

There and Back Again

The Enduring Impact of World War I in the Works and Lives of Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis, and on British Society between the World Wars



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Lastly, I want to thank you, dear reader, for taking the time to journey with me through these pages. Whether these genres and works have been a significant part of your life, as they have mine, or if you have never read a book in either fantasy or detective fiction, I hope you take something from this piece about the power of fiction, particularly escapist fiction, and its importance to understanding history and how people experienced it.

Introduction

You step through an antique wardrobe into a snowy glen lit by the gentle light of the sun and a street lamp. Within hours, a timid faun has become your friend, you have discovered that the world inside the wardrobe is much larger than you could have ever imagined, and you have somehow made an enemy of the ice witch who rules it. You retreat back through the wardrobe, but will return to that magical world to face whatever it contains. If you do, you agree to feel all that it and its inhabitants have to offer, whether as a king, a soldier, an outcast, a burglar, or something else entirely. When you eventually journey back home through the wardrobe for the last time, you will bring with you all that you experienced in the other world.

Escapist literature, in particular detective fiction and high fantasy, exploded in Britain in the wake of World War I, at the same time and in contrast to the birth of Modernism, which was characterized by anger at the monumental waste and futility of the war. Escapist literature, on the other hand, found commercial success through an audience hungry for distraction, and delivered clever plots, engaging characters, complex magical systems, and fantastical worlds. Both fantasy and detective fiction soared to new heights in Britain in particular with the pioneering work of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis in high fantasy and of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers in detective fiction. World War I deeply impacted the four authors, so it is unsurprising, though underappreciated, that the milieu of interwar British society so deeply permeates their work. Their novels' resonance with a wide audience speaks to their ability to address the complex impact, both personal and societal, of World War I and its aftermath, and to depict a world after the war with which readers could identify.

Tolkien, Lewis, Christie, and Sayers' novels are both pivotal documents in their respective genres and historical artifacts demonstrating societal-level reformulations of the post-

World War I world. The ways in which high fantasy and detective fiction rebuilt a shattered world through distinct visions of post-war order reflect the lived experiences of both authors and readers. Their works are not merely escapist, though their escapism is as much evidence of the impact of World War I as the ways in which they engage with reality. These novels have towering cultural legacies, and, as they owe much of their formulation to World War I, understanding this cultural history allows us to appreciate the extent to which the war continues to permeate our culture today. Most immediately, however, these novels offer a window into British society between the world wars. World War I irrevocably altered warfare, demography, international law, the global economy, imperialism, public health, national identity, class consciousness, and gender order, and the works examined here are singular products of these phenomena and the ways that British society wrestled with them in the interwar period.¹

Drawing on evidence from letters, autobiographies, diaries, and essays from Sayers, Christie, Tolkien, and Lewis alongside elements of character, plot, narrative style, setting, and world-building from their fictional works, this thesis will analyze the ways in which each author responded to the war and to tensions in interwar British society and resolved them within their own fictional worlds and philosophies. These works' commercial success also provides insight into readers' hopes and desires for the post-war world, as well as the ways in which readers attempted to process their own trauma from their wartime experiences.

Gender sharply divides the two genres. Detective fiction in the interwar period was dominated by the "Queens of Crime" and consumed by a primarily female reader base.² Lewis

¹ Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

² The four Queens of Crime are generally considered to be, in addition to Sayers and Christie, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh. On readership statistics: From Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971). A 1933 report from Poole, England found that 75% of the town's readers were women (Watson, 32). Watson also notes that: "family reading was generally chosen by women" (Watson, 105), and in this way women generated the unprecedented explosion of detective fiction in the interwar period: "there never has been in the whole history of writing anything approaching a similar output of invention on

and Tolkien, meanwhile, largely founded the genre of epic fantasy, with Tolkien still considered the “father of fantasy.” They worked within their self-curated, male enclaves within Oxford and contributed to an image of fantasy as by and for men, despite the significantly female reader base.³

The greatest shortcoming of the existing literature on these works is its failure to examine both genres at once, missing the tension between competing visions for the post-war world.⁴ While there are reasons for this divide, it hinders our understanding of the cultural and social landscape of interwar Britain. Since each genre is both a cultural and individual response to the societal and personal trauma of World War I, both for those who served and those who remained at home, the similarities and differences between them can help us understand reactions to the war more completely. Examining these genres together also allows us to reassess the assumed dichotomy of the gendered experience of the war, to understand how experiences of men and women during the war overlapped and diverged, and to delve further into how varying visions of post-war society in imaginary worlds reflect on the experiences and identities of both authors and readers.

one subject; and whereas most writing is a supply which humbly hopes to create demand, all this detective writing is a clear case of a demand creating supply.” Novelist Howard Spring, quoted in Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 32.

³ It is also worth noting the tradition of fantasy as a domain of male writers preceding Lewis and Tolkien. Tolkien once remarked: “Literature has been (until the modern novel) mainly a masculine business.” J. R. R. Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter, and Christopher Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 50.

⁴ The divide in scholarship is perhaps partially due, in addition to the literary difference between the two genres, to the asynchronous public reaction to these genres; Sayers and Christie rose to fame during the interwar period, while Lewis and Tolkien published the bulk of their most successful work shortly after World War II. Sources do exist that examine Lewis alongside Sayers, but only with respect to their Christian apologetics and philosophy, not their fiction; for example, a chapter in: Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *A Sword between the Sexes? C.S. Lewis and the Gender Debates* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2010).

Scholars recognize the role of the memory of World War I in Sayers' work, both through the atmosphere of her novels and in her characters.⁵ Though the impacts of the war are less obvious in Christie's work, scholarship exists that traces the importance of the war in her mysteries.⁶ Scholarship on Lewis and the war is more limited, overshadowed by scholarship on his theology and hampered by his reticence in speaking about his war experience.⁷ The impact of the war on Tolkien's work is the most developed, tracing, sometimes too far, aspects of his fiction as evidence of his lived experience.⁸ I argue for placing a higher value on using a lens of escapism alongside and in conversation with the role of commemoration in all of these authors' works.

Critics generally argue that detective fiction, introducing female characters with greater agency, including female detectives, alongside male characters that marked a distinct departure from traditional heroes, challenged gender roles in the interwar period.⁹ While scholarship has

⁵ Kathryn Hendrickson, "Whose Trauma? Dorothy L. Sayers's Use of Shell Shock and the Role of Memory in Interwar Detective Fiction," *Clues* 37, no. 2 (2019): 51–60.; Monica Lott, "Dorothy L. Sayers, the Great War, and Shell Shock," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 15, no. 1 (2013): 103–26.

⁶ Especially: Bernthal, Rebecca Mills, J. C., ed. *Agatha Christie Goes to War* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁷ Generally taking the stance that Lewis did not write extensively on the war because it did not affect him deeply: Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979). One of the most ardent proponents of the impact of the war on Lewis remains: K. J. Gilchrist, *A Morning after War: C.S. Lewis and WWI* (New York: P. Lang, 2005).

⁸ Including: John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-Earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); Theresa Freda Nicolay, *Tolkien and the Modernists: Literary Responses to the Dark New Days of the 20th Century* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014); Janet Brennan Croft, "The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings,'" *Mythlore* 23, no. 4 (90) (2002): 4–21.; Joseph Loconte, *Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War: How J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis Rediscovered Faith, Friendship, and Heroism in the Cataclysm of 1914-18* (Colorado Springs, CO: Nelson Books, 2015).

⁹ Arguing that Golden Age detective fiction launched the archetypal woman who was the detective's equal in a manner heavily coded male, bending their gender roles to accommodate an equalizing masculinity available to both men and women: Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 136.; see also: Sylvia A Pamboukian, *Agatha Christie and the Guilty Pleasure of Poison* (Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); M. Vipond, "Agatha Christie's Women," *International Fiction Review* (1981); For gender fluidity in Sayers' work, see: Sally Beresford-Sheridan, "Bending the Genre: Portraying the Genders of Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey in the Detective Fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers," *Clues* 36, no. 2 (2018): 19–28.; Stephen Armstrong, "Writing Gender Identity through Musical Metaphor in Dorothy L. Sayers's Gaudy Night," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 21 (2017): 146–68.

more completely explored the way that Sayers breaks down gender dynamics, I argue that scholars tend to underappreciate how Christie treats gender with undisguised mockery, using it as yet another tool to mislead the reader.

Lewis and Tolkien's work, meanwhile, is often cast as either highly patriarchal and even misogynistic, or else widely misunderstood. In an early criticism of Lewis and Tolkien's treatment of gender, Doris Myers lamented that, given the freedom of fantasy, they continued to rely on traditional masculine-feminine archetypes.¹⁰ Thirty years later, Sam McBride and Candice Frederick presented a more comprehensive but still deeply critical analysis of the two authors, arguing that *The Lord of the Rings* reflects Tolkien's "desire to maintain his accustomed gender hierarchy," and that Lewis' female characters "are bound by fairly rigid gender roles, which they struggle against to their own unhappiness."¹¹ Though some authors convincingly paint Tolkien and Lewis in more progressive lights, both narratives miss the discomfort with which both authors treat gender and attempt to circumvent it.¹² Neither interpretation—the sexist or misunderstood-progressive—adequately recognizes the tumultuous gender undercurrent of the historical context in which these authors lived, nor do these interpretations consider sufficiently the ways in which both authors were deeply uncomfortable with the gender divide, creating worlds that avoid friction between genders not by strict adherence to Victorian models but by the removal of gender differences entirely.

Scholarship correctly points out the distinctly conservative positions of all four authors but insufficiently appreciates the manner and extent to which the novels of all four authors echo

¹⁰ Doris Myers, "Brave New World: The Status of Women According to Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams," *The Cimarron Review*, no. 17 (October 1971): 13–19.

¹¹ As did: Gretchen Bartels, "Of Men and Mice: C. S. Lewis on Male-Female Interactions," *Literature and Theology* 22, no. 3 (2008): 324–38.; Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, *Women among the Inklings: Gender, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2001), 109, 130.

¹² Derek Pacheco, "'Funny Queer Fits': Masculinity and Desire in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2021): 263–82.

the specific conservatism of middle-class interwar Britain. Tolkien and Lewis' glorification of medievalism compliments the ecocentrism (placing the natural world at the center of societal importance), Romanticism, and rejection of modernity in their works.¹³ Tolkien's benevolent, hierarchical class structure is a political fantasy that smooths over class antagonisms with idealized leaders, while Lewis sweeps class issues under the theological rug, but maintains the same idealized class relations. Sayers and Christie's work, in the absence of the worldbuilding required for high fantasy, has faced greater scrutiny for its portrayals of class, contemporary society, and justice; while some scholars defend their treatment of class as progressive, this aspect of their work marks Sayers and Christie's mysteries as conservative fixtures of the interwar period.¹⁴

All four authors grew up and were educated in largely single-sex environments, were devout Christians, and lived in unusual and often less-than-ideal domestic circumstances. Both Lewis and Tolkien grew up with almost no contact with women. Both lost their mothers at a young age (Lewis at nine, Tolkien at twelve) and studied in all-male environments before and then at Oxford, and all their formative friendships were with men—both lost many of those friends in the war. The Inklings, the famous intellectual-literary circle founded and sustained largely around the Tolkien-Lewis friendship, was an intentionally all-male group.

¹³ John G. West, *Celebrating Middle-Earth: The Lord of the Rings as a Defense of Western Civilization* (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2002).; Jonathan Witt, Jay W. Richards, and James V. Schall, *The Hobbit Party: The Vision of Freedom That Tolkien Got, and the West Forgot* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).; Clare Echterling, "Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Classic Children's Literature, and the Imperial-Environmental Imagination in 'The Chronicles of Narnia,'" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 49, no. 1 (2016): 93–117.; Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Focusing especially on class and gender, and presenting Sayers' work as conservative and highly reflective of the historical moment: Terrance L. Lewis, *Dorothy L. Sayers' Wimsey and Interwar British Society* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1994). Work on justice: J. C. Bernthal, "Killing Innocence: Obstructions of Justice in Late-Interwar British Crime Fiction," *Clues* 37, no. 2 (2019): 31–39.

Tolkien's marriage was overshadowed first by World War I and then by his Oxford life. His devotion to the latter left his wife Edith isolated and resentful, though biographers note his increased devotion to her in the last few years of her life. He idolized her, even while their relationship grew strained from his preoccupation with his Oxford communities, from which he kept her separate.¹⁵ Writing to his son, he remarked: "In this fallen world the 'friendship' that should be possible between all human beings is virtually impossible between man and woman."¹⁶ By "fallen world," Tolkien referred to the time "since Adam fell," implying a perpetual state of affairs rendering friendship between men and women impossible.¹⁷ His own life reflected this philosophy; he viewed his marriage as incompatible with and often a distraction from his male friendships, and he resented Lewis' marriage, blaming it for a dwindling of their friendship.¹⁸

Lewis rejected the idea of marriage until late in life when he met and married Joy Davidman, though he knew she was dying of cancer. Before that, he lived with the mother of a dead World War I comrade; biographers still debate whether they were romantic partners, but it was an unorthodox domestic arrangement regardless.¹⁹ Friendship, for Lewis, was the highest form of human connection, and reserved for men. He once wrote to his friend Bede Griffiths bitterly: "The decay of *friendship*, owing to the endless presence of women everywhere, is a thing I'm rather afraid of."²⁰ In his treatise *The Four Loves*, Lewis presented a less essentialist

¹⁵ Separation of home life and Oxford was normal; Oxford dons were only permitted to marry beginning in 1877, and many remained unmarried. Frederick and McBride remark: "even in the 1950s marriage was considered as failing at one's profession...even for the married members of the university, meals, lectures, committees, and social events, typically encompassing several evening events each week, were predominantly male. The spouses remained in the suburbs, tending children and running the household. These circumstances distanced college members from their families." Frederick and McBride, *Women among the Inklings*, 5.

¹⁶ Tolkien, Carpenter, and Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 48.

¹⁷ Tolkien, Carpenter, and Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 48.

¹⁸ Frederick and McBride, *Women Among the Inklings*.

¹⁹ For: George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (London: Hodder & Stoughton), 1997.; Against: Philip and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), 2015.

²⁰ Letter from C.S. Lewis to Bede Griffiths, quoted in Frederick and McBride, *Women among the Inklings*, 1.

paradigm of the relationships between the sexes, arguing that: “Where men are educated and women are not, where one sex works and the other is idle, or where they do totally different work, they will usually have nothing to be Friends about.”²¹ This implies that without socially constructed gender norms, men and women might naturally be friends, but Lewis’ main framework of gender depended on his Christian theology. He conceived of humanity’s relationship to God as the marriage between humans (gendered female) and God (gendered male): “the Priest at the Altar must represent the Bridegroom [i.e., Christ] to whom we are all, in some sense, feminine.”²²

Christie, meanwhile, was homeschooled until she lost her father at age eleven; she then continued her education at a series of all-girls’ schools. She served as a nurse during World War I, and the war and her work served as the context for her courtship and marriage to Archie Christie. She was deeply in love with him and when Archie announced his intention to leave her for another woman, Agatha disappeared for eleven days, inciting a media frenzy.²³ Combined with a recurring nightmare from childhood (a “Gunman” always appearing in the disguise of a close family member), it is easy to understand why the murderer is so frequently camouflaged in the domestic façade in her mysteries.²⁴

Sayers, by her own account, “was an only child and had practically never seen or spoken to any men of my own age till I was about twenty-five.”²⁵ She lived in close parallel to the

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960), 105.

²² Lewis used these words in a letter to Sayers, unsuccessfully urging her to oppose women’s ordination. C.S. Lewis to Dorothy Sayers, July 13, 1948, Hooper, ed., *Collected Letters*, vol 1, 860, quoted in Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *A Sword between the Sexes? C.S. Lewis and the Gender Debates* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2010), 104.

²³ Sayers actually took part in the “Great Sunday Hunt” in which nearly 15,000 fans searched for the missing novelist. The public contributions to the search were “enough to build a house.” *The New York Herald (European Edition)*, “Finding of Mrs. Christie Sets All England Agog,” December 15, 1926.; *Aberdeen Journal*, “Search for Novelist,” January 5, 1927.

²⁴ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 24-25.

²⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1971), 48.

Inklings, graduating Oxford in 1915, the same year as Tolkien, and forming the Mutual Admiration Society, an all-female student group that met to provide encouragement and criticism on each other's work, lasting decades beyond their Oxford years.²⁶ She specialized in medieval scholarship and, like Lewis, wrote Christian apologetics and works intended to bring Christianity to the masses and revitalize its importance in popular culture.

After graduating from Oxford, Sayers experienced a string of failed relationships, including one that left her with an unplanned pregnancy, which she hid from nearly all her friends and family. After her son's birth in 1924, she left him in the care of her cousin but continued to provide for him and eventually "adopted" him when her Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries allowed her the financial stability to do so. Sayers married war correspondent Captain Oswald ("Mac") Fleming in 1926; they had no children, though she gave her son his last name. Their marriage grew strained as the shell-shock he sustained from World War I worsened and his mental and physical health deteriorated, but they remained married until his death in 1950.

The authors had different attitudes towards gender. Christie capitalized on the murderous discord she so easily sowed between men and women in her fictional domestic settings, while Lewis and Tolkien saw the introduction of women to spaces they held sacred—the Church, Oxford, and their fictional worlds—as a threat. Sayers, meanwhile, offered a rebuttal to the kind of essentialist thinking that led Lewis and Tolkien, and even Christie to some extent, to despair of any kind of harmony between the sexes. In a 1938 address to a women's society, Sayers argued simply:

“I do not know that women, as women, want anything in particular, but as human beings they want, my good men, exactly what you want yourselves: interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures, and a sufficient emotional

²⁶ Sayers would not formally receive her degree until 1920, five years after graduating, when Oxford first conferred degrees on women.; Mo Moulton, *The Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and Her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019).

outlet. What form the occupation, the pleasures, and the emotion may take, depends entirely on the individual. You know that this is so with yourselves – why will you not believe that it is so with us?”²⁷

As she was speaking to a majority-female audience, the address to men was rhetorical; her most famous male adversary in this debate was Lewis, and she posed similar questions to him over their years of correspondence.²⁸

As in her own life, where she conceived of religious roles and doctrine, academic analysis, and personal relationships as issues concerning human beings, not men and women, Sayers’ fictional characters are never defined by their sex, a point which she found some critics struggled to grasp. She reflected that she was once asked by a man:

“how I managed to write such natural conversation between men when they were by themselves...I replied that I had...[made] my men talk, as far as possible, like ordinary human beings. This aspect of the matter seemed to surprise the other speaker...One of these days it may...occur to him that women, as well as men, when left to themselves, talk very much like human beings also.”²⁹

Sayers’ solution to the problem of gender is the most comprehensive and practical of the four authors, and is also the strongest from a literary perspective. Her anti-essentialist approach allows her to depict an engaging and realistic cast of characters, both men and women, while Tolkien omits women nearly entirely, Lewis relies on Christian truisms, and Christie, though a master of plot, creates distinctly two-dimensional characters.

