Eger Journal of English Studies ***XIII*** *(2013) 37–45*

Evil Rides on the Bus—Space and Female Identities in Margery Allingham's and Josephine Tey's Crime Novels

Renáta Zsámba

Similarly to other genres, Britain's crime fiction could not escape the traumas of the World Wars despite its 'escapist' mission. A return to the country house either in rural areas, small towns or 'villagized' city centres is one of the phenomena which intensified with a growing awareness of mass production and technological development after the Great War. Classical crime fiction which has the middle-class in its focus wonderfully reflects such concerns. The unbearable sight of the present and the terrifying feeling of losing the past deprive the English middle-class of their existence in proper space and time. Their perpetuity in the carefully constructed milieu is constantly informed by new waves of modernity either in various forms of crime or disturbing characters. Allingham and Tey wonderfully demonstrate the agonies of modernity reflected in the character of the young female figure and her choice of places for action. In my paper I seek to explore the battle of the Victorian Angel and the Modern Avenger in their 'space explorations'.

Introduction

In the aftermath of modernisation and the Great War, which in many senses was the embodiment of the negative, threatening aspects of modernisation, classical detective fiction played a key role in constructing a nostalgic image of England, English identity and the English countryside.

The genre was also in a very advantageous position due to growing literacy and the paperback revolution. Crime fiction was booming in the 30s and 40s, as Ernest Mandel points out in *Delightful Murder*, which he attributes to the fact that many found pleasure in reading detective stories to escape from the increased monotony, uniformity and standardization of work and life (71). In thinking about the causes of the genre's increasing popularity, however, one also has to take into consideration the fact that classical crime fiction, besides being escapist literature, also had the English middle-class in its focus.

A novel approach to mid-century crime fiction allows us to interpret the genre as a *lieu de mémoire*[1] of the English middle-class, rather than as simply the source of pure enjoyment. Classical crime fiction was one of those discursive sites where the reinvention and relocation of the English middle class was taking place after the Great War. Both the trauma of the Great War and the weakening and later the loss of the Empire forced the English to reinterpret their own identity. Members of the middle-class chose what and what not to remember. The creation of an allegorical England from pieces of their recollections led to a memory crisis and sometimes to pathological forms of nostalgia.[2] Susan Stewart points out in *On Longing* that this nostalgic attitude of the middle-class gives "the false promise of restoration" (150), adding that "restoration can be seen as a response to an unsatisfactory set of present conditions" (ibid.). To reinforce their existence in modernity, they will only give way to 'particularity', meaning that the reproduced middle-class values will be reflected in a system of customs related to the everyday environment, as Patrick Wright says in *On Living in an Old Country*, referring to Agnes Heller's *Everyday Life* (9). Some features such as everyday routine and the home seem rather significant in the novels, which allows for the supposition that classical crime fiction, despite the rigid form, is able to incorporate elements of the novel of manners and the domestic novel. Their presence, however, brings back the atmosphere of the Victorian period when 'real' Englishness was defined primarily in terms of manners and class structure all of which strongly prevailed even after WWII.

Margery Allingham's and Josephine Tey's novels can be read as typical examples of this cultural function. They were not only each other's contemporaries but also shared views on the effects of modernity and war traumas in their society. In their novels the characters' behaviour and lifestyle are strictly restricted by their immediate environment and movement in space which makes their existence predictable. Any kind of deviation from the rule of everyday or unpredictable attitude is considered as a form of crime which might disturb the illusions of middle-class recollections.

In Allingham's *Police at the Funeral* and Tey's *The Franchise Affair*, one witnesses such inconsistent behaviour in the young female figure who occupies a

[1] Pierre Nora claims that "*Lieux de mémoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory... The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of *lieux de mémoire* – that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need for them" (*Between Memory and History*: *Les Lieux de Mémoire* 12).

