The Role of Setting in the Golden Age Detective Novel

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Abstract

Analyses of crime fiction often focus on the plot, characters and their social positioning but tend to pay much less attention to the actual setting. Employing the concept of active and passive relationships of setting and plot, G. J. Demko's notion of cultural and physical space as well as other theories of literary representation of place, the article discusses the role of setting in the Golden Age crime fiction, namely in Agatha Christie's The Mysterious Affair at Styles *and* Third Girl.

Keywords

Setting, space, crime fiction, detective novel, Golden Age, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *Third Girl*

Indisputably, readers all over the world enjoy reading detective stories. In such tales, there is a plot involving crime, a character of a more or less professional detective or a sleuth, several suspects, and a specially designed setting. The end of the story mostly provides a resolution as to who committed the crime and the person is punished or escapes the punishment. Despite this repeated and basic pattern, books about murders, robberies and mysterious acts of crime have been popular with readers for more than one hundred and fifty years.

There are countless contemporary writers producing works of detective fiction, but people still take delight in reading detective novels which were created in the first half of the 20th century. In fact, writing detective novels reached its peak in the inter-war period called the Golden Age including authors such as Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers. Although there have been many books and articles published concerning the classic detective novel, the majority of them focuses on the puzzle presented in the detective story, the investigator's deductive reasoning, or the recurring types of characters and does not pay much attention to the setting, which is often perceived only as a necessary but unimportant background. Nevertheless, the setting may actually prove to have a more significant role in detective fiction than it does in other literary genres. This article shall therefore discuss the features of the settings in British detective novels written during the Golden Age and what the role of the setting is.

Ronald Knox, an author as well as a keen reader of classic detective fiction, commented on the alleged sameness of detective novel settings and said: "If I walked into the detective-story house, I believe I should be able to find my way about it perfectly; it is always more or less the same design."[1]

Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines setting as "the where and when of a story or play; the locale."[2] According to Douglas McManis, "a plot needs to have a setting as introductory background for a story and […] the setting for a plot should be a fictionalized

1 Ian Ousby, *The Crime and Mystery Book: A Reader's Companion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 77, quoted in Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 37.

2 J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 812.

version of the real world milieus which characters would ordinarily frequent on the basis of their socioeconomic status."[3]

Therefore, the geography of the genre was based on ordinary places which people would commonly stay in or visit. Agatha Christie herself said in one of her prologues that the writer does not need to invent his or her own settings; all he or she has to do is to look around and choose a specific place which exists somewhere. That was for her the only unbreakable and inviolable condition: the place must be definite and ordinary (e.g., a train, a hotel, a country house, or a party), and must exist in time and space, it cannot be abstract or unusual.[4]

Thus, for example, in Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* the place seems to play a significant role as it is even included in the novel's title; it tells the reader that the narrative will concern a puzzling event at a specific place. On the very first page of the novel, Christie places Styles, the setting of the crime, into a county in the East of England: "As a boy, though, I have often stayed at Styles, his mother's place in Essex."[5] Most readers would probably imagine a beautiful, romantic landscape with large fields, isolated country manors, or a calm sandy beach below green pastures. As one can see, Agatha Christie is quite terse; she lets the reader create the place in his or her mind when providing this short, one-sentence description. It is mentioned that the mystery at Styles takes place during the First World War in 1916; the place therefore exists in time just as in space.

The setting usually limits the number of suspects to a few individuals. The English country house can separate a small and elite group from the rest of the world. W. H. Auden says that the story must feature a closed society so that the murderer is hidden inside the group (with the murderer included, the society is not innocent). The possibilities to meet this condition are: to employ a group of relatives (e.g., a family gathering in a country house); to place the story inside a closely knit geographical group (e.g., a small old village); to have an occupational group as the suspects (e.g., a theatrical company); or to have the group isolated in a neutral place (e.g., an island).[6]

According to Topolovská, the country house fiction usually includes the arrival of guests who play the role of "a grateful alien", somebody who observes and admires the house and unlocks its secrets. There are more invited than uninvited guests and they mingle together. When they do so, the unfinished business can be finally uncovered and settled.[7] At the beginning of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, this role is played by the first-person narrator, Hastings, who is later joined by the detective, Hercule Poirot, and they solve the crime at Styles together. Hastings constantly admires the country-house setting throughout the novel.