The War

Historian Jay Winter’s analysis of war casualties indicates that, in total, over 6 million men from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland served in the British armed forces; almost 723,000, or 11.6 percent, of these men died in the war, while another

²⁷ Sayers, *Are Women Human*, 44.

²⁸ Sayers, along with several of Lewis’ colleagues and his wife, eventually convinced him to take a less essentialist view of women, though that success did not significantly impact his writing of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

²⁹ Sayers, *Are Women Human* 48-49.

nearly 1.7 million of them, or 27.3 percent, were wounded, and over 163,000, or 2.66 percent, were taken as prisoners of war. The cumulative toll of casualties exceeded a staggering 2.6 million, or over 41 percent of those who served. Those 2.6 million casualties represented roughly 22 percent of the pre-war population of men age 19-49. Casualties occurred unevenly; the men between 20 and 24 years of age who died in the war represented roughly 16 percent of the total 1911 population of the same age group, and men between 17 and 37 years of age registered, between 1914 and 1918, a mortality rate between two and eight times the hypothetical equivalent in the absence of war.³⁰ While Tolkien and Lewis both served in the army, Christie was a nurse and then worked at a dispensary, and Sayers's principal involvement came by caring for her shell-shocked husband after the war. Despite their common religion, race, country of origin, and general socio-economic status, the fact that two were men who served in the war and the other two were women who did not see the front lines represents a significant difference in their lived experience of the war.

Tolkien joined the British Army as a Second Lieutenant in July 1915 after obtaining his degree. In June 1916 he was posted as a signals officer in the 11th Battalion, the Lancashire Fusiliers, and by July he had arrived at the Somme, one of the roughly three million soldiers who would fight in the battle, of which roughly one million would die. Tolkien contracted trench fever, an infection communicated by lice, and was removed to a military hospital on November 8th, 1916. He remained out of action for the remainder of the war, convalescing in various hospitals, which likely saved his life; when his regiment entered action on May 27th, 1918, nearly

³⁰ J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

the entire battalion was killed or taken prisoner.³¹ He later reflected: “by 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.”³²

Lewis entered Oxford in the summer of 1917 and joined its Office Training Corps. Mere months later, on his nineteenth birthday, November 29th, 1917, Lewis found himself, like Tolkien, at the Somme. After being wounded by an off-target British shell that killed two of his comrades on April 15th, 1918, Lewis was transferred to a hospital and underwent a physically and emotionally arduous convalescence, after which he returned to his studies.

Both Tolkien and Lewis wrote extensively during their time in the trenches, a remarkable feat in itself given the conditions. Tolkien began composing the myths of Middle Earth during World War I “in grimy canteens...or by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire.”³³ Lewis developed a reputation for being able to write in extraordinary conditions, and his most vivid recollections from the war were writing, reading, or engaging in intellectual debate with other soldiers. For both men, their fictional worlds gave them a respite from the front, even while their real surroundings permeated their imaginary ones. For Tolkien in particular, although *The Lord of the Rings* was published after World War II, he took great care to explain that the first, not the second world war served as the inspiration and guidance for his writing:

“The crucial chapter ‘The Shadow of the Past’ was written long before the foreshadow of 1939 had yet become a threat of inevitable disaster...The story would have developed along essentially the same lines, if that disaster had been averted...Little or nothing in it was modified by the war that began in 1939 or its sequels.”³⁴

³¹ Joseph Laconte, *A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War: How J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis Rediscovered Faith, Friendship, and Heroism in the Cataclysm of 1914-1918* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 72.

³² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), xxiv (preface to the 2nd edition).

³³ Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: Grafton, 1992), 91.

³⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 6-7 (foreword to the 2nd edition).

Sayers and Christie experienced the war from different, though no less impactful, vantage points. Christie worked as a nurse, while Sayers' husband returned from the war with a debilitating case of shell-shock that placed further emotional and financial stress on her already precarious situation. All four authors experienced the societal-level destabilization, mass grief, and deep-set crisis that haunted British life in the interwar period.

This paper progresses through an investigation into three central themes presented in both genres. The first chapter will examine how the authors' wartime experiences were incorporated into their works through both memorialization and escapism, how trauma is processed, and what role memory plays in these narratives. We will see that each author combines, to different extents, strategies of escapism and memorialization to use their craft to process their own trauma from the war. All four authors create work that thrives in the tension between memorialization and escapism—that is, between reflecting the reality of their lived experiences and the traumas and losses they continued to manage and grieve, and the fanciful construction of meaningful imaginary worlds that provided distraction. Tolkien and Sayers, however, tended to memorialize wartime and ongoing traumas more directly alongside the escapist elements of their work, while Christie, focusing on the intricacies of the plot, accomplished a greater level of escapism even while she engaged in acts of memorialization at a high level. Lewis used escapist strategies most heavily, both in his work and his life. For all four authors the act of writing, whether in pursuit of commemoration or escape, provided a therapeutic approach to reckoning with their experiences.

The second chapter will explore how each author constructed a gender order that remedied the gender issues each author perceived in interwar British society. Though each differs in its precise construction, I argue that all four authors considered gender fundamentally a problem and worked to remove the issue from the societies they constructed. In doing so, each

author rejected Edwardian masculinity in favor of a more complex and less militaristic model. Though their depictions of women are more varied, all expressed discomfort with the gender divide and sought to do away with it—Tolkien by excluding women; Lewis by leaning into a religious allegory; Sayers by creating complex characters who blur gender lines; and Christie by making a parody of gender archetypes that deceive the reader and reveal the inanity of gender stereotypes.

Chapter Three will turn to how the political is constructed in each work, including governmental structure, ideas of law and justice, and class dynamics. Each author, responding to a deep crisis of faith in institutions, provided an ultimately conservative, moral alternative to political problems and exhibited a distinct affinity for the middle-class conservatism of 1930s Britain. We will see throughout that despite the significant differences in their lived experiences during the war and after, in their professional and personal lives, and in their literary work, the four authors overlap significantly in the ways in which they reckon with the war and its impact on their society.

Chapter 1: World War I and Trauma: Memory and Escape

“Keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more.” – J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*.

“Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? . . . If we value the freedom of mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can!”
– Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*.³⁵

Sayers, Tolkien, Lewis, and Christie all wrestled with and sought to make sense of the traumas they experienced during and after the war in their fictional works. Being able to escape the trauma entirely, and creating worlds that defy the conditions that wrought that trauma, is one kind of triumph over the past. Yet, elements of reality, both through memorialization of personal and collective trauma, remain entrenched in these worlds, allowing authors and readers to confront traumatic experiences and overcome them through remembrance. Each author combined strategies of escapism and memorialization in the fabric of their fictional worlds to process their own trauma from the war. The commercial success of these novels speaks to the cultural resonance of this balance between memorialization and escapism.

The genres themselves are well-suited to maintaining the tension between memorialization and escapism. Detective fiction, where the individual death is highly, intimately known, both the victim and the perpetrator identified, and the latter usually punished, cements the distinction between life and death, a distinction made hazy by soldiers living amongst corpses in the trenches and the anonymity of those corpses. The genre of high fantasy seems at first more inclined to escapism, but while Tolkien used the genre to memorialize and process the pain of the war, Lewis used fantasy to escape his memories and experiences of the war entirely, and so high fantasy itself is not bound to either escapism or memorialization.

³⁵ Le Guin, one of the giants of modern fantasy, is here paraphrasing J.R.R. Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories*.

In addition to the sheer magnitude of death World War I unleashed on the world, the war also induced deep-seated societal change. Though the war was less physically debilitating to England than to continental Europe, where vast swathes of land were destroyed, Britain still emerged from the war in severe debt to the United States and grappling with the economic crises of 1918-1920, inflation, unemployment, and a reduction in industrial production. Inter-racial and inter-class encounters also had profound implications for British society; British soldiers fought side by side with soldiers from British colonies, as well as British soldiers from other classes.³⁶ The war also produced new political claims that drew inspiration from the fall of empires in Eastern Europe and the Bolshevik revolution that gave rise to new forces in British politics.³⁷ At the end of the war, the absence of fallen soldiers left millions of bereaved citizens to cope emotionally and financially, while surviving but wounded soldiers represented financial and emotional burdens to their communities.³⁸ Meanwhile, demobilizing and re-acclimating an immense force of men to civilian life who had witnessed and engaged in new levels violence brought the threat of violence home.³⁹ Individuals experienced these micro and macro shifts differently depending on their circumstances, but between wrenching personal grief, shattered trust in the international order, and varied and far-reaching societal destabilization, survivors of the war were almost uniformly forced to reckon with destruction in their personal lives as well as

³⁶ Hilary Buxton, "Imperial Amnesia: Race, Trauma and Indian Troops in the First World War," *Past & Present* 241, no. 1 (November 1, 2018): 221–58.; Richard Fogarty, "Race, Sex, Fear and Loathing in France during the Great War," *Historical Reflections*, 34: 1 (2008).; Brian Fawcett, "The Chinese Labour Corps in France, 1917-1921," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 40 (2000), 33-111.

³⁷ Joshua Sanborn, "The Genesis of Russian Warlordism: Violence and Governance during the First World War and the Civil War," *Contemporary European History*, 19: 3 (August 2010), 195-213.; Peter Gatrell, "War, Refugeedom, Revolution," *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 58: no. 1/2 (2017), 123-46.

³⁸ Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³⁹ Jon Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and the Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain," *Journal of Modern History*, 75: 3 (2003), 557-89.; Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds. *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (The Greater War. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

a vastly changed global order.

In this chapter, I will trace the ways in which personal and societal experiences of World War I shaped the construction of the works of the four authors, and also the ways in which these works sometimes rejected those experiences and the changes brought on by the war. I will examine each author's method of addressing their personal experiences and strategies of dealing with their trauma, beginning with Tolkien and progressing through Sayers, Christie, and finally Lewis. Tolkien and Sayers memorialized their wartime losses most prominently in their works. Tolkien commemorated the heroism and pain he witnessed and experienced in the war, while Sayers paid homage to Mac's shell-shock in her depiction of its impact on Wimsey's life. Christie's work engages in memorialization at a high level, but, even more than Sayers, leverages the detective fiction genre to restore the individualization of death, while her plots, for which she is most famous, draw the reader away from reality and into a psychological puzzle. Lewis to the greatest extent used escapism to both distance himself from the war while fighting it, protecting himself psychologically while physically in the trenches, and move on from the war afterwards. *The Chronicles of Narnia* is likewise the most escapist of these four authors' works.

Tolkien

The Lord of the Rings (LOTR) memorializes the ordinary soldier in the quiet courage of the hobbits, reclaiming their significance from the great futility of the war. Tolkien once wrote to his publisher: "I have always been impressed that we are here, surviving, because of the indomitable courage of quite small people against impossible odds. [The hobbits were made small] to show up, in creatures of very small physical power, the amazing and unexpected heroism of ordinary men 'at a pinch.'"⁴⁰ The central but reluctant heroes of the series, the hobbits (Frodo, Sam,

⁴⁰ The Tolkien Estate, "Letter to Milton Waldman, Publisher, 1951," <https://www.tolkienestate.com/letters/letter-to-milton-waldman-publisher-1951/>.

Pippin, and Merry) hardly resemble the “mythic” figures (the men, elves, wizards, and dwarves). The hobbits allow Tolkien to memorialize his past self and what he went through in the war and his fallen friends, while the mythic figures construct an opposing version of the same world, in which men wage battles heroically and walk away with minimal casualties and a conspicuous lack of psychological damage.

After finishing his quest, Frodo returns to the Shire, only to find that he cannot manage to return to the life he led before, realizing that: “there is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?”⁴¹ The wound he sustains at the beginning of his quest never fully heals, and he is the only character to exhibit lasting physical and psychological damage, allowing Tolkien to pay homage to the shell-shocked and physically disabled veteran, as well as the less visible, but pervasive trauma many, including himself, sustained. At the same time, his isolation of this phenomenon to Frodo allowed him to both honor and make sense of his own experience through writing and to create a world not defined by the trauma of war, for the great warriors like Aragorn who fight in traditional battles transition easily from war into their roles as kings and husbands.

Merry and Pippin’s struggles allow Tolkien to explore other dimensions of his war experience. When Merry finds himself separated from the Fellowship, his crisis echoes Tolkien’s fear, alone at the Somme, having already lost friends and unable to know if the rest were alive: “Everyone he cared for had gone away into the gloom that hung over the distant eastern sky; and little hope at all was left in his heart that he would ever see any of them again.”⁴²

⁴¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954), 268. (Note: we will reference this edition from here on; the previously referenced preface and foreword exist only in the second edition.)

⁴² Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 159.

Like his companions, Pippin is an unlikely hero, reluctant to join the fray and unsure of his own physical or moral strength—he says firmly: “I am not warrior at all, and dislike any thought of battle.”⁴³ Tolkien felt the same when he joined the army; he felt his place was in academia, and had no desire to be wrenched from his studies and forced into the war’s brutal slaughter. He later discouraged his sons from volunteering for the army, and after his son Michael enlisted in the middle of his university career, Tolkien wrote to him: “I was pinched into it all [militarism and the army], just when I was full of stuff to write, and of things to learn; and never picked it all up again.”⁴⁴

Through the hobbits, Tolkien immortalizes the good as well as the suffering from his memories of the war. He acknowledged decades after his service: “My ‘Sam Gamgee’ is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself.”⁴⁵ Sam and Frodo’s friendship is one of the defining themes of the series and bears striking resemblance to the classic comradeship and loyalty of fellow soldiers; Sam even physically carries Frodo up the side of Mount Doom when Frodo is too weakened by the Ring to go any further, starkly reminiscent of Tolkien’s memories of soldiers carrying the wounded through No Man’s Land. Writing *LOTR* allowed Tolkien to immortalize the friends who died in the war and reclaim their loss from its overwhelming purposelessness.

Tolkien passed his technique of using writing as a kind of therapy on to his son Christopher, fighting in World War II, explaining how his earliest writings were a way of coping with the physical suffering, perpetual violence, and chronic fear of war: “I sense amongst all

⁴³ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 39.

⁴⁴ Tolkien, Carpenter, and Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 46.

⁴⁵ Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 89.

your pains (some merely physical) the desire to express your *feeling* about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it from festering. In my case it generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes.”⁴⁶ This technique incorporated an acknowledgement of his loss and suffering alongside creating a world entirely apart from the ethos of modern warfare.

Many of Tolkien’s most haunting recollections did, however, become part of the fabric of Middle Earth. One can hardly read Tolkien’s description of the Dead Marshes—putrid, swampy, with dead faces in the water—without recognizing a depiction of trench life. The orcs’ siege of Gondor, with the hastily constructed trenches, catapult machines, and the orc captains’ careless butchery of their endless supply of troops reveals the depths of Tolkien’s disgust for the manner in which the war was waged. At the same time, the battles feature riders on horseback, sharp-eyed archers, and hand-to-hand combat, where victory is determined by skill. War in Middle Earth involves a dignity and heroic grandeur that was not afforded to Tolkien and his fellow soldiers. The juxtaposition of the two aesthetics creates a unique combination of realism and escapism, a contrast that remains a defining attribute of high fantasy today.

Sayers

Sayers’ lived experience is at first glance the most removed of the four authors from the trauma of World War I, and yet shell-shock, the most recognizable form of wartime trauma, centers more explicitly in her work than in any of the others’. Because of the centrality of Wimsey’s shell-shock, Sayers is the most recognized for creating “at a widely accessible level...fictions which offered [readers] a methodology for re-enacting painful memories and experiences in order to master them.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Tolkien, Carpenter, and Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 78.; Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes are founding stories of Middle Earth that would later become part of *The Silmarillion*.

⁴⁷ Bryonny Muir, “Bringing up the Body (Don’t Mention the War): Traumatic Return in Dorothy L. Sayers’ *The Nine Tailors*,” *English: Journal of the English Association* 66, no. 255 (December 1, 2017): 291.

Sayers' husband survived World War I but in a gradually deteriorating psychological state. His struggle with shell-shock left him in poor health for the rest of his life, affecting their relationship, Sayers' work, and their day-to-day lives.⁴⁸ A letter to her cousin Ivy Shrimpton, then taking care of Sayers' illegitimate son, offers insight into the toll that Mac's mental state took on her life:

“The fact is that Mac is getting so queer and unreliable that is not safe to trust him to do anything at all, and if he is told that he has forgotten anything, he goes into such a frightful fit of rage that one gets really alarmed. The doctors say that he *is* getting definitely queer – but there doesn't seem to be much that one can do about it...due to some kind of germ or disease or shock or something – probably a result of the War...it makes everything very difficult, and explains a lot of what you must have thought slackness and queerness on my own part. It also makes the financial position very awkward, as he can't earn any money, and what with his illness and the difficulty of managing his odd fits of temper and so on, it isn't easy for me to get any work done regularly and properly...I can't explain on paper quite how difficult things are. There seems no remedy for them but patience.”⁴⁹

Writing offered Sayers financial independence, especially important given Mac's inability to maintain a job, but also an escape from and an opportunity to process and give meaning to the daily toll of her husband's shell-shock. She once joked that: “When I was dissatisfied with my single unfurnished room I took a luxurious flat for [Wimsey] in Piccadilly. When I had no money to pay my bus fare I presented him with a Daimler double-six, upholstered in a style of sober magnificence, and when I felt dull I let him drive it.”⁵⁰

Inhabiting Wimsey's wealth provided her with one form of escape, but Wimsey himself is a sort of escapist version of Mac as well; Wimsey, despite his shell-shock, is able to maintain a

⁴⁸ Though his poor health presented a chronic challenge to the couple, they remained married until his death. He even wrote a cookbook (“Gourmet's Book of Food and Drink”) and dedicated it to his wife, “who can make an Omelette.” Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, “Above All, Laughter and Delight,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 1979, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/07/15/archives/above-all-laughter-and-delight-delight-authors-query.html>.