[2] In his *Az Ártatlan Ország*, Tamás Bényei explains that the consequences of the weakening and loss of the Empire could be seen in the form of nostalgic reactions as well as in the search of a new Englishness and English tradition. He also refers to Terry Eagleton claiming that the English-myth was reproduced by the English middle-class who sought their identity more in the country lifestyle rather than in the premises of the big cities. Also, the English novels produced characters whose lifestyle was mostly characterized by suppression and utter self-restraint (143).

key position, one as the Victorian Angel and the other as the Modern Avenger[3]. Though very different in many aspects, I reckon that both of these representations can reveal traits of memory crisis, false identities and the consequences of the artificially constructed milieu. In the present paper I intend to analyze how middle-class anxieties, suppressions and the uses of space are reflected in the young female character and how the presence of crime is linked to the New Woman concept in the novels.

Police at the Funeral

In Margery Allingham's *Police at the Funeral*, published in 1931, we come to meet a young girl, Joyce Blount, who is already engaged, lives with a group of old people, the Faradays, in Cambridge, in a Victorian house called Socrates Close. Though she is a member of the family, she is also employed as a servant, a daughter-cum-companion. Her position in the house is rather restricted to domestic jobs as she describes it in the following passage: "I pay the bills and do the flowers and see about the linen and read to the family and all that sort of thing. I play Uncle William at chess, too, sometimes" (16).

Socrates Close is greatly isolated from the outside world with a wall which should be "heightened [according to aunt Caroline], because when people come past it nowadays on buses they can see over" (17). This image of the intimacy of the country house and the home has been linked with Englishness and cultural memory, claims Nóra Séllei by quoting Kathy Mezei, in her book, *A másik Woolf*. Further on she points out that "these houses keep those conservative values alive, retarding the development of the new generation and also being the recurring signifiers of women's wasted lives" (322). In a letter to Allingham's detective, Mr Campion, Joyce's fiancé, Marcus, describes her as follows: "She has a very romantic nature, I am afraid, and hers is a dull life" (*Police at the Funeral* 7). Undoubtedly, Joyce reproduces the qualities associated with the Victorian Angel only to carry on with the tradition of the Faradays. She is under constant control either by her fiancé or her old relatives. Her spatial movement is also watched upon and is restricted to domestic sites. It is only on Sunday that

[3] The analysis of these two in the novels are worthy of interest especially if one considers Rita Felski's essay, "Modernity and Feminism" in which she describes the contradictions between the two categories: modernity and woman. In the nineteenth century, she points out "the distinction between a striving, competitive masculinity and a nurturant, domestic femininity, while a feasible ideal only for a minority of middle-class households, nevertheless became a guiding rubric within which various aspects of culture were subsumed" (18). As compared to this in the early twentieth century "the figure of the New Woman was to become a resonant symbol of emancipation whose modernity signaled not an endorsement of an existing present but rather a bold imagining of an alternative future" (14). Although Felski describes the social, economic changes with respect to gender issues of the 19th and early 20th century, in Allingham and Tey, it seems that the same concerns of binary oppositions such as masculine and feminine, private and public, modern and antimodern return after the wars reflecting the traumas and unwillingness of separating from the past.

the family 'goes out' to church, nevertheless, for the ladies, the going is not linked with walking in the street. "Most of us go by car" (17), Joyce says to Campion, seemingly agreeing with the tradition that the respectable woman does not mingle with the public world of work, city life, bars and cafés, (79), as Elizabeth Wilson describes it in *The Invisible Flâneur*. At this point we understand that after the Great War the urge to maintain the intimate atmosphere of one's private life as opposed to the unknown dangers of the public sphere corresponds to the temporal distinctions between past and present. The recognition of this feature in classical crime fiction takes one back to the 19th century, which "saw the establishment of increasingly rigid boundaries between private and public selves" (18), says Rita Felski in *Modernity and Feminism*. Such spatial dimensions constantly shape and reinforce female identity and the country house is supposed to guard such values. Socrates Close, which was "built some time in the beginning of the last century…spacious, L-shaped and gabled" (26), stands for perpetuity as the one "that hasn't altered outside" (ibid) according to Campion. The features of the building, however, return in the new world with gothic features, as suggested by words like 'gloomy', 'grim dignity and aloofness', which make the house "rather awful" (ibid), says Joyce.