Still concerning the human milieu, Auden states that it is advisable to choose a society with an intricate ritual which is described in detail so the murderer may use his knowledge of the

3 Douglas R. McManis, "Places for Mysteries," *Geographical Review* 68, no. 3 (July 1978): 320.

4 Agatha Christie, *Passenger to Frankfurt* (Pocket Books: New York, 1974), viii, quoted in McManis, "Places for Mysteries," 320.

5 Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (London: HarperCollins, 2013), 1.

6 W.H. Auden, "Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict," Harper's Magazine (May 1948): 407-408.

7 Tereza Topolovská, *The Country House Revisited: Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017), 110.

ritual to successfully commit the crime. "A ritual is a sign of harmony between the aesthetic and the ethical in which body and mind, individual will and general laws, are not in conflict."[8]

Auden further advises that the setting should reflect its inhabitants who are, at least supposedly, honourable and innocent people. The more paradise-like the place is, the greater contrast the murder creates. A corpse found in a well-to-do neighbourhood is going to shock the reader significantly more than a dead body in a slum.[9]

The society and the setting are therefore interconnected. A story must feature a closed set of characters who fit into the setting; furthermore, their appearance is as immaculate as the surroundings so the reader may experience the striking contradiction between the atrocious crime and the peaceful setting. It is also crucial to again stress the fact that the place must be real and believable in the role of the characters' natural habitat. Based on their behaviour, social class and history, it is possible for them to find themselves in the described place where later a violent murder occurs. According to Topolovská, most of the characters in Agatha Christie's country-house detective novels do not work and live on their accumulated capital.[10] Country houses tend to be occupied by a rather homogeneous group of people; such a group of more or less same characters is typically found in a classic detective story. These members of upper and upper-middle classes completely rely on the past and try to maintain the fading gloriousness of their country manors like the characters in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.[11]

Most of the above stated can be applied to a majority of Golden Age detective novels, however, there is one significant difference between American and British crime fiction of the inter-war period. American Golden Age fiction had its so-called hard-boiled mode; in the crime novels, there was a tough private eye and the focus was on social and economic corruption of American cities, indivisible violence, and on how the institutionalized law was incapable of bringing the guilty to justice at the time.[12] The probably best-known hard-boiled character is Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe who, as John Scaggs puts it, often worked on the margins of legality when trying to locate the sources of contamination.[13] The hard-boiled novels written in the United States of America were mostly set in a modern city.[14]

Nevertheless, the urban setting is used in quite a few of Christie's novels as well and her depiction of the city of London is noticeably different from the country-house setting. In *Third Girl*, the character of Ariadne Oliver offers her disapproving opinion on the city when she describes a block of flats as an impersonal, extremely functional building.[15] Shortly after arriving at the block

8 Auden, "Guilty Vicarage," 407.

9 Auden, "Guilty Vicarage," 408.

10 Topolovská, *Country House*, 13.

11 Mary Anne Ackershoek, "The Daughters of His Manhood": Christie and the Golden Age of Detective Fiction," in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 124.

12 Charles J. Rzepka, "Introduction: What is Crime Fiction?," in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Singapore: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 6.

13 Lee Horsley, "From Sherlock Holmes to the Present," in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Singapore: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 33.

14 John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 50.

15 Agatha Christie, *Third Girl* (London: HarperCollins, 2015), 25.

of flats, Mrs Oliver's fear of new technology is revealed because she is supposed to get inside a lift and is reluctant to do so. The lift is compared to "a yawning mouth with a menacing clash" and a "yawning cavern."[16] In addition, she believes that such technology is too advanced: "I shouldn't have thought *that* lift would dare to go out of order. It's so-so-robot-like."[17] It has been suggested by many that the character of Mrs Oliver, a large woman creating detective novels featuring a foreign detective, is the revelation of Christie's true feelings.[18] It is definitely interesting to realize that the reader learns the author's opinion on the London setting through this self-portraying character. It can be claimed that when the urban setting is employed in Christie's works, it is similar to its American counterpart in being full of flaws even prior to the murder.