⁴⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, vol. 1 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 341-342.

⁵⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, “How I Came to Invent the Character of Lord Peter Wimsey,” *Harcourt Brace News*, July 15, 1936, quoted in C.S. Lewis Institute, “The Remarkable Dorothy L. Sayers,” <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/the-remarkable-dorothy-l-sayers/>.

remarkable level of competence and gentility. He is not only able to perform a highly intellectual and taxing job, but he also provides an emotionally supportive environment for Harriet to pursue her own work. Sayers, burdened financially with Mac's illness and having to spend so much time managing him, must have longed for a more stable home life. Wimsey's character simultaneously memorializes the reality of shell-shock and provides Sayers an escape, both through vicarious enjoyment of his wealth and through imagining life with a high-functioning version of Mac.

The importance of shell-shock to Wimsey's character is most immediately a recognition and commemoration of the psychological ramifications of the war. He remarks in *Whose Body?*: “[Detective work] is a hobby to me, you see. I took it up when the bottom of things was rather knocked out for me, because it was so damned exciting.”⁵¹ Detecting offers Wimsey, at first, an escape from his own mind into the minds of criminals, but the strain Wimsey puts on his body and mind while on the hunt triggers flashbacks, which in turn often lead him to the criminal.

Wimsey's investigations in *Whose Body?* encapsulate the cyclical nature of his shell-shock, which both enables and is triggered by his detecting. Wimsey's discovery of the murderer's identity is a process of *remembering* rather than realizing: “He remembered—not one thing, nor another thing, nor a logical succession of things, but everything—the whole thing, perfect, complete, in all its dimensions as it were and instantaneously.”⁵² The process of remembering the minute observations stored in the recesses of his mind and the intensity of his thoughts triggers a flashback, making Wimsey believe he is back in the trenches and under German fire, a sound that is actually the rush of water in the cistern.

“‘Hush! No, no—it's the water,’ said Lord Peter with chattering teeth; ‘it's up to their waists down there, poor devils. But listen! Can't you hear it? Tap, tap, tap—

⁵¹ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 120.

⁵² Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 129-130.

they're mining us—but I don't know where—I can't hear—I can't. Listen, you! There it is again—we must find it—we must stop it...Listen! Oh, my God! I can't hear—I can't hear anything for the noise of the guns. Can't they stop the guns?' [Bunter]: 'That's our own sappers at work in the communication trench. Don't you fret about that, sir.'

Lord Peter grasped his wrist with a feverish hand. 'Our own sappers...sure of that?'

'Certain of it,' said Mr. Bunter, cheerfully...

Lord Peter allowed himself to be dosed and put to bed without further resistance. Mr. Bunter...sat grimly watching the younger man's sharp cheekbones and the purple stains under his eyes.

'Thought we'd had the last of these attacks...Been overdoin' of himself.'...An affectionate note crept into his voice. 'Bloody little fool!' said Sergeant Bunter."⁵³

Bunter knows better than to challenge Wimsey's hallucinations, and this is the only instance in which Bunter calls Wimsey "Major." More surprising is that this passage is the only time Sayers invokes Bunter's Sergeant title, thus immersing both the characters and reader fully in the war memory. Wimsey's fixation on the sound of the cistern, which in the flashback he hears as gunfire, later allows him to determine that the murderer committed the crime using the cover of the noise of the cistern, his shell-shock enabling his detecting even as his detecting triggers his symptoms.

Wimsey's confrontation with the murderer, a noted neurologist, under the guise of a patient similarly immerses the reader in a mixture of Wimsey's wartime memories and the complexities and unknown factors of shell-shock. As Wimsey waits for his appointment, he remembers feeling anxiety during a wartime mission infiltrating a German camp. In his conversation with Freke, they discuss shell-shock and Freke's theory that trauma inflicts physical damage on the brain's tissue—given Sayers' frustration that doctors were unable to diagnose or understand Mac's condition, she likely followed the scientific literature on this subject. Freke's

⁵³ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 133-134.

profession, Wimsey's recollections in the waiting room, and their discussions make the details and difficulties of shell-shock inescapable for the reader.

The enabling-and-triggering cycle of Wimsey's shell-shock and detecting is slowly broken by forced confrontation with the contents of his mind and his growing ability to remember and endure those memories. Sayers describes Wimsey's journey to unearth evidence in a graveyard by evoking images of life in the trenches. Sayers's use of the second person drives home to the reader the disorientation and visceral fear of Wimsey's experience:

“The vile, raw fog tore your throat and ravaged your eyes. You could not see your feet. You stumbled in your walk over poor men's graves. The feel of Parker's old trench-coat beneath your fingers was comforting. You had felt it in worse places. You clung on now for fear you should get separated.”⁵⁴

Her use of the second person anticipates the style of several World War I narratives and memoirs, including David Jones' epic poem *In Parenthesis*, where in especially fraught moments he slips unexpectedly from the third to the second person to communicate a sense of immediacy.⁵⁵ After exhuming the necessary body, Wimsey discovers the final piece of evidence that confirms the murderer. To obtain the clue, Sayers forces Wimsey—and the reader—to confront the horror of the trenches, with Parker's comforting presence to guide him through it. In this scene, Wimsey's detecting, instead of triggering his symptoms, gives Wimsey an opportunity to process and overcome a challenging memory, just as Sayers' novels, with their unabashed look at life with shell-shock, gave readers suffering similar challenges or, like her, managing a loved one with such conditions, the opportunity to confront and understand their pain within the escapist framework of an engaging detective story.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 175.

⁵⁵ David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

⁵⁶ For more on the specific impact of the war on both language and rhetoric in English literature, see: Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

The centrality of this complex relationship between Wimsey's shell-shock and his detecting is evidence of the complexity of the lingering psychological effects on all who experienced the war. Wimsey's psychological scars from the war present differently than Sayers' husband's, but they share episodes of intense emotional volatility, malaise, and periods of mental absence (for Wimsey, flashbacks; for Mac, memory loss).

Wimsey is forced to confront the messiness and darkness of his own internal landscape throughout his cases. In *Strong Poison*, the possibility that the victim killed himself is the main factor obscuring the murderer and the theme forces Wimsey to confront, rather than escape, his trauma—in this case, his own suicidal inclinations. Ruminating over the case, Wimsey remarks to himself:

“‘It’s very ungentlemanly to commit suicide without leaving a note to say you’ve done it—gets people into trouble. When I blow my brains out—’
He stopped. ‘I hope I shan’t want to...I hope I shan’t need to want to. Mother wouldn’t like it, and it’s messy.’”⁵⁷

Confronting the implications of suicide forces Wimsey to reckon with thoughts of his own death, and in doing so, understand and separate from them.

Christie

Christie's novels lack the emotional angst of Sayers', but even the good-natured, comical Hercule Poirot and his exploits betray Christie's inescapable past. Her time as a nurse was deeply rewarding, but it exposed her to the carnage of war and her powerlessness in the face of it. Though the fault lines of the trauma of World War I are less stark than in Sayers' work, Christie's fiction is as uniquely a product of World War I as Sayers'. In particular, Christie uses the format of the detective genre to re-establish the line between life and death to correct the great anonymity and ubiquity of wartime casualties.

⁵⁷ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 125.

The historiography of trauma in World War I has long focused on men serving in the trenches, neglecting the stories of the roughly 90,000 nurses who witnessed, experienced, and were traumatized by the horrors of the war.⁵⁸ While it is true that the debilitating effects of shell-shock concentrated in the male population as an obvious result of front-line warfare had significant impact on British society in the interwar period, that does not diminish the war's impact on the largely female medical personnel at the front and in hospitals (like Christie) and on the usually female caregivers who devoted their lives to shell-shocked veterans (like Sayers).

The historiography of World War I nurses' trauma has increased in recent years.⁵⁹ The history of trauma is a deeply gendered one; while shell-shock complicated the viability of traditional masculinity, the dignity of the diagnosis insanity was for so long reserved for men, with female psychological trauma lumped under the contentious label of hysteria.⁶⁰ Margaret Higonnet, for example, challenges the view of war trauma as a male disease by inspecting wartime trauma experienced by noncombatants, while Santanu Das analyzes the specific trauma nurses experienced as a result of their uniquely visceral work.⁶¹ While individual experiences and reactions to those experiences differed, the reality of any World War I hospital would have been brutal. One nurse remembered: "The floor was piled high with bandages, amputated limbs, blood, bits of flesh, the air was filled with narcotics, pus, the reek of blood...shattered

⁵⁸ The figure of 90,000 may be disputed, but multiple encyclopedias cite "Reports on Voluntary Aid rendered to the Sick and Wounded at Home and Abroad, op.cit., p. 180" for the number.

⁵⁹ Margaret R. Higonnet, Ellen N. La Motte, and Mary Borden, eds., *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War* (Boston, Mass: Northeastern University Press, 2001).; Christine E. Hallett, *Containing Trauma: Nursing Work in the First World War* (Manchester, UK; New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2009).

⁶⁰ Amy Milne-Smith, *Out of His Mind: Masculinity and Mental Illness in Victorian Britain* (Manchester University Press, 2022).; Cecilia Tasca, Mariangela Rapetti, Mauro Giovanni Carta, et al., "Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health," *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health: CP & EMH* 8 (October 19, 2012): 110–19.

⁶¹ Margaret R. Higonnet, "Authenticity and Art in Trauma Narratives of World War I," *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no. 1 (2002): 91–107.; Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

limbs...hung from a few scraps of flesh, bad head wounds, hopeless stomach wounds—it was beyond consolation.”⁶² The goriness of the hospital was exacerbated by understaffing, lack of training, and shortage of medical supplies, causing chronic, intense stress. Christie remembered fainting and being hauled out of the room by another nurse the first time she assisted in an operation.⁶³ Nursing did, however, offer significant independence and purpose, and while her experience was intense, it was ultimately a transformative period. She reflected: “From the beginning, I enjoyed nursing. I took to it easily, and found it, and have always found it, one of the most rewarding professions that anyone can follow.”⁶⁴

Her husband, serving in the Royal Flying Corps, reacted to the war differently. After three months of complete separation—Archie at the front, Agatha in hospitals—Christie reflected on the different ways the war had affected them:

“In that short period, I had lived through an entirely new kind of experience: the death of my friends, of a sudden atmosphere of war, of uncertainty, the background of life being altered. Archie had had an equal amount of new experience, though in a different field. He had been in the middle of death, defeat, retreat, fear... The difference between us showed up at once. His own determined casualness and flippancy, almost gaiety—upset me. I was too young then to appreciate that that was for him the best way of facing his new life. I, on the other hand, had become far more earnest, emotional, and had put aside my own light flippancy of happy girlhood. It was as though we were trying to reach each other, and finding, almost with dismay, that we had forgotten how to do so.”⁶⁵

Individuals will naturally develop different coping mechanisms in the face of life-altering events, depending on temperament, environment, and other factors; in Archie and Agatha’s case, the distinction between them was exacerbated by the gender divide and the difference in their

⁶² Elfriede Schulz, *Frontschwester: Ein deutsches Ehrenbuch, Deutsche Tat im Weltkrieg, 1914/1918*, vol. 21 (Berlin: Bernard & Graefe, 1936), 117, 111, quoted in Higonet, “Authenticity and Art in Trauma Narratives of World War I,” 97.

⁶³ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 221.

⁶⁴ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 218.

⁶⁵ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 221-222.

experiences. While Agatha's response reflected a synthesis of the purpose and the challenge of her war work, which became part of her identity and a transformative period with which she engaged emotionally, Archie might have felt cultural pressure to appear unaffected and dismiss the emotional impact of his experience.

Christie commemorated her nursing experiences in her work, but her detective novels also served as an escape from both chaos and boredom in her life. After nursing, she worked at a dispensary and found herself with unexpected free time. She observed coworkers for inspiration for characters and devised clever plots to distract herself the boredom: "Sometimes I would be on duty alone in the afternoon with hardly anything to do but sit...I began considering what kind of a detective story I could write."⁶⁶ Christie's chosen activity to escape would serve her well beyond the war years, in periods of boredom, loneliness, frustration, and anger.

A hasty marriage to Archie in 1914 became real after the conclusion of the war; Christie found herself wrenched from her old life and into her husband's house and life. She remembered: "I *was* slightly lonely. I missed the hospital and my friends there and the daily goings on, and I missed my home surroundings."⁶⁷ Devising elaborate mystery plots and imaginary characters offered her connection, control, and interest in a world that forced her to navigate so many changes in a short time and then bound her to a husband who would in a short time abandon her. For Christie, as for Sayers, the act of writing provided escape and meaning in the midst of a stressful marriage.

While her husband took an escapist approach to the whole experience—"Archie never mentioned the war or his part in it; his one idea in those days was to forget such things"—Agatha Christie did not forget, but nor did she permit her wartime experience to dominate her detective

⁶⁶ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 241, 241-242.

⁶⁷ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 250.

fiction.⁶⁸ Christie's interwar work, like Sayers', is steeped in the high-stakes, societal-level recalibration after the disorientation and wreckage of World War I. As such, her detective novels involve memorialization at a high level, allowing her readers to recognize in her idyllic, domestic settings some of the impacts they must have felt in their own lives. Christie allowed the circumstances and ethos of the war to permeate her novels, from mentioning the lingering effects of wartime rationing on a household to attributing a character's actions to wartime trauma.⁶⁹

Christie's Poirot is, like Sayers' Wimsey, a World War I veteran, but while Wimsey's most notable scars from the war are psychological, World War I forces Poirot to flee his native Belgium and leaves him with a limp, but does not feature prominently in his mental landscape. Poirot did not reflect Christie's wartime and interwar experience nearly as directly as Wimsey did Sayers', but his detective work allowed Christie to explore the intricacies of death and the things she witnessed, and to work within the strict paradigm that murder is a violation of the natural order, and that such violation may be corrected by the logical observation of detail and deduction. Her choice to work within such an idealized paradigm was itself an escapist departure from reality.⁷⁰

As with most detective fiction, Christie's works revolve around the details of death, and of intimately knowing and observing the corpse and its story. The questions the detective asks, and in Christie's case always answers, narrow in on the time, manner, and cause of the victim's death. With what weapon was the killing inflicted, or were they poisoned? By what means? What motive did the murderer have? Why did this death occur? And most importantly, who

⁶⁸ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 234.

⁶⁹ For example, in *Murder at the Vicarage*: "Mr. Redding [seems] only too anxious to be hanged...there's no accounting for tastes...there's a lot of gentlemen went a bit balmy after the war." Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (London: HarperCollins, 2016), 96.

⁷⁰ See also: J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

killed them? Through the process of detection, nearly always involving an actual examination of the corpse, Christie provides her readers with a complete understanding of the events leading up to, during, and after the murder. The promise of resolution, through both punishment of the murderer and knowledge of the circumstances of death, both usually unobtainable luxuries for the bereaved, would have been undeniably comforting to readers.

Though Christie did form relationships with many of her patients, helping them write letters home and learning idiosyncratic details of their lives, others died without her learning their name, and still others died on their way to hospital. The casualty lists—the known dead—contrasted with the battlefields strewn with unidentified corpses, the fields often too dangerous to recover bodies and identification tags. Men declared missing and presumed dead might in fact be prisoners of war, lost, wounded, or otherwise unaccounted for. Details beyond the fact of death and general cause were highly unusual, and the chance to perform a burial far from guaranteed. As many as half of the men killed had no known burial spot, and families could reasonably continue doubting their loved ones had indeed died. The work of the Red Cross and other organizations was essentially detective work.⁷¹ With few reliable sources and often contradicting statements, volunteers had to sift through inadequate evidence and deliver their verdict to anxious and bereaved families.⁷²

As a soldier, Poirot would have witnessed the awful anonymity of death in World War I, but his emotionally detached, energetic, and cheerful detective work makes it easy to forget. His famous reliance on his “little grey cells” assures the reader that he needs only his intellect to unravel the mystery and provide the reader with the same cerebral detachment from the horror of

⁷¹ The Australian unit of the Red Cross led by Vera Deakin, daughter of a former Prime Minister, not only sought to obtain the names of the dead and confirmation of death, but also the “details concerning the last hours, deaths and burials of Australians.” Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 38.

⁷² Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.

death.⁷³ Poirot, like Wimsey, always discovers the villain, the manner of death of the victim, and informs the relevant parties, thus dutifully separating death and life, providing the dead with finality and identification. He does so in an engaging, often humorous, way, and is personally removed from the case, protecting both himself and the reader. In contrast, Wimsey's work triggers flashbacks and he is emotionally invested in his cases, saving both Harriet Vane and his brother from wrongful conviction, making the reader more emotionally invested in the outcome of individual characters.⁷⁴ Poirot thus restores order in a way that Wimsey does not try to; while Wimsey recognizes and honors trauma, Poirot dispatches it. Christie leverages the power of the detective fiction genre to address a pervasive, societal-level trauma with which nearly all her readers would have been familiar—epitomized in the ubiquitous sign of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and other war memorials to the dead—while also providing an engaging and escapist form of entertainment that reduces the problem of the unknown corpse to a clever puzzle which is ingeniously solved by a lovable Belgian detective, or a lovable spinster amateur detective, depending on the novel. Her work, like Sayers', guarantees identification of the dead, and a complete explanation of their story. Poirot's "little grey cells" deliver through a meticulously logical framework results that restore the individualization of death, so different from the war's anonymous, meaningless slaughter.

Lewis

The extent to which the war affected Lewis has been debated by biographers, historians, and literary critics. English professor KJ Gilchrist claims that it impacted him profoundly, arguing that "what Lewis did not say about his war experience" was just as important as what he

⁷³ Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

⁷⁴ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Fiction and the Writing of Trauma, 1914-1934: The Ghosts of World War One* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

did say, citing “the renewal of trauma through remembering” as a reason for reticence and suppression generally in veteran memoirs and interviews, including those of Lewis.⁷⁵ Most others argue that his papers indicate that the war featured very little in his mental landscape because it was simply not as horrific to him as others, and should not be considered a transformative experience in his life.⁷⁶ The war does feature very little in his writings; Lewis once wrote to a child: “I was at three schools...I never hated anything so much, not even the front-line trenches in World War I.”⁷⁷

However, to dismiss the impact of the war on Lewis is to dismiss the power of escapism. Lewis’ recollections of the war indicate that his was a commonly traumatic experience, but rather than allowing his memories of it to dominate his life and work, he leveraged escapism in both his lived experience and fictional work to a level that no other author examined here attempted. In discussing how much he was able to separate first the prospect and then the memories of war from his day-to-day life and consciousness, Lewis admitted:

“I put the war on one side to a degree which some people will think shameful and some incredible. Others will call it a flight from reality. I maintain that it was rather a treaty with reality, the fixing of a frontier. I said to my country, in effect, ‘You shall have me on a certain date, not before. I will die in your wars if need be, but till then I shall live my own life. You may have my body, but not my mind.’”⁷⁸

This treaty was, by his accounts, successful. Lewis was acutely aware of the likelihood of dying in combat, lost many friends, and was hospitalized for long periods with illness and injury.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ K. J. Gilchrist, *A Morning after War: C.S. Lewis and WWI* (New York: P. Lang, 2005), 1-2.

