over time the Agatha Christie persona "came to embody the very idea of English murder" – "Agatha Christie' became the living definition of classic English mystery fiction" (Thompson 2007:377). In fact, she came to embody what the dominant discourse in England at the time regarded as essential to detective fiction. While these works fall outside of the scope of this study, it is useful to note that Christie reinforces the stereotypical image of a 'English detective fiction author' in the character of Mrs Ariadne Oliver in *Cards on the Table*, *Mrs GcGinty's Dead*, *Dead Man's Folly*, *The Pale Horse*, *Third Girl*, *Hallowe'en Party*, and *Elephants Can Remember*. Mrs Oliver "is generally accepted as Christie's own alter ego. She is a middle-aged, successful and prolific writer of detective fiction and creator of a foreign detective, the Finnish Sven Hjerson. She hates literary dinners, making speeches, or collaborating with dramatists" (Curran 2009:73). Curran emphasises that "[t]here can be little doubt that when Mrs Oliver speaks we are listening to Agatha Christie" (2009:73).⁸

According to Thompson, "all her life Agatha would value the ability to maintain a façade" (2007:82). During the early twentieth century, the prevalent system of thought considered it to be a sign of decorum and good breeding not to show emotion. Christie has Miss Marple comment on this in *A Christmas Tragedy*: "I remember my dear mother teaching me that a gentlewoman should always be able to control herself in public, however much she may give away in private" (Christie [1930] 2008a:463).

⁸ While I agree to some extent with Curran, it is necessary to recognise that Christie's caricatured representation of Mrs Oliver militates against this. Mrs Oliver is often portrayed as ridiculous. (I am indebted to Professor Margaret Mackey of the University of Alberta for this observation.)

Christie's mysterious and secretive persona could also function as a mechanism for self-protection. Christie had a strong dislike of the press and publicity, and her façade would have protected her from self exposure. Christie's apparent dislike of the publicity could have been the result of her resentment of the media because of the wave of publicity that followed her infamous disappearance in December 1926. According to Morgan, after this Christie "took pains to establish that she was bewildered and forgetful, the better to sustain the public explanation of the events that followed" (1985:128) – creating a façade and suppressing any information about her disappearance that might have damaged her reputation. Morgan believes that following Christie's disappearance in 1926,

it is as if Agatha became two people. One, Agatha Christie, was regarded by the press and to some degree the public as their property, someone in whom there would be continuing interest, about whom there would always be talk, a popular author.... The other person was Agatha, natural, domestic, an ordinary human being rather than a myth.

(1985:162)

Like Christie, Blyton created a carefully guarded public image and suppressed "information that did not fit the image" (Rudd 2000:24). Druce (1992:9) believes that Blyton's autobiography *The Story of My Life* is contrived and written to reinforce her persona and present an idealised picture of her life: in her autobiography she omits reference to her marriage to Hugh Pollock, her miscarriages, and her parents' troubled marriage. Like Christie's Ariadne Oliver, there are a number of references that claim that George in the *Famous Five* series is based on Blyton. These claims are indicative of the correlation between and reflection of Blyton's life and her writing – like Blyton, George rebels against dominant discourses that reinforce the domestic and submissive role of women. I discuss the character of George in more detail in Chapter Four of this study.

As I have already pointed out, Blyton claimed that she chose to follow a career in teaching because she wanted to write books for children, because it would “provide a useful background to her writing” (Ray 1982:11), and that by becoming a teacher she would be exposed to children and thus “learn how to write about and for them” (Stoney 1992:31). Her alleged desire to write for children is evident in comments such as the following:

I must train as a kindergarten teacher, of course!... I would learn what the children wanted to read and also what they ought to read! I could write all the time I was training! I could try out my stories and poems on the children themselves. They should be my critics.