British Golden Age rural setting is not "contaminated" before it becomes the scene of the crime, so the ending of the story should restore the tranquillity of the pastoral setting which was presented at the beginning. George Grella states that when the murderer is revealed and leaves, the world inside the story may finally come back to its original peacefulness and the group of suspects without the murderer and victim now represents the society as it should be. They are "cleansed of guilt", have no obstacles placed in front of them and may return to living a normal life.[19] In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the murderer and his accomplice are proven guilty when Poirot finds a piece of their compromising letter and it is clear they will face justice and go to prison. Styles regains its peaceful atmosphere, family relationships are improved, Poirot expresses his hope that one day even Hasting may find someone; the story ends on an optimistic note.[20]

Scaggs also claims that the setting may have significant stylistic effects because the incongruity of a murder committed in a pastoral setting is perceived as ironical and creates a shocking contrast between the peaceful setting and the atrocious crime.[21] Yi-Fu Tuan talks about "the juxtaposition of violence with rose gardens and cow pastures" which is perceived as incongruous, as opposed to the city where violence is expected.[22] Whereas American Golden Age setting is already rotten, filled with organized crime inside a large chaotic city, the British rural one contains no flaw until the crime suddenly appears on the scene. For instance, even after the investigation at Styles had already started, "Poirot stopped for a moment, and gazed sorrowfully over the beautiful expanse of park, still glittering with morning dew,"[23] perceiving how innocent and "so beautiful, so beautiful"[24] nature is. In this way, Christie created a striking contrast between the action and the setting, i.e. the murder and the countryside.

No matter whether the crime is committed in the city or in the countryside, its setting must be "anchored" in space. According to Scaggs, the importance of realist spatial setting is evident

16 Agatha Christie, *Third Girl* (London: HarperCollins, 2015), 26.

17 Christie, *Third Girl*, 28.

18 J.C. Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2016), 55.

19 George Grella, "Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 44.

20 Christie, *Styles*, 239-240.

21 Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 50.

22 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 131.

23 Christie, *Styles*, 41.

24 Christie, *Styles*, 42.

in the presence of maps in Golden Age fiction.[25] *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which marks the beginning of the Golden Age, includes two maps depicting the places where the crime happened. The fact that the maps may not be of any help to the reader plays no role; they should fix a specific event in spatial terms, together with the use of titles referring to places.[26]

The history of enclosing maps to detective novels is quite interesting. Professor G. J. Demko in his on-line essays on landscapes of crime claims that a lot of early writers of mystery stories felt it was necessary to include even very simplified maps of the scene. In 1878, Anna Katharine Green, one of the first female writers of this genre, put two primitive maps into *The Leavenworth Case* which showed the bedroom and the study room and were supposed to give the reader basic spatial information about the crime scene. During the Golden Age in Britain, maps became quite popular and were used by Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, American writers S. S. Van Dine, Phoebe Atwood Taylor, and others. Maps of the crime scene reached their heyday between 1943 and 1951 when a publisher called Dell started publishing colourful Dell Mapback series in which the books had beautiful, detailed maps on their back covers. Maps have seldom been used in modern crime fiction; Demko ascribes it to the higher publishing cost and the influence of the post-modern style.[27] Nevertheless, maps still may help the reader understand the setting a bit more and enhance the story.

McManis, similarly to Scaggs and Demko, stresses the importance of sketches and maps and the fact that they belong to the inherited format.[28] He also states that the role of the geographical setting in the works of Christie and Sayers is "threefold".[29] The setting was supposed to provide the place or a number of places for the action of the plot. Having a locale where the crime would be committed was a necessary condition for the format; the mystery must have occurred not only under certain circumstances but also must have occurred somewhere. The story therefore must contain one place or a number of places where the murder is firstly committed, then discovered, and solved at the end of the novel.