⁷⁶ For example: Carpenter, *The Inklings*.

⁷⁷ C. S. Lewis, Lyle W. Dorsett, and Marjorie Lamp Mead, eds., *C.S. Lewis Letters to Children* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 102.

⁷⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy; the Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Bruce, 1956), 158.

⁷⁹ Lewis reflected in hindsight: “even a temper more sanguine than mine could feel in 1916 that an infantry subaltern would be insane to waste anxiety on anything so hypothetical as his postwar life.” Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 183. Lewis was thus fully aware and willing to confront the reality of death in war but managed to construct a parallel reality that protected him from the lingering effects of that knowledge.

Throughout the landscape of terror and grief, however, Lewis remained safely ensconced in his imaginary worlds, emerging only to engage in intellectual discussions with some of his comrades, tend to personal matters (including taking in Jane Moore, the mother of his fallen friend Paddy), and to execute his day-to-day military responsibilities.

Lewis' depiction of war in his fictional work exemplifies the divide between his lived experience in World War I and his construction of Narnia. Aside from occasionally referencing blood on a sword, or of a minor character's courageous sacrifice, Lewis' battles are markedly bloodless affairs.⁸⁰ The final battle in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is an event of epic proportions, a climactic clash of all of Narnia's creatures, with great casualties on both sides. Some of the casualties are sanitized, turned to stone by Jadis and then restored by Aslan's breath, or saved by Lucy's healing cordial, but the bodies of the dead and dying must have remained under the now-restored sun, and Narnia, like the battlefields of World War I, would have been strewn with corpses and blood, the terrain marred by the trampling of feet, hooves, and paws. However, after Aslan defeats the White Witch, all of that is forgotten: "That night they slept where they were. How Aslan provided food for them all I don't know; but somehow or other they found themselves all sitting down on the grass to a fine high tea at about eight o'clock."⁸¹ Upon close inspection, the idea of having tea on a recent battlefield is unnerving, but that was precisely Lewis' strategy: to disassociate from the details.

Such a strategy apparently worked in real life, where, in accordance with Lewis' "treaty with reality," his beloved books provided him with an alternate, and far superior, world in which to live. He reflected:

⁸⁰ In a rare exception to Lewis' reluctance to kill characters, Roonwit the Centaur dies in *The Last Battle*, and his last words are: "Noble death is a treasure which no one is too poor to buy." Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 717.

⁸¹ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 193.

“But for the rest, the war—the frights, the cold, the smell of the H.E. [high explosives], the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, the sitting or standing corpses, the landscape of sheer earth without a blade of grass, the boots worn day and night till they seemed to grow to your feet—all this shows rarely and faintly in memory. It is too cut off from the rest of my experience and often seems to have happened to someone else. It is even in a way unimportant. One imaginative moment seems now to matter more than the realities that followed. It was the first bullet I heard—so far from me that it ‘whined’ like a journalist’s or a peacetime poet’s bullet. At that moment there was something not exactly like fear, much less indifference: a little quavering signal that said, ‘This is War. This is what Homer wrote about.’”⁸²

Literature and his love thereof protected him in a very real way from the memories that consumed other veterans. In his autobiography, his discussions of the books he read during and after the war and the intellectual transformation he underwent during his years at Oxford are far more animated than discussions of his war experience. For Lewis, escapism was a sufficiently powerful tool to shield him from the trauma of war, a reaction that is at odds with his prolific philosophical musings on any subject of importance to him—his faith, the nature of love, and his wife’s death.⁸³ Escapism was not, therefore, the governing doctrine of his life, but something he applied specifically to his experiences and memories of the war, while in other aspects of his life, exposition served him better. The same might have been true for many of Lewis’ readers who found comfort in Narnia, different to the comfort they and others found in the mournful, triumphant catharsis of Middle Earth, the unabashed engagement with shell-shock in adventures with Lord Wimsey, or the unerringly logical, clinical order Poirot so deftly restores in his cases.

⁸² Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 196.

⁸³ See especially: C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976).; C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1970).; C. S. Lewis, *How to Be a Christian: Reflections and Essays* (London: William Collins, 2018).; C. S. Lewis, *How to Pray: Reflections and Essays* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018).; C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).; C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: Or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).; Lewis, *The Four Loves*.

The Public Appetite for Escapist Content

One of the main benefits of examining fiction is to understand, as Gilchrist put it in his analysis of Lewis, what “is not said.” Such topics as painful and intimate as trauma are seldom discussed with the same alacrity as lighter subjects. The rise of detective fiction in the interwar period and of fantasy in the postwar years speaks to the demand for literary comfort and catharsis. Detective fiction’s meteoric commercial rise makes this point especially well. Symons claimed that “if 1914 is taken as a basis, the number of crime stories published had multiplied by five in 1926 and by ten in 1939.”⁸⁴ At that point, detective fiction constituted roughly 25% of all fiction published, with demand driven especially by the “coffee break and commuter classes.”⁸⁵

Gaining more precise evidence as to what drew readers to these books is more difficult. The British Mass Observation project provides insight largely into the fact that these books were enormously popular in the interwar and postwar periods, consistent with the sales statistics. In responding to questions such as “What are you reading?,” people wrote lists and sometimes explanations. Detective fiction, specifically Christie and Sayers’ most popular titles, dominates these lists, publishing in greater numbers, rising in popularity earlier, and occupying a significant portion of the market.

Many readers admitted to their consumption of detective fiction and fantasy apologetically, emphasizing the classics they had read, but others noted the merits of escapist literature. One British survivor of the war reflected in a response to a 1942 questionnaire: “There was a tendency, a little while back [after World War I], for me to focus on escapist literature of

⁸⁴ Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: New York: Viking; Viking Penguin, 1985), 108.

⁸⁵ Peter Dunn, “Morse, codes and crosswords,” *Independent*, 28 January, 1989.; Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 65.; Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 31.

the detective fiction sort, this being the only kind of literature that does enable me to forget myself.”⁸⁶ Another in 1940 reflected: “I read more...not so much the paper as light books and escapist stuff.”⁸⁷

People are reticent to talk about their psychological connection to wartime trauma; it is easier to say that one is reading the most popular books of the day, even that they provide distraction from the nearly ubiquitous troubles of war past and present. Still, the fact that such a large percentage of the population was reading these books betrays what they were unwilling to confess. The mere fact of these four authors’ commercial success is evidence not only of their genre-defining innovation, but also of the resonance of darker themes that struck a chord with the generation that lived through two world wars. Even Lewis, the most determinedly escapist of our four authors, remarked on the kernel of truth inherent in the best fantasy stories, and the absence of truth in so many realistic stories:

“You can have a realistic story in which all the things and people are exactly like those we meet in real life, but the quality, the feel or texture or smell, of it is not. In a great romance it is just the opposite. I’ve never met Orcs or Ents or Elves—but the feel of it, the sense of a huge past, of lowering danger, of heroic tasks achieved by the most apparently unheroic people, of distance, vastness, strangeness, homeliness (all blended together) is so exactly what living feels like to me...and it is so like the real history of the world: ‘Then, as now, there was a growing darkness and great deeds were done that were not *wholly* in vain.’”⁸⁸

Realism and truth are two separate ideas, and though the four authors differ in the extent and manner in which they favor escapism or memorialization in their work, this tension resonated with a generation (and generations to come) who needed both a shield from a brutal reality and a lens through which to understand and process the truth of their experience.

⁸⁶ Mass Observation, Direct Respondent 1234, reply to May 1942 Directive.

⁸⁷ Mass Observation, Direct Respondent 1127, reply to September 1940 Directive.

⁸⁸ Lewis, *Letters to Children*, 81-82.

Chapter 2: On the Problem of Gender

“*I do hate this differentiation of the sexes.*” – Agatha Christie, *Appointment with Death*

People around the world experienced World War I in vastly different ways; in any particular region, differences in age, class, gender, and simple luck divided wartime experiences further. Women were unable to vote in any of the combatant nations at the outbreak of war, excluding them from the political processes that brought it about. In Britain specifically, the suffrage movement was largely put on hold in order to devote energies to the war effort while women stepped into spaces, and even attire, including pants, previously reserved for men.⁸⁹ On the other hand, in an environment of fervent militarism, going to war was integral to popular conceptions of masculinity. Tolkien delayed his military service until after graduating Oxford, to the chagrin of his family. He later reflected: “In those days, chaps signed up or were scorned publicly.”⁹⁰ Over the course of the war, the dangers, inefficiencies, and falsehoods of this gender paradigm were laid bare.⁹¹

The advent of modern, total war meant women became deeply involved in the war effort. They served as nurses, radio operators, and truck drivers; they established charities and volunteer services for soldiers and orphans and widows of war; and, to the growing anxiety of their societies, they performed jobs previously reserved for men. In addition to these crucial forms of labor, without which the war efforts in any of the combatant countries would have failed, women

⁸⁹ Susan R. Grayzel, and Tammy M. Proctor, eds. *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).; Margaret R. Higonnet, ed., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). For a global lens, see: Mona L. Siegel, *Peace on Our Terms: The Global Battle for Women's Rights after the First World War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁹⁰ Tolkien, Carpenter, and Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 53.

⁹¹ On the strategic invocation of military masculinity for female suffrage, see: Nicoletta Gullace, “*The Blood of Our Sons’: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).; on the social changes of Britain before and after the war, see: Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: Bodley Head, 1965).; on the labor dynamics of this gender paradigm and their political implications, see: Keith Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System since 1911* (London: A. Deutsch, 1979).

continued to perform the traditional child-rearing and housekeeping duties, and, when food conditions deteriorated, were the ones to stand in bread lines for hours to obtain food for their families. The conclusion of war forced a reckoning of this crisis of masculinity alongside deep anxieties and resentments of women's rapidly changing role in society. Though the latter had begun before even the "sex war" and pre-war suffragist movement, they were made immediate and personal by individuals' experience in the war.⁹²

The extension of suffrage in 1918 in Britain to most women over thirty was couched in recognition of women's wartime contributions, but this recognition was isolated and short-lived.⁹³ Sayers commented bitterly: "We will use women's work in wartime (though we will pay less for it, and take it away from them when the war is over). But it is an unnatural business, undertaken for no admissible feminine reason...but simply because, without it all the *Homo* (including the *Vir*) will be in the soup."⁹⁴ Sayers witnessed the expulsion of women from their wartime work, the permeation of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* ("children, kitchen, church") ideology in British culture, and the enduring disconnect between veterans and the home front.⁹⁵ The gendered nature of this divide manifested in veterans' "lingering hostility" towards those who had not fought, especially the 'old men,' who had directed but not experienced the war, and women.⁹⁶

In the gender crisis of the interwar period, two models of masculinity did battle for mainstream recognition. The Edwardian model, with its emphasis on emotional repression,

⁹² Grayzel and Proctor, *Gender and the Great War*.

⁹³ The age requirement for women left around five million out of eleven million adult women disenfranchised and was intended to prevent women from attaining a majority over men after the slaughter of war killed so many.

⁹⁴ Dorothy L Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1971), 65-66.

⁹⁵ Susan Kingsley Kent, "The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War I and the Demise of British Feminism," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3 (July 1988): 232-253.

⁹⁶ Michael Roper, "Manliness and Masculinity: The 'War Generation' and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914-50," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April 2005), 346.

physical exertion, and militarism, came under a new level of scrutiny, not only for the terrible juxtaposition of militarism and the unprecedented slaughter of the war, but also the medical necessity of coping with the widespread psychological damage the war inflicted on veterans.⁹⁷ In particular, cultural responses to the crisis of shell shock and conceptions of courage and cowardice proved difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with Edwardian masculinity's idealization of emotional reticence, physical strength, and the victory of willpower over fear.⁹⁸ It remained, however, a powerful social force and existed in tension with the model of "muscular Christianity" from the mid-nineteenth century, which "had emphasized such qualities as compassion, fairness and altruism."⁹⁹ The men who returned from the front in many cases did so physically and psychologically shattered, and in Britain alone the hundreds of thousands who did not return left families emotionally and financially crippled. The former's presence and the latter's absence lingered as a constant reminder of the fallacy of Edwardian masculinity and militarism.¹⁰⁰

Much of the historiography from the 1980's on masculinity in interwar Britain emphasizes how responses to the psychological crisis of the war prompted a revision to Edwardian masculinity, and that in response to the widespread psychological crisis, new Freudian approaches of psychoanalysis were incorporated in place of the wartime treatment of "cowardice."¹⁰¹ Scholars point to, in particular, *The Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into Shell Shock*, which concluded that "cowardice" was a complex assessment:

⁹⁷ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).; Roper, "Manliness and Masculinity."

⁹⁸ Grayzel, *Gender and the Great War*.

⁹⁹ Roper, "Manliness and Masculinity," 347.

¹⁰⁰ Mosse, *The Image of Man*.

¹⁰¹ This included 306 executions for cowardice in the British army that were retroactively pardoned. Alasdair Brooks, "Shot at Dawn: Memorializing First World War Executions for Cowardice in the Landscape of the UK's National Memorial Arboretum," *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 56, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 28–42.

“The military aspect of cowardice is justified. That seeming cowardice may be beyond the individual's control. That experienced and specialised medical opinion is required to decide in possible cases of war neurosis of doubtful character. That a man who has already proved his character should receive special consideration in cases of subsequent lapse.”¹⁰²

Sources like this indicate that in the wake of the war, cultural responses allowed increased flexibility in popular conceptions of masculinity.

Historiography of the 1990's tends to present a contrasting narrative, that the war only solidified the ideal of Edwardian masculinity. Joanna Bourke points out that techniques drawing on psychoanalysis and Freud's theories were “not the norm,” and that “many experts continued to regard shell shock as cowardice and to emphasize the rebuilding of manliness through physical effort.”¹⁰³ George Mosse takes a similarly dim view of the interwar period, arguing that many post-war poets regarded “the First World War both as an adventure and as a test of manliness... a general feeling prevailed that a new type of man had emerged from the trenches...men of steel loaded with energy, ready for combat.”¹⁰⁴ Michael Roper argues for a mix of the two, with Edwardian masculinity still undeniably present, but shaken by the pervasiveness of shell-shock and, to some extent, the influence of the growing field of psychology.¹⁰⁵

As I discussed in the introduction, Tolkien and Lewis wrote from the context of intense gender divide, strong male friendships in the near-complete absence of women, unorthodox domestic arrangements, and the broader gender crisis from World War I. Sayers and Christie, meanwhile, wrote from a context of volatility in their personal lives, the demise of British

¹⁰² The National Archives, *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock'* (London 1922), 140, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/medicine-on-the-western-front-part-two/war-office-report-on-shell-shock/>.

¹⁰³ Roper, “Manliness and Masculinity,” 344.

¹⁰⁴ Mosse, *The Image of Man*.

¹⁰⁵ Roper, “Manliness and Masculinity.”

feminism alongside the advent of full female suffrage, pushback against women in traditionally male jobs, and the plight of the “surplus women” after the male death toll of World War I. As discussed in the previous chapter, Sayers and Christie lived through the same societal crisis as Tolkien and Lewis, but as women and within their own unique circumstances, experienced it differently. Though each differs in their precise construction, I argue that gender poses a problem for each author. Each sought to build imaginary worlds with an alternative social architecture that resolved the issues inherent in the gender divide. I will proceed through an examination of the presentation of women, men, and finally marriage in their works, considering each author individually and in comparison with the others.

All four authors reformulated the domestic ideal, rejecting it and the nuclear family as remedies for the tensions, sufferings, and political instabilities they saw in their world. Rather than retrieving Victorian gender ideals, they create androgynous worlds, where gender ambivalence is the most stable social framework. All four rejected Edwardian masculinity in favor of a more complex and less militaristic model, incorporating traditionally feminine attributes into male characters, while their approaches to the “Woman Problem” are more varied. Tolkien constructed a nearly uniformly male cast whose scarce female characters provide motivation and means for the abolition of gender in Middle Earth. Lewis vilifies femininity far more, and his female characters are successful because of their devotion to Aslan, the Narnian representation of Jesus in lion form. Lewis represents humanity as gendered female in opposition to God’s maleness, ignoring the significance of gender divisions among humans. Meanwhile, Christie deconstructs the significance of gender by using it as a mis-directive, a tool to create an engaging archetype that deceives the reader, while her detectives, villains, victims, and bystanders are as equally likely to be women as men. Most successful in the pursuit of abolishing

gender, Sayers adopts a determinedly anti-essentialist approach to female emancipation and plays with gender fluidity to blur the distinctions between her male and female characters.

On Women

Tolkien

Tolkien conceives of Middle Earth through his preoccupation with the highly masculine world of the trenches and his Oxford circle, and the few depictions of women in *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*) serve to explore the dangers of strict gender roles (Éowyn), diminish the power of femininity (Galadriel), and provide a marriage advantageous to the narrative arc (Arwen).

Tolkien goes to great lengths to highlight the absence of women. For example:

“...there are few dwarf-women, probably no more than a third of the whole people. They seldom walk abroad...they are in voice and appearance...so like to the dwarf-men that [Men believe] that there are no dwarf-women...As for the men, very many...do not desire marriage, being engrossed in their crafts.”¹⁰⁶

This disdain of marriage in pursuit of one’s craft is very Tolkien-like and fits neatly into the gender order of Middle-Earth; dwarves, both men and the few women, are so engrossed in their art that they have only secondary interest in each other, and the outside world does not have to bother with dwarf-women at all. His depiction of the Ents is even more extreme; Merry and Pippin quickly discover that the Ent-wives have been missing for eons, and that the Ents (male) cannot find them. Tolkien does not trouble to explain how their race continues to exist without women, nor why there was a need to exclude even female trees from Middle Earth. His only justification was: “The only criticism that annoyed me was that it ‘contained no religion’ (and ‘no Women’, but that does not matter, and is not true anyway).”¹⁰⁷ He considered his scant female characters representation enough, an ironic failure of worldbuilding from the author who

¹⁰⁶ Tolkien, *The Return of the King: The Lord of the Rings*, 352.