Also, preventing women from public life may allude to the fact that their sexuality could be supervised. Honi Fern Haber turns to Foucault when analysing power relations with regard to the embodiment of gender distinction. In her essay, *Body Politics and the Muscled Woman*, she recalls Foucault's description of the body as a "surface upon which the rules, hierarchies, and metaphysical commitments of culture are inscribed and reinforced" (138). In the novel, Marcus comments on life in the house as follows: "Imagine it, Campion, there are stricter rules in that house than you and I were ever forced to keep at our schools. And there is no escape" (33).

The rules of everyday life are reflected in the female figure who has been "taught to shrink away from the world" (Haber 138). Interestingly enough, Marcus, though well aware of the life and disturbing circumstances in Socrates Close, is not urged to help his fiancée out of the unpleasant conditions and turns a "truculent pink face" (38) when Uncle William, a family member comments on this:

> In the first place there's that dear girl of ours – and yours. I don't think that at the present time the Close is the place for her. Of course I have no authority with young people, but I think if you could put your foot down, my boy, we could get her to go and stay with that pretty little American friend of hers in the town (38).

Reassuring that the environment disciplines the body, Allingham thus brings back the image of the masculine desire for the innocent female body strongly linked to the English landscape and the country house in the novel. Also, the last sentence of the passage 'there is no escape' stands for the impossibility of

female resistance and allowing for Foucault's worrisome remark that "there is no outside of power" (140).

However, the carefully constructed milieu borrows only a false restoration of the desired past. It is not only the intimate web of familial relations which dissolves due to the consequences of denying the present, the house itself transforms from the Great Good Place into the Great Wrong Place as Martin Priestman points out in *P.D. James and the Distinguished Thing*. Tamás Bényei explains in *Az Ártatlan Ország* that the fact of focusing on only what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' prevented one from recognizing the presence of evil. After WWI, this attitude culminated in the inhibitions of everyday life and in classical crime fiction such inhibitions and suppressions were presented in various forms of crime within the family (60). Previously I referred to Foucault's remark on power relations. I believe, though, that in Allingham's novel, the presence of crime gives way to female resistance, to the end of Joyce's restricted life. Realizing that there is no escape from the strict rules, she seems to consider the puzzle of the disappearance of her uncle as an opportunity for her own independence in taking action. She is thrilled by the idea of going to London to consult a suitable specialist and meet a professional sleuth. This, though, is ridiculed by her fiancé in his letter to Campion: "If you could give her at least the thrill of seeing the sleuth himself, perhaps even sleuthing, you would be rendering my eternal debtor he who begs always to remain my dear fellow..." (*Police at the Funeral* 8).

As the investigation becomes increasingly public, we see her starting to deconstruct her position as a Victorian Angel in the family. By talking to 'strangers', thinking, speculating and analyzing the mystery, she gradually forgets herself, her everyday routine and domestic position is slowly abandoned. Jan Assmann says that without repetition the process of passing over the tradition will collapse (Séllei 295). Towards the end of the investigation, Joyce also surprises us by performing activities publicly, smoking or serving brandy to her alcoholic uncle, which required secrecy before. Hypocrisy, blindness, and pretence will all become a frustration for her. A conversation with Campion may justify this idea:

> Even the Queen smokes sometimes, they say. But [Great-aunt Caroline] she thought I ought to have my cigarette in private, so as not to set a bad example to the aunts. It's all rather beastly, isn't it?, she said.
> 'It's queer', he said guardedly. 'I suppose this is the last household in England of its kind?'
> The girl shuddered. 'I hope so', she said. (*Police at the Funeral* 87)

From this passage one might also realize that women's 'crimes' cannot be separated from their familial contexts. Any form of misbehaviour or deviancy will be considered as a violation of the social norm. In *Discipline and Punish*,

Foucault writes that "our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance" (Haber 148). For Joyce, the act of putting herself in danger leads her to self-liberation from all the restraints the family and the house impose on her. She is finally sent away by her aunt to protect her from further violent events. Eventually, the outside will be seen as the sphere for survival.