The relationship between the setting and the story development is sometimes *passive* and sometimes *active*. A passive relationship means that the setting serves as a story background only, a stage which is rarely described or mentioned. On the other hand, when there is an active relationship, the setting has two additional roles. The specific features of the place may be essential to the commission of the crime and then to the solution. For instance, if there is foul weather playing a role in the tragedy, the setting must be a place where this type of weather can occur. If a person is crushed by a bulldozer, the setting must contain an environment where people typically operate bulldozers and the plot naturally must explain why that person was in that particular location at the time given.

To demonstrate this on Christie's work, the plot of *Third Girl* requires a large city full of people; the girl who thinks she has committed a murder but is not sure needs a crowded place where

25 Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 51.

26 Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 51.

27 "Mapping the Mystery," *G. J. Demko's Landscapes of Crime*, accessed March 15th, 2018, http://www.dartmouth.edu/~gjdemko/maps_mysteries.htm.

28 McManis, "Places for Mysteries," 320.

29 McManis, "Places for Mysteries," 320.

it will be a challenge to discover if somebody has been murdered (as opposed to the countryside where there are only few people who usually know each other). In this story, a London girl who is about to bring Poirot an important piece of evidence is run over when crossing the street and the setting of the hurried city makes it possible and even makes it look like an accident occurring during the rush hour.

Another role of setting is that the elements of place may together form a *puzzle* which needs to be solved so the criminal could be uncovered. Such puzzling elements in the setting could create diversions and misclues and hence make the process of crime-solving more perplexing.[30] Does the hardly accessible cave hide any clues and should the investigator make any effort to get there? Was the person's death an accident caused by incautiousness on the edge of the rock or was it a murder? Did the deceased not know that there is a dangerous swamp in which one could drown? The story may sometimes challenge the reader to determine whether the death was just an accident which had happened for instance due to terrible weather conditions, slippery mud, or poor visibility on the road. In other words, in some cases the setting itself may be the cause of the character's death and thus no murder is committed and, consequently, there is no need to search for the murderer.

When Poirot is investigating the murder at Styles, the objects at the crime scene provide much evidence and Poirot keeps their significance secret until the end of the novel. The setting provides a puzzle which must be solved in order to reveal the criminal. Why is the coffee cup on the floor smashed to powder? Is the small piece of a charred document inside the fireplace the victim's new will? Whose dark green fabric got stuck inside the door bolt? How would anyone be able to enter the locked room?

Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi claim that the setting may be used as a vehicle for essential story elements such as a story conflict. Conflict, defined as "a struggle or difficulty that impedes a character from achieving his goal,"[31] is most evident in the form of an obstacle, *a physical roadblock* (Ackerman and Puglisi use the need to cross a mountain in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* as an example). Such a physical "roadblock", even a possible murder weapon, is provided by the setting in *The Big Four* when Poirot and Hastings are nearly killed by a falling tree in France. This seeming accident was in fact one of the Big Four's attempts to dispose of Poirot and it complicates their investigation.[32] Ackerman and Puglisi also state that a conflict caused by the setting can arise when a character revisits an old place of his or her past which brings back terrible memories from the past.

In order to paint a clear picture of the physical world and the conflict which is about to be provoked, it is effective to have conflicts take place in settings which are thoroughly described and may thus convey information about the characters (e.g., a cold, impersonal living room with no family photos can suggest dysfunctional family relationships).[33] However, as has been noted, it is important that these people fit the setting; a ragged street person causing a large conflict inside

30 McManis, "Places for Mysteries," 321.

31 Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi, *The Rural Setting Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Personal and Natural Places* (N.p.: JADD Publishing, 2016), 16.