¹⁰⁷ Tolkien, Carpenter, and Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 220.

pioneered its importance to high fantasy, inventing multiple languages for Middle Earth and writing supplementary histories to complete its lore. These conspicuous, deliberate, and entirely unnecessary exclusions of women construct a world where the problem of gender is largely solved by simply erasing women.¹⁰⁸

Of the three female characters who feature in *LOTR*, Éowyn, Princess of Rohan appears in the greatest number of pages, is most important to the plot, and has the most complex character.¹⁰⁹ Readers are introduced to Éowyn as she endures the unwanted attentions of Saruman's servant, Wormtongue.¹¹⁰ Trapped and alone in her uncle's palace, she seeks death in battle. Gandalf, understanding her desperation, explains to her brother: "You had hordes, and deeds of arms, and the free fields; but she, born in the body of a maid, she had spirit and courage at least the match of yours...doomed to wait upon an old man...her part seemed to her more ignoble than that of the staff he leaned on."¹¹¹ Éowyn's plight, unique among the trials Tolkien's characters endure, is an acknowledgement of the toll gender roles inflicted on women. Éowyn endures sexual harassment, physical imprisonment in a castle, exclusion from any kind of diversion, and the humiliation of confinement to a domestic role. Aragorn's claim that "the deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised" is rather cheap consolation for the depth of Éowyn's despair, and for the suffering of all women in Middle Earth, not only those with "spirit

¹⁰⁸ Frederick and McBride observe: "Middle-earth is very Inklings-like, in that while women exist in the world, they need not be given significant attention and can, if one is lucky, simply be avoided altogether." Frederick and McBride, *Women Among the Inklings*, 108.

¹⁰⁹ There are several minor female characters who appear in at most one scene and add little to the plot or gender landscape: the mystical washerwoman Goldberry; Sam's wife Rosie Cotton; the wise woman Ioreth, the miserly Hobbit shrew Lobelia Sackville-Baggins; and Shelob, the gargantuan and highly sexualized spider, and the only female enemy depicted in Middle Earth.

¹¹⁰ The sexual harassment clearly indicated here is underappreciated. See: Theresa Freda Nicolay and Laura Michel, *Tolkien and the Modernists: Literary Responses to the Dark New Days of the 20th Century* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014).

¹¹¹ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 143.

and courage.”¹¹² Such pithy comfort echoes bitterness that women experienced in the interwar period, with the brief expansion of women’s labor opportunities during the war and the subsequent hostility when the men returned. Éowyn says as much: “All of your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more.”¹¹³

She is the only woman to wield a sword, and though she has a moment of glory defeating the Nazgul, her happy ending concludes with her marriage to Faramir, who “[tames the] wild shieldmaiden of the North!”¹¹⁴ There is a contradiction, then, between Éowyn’s eventual “taming” and the recognition of the evils of the gender order that drove her to seek death in battle in the first place. In compromising his usual exclusion of women and acknowledging the dangers of gender roles, Tolkien ingrains even more deeply the removal of gender as a foundational principle of Middle Earth.

Providing another reason to remove gender from Middle Earth, Galadriel’s arc gestures to the dangers of femininity. When the Fellowship takes refuge in her realm, Frodo, losing faith in his ability to complete his quest, offers Galadriel the Ring. At that moment, she transforms into a terrifyingly beautiful version of herself and offers a prophecy:

“You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!”¹¹⁵

No male Ringbearer increases in beauty by their possession of the Ring—Gollum is a hideous creature, having withered away wretchedly in a dingy cave for centuries, while only the use of

¹¹² Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 58.

¹¹³ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, The Return of the King*, 58.

¹¹⁴ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 243.

¹¹⁵ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 381.

the male pronoun links Sauron to any visual representation. In contrast, Galadriel as a Ringbearer is beautiful and bewitching, capturing men's hearts even as she oppresses them. She resists the temptation, however, refusing the Ring and returning to her usual appearance, saying softly: "I pass the test...I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel."¹¹⁶ Galadriel's strength in refusing the Ring should not be dismissed; while Middle Earth's myths are littered with great men who fail the test, including Denethor, Boromir, and Saruman, she stands with Aragorn, Gandalf, and Faramir as the only (non-Hobbit) characters to be freely offered the Ring and refuse. However, while her male counterparts rise to greater glory after their valiant rejection of evil, Galadriel's choices are to reign as a beautiful, evil, and all-powerful queen or to go into exile, surrendering her throne. Like Éowyn and Arwen, she surrenders power, and in doing so, finds her proper place, relinquishing this uniquely feminine power that Tolkien depicts as inextricably tied to evil.¹¹⁷

We are left with no doubt that gender posed a problem to Tolkien, but he offered no alternative beyond the removal of women and men's liberation from Edwardian masculinity, as we will see later. Tolkien's three most significant female characters from part of this masculinist construction, particularly by showcasing Tolkien's discomfort with, if not women generally, then certainly with gender differences.

Lewis

In contrast to Tolkien, Lewis arranged protagonists throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia* in gender-equal sets, though three of the titles are skewed to emphasize the male protagonists.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 381.

¹¹⁷ For a more sympathetic reading on this episode, see: Verlyn Flieger, *There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale: More Essays on Tolkien* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2017).

¹¹⁸ Polly and Diggory adventure together in *The Magician's Nephew*; Bree and Shasta are joined by Hwin and Aravis in *The Horse and His Boy*; Susan and Lucy with Edmund and Peter in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*; in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace arrives in the place of Peter and Susan

Aslan is the only character to appear in all seven novels, creating a dynamic where gender differences among humans are rendered largely insignificant in devotion to God. Lucy's special relationship to Aslan acts as a placeholder for humanity as female in its marriage to a male God, while Lewis' two witches and Susan code femininity as evil in Lewis' gender order.

Lewis is far more comfortable than Tolkien depicting female villains, in particular beautiful, feminine witches. Jadis, the White Witch, serves as the villain in the first two novels. Lewis describes her through a series of scenes as:

“seven feet tall and dazzlingly beautiful...her height was nothing compared with her beauty, her fierceness, and her wildness. She looked ten times more alive than most of the people one meets in London...an enormous woman, splendidly dressed, with bare arms and flashing eyes, stood in the doorway. It was the Witch... Her teeth were bared, her eyes shone like fire, and her long hair streamed out behind her like a comet's tail.”¹¹⁹

Her attire, long hair, bare arms, and dazzling beauty threaten Aslan's holy kingdom, where female power has no place. Lewis' second witch, the Lady of the Green Kirtle, takes the form of a seductress and serpent and, like Jadis, possesses a striking and otherworldly beauty. The Lady murders Prince Rilian's mother, and later enchants and imprisons Rilian. The first time he sees her in human form, Rilian describes her as “the most beautiful thing that was ever made.”¹²⁰ His mentor Drinian is equally struck by her beauty, though his maturity allows him to evade her seduction; Drinian describes her as:

“the most beautiful lady he had ever seen...she was tall and great, shining, and wrapped in a thin garment as green as poison. And the Prince stared at her like a man out of his wits...It stuck in Drinian's mind that this shining green woman was evil.”¹²¹

to skew the balance slightly, but he is joined by Jill in *The Silver Chair* and *The Last Battle*, restoring the equilibrium.

¹¹⁹ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Magician's Nephew*, 42, 45, 51, 54.

¹²⁰ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Silver Chair*, 576.

¹²¹ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Silver Chair*, 576.

Both Jadis and the Lady bear thematic resemblance to Medusa, which would have appealed to Lewis as a classics scholar; Jadis' wand turns creatures to stone, while the Lady psychologically imprisons her victims, and when that fails, she turns into a snake to dispatch her victims. Their dazzling beauty and conspicuous femininity contrasts against the ordinary appearance of the female protagonists.

Lewis most infamously vilifies femininity in the figure of Susan.¹²² In *The Last Battle*, when the former kings and queens of Narnia return to join Aslan in his everlasting kingdom, Susan is conspicuously absent:

‘My sister Susan,’ answered Peter shortly and gravely, ‘is no longer a friend of Narnia.’

[Jill]: ‘She’s interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up.’”¹²³

Even putting aside her siblings' remarkable indifference to her loss, it is astonishing that Susan should be the one banished, as Edmund and Eustace cause the main disasters in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, respectively. But while Edmund's treachery and Eustace's cowardice are redeemed, it is Susan who falls from grace. While some authors have argued that “nylons and lipstick” represent a worldliness unrelated to gender, it is impossible to ignore the overt criticism of female sexuality. Even if we do take this as a criticism primarily of materialism, Susan's disgrace carries the implication that such sins—of materialism, worldliness, growing up, etc.—are associated with women, and not men.¹²⁴ In Narnia, humanity, flawed and gendered female, achieves salvation through virtue and faith in Aslan, and is rendered largely androgynous in the process, while femininity is an obstacle to

¹²² This is generally referred to as the Problem of Susan by Lewis scholars. Bartels, “Of Men and Mice.”

¹²³ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*, 741.

¹²⁴ Bartels, “Of Men and Mice,” 325.; Alan Jacobs, “A Little Narnian Adventure,” *The New Atlantis* (blog) (January 25, 2014).

achieving this salvation. Masculinity, embodied in Aslan, does not receive the same treatment.

Even Lucy's temptations are coded feminine; in a moment reminiscent of Galadriel's temptation, Lucy looks into a magician's spell book to see a spell that would make her beautiful beyond mortal means:

“She saw herself throned on high at a great tournament in Calormen and all the Kings of the world fought because of her beauty. After that it turned from tournaments to real wars, and all Narnia...[was] laid waste with the fury of the kings and dukes and great lords who fought for her favour. Then it changed and Lucy, still beautiful beyond the lot of mortals, was back in England. And Susan (who had always been the beauty of the family)...looked exactly like the real Susan only plainer and with a nasty expression. And Susan was jealous of the dazzling beauty of Lucy, but that didn't matter a bit because no one cared anything about Susan now.”¹²⁵

She is only stopped from casting the spell by a vision of Aslan on the page. Even as the most righteous and devoted to Aslan of the children, femininity represents a threat, one that she valiantly subdues with Aslan's help. Indeed, moments after overcoming the temptation, she looks up to see Aslan standing in the doorway and “her face lit up till, for a moment (but of course she didn't know it), she looked almost as beautiful as that other Lucy in the picture.”¹²⁶ Like Galadriel diminishing to the West with her morality intact, Lucy attains a lesser beauty from her goodness, a beauty that threatens no one, largely because it offers no temptation to men.

Christie

Christie uses gender to make a fool of her reader. Perhaps her most critically acclaimed mystery, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* employs Christie's signature orchestration of plot, character, and setting to create a puzzle that deceives and misdirects the reader while laying out clues that can lead to only one conclusion. The narrator, Dr. Sheppard, and, as we eventually learn in a dramatic plot twist, the murderer himself, constantly mocks Caroline, his gossiping

¹²⁵ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 495-496.

¹²⁶ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 498.

spinster sister for relying (according to Dr. Sheppard) too much on feminine intuition, but she often stumbles uncannily into the truth. Christie uses these gender stereotypes—the male professional and the nosy, gossiping woman—to mislead the reader into trusting Dr. Sheppard and dismissing Caroline. Similarly, Miss Marple leans into the stereotype of the gossiping spinster who knows all the comings and goings of her small town. The unlikeable Inspector Slack dismisses her, but the vicar instinctively trusts her.

Through Hastings', Poirot's friend and "stooge assistant," comically Victorian perspective, *The Murder on the Links* reads as a survey of damsels in distress who turn out to have their own agendas which Hastings proves unable to see.¹²⁷ The first woman he is besotted with, a "goddess," turns out to be the murderer along with her mother; Dulcie Duveen pretends to faint at the sight of a corpse in order to steal a piece of evidence; and Eloise Renault, the victim's distraught wife, was undertaking a scheme of her own all along.¹²⁸ In the climactic scene of the novel, Poirot and Hastings arrive at the manor in pursuit of the murderer, only to find the door locked and the murderer already inside on the second floor with her would-be victim. The confrontation juxtaposes three feminine archetypes: Dulcie, the boyish acrobat saves Eloise Renault, the physically frail but morally steely matriarch, from Marthe Daubreuil, the deadly, beautiful seductress. While Poirot and Hastings watch helplessly from outside, the significance of each woman is revealed beyond her femininity. Each woman is two-dimensional, but each uses her gender to deceive other characters and, ultimately, the reader. Hastings, burdened by his Victorian adherence to fixed gender roles, is easily duped by his perception of women as women, rather than as people.

¹²⁷ Christie wrote Hastings as a parody of John Watson from the Sherlock Holmes tradition, just as Poirot is something of a parody on Sherlock himself.

¹²⁸ Agatha Christie, *The Murder on the Links* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1923; Project Gutenberg, 2019), Chapter 2: An Appeal for Help, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/58866/pg58866-images.html>.

Sayers

Unlike Christie, Sayers is perfectly forthcoming in her disdain for culturally imposed gender roles. Two of her earliest female characters, Miss Murgatroyd and Miss Climpson, operate as the truth-finders for Wimsey, going under cover for long periods of time and leading an agency of investigating spinsters under the guise of a typing agency, known as the “Cattery,” funded by Wimsey’s fortune. In *Strong Poison*, Miss Climpson undertakes a mock séance to uncover a will crucial to solving the mystery; she deliberately uses the cover of feminine spirituality to distract the suspect from the possibility of her being a detective. Wimsey is forced to wait on the sidelines while his spinster network faces the criminals and gathers evidence. In her creation of the Cattery, Sayers not only subverts a gender paradigm, but also confronts the issue of the “surplus women” after World War I. Wimsey complains: “Miss Climpson is a manifestation of the wasteful way in which this country is run. Thousands of old maids, simply bursting with useful energy, forced by our stupid social system into...posts as companions.”¹²⁹ Such a simple observation of the wildly inefficient division of labor along gender lines might nonetheless have been a fraught claim; long-term unemployment in Britain, concentrated in the working class, chronically plagued British society in the 1930s, and the anxiety surrounding women occupying men’s jobs during the war had hardly disappeared.¹³⁰

The gender balance of Sayers’ characters evolved over her career. Her first novel, *Whose Body?*, has a predominantly male cast, but by her tenth Lord Peter Wimsey mystery, the plot is set in an all-female environment, and practically the only male character is Wimsey himself. She introduced Harriet Vane in *Strong Poison* in 1930, the same year Agatha Christie published her

¹²⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 1987), 48, quoted in P. D. James, *Talking about Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2009), 98.

¹³⁰ N. F. R. Crafts, “Long-Term Unemployment in Britain in the 1930s,” *The Economic History Review* 40, no. 3 (1987): 418–32.

first full-length novel featuring Miss Marple (*Murder at the Vicarage*). It would be too simplistic to reduce Harriet and Miss Marple to the female equivalents of Wimsey and Poirot—they are distinct characters worthy of their own examination—but they do represent turning points of gender balance in these authors’ works.

Harriet Vane is for many scholars the crowning achievement of latent feminism in Golden Age detective fiction.¹³¹ Through Harriet and Peter’s relationship, Sayers blurs gender lines from both sides, incorporating feminine attributes into Lord Peter’s character even as she incorporates traditionally masculine attributes into Harriet’s alongside the traditionally feminine.¹³² In *Gaudy Night*, Peter and Harriet wander about Shrewsbury’s lawns in academic regalia. When Peter is called away, he mistakenly takes Harriet’s gown instead of his own. Harriet reflects: “Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. We’re much of a height and mine’s pretty wide on the shoulders, so it’s exactly the same thing.’ And then it struck her as strange that it should be the same thing.”¹³³ Harriet and Peter’s differences in gender cease to matter; they wear the same attire, are of such a similar build that they can exchange gowns, and are brought onto the most equal intellectual plane of any of their adventures thus far.¹³⁴

Sayers’ anti-essentialism is situated within a distinctly Christian framework. She reflected:

“Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher...who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be

¹³¹ Including: Schaub, *The Female Gentleman*; Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

¹³² Stephen Armstrong, “Writing Gender Identity through Musical Metaphor in Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Gaudy Night*,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 21 (2017): 146–68.

¹³³ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (New York: Bourbon Street Books, 2012), 325.

¹³⁴ It is interesting to note that Sayers plays with gendered clothing norms at various moments; in *Busman’s Honeymoon*, Sayers acknowledges briefly: “In nothing has the whirligig of time so redressed the balance between the sexes as in this business of getting up in the morning. ... Harriet was knotting her tie before the sound of splashing was heard in the next room.” Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon* (New York, US: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 1986), 92, quoted in Schaub, *The Female Gentleman*, 40. Harriet dresses faster and more simply than her now-husband, and with the masculine detail of a tie.

feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend...nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything ‘funny’ about woman’s nature. But we might easily deduce it...from His Church to this day. Women are not human; nobody shall persuade that they are human; let them say what they like, we will not believe it, though One rose from the dead.”¹³⁵

In this sense, Lewis’ gender order is not so different from Sayers’; in comparison to the divine, humans are humans before they are men or women. Lucy is the first at the Cradle and the last at the Cross, always the first to see Aslan and witnessing Aslan’s sacrifice and rebirth at the Stone Table with Susan. Yet, Lewis interprets gender differently from Sayers, who posits that Jesus’ words and actions, rather than representing a theoretical female Church wedding the male divine, are proof of the inanity of socially-constructed gender norms.

On Masculinity

Tolkien

Tolkien’s rehabilitation of masculinity was deeply personal after witnessing the carnage wrought by Edwardian masculinity’s devotion to militarism in World War I. His portrayal of Aragorn and Faramir champions the model of “muscular Christianity.” Both men are sensitive, gentle heroes, skilled in combat but loathing of violence. Faramir declares: “War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all, but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend.”¹³⁶ Tolkien once wrote to an inquiring reader that “as far any character is ‘like me’ it is Faramir—except that I lack what all my characters possess (let the psychoanalysts note!) *Courage*.”¹³⁷ His jovial self-identification as lacking the key attribute of Edwardian masculinity pointedly rejects the model as a whole. In his purely fictional world, however, his

¹³⁵ Sayers, *Are Women Human*, 68-69.

¹³⁶ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 280.

¹³⁷ Tolkien, Carpenter, and Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 232.

characters allow him to depict his ideal masculinity, which significantly includes both conspicuous courage and simultaneously gentleness, a melding of Edwardian and Christian masculinities.