(Blyton, in Druce 1992:10)

It seems convenient that Blyton, who was writing her autobiography and looking back on her life, insisted that she always wanted to write for children; after all, she was unsuccessful in all her attempts to write for adults. Thus, as I have already suggested, she might have claimed to have had a desire to write for children to compensate for her failure to write books successfully for adults. Rudd believes that Enid Blyton “constructed her own *persona*” (2000:24) to fit society’s image of a children’s writer. In addition, Blyton’s desire to write for adults is an indication of the discourses surrounding literature at a time when children’s literature was marginalised; there was far more status associated with being an author of adult novels than with being a writer of books for children. Children’s books were viewed as inferior to adult books. As I have observed elsewhere, “discourses about literature have held that children’s literature is inferior, or ‘other’ and, therefore, not of interest to purist academics” (Coetzee 2003:42).

The writing process described by Blyton is also unrealistic and idealised. According to Baverstock (2000:27), Stoney (1992:139) and Greenfield (1998:66), Blyton described the writing process as something like a movie being played in her mind as she wrote. These

descriptions are reinforced by Blyton's description of her writing process as she described it in a letter to psychologist Dr Peter McKellar.

I shut my eyes for a few minutes... I make my mind a blank and wait – and then, as clearly as I would see real children, my characters stand before me in my mind's eye. I see them in detail... and I always know their Christian names but never their surname. (I get these out of a telephone directory afterwards!)... As I look at them, the characters take on movement and life... and perhaps I see that one of them has a dog, or a parrot, and I think – 'Ah – that's good. That will liven up the story....That's enough for me... I begin.... The story is enacted in my mind's eye almost as if I had a private cinema there... I am in the happy position of being able to write a story and read it for the first time, at one and the same moment.

(Blyton, in Greenfield 1998:69)

Like Christie's image of herself as the 'Queen of Crime' and the 'Duchess of Death', Blyton's persona created a "brand name" (Rudd 2000:30) that was successfully sold to the world, but to some extent it also protected her private life from being exposed to the press, and the possible judgement that may have been exercised by society about aspects of her life, such as her divorce, that did not conform to the acceptable norm and might well have influenced the sales of her books.

4 CONCLUSION: CHILDREN OF THEIR TIME

In 1950 Agatha Christie was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and on 1 January 1956 she became Commander of the British Empire. In 1971, aged 81, she became Dame Commander of the British Empire. When asked how she would like to be remembered, Christie modestly replied: “I would like to be remembered as a rather good writer of detective stories” (Curran 2009:68). Agatha Christie died of natural causes on the afternoon of 12 January 1976.

In 1957 Enid Blyton began complaining of chest pain and in the early 1960s she began to show signs of Alzheimer’s disease. “She was unable to write anything after 1963 and her last three books were published the following year” (Baverstock 2000:31). Enid Blyton died on 28 November 1968.

Modern ideas feature in the writing of Agatha Christie. Thompson remarks that “[h]er villages are especially alive; and what is rarely appreciated is that they move with the times” (2007:279). As discussed earlier in this chapter, *A Murder is Announced*, written in 1949, reflects the post-war effects on rural British society, while in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Christie refers to the pervasiveness of cocaine use in society when she has Miss Russell comment: “Drugs do a lot of harm. Look at the cocaine habit.... It’s very prevalent in high society” (Christie [1926] 1974:17). Christie also goes on to refer to an article in the *Daily Budget* on the “smuggling of cocaine” (Christie [1926] 1974:136). She even includes reference to real-life murderer Hawley Harvey Crippen, the American physician hanged in 1910 who “cut up his wife” (Christie [1930] 1972:60). Thompson believes that:

For all that she was a product of her background, Agatha was also a creature of her time: she engaged deeply with the middle years of the twentieth-century. 'Agatha Christie' may be fossilised in time but Agatha herself was not. She wrote about the world she lived in: about class mobility in *Endless Night*; political fanaticism in *One, Two Buckle My Shoe*, *Destination Unknown* and *The Clocks*; the effects of war in *Taken at the Flood*, *The 4.50 from Paddington* and *A Murder is Announced*; social engineering in *They Do It with Mirrors*; virtual reality in *At Bertram's Hotel*; café culture in *The Pale Horse*; drug culture in *Third Girl*; changing attitudes towards the death penalty, heredity, the nature of justice, guilt and criminal responsibility. She did not draw attention to the fact that she was writing about these things. That was not her way. Nor did she particularly agree with much contemporary thinking, even though she engaged with it. She was, at root, a late Victorian who believed in God and the human spirit rather than 'ideas'.