32 Agatha Christie, *The Big Four* (London: HarperCollins, 2016), 56.

33 Ackerman and Puglisi, *Rural Setting Thesaurus*, 20-21.

a posh boutique with security guards would be hard to believe. Daniela Hodrová supports this claim when she states that the nature of a place is inseparably connected to the type of a character who stays in or travels through the place. [34] She also claims there is a certain interconnection between places and genres. When the hero in a fairy tale enters a forest, he is expected to meet a dragon, a giant or another magical character there with whom he will have an interaction. Such places are destined to be the setting for a story event.[35]

Demko claims that there are two broad types of the setting, *physical* and *cultural*. The physical environments are further divided into *human created* environments (rooms, buildings, cities, etc.) and *natural* environments (deserts, islands, weather and other natural phenomena). The cultural environments concern the socio-economic characteristics of places, e.g. a rich English drawing room may create a unique texture for the story. He further distinguishes a *dynamic* or *static* place used for a setting. The dynamicity is an essential feature of story settings because places are often changing and these changes concern many aspects. Regarding the physical setting, the weather and the climate may change and thus create a specific mood or convey a certain message to the reader. Thus for example a cultural setting can be marked as dynamic when the detective goes from a posh and upper-class house to a terrible dark alley. Features of a character are conveyed more effectively and subtly by the setting than by an explicit description.[36]

Daniela Hodrová divides the places in literary works into two groups which are also termed *static* and *dynamic*. However, according to her, a static place is understood as a house, and a dynamic place means a journey, together with moving vehicles such as ships or trains. A journey is a series of places connected by the character of a traveller. Static and dynamic places usually occur in fiction together as Hodrová illustrates on the example of Dante's *Divine Comedy* which takes place in hell, purgatory, and heaven. These are static places, but the pilgrim's journey creates a series out of them.[37] The setting in Christie's novels is always a series of places; the story never takes place in one room only. It is necessary for the investigators to talk to the suspects, to examine the crime scenes and the surroundings and to collect evidence. The story in detective novels is therefore never limited to only one place.

Ackerman and Puglisi share the same opinion as Demko concerning the dynamicity; although the setting can be thought of as a fixed element, it may change significantly when a few variables are altered by the author. London cannot change its location, but the time of day, the season, and the weather in London may make the city look considerably different. If one considers London depicted by Christie in *Third Girl* and *The Big Four*, two of her most urban novels, it is a gloomy place full of young people minding only themselves who look very similar to each other. Inside this setting, they lose their individuality and become a mass of bodies, all alike. They are compared to ants, animals, which are outwardly all the same and are not thinking individually.[38]

34 Daniela Hodrová, "Pamět a proměny míst," in *Poetika míst*, ed. Daniela Hodrová (Prague: H & H, 1997), 18. (All translations from Hodrová by the author.)

35 Hodrová, "Pamět a proměny míst," 15.

36 "Defining Place in Crime Fiction," *G. J. Demko's Landscapes of Crime*, accessed March 16th, 2018, http://www.dartmouth.edu/~gjdemko/defining_place.htm.

37 Hodrová, "Pamět a proměny míst," 18.

38 Christie, *Third Girl*, 78.

Christie's city is characterized by comfortable living, great job as well as other opportunities, but also by uniformity, a large number of inhabitants, loneliness, and loss of individuality. In *The Big Four*, Christie puts stress on how mobile the people are in this urban setting; Poirot can comfortably travel by bus, train or taxi to any place in London. Interestingly, McManis states that Christie never described the entire gigantic city, only details or specific elements and that the city's main role was as a "transportation hub."[39] Her characters would go to London to do shopping and then return to the countryside or they would travel from London to escape it for a weekend. There is no beauty in the city, only functionality and comfort, as is evident from these two comments on the appearance of a block of flats: "'Really, Frances, it's like living in a prison block, that building. Wormwood Scrubs or something.' 'Nonsense, Eileen. I tell you, they're frightfully comfortable, these flats.'"[40] Paradoxically, even though there are lots of people around, one can suddenly find himself or herself completely abandoned: "As is the precarious fashion of London, one moment you are amongst people all round you and the next moment there is nobody in sight."[41] There are masses of Londoners who seemingly lose their individuality in the crowds and look alike. If they work, their lives are hurried and stressful and if they do not have money, they yearn for it. Violence is also ever-present in Christie's London until the culprit is exposed and punished.