The Franchise Affair

Josephine Tey published *The Franchise Affair* in 1949, well after Allingham's *Police at the Funeral*, yet the same notions, such as inside and outside, private and public, past and present still prevail after the Second World War. The Franchise, which provides a dwelling for two women, Mrs Sharpe and her daughter, Marion, is nothing particular. It is in Milford, a small town just like any other place in England, but "after all it was England and the English countryside at that: famed for minding its own business" (128). Just like Socrates Close in the other novel, the Franchise is also surrounded by a wall but not high enough to prevent gazes from the top of a double-decker. This time danger is not the product of family inhibitions in the alleged intimacy of the home but it is rather the horrors of the outside linked with sexual liberation and the rapid development of technology. Tey's key character, a 15-year-old girl, Betty Kane, is seen through the eyes of Robert Blair, the Sharpes' legal advisor. He comes to be hired by the ladies when Betty Kane accuses them of kidnap, beating and forcing her to do domestic labour for them.

According to Rita Felski the "the representations of modernity are increasingly feminized and demonized" (31). Tey's novel seems to justify that idea as a sharp contrast is set up between the New Woman and the Victorian Angel. Because the New Woman concept is interpreted from the masculine point of view, we see that her figure is the embodiment of the Modern Avenger. Blair being conscious of his family heritage, class and social status, has memory of what the respectable woman is supposed to be like. Betty Kane's social background, appearance, and oversexed nature[4] all contradict the ideal image of the English middle-class. All these features make it impossible for Blair to believe any of the girl's accusations or in her being innocent.

Betty Kane is an adopted child from a working-class family. She was born in London, and she being only a baby when her parents die in a bomb explosion in the war, the Wynns adopt her and move her to Aylesbury, a small town. Moving a city-dweller from a working-class background alludes to the idea of corrupting the English countryside with 'city dirt'. From an old acquaintance, Blair learns that Betty's birth-mother was a bad wife and a bad mother wanting to "have the child off her hands" (*The Franchise Affair* 85), going out for her

[4] "I can tell you one thing about her. She is over-sexed…with that colour of eye…That opaque dark blue, like a very faded navy – it's infallible" (36). This is what Marion Sharpe says to Robert Blair about Betty Kane at their first encounter.

cigarettes three times a day and dancing with officers at night. The father however, he said "deserved better luck than that woman. Terribly fond of the little girl" (86), he even wanted to go away to the country, but she would not go. Reading these lines, one may realize that in Tey's novel, the countryside is preserved for those who deserve it and who are seen as 'good' people. Betty Kane, also labelled as a cupboard-love kid in London, has eyes set wide apart and of darkish blue colour, a physical feature that identifies her with a professional liar. With such genes, she is doomed to be dangerous and follow her mother's path. Her adopting parents, however, describe her as a nice girl who "has never given a moment's anxiety" (74) and appreciating this, they send her away on holiday to a relative in Larbourough. Blair finds out from Mrs Tilsitt, a family member who lives in an area where the houses are indistinguishable and where one would not leave his car on the street that Betty has spent all her holiday going to the pictures, small restaurants and cafés as well as bus-riding "anywhere the fancy took her" (101). These sites are strongly connected to public places where a respectable woman does not go. Betty Kane loitering in public places all alone corresponds to the Victorian vision of the 19th century when such women were likely to be taken for a prostitute claims Felski. The bus taking her around the country is viewed as an unwanted means of spreading evil in the innocent landscape. Public transport and the demonic woman are both associated with modernity in classical crime fiction although Betty's alleged custody in the attic of the Franchise may also refer to Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. In the book the mad woman is locked away in the attic, a perfect place for hiding society's waste there. Tey ironically approaches the Victorian tradition which is still maintained by the English middle-class. By bringing pieces of the new life into the intimacy of the country, she points out that one cannot disregard evil's presence any longer and wait for it to disappear by itself.

Finally, I would like to focus on Betty Kane being labelled as oversexed. Her stepmother says to Robert Blair that "Betty even as a little girl would never imagine the things...there had to be a real thing there" (77). Her desire for reality drives her to pick up a married man at a restaurant, invite him to the pictures, travel in his car and go off with him to Copenhagen. To hide all of what happens and justify her absence of a fortnight, she makes up a story of her being kidnapped and forced to do domestic labour. Domesticity as such is much emphasised in the novel. One of the dwellers, Marion, keeps saying how much she loathes housework. Given that Betty Kane is kidnapped to do 'domestic' jobs and the other woman refuses it, I claim that this can also be approached from the aspect of sexuality. In *Prostitution*, Kathryn Norberg points out that in the 18th century the French word 'servante' "covered not just housemaids but bar girls, in particular the women who worked in the taverns...Consequently, we may assume that the label *domestique* covered not just maids of all work, but hardened prostitutes as well" (471).