(2007:388)

However, in spite of the dramatic changes taking place in society, and the discourses emerging in the first half of the twentieth century, Blyton and Christie were embedded in a number of the ways of thinking, attitudes and belief structures of the time and these, of course helped to create and sustain their horizons of expectation.

While Christie tried to reflect social changes in her writing she held onto these certain values and judged changes from this viewpoint – she was, after all, a creature of her Edwardian upbringing. She “welcomed new friends, new books, plays and films, she discussed new ideas and visited new places, but her tastes and habits were fixed” (Morgan 1985:282).

Agatha Christie is stuck for all eternity at a tea-party in a country vicarage, sticking a fork into her seedcake as the bank manager's wife chokes on a strychnine sandwich. Around her the real world turns, but she remains fixed in 1932: a time when servants were adenoidal, ladies never showed their feelings in public and Jews had to be asked for the weekend, damn them.

(Thompson 2007:385)

Bargainnier refers to Christie's “nostalgia for an earlier, simpler, and ‘more moral’ society” (1980:194), and in *A Murder is Announced* Mrs Blacklock emphasises her preference for her own times. Perhaps Christie, too, was aware of her own feelings of nostalgia.

“I suppose there was once heaps of coke and coal for everybody?” said Julia with the interest of one hearing about an unknown country.

“Yes, and cheap, too.”

“And anyone could go and buy as much as they wanted, without filling in anything, and there wasn’t any shortage? There was lots of it there?”

“All kinds and qualities – and not all stones and slates like what we get nowadays.”

“It must have been a wonderful world,” said Julia, with awe in her voice.

Miss Blacklock smiled. “Looking back on it, I certainly think so. But then I’m an old woman. It’s natural for me to prefer my own times. But you young things oughtn’t to think so.”

(Christie [1950] 1979:24)

However, Miss Blacklock’s comment that “you young things oughtn’t to think so” is evidence of Christie’s awareness of emergent discourses and changes in society, and illustrates her understanding of the fluctuating discourses of the society in which she lived. Christie also includes a number of Victorian elements in her writing, which reflect her own frame of reference. In *A Murder is Announced* Miss Blacklock wears “a set of old fashioned cameos – a Victorian touch” (Christie [1950] 1979:43). Miss Blacklock’s drawing-room is also described as a “[t]ypical Victorian double drawing room” (Christie [1950] 1979:43).

Like Christie, Enid Blyton was “a product of the period in which she lived and wrote” (Ray 1982:11). This point is reiterated by Greenfield who believes that “the Edwardian era in which Enid Blyton grew up and which coloured her conscious and sub-conscious thought” (Greenfield 1998:73). Enid Blyton “was caught in a kind of time-warp, ignorant of modern slang and idioms” (Greenfield 1998:53). The use of terms like ‘queer’ and ‘gay’ have new connotations in comparison to their meaning in Blyton’s time: in the *Noddy* series Noddy is described as ‘gay’, carefree and merry, not homosexual. Similarly, in *Five on Kirrin Island Again* Martin draws pictures of birds, flowers and butterflies – Blyton describes these as “queer pictures for a boy to draw” (Blyton [1947] 1967:116) where the term queer means strange, unusual or inappropriate, not homosexual.

Both the dominant and emergent discourses of the time shape the background which informs Blyton and Christie's lives and works. While Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie reflect some of the emergent discourses of the time in both their writing and in their personal lives, we also see the influences of old-fashioned opinions and beliefs.