Faramir's revulsion towards war gives voice to Tolkien's resentment of the waste he witnessed at the Somme, even while allowing him to understand his experience of war in a frame that gives it meaning. The celebration of the masculinity of characters who explicitly despise combat and violence points to the kind of masculinity that was eclipsed by the militarism of the latter half of the nineteenth century and World War I. Aragorn, for his part, is the epitome of a knight of King Arthur's court, with his illustrious lineage, military command of both Gondor and the army of the dead, and romance with Arwen. At the same time, he is a reluctant leader, and Tolkien takes care to emphasize his healing abilities and gentleness of spirit alongside his titles and victories in battle. Characters adopting an ideal masculinity is a kind of escapism, allowing Tolkien to dwell amongst fictional men who correct the mistakes he sees in his own world.

Lewis

Like the others, Lewis found Edwardian masculinity largely distasteful, but his reformulation of it depends on Narnia's overarching religious-allegory-framework as he guides his characters towards salvation through devotion to Aslan. Though the kings of Narnia become royalty in more militaristic ways than their female counterparts, they rely on Aslan's approval for legitimacy. For example, Peter's status as king is formalized after killing Jadis' wolf-agent, but Aslan chooses and knights him. The act of killing the grey wolf proves his prowess in battle, but his kingship is derived solely from Aslan's blessing. Likewise, in *Prince Caspian*, Peter engages in single combat with Miraz to buy the Narnians time, but true salvation comes from Lucy and Susan finding Aslan, who awakens the trees and ultimately defeats the enemy. Human

masculinity, steeped in the trappings of medieval militarism, is insignificant and flawed in comparison to Aslan's divine masculinity, ultimately the model for all of Lewis' characters, both male and female.

Lewis defines masculinity in another way as well, by explaining feminine behavior in male human characters. In *Prince Caspian*, when the Pevensies reunite with their Narnian friends, "Peter leaned forward, put his arms round the [Badger] and kissed the furry head; it wasn't a girlish thing for him to do, because he was the High King."¹³⁸ When Narnia is destroyed, Tirian reminds Peter and his fellow kings that it is permissible to cry, as the queens do: "Sirs...the ladies do well to weep. See, I do so myself...It were no virtue, but great discourtesy, if we did not mourn."¹³⁹ Lewis feels it necessary to give his male characters special permission to display outward forms of affection and emotion, something that Tolkien takes for granted, as his male characters often weep, embrace, kiss, and sing, actions that are simply part of their masculinity, though, in the absence of women, that masculinity represents all genders. Lewis' ideal masculinity is a sometimes-clumsy imposition of chivalry onto children whose genders theoretically cease to matter in their devotion to Aslan.

Christie

Poirot mocks English masculinity, warmly embracing and kissing Hastings on any occasion, obsessing over his toilette (most famously, his moustache), retiring to grow vegetable marrows (like Bilbo), taking a special interest in domestic details, and, though he is a veteran, eschewing any kind of physical labor or violence. Poirot's eccentric, effeminate, and distinctly foreign appearance allows him to appear innocuous, but presents a challenge to the idea of English

¹³⁸ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, 396.

¹³⁹ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Final Battle*, 753.

masculinity.¹⁴⁰ *Styles* owed its success in large part to the popularity of its detective and “the exuberant personality of M. Poirot, who is a welcome variation on the ‘detective’ of romance.”¹⁴¹ Poirot, for whom, as Christie says, dust on his lapel would have caused far more distress than a bullet wound, is particularly in tune to domestic clues, which serves him well throughout his cases. In *Styles*, he solves the mystery by noticing that the spills on the mantel have been disturbed after he so carefully arranged them earlier. The police, blundering after footprints, fingerprints, and weapons, miss what Poirot observes in the rich details of domestic life. Poirot’s reverence for, rather than dismissal of, the profound, often violent truths hidden in domestic spaces is a crucial component of both his detecting prowess and masculinity.

Hastings, as a relic of the Victorian era, mocks English masculinity in a different way.¹⁴² The comical gentlemanly instinct works against him in both cases and courtship. He is never able to grasp the full picture of what is happening, to Poirot’s perpetual amusement, and even the reader is allowed to feel superior to him. In *Murder on the Links*, Hastings finds it very proper when Dulcie faints at the sight of the corpse, in keeping with “a powerful postwar urge to see women restored to their proper place in the order of society...unlike the nurses of the First World War, they should very properly fall down at the sight of the prostrate male.”¹⁴³ Hastings is a parody of the masculinity of pre-war society, and through him, Christie mocks those who would return to it after the disaster of World War I.

¹⁴⁰ J. C. Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁴¹ Quoted in John Curran, *Agatha Christie: Murder in the Making; More Stories and Secrets from Her Notebooks* (New York, NY: Harper/HarperCollins, 2011), 72.

¹⁴² Christie, *An Autobiography*, 268.

¹⁴³ Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 36.

Sayers

Lord Peter Wimsey possesses the confidence, sensibilities, including a passion for the finer things in life, and detecting brilliance of Poirot. He is also a far more complex character, with a vulnerability and emotional depth that Poirot lacks. In the words of one 1935 review of *Gaudy Night*: “Lord Peter, the courteous aristocrat and scholar (for he plays many parts) puts the male point of view, one to which few male readers will demur.”¹⁴⁴ Partly by narrative necessity is Wimsey so widely talented—as Sayers notes, he can hardly spend half the novel consulting experts—but his talents are not the defining attributes of either his character or his masculinity. Understanding Wimsey’s masculinity through *Gaudy Night* gives priority to female perception of masculinity, since the novel is set largely from Harriet’s perspective. After multiple books of rejecting his courtship, she begins to see him in another light: “Harriet could find nothing to say to him. She had fought him for five years, and found out nothing but his strength; now, within half an hour, he had exposed all his weaknesses, one after the other.”¹⁴⁵ Only after she discovers his weaknesses does Harriet seriously consider him as a romantic partner. Sayers places a primacy on emotional vulnerability, a direct refutation of Edwardian masculinity.

Another review of *Gaudy Night*, this one from 1979, notes the “backbone of feminism” in Sayers novels, especially in comparison to Christie, and claims: “Wimsey, always a mild-mannered fellow, undergoes an almost total emasculation process before he and Harriet are wed (Yes, Virginia, they do get married). Sayer’s novels go beyond being an entertaining experience. They are a feminist experience as well.”¹⁴⁶ The utility of Wimsey’s particular brand of masculinity has evidently varied dramatically over the years. For the reviewer in 1935 (male),

¹⁴⁴ Simon Harcourt Nowell Smith, “Crime in College,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 9, 1935.

¹⁴⁵ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 323-324.

¹⁴⁶ Kathi Maio, “Oh! Sweet Mystery: More than Christie,” *Sojourner* 4, no. 11 (July 1979): 7.

Wimsey's Renaissance-style expertise in such a variety of subjects represented part of his appeal to male readers. For a critic in 1979, his masculinity served to make him worthy of Harriet and to create a feminist narrative. A 1935 reading of Wimsey's masculinity stands entirely apart from feminism, and should not be overlooked in the quest to codify Sayers as feminist—in part because she herself explicitly rejected such a label.¹⁴⁷ While Wimsey is in many ways a feminist achievement, reviews like this understate the wholesale deconstruction of gender achieved through the blurred gender dynamics of Harriet, Wimsey, and their individual characteristics. Wimsey does not only deconstruct Edwardian masculinity for feminism; he also deconstructs it to rehabilitate masculinity.¹⁴⁸

On Marriage

Marriage, as a potential overlap of gendered spheres, might have presented the four authors with a convenient point of coexistence of the sexes to solve the problem of gender, but the four authors depict marriage at best as successful marriages when the problem of gender has already been solved and at worst as another symptom of the gender problem. All use it sparingly in their work, reformulating the domestic ideal to be an incidental occurrence and maintaining that the resolution of the gender divide relies on their individual gender frameworks for men and women respectively.

Tolkien is entirely uninterested in marriage, using it at most to tie up loose ends. At the conclusion of *LOTR*, only Faramir, Aragorn, and Sam are married. Sam's marriage allows him to return to the Shire's cult of the ordinary, while Faramir and Aragorn's marriages serve the

¹⁴⁷ Sayers in a presentation once explained: "Your Secretary made the suggestion that she thought I must be interested in the feminist movement. I replied—a little irritably, I am afraid—that I was not sure I wanted to 'identify myself,' as the phrase goes, with feminism, and that the time for 'feminism,' in the old-fashioned sense of the word, had gone past." Sayers, *Are Women Human*, 21.

¹⁴⁸ It is worth emphasizing the intergenerational conflict over the nature of feminism. In addition to the quote in the previous footnote, we refer to: Winifred Holtby, "Feminism Divided," *Equal Rights* 13, no. 28 (Aug 28, 1926): 230-231.; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (United States: Dead Authors Society, 2016).

practical purpose of continuing the lines of stewardship and kingship, respectively. Tolkien invented Arwen specifically for this purpose, completing Aragorn's return to the throne and enabling him to continue his line.¹⁴⁹ Arwen forsakes her immortality to marry Aragorn and waits for him while he pursues his quest, mirroring Tolkien's marriage to Edith after two years' imposed separation. However, while Aragorn is granted dignity and honor in death ("long there he lay, an image of the splendour of the Kings of Men in glory undimmed before the breaking of the world"), Arwen faces a long and ignoble ending.¹⁵⁰ After Aragorn's death,

"Arwen went forth from the House, and the light of her eyes was quenched, and it seemed to her people that she had become cold and grey as nightfall in winter that comes without a star. Then she said farewell to...all whom she had loved...and passed away to the land of Lórien, and dwelt there alone under the fading trees until winter came...There at last...she laid herself to rest...and there is her green grave, until the world is changed, and all the days of her life are utterly forgotten by men that come after..."¹⁵¹

Without her husband, Arwen has no future, exposing the flimsiness of her character. Their marriage, producing children, solves the issue of succession, but it does not solve the broader problem of reconciliation between the sexes. Her presence fails even to resolve Aragorn's emotional arc; kingship, Sauron's defeat, and the friendship of the Fellowship are more significantly responsible for Aragorn's happy ending, just as Tolkien's attachment to the Inklings was more emotionally impactful than his marriage.

There are even fewer marriages in Lewis' work. Those that do exist take place on a "pretend" level, like children acting at adult marriage. To resolve the issue of succession, Aslan chooses all

¹⁴⁹ Elrond decrees that while it will be Arwen's choice to either depart with him and the other elves to the Grey Havens (the immortal afterlife for elves) or marry Aragorn and remain in Middle Earth, he will accept no other husband for her than "the King of Gondor and Arnor." Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 342. Arwen becomes, through her father's wishes, part of Aragorn's motivation to reclaim the throne of Gondor and defeat Sauron, a prize to be won after his conquest.

¹⁵⁰ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 344.

¹⁵¹ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 344.

the kings and queens of Narnia, and the pairs or quartets of kings and queens that rule Narnia jointly are either siblings or good friends.¹⁵²

For Christie, married life provides convenient locations for murder. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (hereafter, *Styles*), the murderer courts and marries Mrs. Inglethorp, a wealthy older woman; his accomplice is his secret lover whom he plans to marry after Mrs. Inglethorp's death.¹⁵³ Marriage largely serves as an incentive for murder, a means of acquiring money, a barrier to marrying someone else, or a ground for festering jealousies. Christie described her brainstorming process for *Styles*: "I returned to thoughts of my other characters. Who was to be murdered? A husband could murder his wife—that seemed to be the most usual kind of murder."¹⁵⁴ Married couples provided a conveniently closed-off circle of potential suspects, heightening the tension, but also, in Christie's view, provides the most fertile ground for murder-inducing jealousy, greed, and resentment.

Poirot, like Bilbo, finds happiness through male friendships, hobbies, and luxury; he never marries and never so much as hints at romantic interest in anyone, fondly mocking Hastings for his constant infatuation with various women.¹⁵⁵ Miss Marple is likewise a spinster; a husband would rather get in the way of her habit of observation.¹⁵⁶ Hastings, however, does get married, disappearing to Argentina after his marriage, and we see little of his and his wife's private life.

¹⁵² Both Lewis scholars and the fanbase consider Susan kissing Caspian in the films decidedly non-canon.

¹⁵³ This secret love and murder triangle in pursuit of money appears multiple times in Christie's work, including in nearly identical form in her more famous *Death on the Nile*.

¹⁵⁴ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 242.; She came to this view even before the disastrous conclusion of her first marriage. She reflected on her naïveté when she was writing *Styles*: "I had married the man I loved, we had a child, we had somewhere to live, and as far as I could see there was no reason why we shouldn't live happily ever after." Christie, *An Autobiography*, 262.

¹⁵⁵ Some Christie enthusiasts expressed outrage at the most recent film adaptation of *Death on the Nile*, in which Poirot is given a love story, claiming it points to Hollywood's continuing inability to portray an asexual character. Though Christie, steeped in homophobic culture, certainly did not intend for queer representation, it remains a central aspect of her continuing cultural relevance.

¹⁵⁶ Christie did create a detecting husband-and-wife team, Tommy and Tuppence, who first appeared in *The Secret Adversary* (1920).

¹⁵⁷ Christie also marries off several secondary characters as an indication of their happy ending, but never dwells on the arrangements of domestic bliss. As with most literary devices she employs, marriage serves the plot, not character.

Harriet's encounters with her former classmates after years apart in *Gaudy Night* provides a study in marriage outcomes. Upon returning to Shrewsbury College, Harriet recollects the personally and professionally successful marriage of Phoebe Tucker:

“Phoebe Tucker was a History student, who had married an archaeologist, and the combination seemed to work remarkably well. They dug up bones and stones and pottery in forgotten corners of the globe, and wrote pamphlets and lectured to learned societies. At odd moments they had produced a trio of cheerful youngsters, whom they dumped casually upon delighted grandparents before hastening back to the bones and stones.”¹⁵⁸

Phoebe's story offers a rosy, if unconventional, view of marriage, which followed after the two found professional commonalities and removed traditional gender labor and domestic divisions. Shortly after, Harriet encounters another former classmate, Catherine Freemantle, who provides a sobering contrast to Phoebe Tucker's happy marriage.

“Very brilliant, very smart, very lively and the outstanding scholar of her year. What in Heaven's name had happened to her?... Catherine Freemantle, it seemed, had married a farmer, and everything had gone wrong. [Catherine]: ‘At the time, my husband wouldn't have liked it much if I'd separated myself from his interests... If you'd spent your time washing and cooking for a family... you'd know that that kind of thing takes the edge off the razor.’”¹⁵⁹

Unlike Catherine, Phoebe and Harriet share intellectual interests with their husbands, though Harriet eventually has children and she and Peter raise them together. But for both, education

¹⁵⁷ Christie explained: “If I *had* to have a love interest in the book, I thought I might as well marry off Hastings! Truth to tell, I think I was getting a little tired of him.” Christie, *An Autobiography*, 268. The pair appear in *The Big Four* (1927) and we see a little more of Hastings' personal life in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (1975); Hastings can also be read as “an insecurely heterosexual figure” constantly battling the “homosexual panic... inevitable in patriarchy.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2008), 185, quoted in J. C. Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction*. Crime Files. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature, 2016), 221.

¹⁵⁸ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 15.

¹⁵⁹ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 50-51.

and professional engagement shape them, not their gender. Underscoring the entire novel is the villain's internalized misogyny; an obsessively devoted wife, her husband's punishment by a female don for academic dishonesty motivates her to wage psychological warfare on any "non-womanly woman" in the college—i.e., any woman who puts her career before marriage.

Sayers creates the most emotionally rich romance in Harriet and Peter's relationship, which is built on the strength of the individual characters. Sayers has the literary advantage of being least hampered by genre conventions. Like Christie, she is unburdened by worldbuilding, but unlike Christie, character, rather than plot, drives her stories, giving her the freedom to explore gender codes more successfully. Harriet begins to consider Peter's offer in marriage only after receiving a letter that puts their relationship in terms of human to human, rather than man to woman:

"More generously still, he had not only refrained from offers of help and advice which she might have resented; he had deliberately acknowledged that she had the right to run her own risks... That was an admission of equality, and she had not expected it of him... To take such a line and stick to it, he would have to be, not a man but a miracle."¹⁶⁰

Sayers presents here the highly specific ingredients for a successful marriage, most importantly, "an admission of equality." Harriet and Peter's happy ending only strengthens Sayers' reformulation of the domestic ideal. Peter ensures that Harriet is able to remain a person unto herself. Harriet's friend counsels her to accept Peter's offer: "You needn't be afraid of losing your independence; he will always force it back on you."¹⁶¹ Harriet and Peter's relationship is successful primarily because it comes about only after establishing each character individually, independent of their gender. Marriage is not a solution to the gender problem; indeed, it only succeeds when the problem of gender has already been resolved. In Harriet and Peter's case, this

¹⁶⁰ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 247-248.

¹⁶¹ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 517.

is achieved through a meeting of the minds, mutual respect, and a dismantling of the social divide between the sexes—that is, when men and women are humans and souls first, and a member of their sex incidentally, not essentially. Such a paradigm does not establish marriage as a solution for the gender problem. Rather, abolishing gender altogether, as Tolkien, Lewis, and Christie also do in various ways, represents the best way forward.

Chapter 3: The Political: Class, Government, and Justice

“To oppose one class perpetually to another — young against old, manual labor against brain-worker, rich against poor, woman against man — is to split the foundations of the State; and if the cleavage runs too deep, there remains no remedy but force and dictatorship. If you wish to preserve a free democracy, you must base it — not on classes and categories, for this will land you in the totalitarian State, where no one may act or think except as the member of a category. You must base it upon the individual Tom, Dick and Harry, and the individual Jack and Jill — in fact, upon you and me.” – Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human*

Though the four authors experienced World War I in distinct ways, each emerged from the war deeply dissatisfied with the way it had been conducted and its impact on their societies. Their political views and the way those views manifested in their work varied, but the four authors largely exhibit the same brand of middle-class conservatism of 1930s Britain. This conservatism emerged from the destruction of war and evolved over the course of the political instability of the 1920s. It championed an inward-looking political focus; a loathing of labor agitation, unions, and strikes; class harmony without class equality; and a preference for appeasement in foreign affairs.