The factor most influential for the setting is *the mood* defined as "the emotional atmosphere that a piece of writing creates." The mood of a scene will prepare the reader for the upcoming events in the story and may be quite easily set by using a specific kind of weather. Rain signifies a gloomy mood, sunshine can make the mood cheerful, fog feels oppressive, breeze on a day filled with a lot of sunlight gives the impression of comfort and thunder may mean an approaching danger. Seasons of the year are also associated with certain feelings and impressions: spring symbolizes rebirth, new beginnings and second changes, summer with its long hot days is typical for stories about youth and innocence, while autumn may represent a coming change or preparedness and winter is usually connected to despair, death and endings.[42] Siddall also discusses the symbols which nature can carry. For instance, the river, moving water, symbolizes the passing of time, the sun is usually associated with life and power, red roses with love, and dew is connected to youthful beauty. These symbols in nature can be loaded with allusions which were gathered from their previous use, they carry cultural references which may change and, interestingly, even their quite broad accepted meanings may shift over time.[43] *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* takes place during the summer, as the reader is reminded several times, and the countryside resembles an earthly paradise:

> The woods round Styles were very beautiful. After the walk across the open park, it was pleasant to saunter lazily through the cool glades. There was hardly a breath of wind, the very chirp of the birds was faint and subdued. I strolled on a little way, and finally flung myself down at the foot of a grand old beech-tree. My thoughts of mankind were kindly and charitable. […] I was at peace with the world.[44]

39 McManis, "Places for Mysteries," 324.

40 Christie, *Third Girl*, 247.

41 Christie, *Third Girl*, 104.

42 Ackerman and Puglisi, *Rural Setting Thesaurus*, 22-24.

43 Stephen Siddall, *Landscape and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24-25.

44 Christie, *Styles*, 154.

Other instances of idealizing nature include the moment when Poirot stops and admires the beauty of the park around Styles[45] or when he almost forgets about the crime, places two chairs outside and enjoys the view of the village street. Hastings also states: "The fresh air blew in warm and pleasant. It was going to be a hot day."[46]

Apart from using various natural elements to symbolize something positive or negative, the writer can adjust the mood by changing the amount of light. When people turn down their lights at home, they create a calm, relaxing, or even romantic atmosphere. Whether the scene takes place in the daylight or during the night makes a significant difference as familiar places become unknown and threating at night.[47] The effect of such mood-setting devices as the particular location, weather, season of the year or the lighting of the place depends largely on the narrator of the story. The author may even create contrast by providing somebody else's viewpoint because the setting will be perceived differently through another character's eyes. Emotional atmosphere may suggest not only what is currently happening in a scene but also what is about to happen; *foreshadowing* is a literary technique used to hint at what is going to come. It may prove to be very effective when it is connected with emotions such as unease or fear. Because emotions may be easily associated with certain locations, the setting can be a great instrument for hinting at events in the immediate future.[48] Thus the setting, specifically a sudden change of weather can suggest at the fact that something bad is about to happen. At Styles, the heaven-like weather is replaced with a sharp, sighing wind foreshadowing the arrest of an innocent character. The investigators must suddenly face a conflict and exonerate the innocent:

> The weather had broken, and the sharp wind was almost autumnal in its shrewishness. Mary shivered a little, and buttoned her black sports coat closer. The wind through the trees made a mournful noise, like some great giant sighing. We walked up to the great door of Styles, and at once the knowledge came to us that something was wrong.[49]

Horsley offers a particularly interesting explanation of the detective novel setting's function:

> Its settings function to remove the story from a wider socio-political sphere, and this isolated context reinforces the formal closure of the narrative and symbolizes what many later writers and critics have felt to be a constricting intellectual and emotional retreat from uncomfortable realities, the diversion of an insular community turning its back on much that was of importance in inter-war society.[50]

The specified setting makes the story more believable and helps the reader to forget reality, to retreat. Were it not for the setting, the characters would simply "float" somewhere in abstract space and the reading process would not trigger the reader's imagination as much as when there is a well-depicted scenery or a thoroughly described house.