Betty Kane's story comes to her during a bus-ride past the Franchise when she sees over the wall. The wall, I would argue, apart from isolating the private from the public has another symbolic meaning when it comes to female

sexuality before the 1920s. It is described by Franz Eder in his *Introduction* to *Gender and the History of Sexuality* that "Victorianism, which brought about an extensive prudery, also erected a wall of silence around all sexual matters" (3). The respectable woman is sexually passive and talks sex mostly focusing on sexual danger, and on the proliferation of sexual practices outside the sanctity of the home, disengaged from the procreative act" (370) claims Judith R. Walkowitz in *Dangerous Sexualities*.

In Betty's case, we witness that female resistance is realised by fighting back with the female body. She embodies the subversive images of women which is "to revolutionize the dominant power" and thus invites the reader to "re-vision culture" (Haber 141). Blair's anxiety about Betty Kane is not finding out whether she lies or not, it is her freedom, uncontrollable behaviour which he finds unnerving. When he learns that she has picked up a man, the girl "had grown into a monster in his mind, he thought of her only as a perverted creature" (206).

Conclusion

Tey's and Allingham's fiction shows that classical detective fiction could and did reflect the social and political changes in mid-century English society. The fact that many were not prepared to face and recognize modernity, the experience of the world wars and the loss of the Empire urged members of the middle class to prolong and live in the past. Their ignorance of the present as well as clinging to the past was part of a more widespread memory crisis in mid-century Britain, sometimes assuming pathological forms of nostalgia. In their recollections middle-class practices, manners, the Victorian home and the unspoilt English countryside manifested real Englishness. Allingham and Tey set such agonies of the middle-class in the focus of their novels and by introducing subversive characters they gradually deconstruct the artificial setting. The young female character in the novels seems to be a problematic piece of middle-class remembrance. In Allingham she is disturbing because she is urged to find her way out of the constructed milieu by abandoning the everyday rituals connected to her position, and in Tey, she is alarming as she is freed from all control and realizes the new waves of modernity in her own life.

Works Cited

Allingham, Margery. *Police at the Funeral.* 1931. St. Edmundbury, Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press Ltd., 1991.

Bényei, Tamás. *Az Ártatlan Ország*. Debrecen: Debrecen University Press. 2009.

Felski, Rita. "Modernity and Feminism." *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Up, 1995. 11–34.

Eder, Francz, Hall, Lesley, and Hekma, Gert. "Introduction." *Gender and the History of Sexuality in the 18th to the Early 20th Centuries*. Ed. Franz Eder. Budapest: Central European University, 1999. 1–26.

Haber, Honi Fern. "Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman." *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*. Ed. Susan J. Hekman. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996. 137–149.

Mandel, Ernest. *Delightful Murder*: *A Social History of the Crime Story*. London: Pluto Press. 1984.

Nora, Pierre. *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Trans. Marc Roudebush. Web. 5 Dec. 2013

Norberg, Kathryn. "Prostitution." *A History of Women in the West*. Eds. Arlette Farge, Natalie Zemon Davis. The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1993. 458–474.

Séllei, Nóra. *A másik Woolf. Kultúrális (ön)reflexivitás Virginia Woolf harmincas évekbeli szövegeiben*. Debrecen: Debrecen University Press. 2012: 297–328.

Stewart, Susan. "Objects of Desire". *On Longing*. *Narratives of the miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993: 132–151.

Tey, Josephine. *The Fanchise Affair*. 1948. London: Arrow Books, 2009.

Wilson, Elizabeth. "The Invisible Flaneur." *The Contradictions of Culture: Cities, Culture, Women*. London: SAGE, 2001: 72–89.

Wright, Patrick. *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*. London: Thetford Press Ltd., 1985.