After the war, the idea of the English national character had changed.¹⁶² In addition to the implications of the human toll of World War I, England in 1920 wrestled with perhaps the most socially disruptive form of class antagonism to date. The Liberal MP Charles Masterman’s *England After War* encapsulated the depth of resentment of the middle classes towards both the profiteer (those gaining wealth ‘illegitimately’) and the working class, the latter drawing more practical manifestations of middle-class ire.¹⁶³ Though the middle classes were rewarded far more than the working classes in the recovery from crises of 1918-1923, stereotypes of the overpaid working man proliferated in the social folklore. When middle class volunteers emerged

¹⁶² Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹⁶³ Charles F. G. Masterman, *England after War: A Study* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922).

as the most eager strike-breakers in the General Strike of 1926, answering Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's call to keep essential services running and helping to defeat the strike, it cemented the mutual antagonism.¹⁶⁴

Another characteristic of the conservatism intimately reflected in the works of the four authors is that of a deliberate focus inward on England, to the exclusion of both continental Europe and the world more broadly. Stanley Baldwin's tenure as Prime Minister throughout much of the 20s and 30s is emblematic of the Conservative Party's preference during this period for a moderate, isolationist politician who would manage labor disputes and focus primarily on domestic affairs, in contrast to Churchill, an energetic and hard-right imperialist. Baldwin instituted reforms formerly associated with the Liberal Party and granted limited self-governance to India in 1935, a move virulently opposed by Churchill. While voices on both the political left and right sought to recast the idea of Englishness in a way that conformed to their own political vision, "the single thread running between all these versions was the theme of social harmony, all the classes converging on a national character."¹⁶⁵ Such a vision seems inconsistent with the labor turmoil of the 1920s but speaks to the deep discontent from all classes and the desire for the resolution of class conflict. The works of all four authors echo this vision of class harmony, specifically the middle-class, anti-union vision. They also echo the Tory voices eager to recast the national character in the form of the pre-modern gentleman archetype who would reclaim England from the Industrial Revolution and commercialism. In Sayers and Christie's work, this takes various forms, from idyllic country or academic settings, inter-class harmony, and the

¹⁶⁴ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951: A Study of a Democratic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 58.

¹⁶⁵ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 168.

interests and mannerisms of the characters, while Lewis and Tolkien's Romanticism and ecocentrism sketch a nostalgic, imagined version of the pre-Industrial Revolution English past.

Governmental structures, methods of implementing law and justice, and class relations in the four authors' works reflect a crisis of faith in political institutions. In examining the political visions of these authors, I will proceed first through an analysis of class and justice in Sayers' work, focusing on the uses of the class system Sayers constructs as well as the questions her portrayal of justice and its implementation raise. I will then turn to Tolkien, who constructs an absolute monarchy led by a king encapsulating his ideal masculinity, while also incorporating capitalist structures that either fail or flourish depending on the character of its leaders, all within a framework of ecocentrism and rejection of modernity. Lewis, like Tolkien, revels in ecocentrism and the medieval aesthetic, but he departs from Tolkien's model of kingship and relies instead on Biblical allegories to create a utopia of Christian communalism. Finally, while Christie often uses class in the same way that she uses gender, as a mis-directive, the broader class framework, as well as the role and nature of justice in her work, points to a deeply conservative reaction to the war.

All four authors present highly moralistic worlds in which individual virtue and competence provide solutions to complex political issues. This is not to say that in constructing these moral orders, they sidestep the political entirely, but it does reflect a hopelessness in their real political future. These authors envisioned worlds in which only kings who do not wish to become kings are crowned and private detectives use their genius to solve crimes and distribute justice according to their own morals. These are ultimately conservative viewpoints, revealing a crisis of faith in political institutions and a turn to individualized and de-centralized systems.

Sayers

Class

Some scholars have argued that Sayers entrenched her novels so deeply in traditional class structures to shroud her radical gender politics, while others argue that traditional class structures were comforting to her as she reached for a nostalgic, conservative, imagined England.¹⁶⁶ One cannot, however, dismiss the idea that creating a character as fabulously wealthy, absurdly aristocratic, and endearingly academic as Wimsey must have been, simply, *fun*. I argue that beyond the entertainment value Wimsey's class privilege offers, it makes light of very real class divisions and their implications. Sayers claimed that "*all* categories, [nationality, class, sex, etc.], if they are insisted upon beyond the immediate purpose which they serve, breed class antagonism and disruption in the state, and that is why they are so dangerous."¹⁶⁷ While this gestures to the artificiality of class distinctions, her philosophy fits neatly into the anti-union middle-class conservatism of interwar Britain; class was a perfectly normal social distinction until "insisted upon beyond [its] immediate purpose," that is, until it caused social disruption.

As discussed in Chapter One, Wimsey's conspicuous wealth provided Sayers with entertainment and escape, but it also serves a narrative purpose, providing a contrasting backdrop to his internal turmoil. As he is desperately and unsuccessfully undertaking the case to save Harriet Vane from wrongful conviction, Sayers contrasts his endless financial resources with the futility of his efforts:

"The stately volumes on his shelves...mocked his impotence...He ground his teeth and raged helplessly, striding about the suave, wealthy, futile room...He snatched up a heavy bronze...and the impulse seized him to smash the mirror...And the next day a new mirror would be ordered, because people would

¹⁶⁶ Schaub, *The Female Gentleman*.

¹⁶⁷ Sayers, *Are Women Human*, 46.

come in and ask questions, and civilly regret the accidental damage to the old one. And Harriet Vane would still be hanged, just the same.”¹⁶⁸

The futility of both violence and wealth is well poised to unearth Wimsey’s vulnerabilities, leaving him caged within his brilliant mind, unable to bend the world to his will. Most of all, the episode shows the great lie of the aristocratic aesthetic. It is little surprise that Sayers would have been so eager to show the flimsiness of aristocracy, belonging to a scion of society that, as discussed earlier, abhorred arbitrary acquisition of wealth nearly as much as they did the working class.

Wimsey’s class is a central aspect of his character, not only in his title, money, and financial ability to pursue detecting as a hobby, but also his fondness for quoting literature, philosophy, and history to people who will not understand, sometimes because it amuses him, and at other times as a strategy for establishing dominance in the conversation. In *Whose Body?*, when seeking to interview a suspect, Mr. Milligan, Wimsey presents his formal title and family credentials, a strategy he employs frequently in his investigations. It works; “Mr. Milligan was annoyed at the interruption, but, like many of his nation, if he had a weak point, it was the British aristocracy.”¹⁶⁹ During the interview itself, Wimsey breaks off on a tangent on his lineage and English history, “[thus] ingeniously [placing Mr. Milligan] at that disadvantage which attends ignorance.”¹⁷⁰ Wimsey employs the same strategy when speaking to a doctor, quoting Socrates and other philosophers, drawing a distinction between professional education and the liberal arts education intimately tied to the aristocracy.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 172-173.

¹⁶⁹ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 58.

¹⁷⁰ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 59.

¹⁷¹ Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 154.

The most important depiction of class relations is the profound friendship between Wimsey and Bunter, stemming from their experiences in World War I, Wimsey as a Major and Bunter as his batman (servant). The trope of the loyal retainer is the defining feature of their relationship—Bunter stands up to Wimsey only when he feels his master is not dressed in sufficiently fine attire to leave the house.¹⁷² Bunter takes care of Wimsey, while in return Wimsey shares his literary fervor and luxuries, an education Bunter receives gratefully.¹⁷³ This cross-class friendship that maintains the class distinction between the aristocrat and his loyal retainer closely mirrors the friendship between Frodo, heir to the Baggins fortune, and Sam, his gardener. This idealized class setting prevents class antagonisms while supporting a rigid class hierarchy.

Justice

Underlying all of detective fiction is the eternal debate of who is guilty and who is innocent. The premise of detective fiction—that there exists an answer to every crime and that every criminal will be caught and punished—stands in tension with the nebulous nature of justice itself and a conspicuous absence of justice for the largest crimes of all.

Wimsey's success in *Strong Poison* in identifying the murderer when the police cannot and depictions of unsuccessful court proceedings paint a picture of government incompetence. This serves as both a plot device, allowing Wimsey to solve the mystery himself, and hints at a larger opinion of government incompetence. In any case, the world Sayers constructs shows an amateur succeeding at bringing justice where the government fails. In doing so, she continues a

¹⁷² Bunter “[blocks] the way to the door with deferential firmness” because Wimsey is in poor trousers and refuses to let him leave until he changes into something finer. Wimsey eventually relents, remarking: “I wish to God I’d never let you grow into a privileged family retainer, Bunter.” Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 112.

¹⁷³ Bunter remarks in one letter to Wimsey as he is off gathering evidence and clues for his master, “It is, if I may say so, more than a pleasure—it is an education, to valet and buttle your lordship.” Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 139.

long and cherished tradition within detective fiction of independence from governmental oversight; it is a tradition that serves an obvious literary purpose, but also betrays a position of conservatism, where only localized expertise, never the state, can deliver justice.

In Sayers' novels, jury trials never bring the criminal closer to justice. In *Strong Poison*, Harriet Vane narrowly avoids being wrongfully convicted because a single woman on the jury believed instinctively that she was innocent, and refused to concede to the other jurors, bringing the trial to a stalemate and giving Wimsey more time to find evidence. In *Whose Body?*, the man we later discover is the murderer testifies falsely as an expert witness, again nearly leading to the conviction of an innocent person.¹⁷⁴ These holes in the criminal justice system and the perpetual inadequacy of the police necessitate the existence of an uncommonly talented amateur detective who must, in turn, be wealthy enough to afford conducting such a hobby full-time.

The responsibility of identifying the murderer, effectively sentencing them to death, however, tears at Wimsey continually. This perpetual underlying guilt is an ironic contradiction to the self-assured, even arrogant air he assumes for the public, but is a crucial companion to the fear he shows in his flashbacks. Detecting might allow him and Poirot, as discussed in Chapter One, to correct the anonymity of death in World War I, but it does not bring back the dead he either killed or could not save. Wimsey's wracked conscience gestures to the unanswerable guilt of killing in World War I. In *Strong Poison*, even while undertaking the case to save Harriet Vane's life, Wimsey wrestles with his own inadequacy to administer justice: "I'm beginning to

¹⁷⁴ This portrayal of jury trials is also tied up with class. In the *Whose Body?* trial, Wimsey's mother, the Duchess, remarks: "What unfinished-looking faces they have—so characteristic, I always think, of the lower middle-class, rather like sheep, or calves' head (boiled, I mean), to bring in wilful murder against the poor little man, he couldn't have made himself plainer." Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 89.

dislike this job of getting people hanged. It's damnable for their friends...I wouldn't think about hanging. It's unnerving."¹⁷⁵

Scientific explanations for crime arise alongside character's guilt. In *Gaudy Night*, Wimsey reveals in conversation with the dons and Harriet the extent to which he feels responsible for the people involved in his cases. One woman he hunted killed two people when she suspected Wimsey was close to discovering her, attempting to cover her tracks; Wimsey refers to them as "my own victims."¹⁷⁶ One don protests that "they were killed...by her fear of the death penalty. If the unfortunate woman had been medically treated, they and she would still be alive today."¹⁷⁷ In *Gaudy Night* in particular, the villain represents a symptom of a flawed gender order, herself a victim of the distorted model of the devoted wife, which raises the larger issue of the proper assignment of guilt to an individual when their flaws were induced by larger societal problems.

Tolkien

Tolkien began writing *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* because it irked him that Britain lacked a canon like the Norse mythology he so adored.¹⁷⁸ Through his writing, Tolkien reclaimed England as a "garden country" in his imagination. This vision, meshed with a political fantasy of the Middle Ages, provided the framework for Middle Earth's political landscape, which is comprised of monarchies and dictators. The rightful king always arises reluctantly to restore order and prosperity to the former, while the dictators Sauron and Saruman govern hordes of indistinguishable orcs while their lands are covered with machinery, smog, and ash. The main

¹⁷⁵ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 125.

¹⁷⁶ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 406.

¹⁷⁷ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 407.

¹⁷⁸ Historians have traced aspects of Middle Earth, particularly the Shire, to early English history. For more on this, see: Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2003).; Jane Chance, *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

consequences of this model, and of the lore of Middle Earth as a whole, are the rejection of industrialism alongside and in tension with an implicit acceptance of lightly-regulated capitalism, the championing of the reluctant leader, and the glorification of a fictional past, complete with an aristocratic class structure including a benevolent elite.¹⁷⁹

World War I represented the death of the myth of progress.¹⁸⁰ Like so many others, Tolkien saw the machines that had led to industrial might, increased life expectancy, population growth, and better living standards, in turn lead to Maxim guns that mowed men down on a scale hitherto unknown. A cataclysm of this scale might be expected to prompt a reconsideration of the structure of political institutions, and despite moments of apparent impending change, including promises of decolonization, World War I might be best characterized as the turning point at which the world failed to turn.

Within Britain specifically, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the 1920s saw unprecedented participation in strikes, with the number of strikers in 1919 (2.4 million) double that of the pre-war record, though the outcomes of the strikes as often favored the employers as the workers.¹⁸¹ Likewise, the brief rise and subsequent fall of the shop-stewards' movement, and especially the defeat of the General Strike of 1926 illustrate how the promise (or threat) of impending change as a response to the disaster of war was largely quashed in favor of the status quo.¹⁸² Meanwhile, the crises of 1929-31, where Britain's trade fell by roughly half, industrial production faltered, and unemployment skyrocketed, futile attempts to resist inflation by clinging

¹⁷⁹ John G. West, ed. *Celebrating Middle-Earth: The Lord of the Rings as a Defense of Western Civilization* (1st ed. Seattle: Inkling Books, 2002).

¹⁸⁰ World War I specifically: Dan Diner, *Cataclysms: A History of the Twentieth Century From Europe's Edge* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008). A 1920 address at Oxford: William Ralph Inge, *The Idea of Progress* (Romanes Lecture 1920. Oxford: The Clarendon press, 1920). The idea of progress more generally: J. B. Bury, *Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (Project Gutenberg, 2003).

¹⁸¹ James E. Cronin, "Strikes and Power in Britain, 1870-1920," *International Review of Social History* 32, no. 2 (1987): 144–67.

¹⁸² G. D. H. Cole, *British Trade Unionism To-Day* (London: Routledge, 2018).

to the gold standard and other economic missteps, and the Great Depression caused a widespread crisis of faith in the global economic framework.¹⁸³ The social and political climate of Britain in the interwar years was characterized by intense anxiety about labor, economic troubles, and national identity. Ultimately, Britain failed to adapt to a materially changed world. Through Stanley Baldwin and the conservative party, the inward-looking, middle-class conservatism favored by all four authors dominated, though did not erase, tensions between other solutions to these anxieties.

At the international level, the isolationism and rejection of the League of Nations that defined the American reaction, the disappointment of anti-colonial activists, and a pervasive sense of disillusionment on both a broad and individual level were perhaps the most significant legacies of the war. It is thus unsurprising that Tolkien's chosen political model for Middle Earth is monarchical. Not only does it invoke a romanticized Medieval political aesthetic, but Tolkien's own politics indicate his loss of faith in democracy, preferring either anarchy or an idealized absolute monarchy. In a letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien expressed a preference for both anarchism ("meaning abolition of control, not whiskered men with bombs") and "unconstitutional' Monarchy."¹⁸⁴ Tolkien reconciled his sympathies for the socialist movement and absolute monarchy under the moral framework of the reluctant leader, invoking the historical myth of *nolo episcopari*, which translates as "I do not wish to be bishopped." The myth held that it was customary for a candidate to use the phrase twice, refusing the episcopate, before accepting, and only upon the third use of the phrase would it be understood as a true rejection of

¹⁸³ Nicholas H. Dimsdale, and Anthony Hotson, eds. *British Financial Crises since 1825* (Oxford, United Kingdom; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁸⁴ Tolkien wrote this letter on November 29th, 1943, with the backdrop of World War II and the growing strength of post-World War I British socialist movement. Tolkien, Carpenter, and Tolkien, eds., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 63-64.

the office. Aragorn fits this model well, remaining in the wilderness, anonymous, reclaiming the throne of Gondor only when Middle Earth's survival is at stake. Tolkien acknowledged that this model would fail in reality, where people who wish to lead are willing to use violence obtain power.

The two important deaths in *LOTR*, of Boromir and King Théoden, complete their masculinity, but more importantly cement Tolkien's political framework. Both men are royalty, and both fall gloriously in battle, representing the final phase of their redemption as they triumph over weakness of will—Boromir over the lure of the Ring, and Théoden over both Saruman's spell and isolationism. Théoden's rejection of isolationism when he overcomes his bitterness towards Gondor and leads his army to their aid, dying in the subsequent battle, might seem to contradict the political ethos of interwar conservative Britain, which focused inward and favored policies of appeasement and isolationism in foreign affairs, but since Middle Earth is itself an insulated version of England, Théoden's choice and Tolkien's celebration of it indicates a vision of a unified England (perhaps without Ireland) rather than a statement on Britain's duty to act in the global order.¹⁸⁵

Even more important is Théoden's sacrifice itself, epitomizing the principle that Middle Earth is a world where kings lead the charge into battle. Théoden's glorious death in combat leading Rohan to Gondor's rescue reveals the depths of Tolkien's bitterness towards the politicians who perpetuated the war but never experienced the horrors of the front lines, the "old

¹⁸⁵ For more on Tolkien's attitude towards Ireland, culturally, linguistically, and politically, see: Matthew M. DeForrest, "J.R.R. Tolkien and the Irish Question," *Tolkien Studies* 13, no. 1 (2016): 169–86.; Dimitra Fimi, "'Mad' Elves and 'Elusive Beauty': Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology," *Folklore* 117, no. 2 (2006): 156–70.; Marjorie Burns, *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-Earth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

men” discussed earlier in the chapter. This political vision is tied up with Tolkien’s masculine ideal, encapsulated in Aragorn’s moment of victory:

“As tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. And then Faramir cried: ‘Behold the King!’”¹⁸⁶

Aragorn’s journey from wandering the wilderness as a king in exile to reclaiming his throne allows Tolkien to unveil his model king, itself dependent on the existence of an ideal masculinity.

Tolkien’s political economy involves the vilification of industrialism alongside an implicit acceptance of informally-regulated, benevolent, trade-based capitalism. We see the latter most clearly in *The Hobbit*, where Lake-town’s financial success relies on prosperous river trade, deposing the corrupt Master of the town for the heroic Bard, and defeating the dragon Smaug and obtaining a portion of its gold.¹⁸⁷ Tolkien shares with the other authors an English middle-class suspicion of anyone with too much wealth.