45 Christie, *Styles*, 41.

46 Christie, *Styles*, 94.

47 Ackerman and Puglisi, *Rural Setting Thesaurus*, 25-26.

48 Ackerman and Puglisi, *Rural Setting Thesaurus*, 29.

49 Christie, *Styles*, 185.

50 Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 38.

To summarize, the setting is the "when" and "where" of the story and is based on real ordinary places which people commonly come to or stay in. The classic detective story should contain a closed society with the murderer hidden inside who must be revealed so the setting can be restored to its original state. The setting should also reflect its inhabitants and, according to McManis, can be either passive or active, meaning that it either plays no role and serves only as a background or that it may be vital to the commission or solution of the murder and may create a puzzle to be solved by the investigator and the reader. It can also be used as a vehicle for delivering a story conflict, may shed light on a character's backstory, and can create a physical roadblock, making it difficult for the characters to continue in their investigation.

As has been noted, the setting can be either dynamic or static; according to Demko, a setting is static when there is no change and dynamic when it changes during the course of the story. As part of the physical environment, the season, weather, atmosphere, or lighting of the setting may be altered; such modifications in the setting can foreshadow the upcoming events in the story or create a desired atmosphere. The dynamicity in the cultural environment, the shift from one location to a completely different one, may provide information about various characters occupying the setting. In Hodrová's opinion, a dynamic place is a series of places connected by the character who visits them and a static place is only one location "anchored" in space. Last but not least, the mood, which is a term used to denote the emotional atmosphere of the setting, can be modified by employing various mood-setting devices and may also depend on a character's perception of his or her surroundings.

As Franks jokingly puts it, there is "a dead body to suit every reader's taste."[51] The variety of settings of mysteries led to diverse sub-genres. According to Scaggs, together with the country house, the locked-room mystery was also popular with the reading public in the Golden Age; the stories contained various methods of murdering somebody in "a hermetically sealed environment" and reduced the world to manageable and self-contained proportions. The popularity of these restricted settings inspired authors to create variations; thus a deserted haunted house can be an example of American variation of the country-house and locked-room.[52] Other variations include a snow-bound mystery or a "murder afloat," taking place on a boat or on a ship. The boat or ship murder may attract a wider audience because of its romantic potential. Scaggs claims that if the setting is cramped and claustrophobic, it could resemble a Gothic locale. Moreover, such confined space can provide an opportunity for an accident to happen and consequently complicate the plot, so the choice of an appropriate setting is essential to the story.[53] A country house, a boat, a train, or a plane are a few examples of settings employed in detective fiction.

Discussing the significance of setting, Demko claims that "settings or the geography in a novel can make the difference between a dull piece of work and one that literally captures the mind of the reader and transports that person to a new place and environment".[54] However, the importance of settings in crime fiction is often overlooked as critics rather discuss the form of

51 Rachel Franks, "May I Suggest Murder? An Overview of Crime Fiction for Readers' Advisory Services Staff," *The Australian Library Journal* 60, no. 2 (2011): 133.

52 Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 51-52.

53 Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 53.

54 Demko, "Defining Place."

the puzzle involved, the detective's personality or the investigation process. Nevertheless, we can conclude setting is "critical because it is the milieu or context thrown into disorder" and therefore there must be a specific place in time and space in which the crime occurs. The place is always located in a specific country with its legal system defining how to proceed and how to punish the criminal. Furthermore, the particular place suggests that a certain corresponding type of people is to be found there (e.g. a country house is expected to contain a group of respectable, well-situated people). The physical setting, the accessibility of the place where the crime is committed, and other characteristics are essential to the story and their knowledge is necessary to uncover the culprit. Other features of the given place such as climate, type of government, or culture should be explicitly said or be implicit in the story in order to identify what is transpiring and to have an idea of how the system works.[55]

Using various theories and concepts of (literary) space, the article showed why setting is an indispensable and thus unjustly underestimated component of the detective novel.

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