The ecocentrism of Middle Earth falls neatly within the Romantic tradition and is the key component of his rejection of modernity.¹⁸⁸ The March of the Ents, in which speaking trees conquer and destroy Saruman’s highly industrialized fortress, dismantling his dams and allowing the water to wash away the industrial grime, is a powerful image of nature reclaiming its territory from machines made for war. The political fantasy that the combined power of the natural world, a reluctant king of the ideal masculinity, and an economic system preventing both individual

¹⁸⁶ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 246.

¹⁸⁷ When Bilbo encounters Smaug, he both strategically and mockingly uses a range of titles, and, in the course of their verbal sparring, remarks: “Surely, O Smaug the unassessably wealthy, you must realize that your success has made you some bitter enemies?” J. R. R. Tolkien, and Douglas A. Anderson, *The Annotated Hobbit* (Rev. and Expanded ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 238.

¹⁸⁸ Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*.

accumulation of inordinate wealth and the nuisances of class consciousness and agitation might be able to combat the tide of modernity is at the heart of both Middle Earth and the England Tolkien imagined.

Lewis

Lewis also presents largely moral, rather than political, answers to the threats of tyranny and modernity, which he, like Tolkien, believed posed the ultimate threat to a just society. Even more than Tolkien, Lewis relied on the genre of fantasy to avoid explaining who produces wealth, how, and with what return; he also uses it to embrace the Medieval aesthetic and celebrate an imagined glory of the Middle Ages without directly advocating for such a political system.¹⁸⁹

Lewis traces the evolution of Narnia from its very first moments, when Aslan's roar marks the dawning of the world to Aslan destroying Narnia and leading the chosen few to the True Narnia—that is, from the Creation story to the Day of Judgement. The ages in between feature a variety of conflicts, social landscapes, and leaders. Successful governments rely on Aslan for approval, but this remains a moral rather than practical order. *The Chronicles of Narnia* are as much a political protest of modernity as they are a Christian apologetic. Lewis does not advocate for a theocracy, but one can read from his novels an implicit yearning for a kind of ecocentric Christian communalism, Romantic libertarianism, and a rejection of the materialism, industrialism, and what he saw as the simultaneous loss of community and of individual importance that came with modernity.

Lewis' most striking similarity to Tolkien is his championing of reluctant leaders. While the villains plot and scheme in their quests for dominion over Narnia, the child kings and queens

¹⁸⁹ Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*.

of Narnia find themselves forced to the throne to save Narnia and because Aslan commands them to do so. They struggle with self-doubt and an awareness of their imperfections, and though they are precocious and perhaps more solemn than is believable, Lewis never allows the reader to forget that they are, in fact, children, and as flawed and unconfident in extraordinary situations as any other child might be.¹⁹⁰ Aslan himself praises such reluctant leadership and self-doubt in Caspian:

“[Aslan:] ‘Do you feel yourself sufficient to take up the Kingship of Narnia?’
 ‘I – I don’t think I do, Sir,’ said Caspian. ‘I’m only a kid.’
 ‘Good...If you had felt yourself sufficient, it would have been proof that you were not. Therefore...you shall be King of Narnia.’”¹⁹¹

Aslan’s manner of choosing heroes is identical to Tolkien’s *nolo episcopari*. It remains a distinctly moral answer to the question of the political, as Caspian and the other kings and queens of Narnia depend on Aslan to vanquish the enemy. Rather, Narnia’s political apparatus best showcases Lewis’ disdain for those for whom power was an end in itself, and, perhaps, for the fault he placed with democracy for selecting only leaders who sought office.

Lewis self-identified as a “dinosaur” and deeply romanticized the Middle Ages.¹⁹² One of the most apparent examples of Lewis’ loathing of modernity is Eustace who, before being remade by Aslan, is a manifestation of Lewis’ deepest grievances with modern society. He is the son of “very up-to-date and advanced people. They were vegetarians, non-smokers and teetotallers.”¹⁹³ Eustace is totally unfamiliar with magic, having read “only the wrong books. They had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments and drains, but they were weak

¹⁹⁰ Indeed, once past a certain age in the real world, the children cannot return to Narnia, until they eventually die and are welcomed to the True Narnia by Aslan. As Aslan encourages him to face his first foe in battle, “Peter did not feel very brave; indeed, he felt he was going to be sick. But that made no difference to what he had to do.” Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 170.

¹⁹¹ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, 411.

¹⁹² C.S. Lewis, “De Descriptione Temporum,” *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), 25, quoted in Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 54.

¹⁹³ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 425.

on dragons.”¹⁹⁴ His unfamiliarity with nature, magic, and animals (he only likes them “if they were dead and pinned on a card”), his progressive parents, and his affinity for machines represent all forms of progressivism and modernity that Lewis abhorred.¹⁹⁵

Lewis was a Romantic primarily through his idolization of the natural world, and Narnia is steeped in that devotion.¹⁹⁶ In every novel, Lewis takes care to paint the landscape in great detail; it becomes a character in itself. In *Prince Caspian* in a moment nearly identical to Tolkien’s March of the Ents, the trees serve as the vessels of Aslan’s vengeance and vanquish the Telmarines, liberating the Narnians. The landscape of the True Narnia is what convinces the protagonists that it is, in fact, Heaven: “every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more.”¹⁹⁷ Conversely, the incongruous lamp post shining in the middle of a winter forest marks the border between Narnia and the real world, and is so unusual because no such technology exists anywhere else. Despite the centuries that pass throughout the seven novels, the most advanced technology remains Susan’s bow and arrow. Narnians never attempt to conquer nature or bend it to their will, thus never creating the means of their own destruction. As Lewis warned: “Man’s conquest of Nature turns out...to be Nature’s conquest of Man.”¹⁹⁸

Lewis longed for both the community and unique value of the individual he imagined in the Middle Ages and thought lost in the industrial machine and the conglomeration of democracy, even while he viewed tyranny and dictatorships as the greatest threat to humankind.

¹⁹⁴ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 464.

¹⁹⁵ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 425.

¹⁹⁶ It is worth noting that Lewis found myth the most convincing rhetorical strategy; he came to Christianity through Romanticism, drawn to the power and the story of it, not through rationalizations.; Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*.

¹⁹⁷ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Final Battle*, 760.

¹⁹⁸ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 80, quoted in Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 60. See also: Clare Echterling, “Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Classic Children’s Literature, and the Imperial-Environmental Imagination in ‘The Chronicles of Narnia,’” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 49, no. 1 (2016): 93–117.; Lily Glasner, “‘But What Does It All Mean?’ Religious Reality as a Political Call in the Chronicles of Narnia,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 25, no. 1 (2014): 54–77.

Lewis remedies the loss of community by bringing at least pairs of children to Narnia at a time and enveloping them in a community of Narnians once they arrive. The only protagonist to travel alone is Aslan himself, an element of his sacrifice. The loss of individual freedom is likewise an underlying tension against which the protagonists must constantly fight. The final enemy, Shift the Ape, explains: “You think freedom means doing what you like. Well, you’re wrong. That isn’t true freedom. True freedom means doing what I tell you.”¹⁹⁹

The seven books chronicle seven upheavals in Narnia’s existence, but these are exceptions, for in between these upheavals, “there were hundreds and thousands of years when peaceful King followed peaceful King...whole centuries in which...every day and week had been better than the last.”²⁰⁰ The Armageddon that Shift incites is a result of industrial encroachment on both the natural landscape and the freedom of individuals to choose their path. Shift plans “to make Narnia a country worth living in,” with “roads and big cities and schools and offices and whips and muzzles and saddles and cages and kennels and prisons.”²⁰¹ Shift’s conquests eventually render Narnia unlivable and Aslan arrives to close the door on Narnia and lead the chosen few to salvation, a world free from industrialization.

The recipient of Lewis’ most visceral hatred is machinery used in the name of tyranny. Aslan’s warning to the first children who visit Narnia is one of collective annihilation, that man will be the author of its own destruction:

““That world is ended, as if it had never been. Let the race of Adam and Eve take warning...one of your race will...find out a secret as evil as the Deplorable Word and use it to destroy all living things. And soon, very soon...great nations in your world will be ruled by tyrants who care no more for joy and justice and mercy than the Empress Jadis. Let your world beware. That is the warning.””²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*, 685.

²⁰⁰ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*, 715-716.

²⁰¹ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*, 685.

²⁰² Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Magician’s Nephew*, 102.

The Magician's Nephew, published in 1955, makes very clear the connection between the atomic bomb and “the Deplorable Word,” which Jadis used to render Charn a barren wasteland reminiscent of a nuclear winter. Lewis’ response to the threat posed by the technology and political developments of modernity, particularly in the post-war world, is a distinctly moral one, and to the extent it engages with the political, its main purpose is to reject the dangers of modernity and the personal frustrations Lewis encountered in contemporary society. Lewis uses the genre of fantasy even more than Tolkien to avoid the difficult issues of labor and production, succession, and regulation of monarchy, reflecting the wishful thinking of an isolationist middle class that longed for a more stable social, economic, and political reality. In Narnia, only those who do not wish to lead do so; happiness and prosperity abound in a world without either government regulation or industrial technology; and Narnians experience no internal divisions, bickering, or inequality.

Christie

Class

Christie has been best understood among the four authors as an example of this interwar middle-class conservatism; the England she depicts is that quintessential “garden country,” most consumed by the private affairs of the nation.²⁰³ As with Sayers’ treatment of class, we must admit to the entertainment value of centering many of Christie’s novels in settings of luxury; in Christie’s words: “It is always exciting, I think, to see *someone* having luck, someone who is rich, someone who has *jewels*...who wants a drab world where nobody is rich, or important, or beautiful, or talented?”²⁰⁴ It is, simply, fun to write characters who are rich, and, especially for

²⁰³ Light, *Forever England*.

²⁰⁴ Christie, *An Autobiography*, 255.

Christie, who glories over the intricacies of spite, resentment, and malice, wealth adds motive, jealousy, and a backdrop of luxury and adventure.

More importantly, class serves as yet another element of the puzzle that remains the ultimate object of Christie's work. In her novels, the plot alone is sacred; everything else is fair game for mockery and use in deception. Class serves as a source of comedy, a motive for murder, and, like gender, a means by which to create expectations that can be subverted. As discussed in Chapter One, Hastings represents a mockery of the Victorian gentleman, a relic that no longer serves society.²⁰⁵ In general, Christie focused on the professional middle class, and her lead characters are often doctors, lawyers, clergymen, or other professionals. Christie's distrust of anyone with too much money come through in her writing, where the victim is frequently a wealthy individual with a sought-after fortune and a recently-changed will. In this way, she is, as Alison Light correctly argued, "not the comfortable high Tory for whom she has so often been mistaken, but a representative of a conservatism much closer to the bone of English life."²⁰⁶

Christie's novels, so often set in an idyllic manor house with servants an assumed element of the household (particularly in her novels of the interwar period), make use of the most convenient aspect of classism: characters ignore servants at their peril, including "air stewards (*Death In The Clouds*), butlers (*Three Act Tragedy*), companions (*After The Funeral*) and governesses (*The Secret of Chimneys*)."²⁰⁷ Neither Miss Marple nor Poirot, however, make such a mistake, recognizing the value of servants in uncovering the murderer.²⁰⁸ Class thus serves as a

²⁰⁵ Poirot grows wealthier over his career as he becomes increasingly famous, but he lacks Wimsey's generational wealth.

²⁰⁶ Light, *Forever England*, 65.

²⁰⁷ The following blog has accomplished the useful task of compiling significant appearances of servants in Christie's work: Helen [Blogger], "Tuesday Night Blog Murders: Christie and Servants," *Your Freedom and Ours* (blog), October 6, 2015, <https://yourfreedomandours.blogspot.com/2015/10/tuesday-night-blog-murders-christie-and.html>.

²⁰⁸ Miss Marple, for example, includes the cook, a young refugee from Europe, in her scheme to unmask the murderer in *A Murder Is Announced*. She also acts in a distinctly maternal, if patronizing, way to her maids, training

largely uninvestigated dimension, useful to the plot, but it remains primarily an element of the background.

While the role of murderer is the highest compliment Christie can pay to her characters (besides the role of detective), and servants are usually not the murderer, she takes care to paint a complete picture of every household and setting that hosts a murder, including the servants, and there is little virtue in any class depicted in Christie's novels. In *Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the household is made up of a hodgepodge of characters, including a soldier on sick leave from the front (Hastings), a homeless refugee (Poirot), a farmer's wife (Mrs. Rikes), an expert on poisons later arrested for espionage (Dr. Bauerstein), the two housekeepers (Annie and Dorcas), and a charity-dependent orphan doing war work at the local dispensary (Cynthia). The household dynamic at Styles is a common one in Christie novels—nearly every member has a motive for murder, and only Dorcas, the loyal housekeeper, indicates any grief over the victim's death. Likewise, in *Murder on the Orient Express*, the murderers are a band of twelve people representing the Armstrong family and servants, avenging the kidnapping and murder of the beloved three-year-old Daisy Armstrong. It is an idyllic portrayal of class harmony, if inequality. The servants are very much a part of the Armstrong family, and, like the cross-class friendships of Frodo and Sam, and Bunter and Wimsey, Christie depicts an idealized class system in which interpersonal relationships prevent class friction and maintain the stability of an idyllic British class hierarchy.

Justice

The structure of the detective novel demands some engagement with the nature of justice, and, like Sayers, Christie needed to create a configuration of justice that is palatable to a

servants, including young orphaned girls, finding them good positions, and keeping in touch with them long after they leave her; in *A Pocket Full of Rye*, she investigates to avenge the murder of one of her former maids.

generation whose ideas of right and wrong had been shaken. The premise of nearly every work of detective fiction (novel or film) involves some kind of independence from the law or lack of governmental oversight. This lends the story excitement and flexibility, avoiding the legal barriers to unhindered investigation, but it also betrays a particular strain of conservatism, as if yearning for a system in which “things are done properly.” Christie adapted this premise to yield a complex but fundamentally conservative system that continually wrestles with the nature of justice in which the detective best administers it, avoiding government bureaucracy.

Perhaps Christie’s darkest book, *And Then There Were None* is a fascinating examination of the twisted nature of judgment, justice, and guilt. The murderer is Judge Wargrave, whose name, “war” and “grave,” is reminiscent of the war’s legacy of the dead and killers lumped together in one unsolvable circle of guilt, with individual deaths unable to be avenged, and individual killers merely a part of the war machine. Tired of seeing people he considers guilty evade punishment by the law under technicalities, Wargrave arranges for nine acquitted murderers to visit an island and, disguised as one of them, kills them one by one. The novel centers around the steadily increasing terror and consuming guilt of the nine victims and presents the reader with a choice between two evils: the system that fails to provide perfect justice, and the self-confessedly blood-lusting and justice-obsessed Wargrave. The story lacks the comforting conclusion of a Poirot novel, in whose morality we are always confident, but instead paints a sinister and cynical picture of the futility of justice, and *both* the state and individual’s ability to deliver it.

Christie’s mysteries take place in settings ranging from the English countryside to the Nile, and the laws of the land also change over the more than half-century in which she wrote; however, no matter the time or place, the ultimate judgement that counts is the detective’s, often

in either subtle or direct violation of the rule of law.²⁰⁹ The most famous example is *The Murder on the Orient Express*, when Poirot gives a false account to the police so that the murderers, themselves all victims of a heinous crime, may remain at liberty.²¹⁰ The reader necessarily sympathizes with this decision, but the explicit condoning of extra-judicial murder remains a significant rebuke of government jurisdiction.

Poirot also often grants the murderer a merciful death, allowing them to commit suicide rather than face trial. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, after confronting Doctor Sheppard with proof of his guilt, Poirot allows him to leave, telling him to write a confession. Sheppard does so before killing himself; in his confession, he requests that his guilt be kept private to protect the feelings of his sister, who would be devastated if she knew of his true nature. Even for this abjectly villainous character, Poirot intervenes to protect the feelings of the murderer, allowing him to decide his manner of death and avoid causing his sister pain. Similarly, in *Death on the Nile*, after the murderer Jacqueline shoots herself and her accomplice, Simon, upon discovery, Poirot admits to knowing that she had a hidden pistol, but allowed her to keep it, knowing that she would only shoot herself and Simon to avoid formal execution. Poirot makes such decisions with complete confidence, granting mercy to even the most twisted of murderers, despite the risk that they might commit further crimes.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ In *Murder at the Vicarage*, the police representative is especially unlikable and out of step with the inhabitants of the village; only Miss Marple, an insider ingrained in the fabric of village life, is able to understand the full picture. One character remarks: 'The police!' Rose tossed her head. 'I can tell you, sir, we don't think much of that Inspector...The police indeed.' 'All the same, the police are very powerful.'"²⁰⁹ Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage*, 182.

²¹⁰ Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (London: HarperCollins, 1934).

²¹¹ In a more subtle critique of the justice system, in *Styles*, the criminals almost successfully use the justice system to evade justice, exploiting the provision that a person can only be tried for a crime once. To thwart their plan, Poirot deliberately withholds information from the police, even presenting false information, to ensure the murderer is not tried in court until Poirot has accumulated complete evidence.

Lastly, Poirot's famous final explanations of the case seldom happen in the courtroom. Christie's first draft of *Styles* used a courtroom setting for the conclusion, but her publisher instructed her to rewrite it, as the legal proceedings and atmosphere of the courtroom made for clunky writing. Rather, Poirot, with his flair for the dramatic, often gathers all the suspects and lays out the case, the murderer slowly realizing that they have been found out.²¹²

Christie's disdain for the police is partly rhetorical, allowing Poirot, Miss Marple, and her other detectives' brilliance to shine all the more clearly. It also adds a comic element, allowing Poirot and Miss Marple to make fools of the police, with the reader joining in their amusement. Poirot's disdain for Monsieur Giraud, "the human foxhound," in *Murder on the Links* allows the reader to understand the superiority of Poirot's methods (and the power of the "little grey cells" over the forensic science of fingerprints), while also enjoying Poirot's sarcasm and barbed wit whenever he interacts with Giraud.

Like Sayers' characters, however, Christie's characters do question the right and responsibility to pass judgement and assign guilt to other human beings.²¹³ Though Poirot sometimes wrestles with his own morality and the responsibility he bears for passing judgement on criminals, he never engages in Wimsey's level of torturous deliberations.²¹⁴ In *Murder at the Vicarage*, Dr. Haydock questions the right of the state to pass judgement on criminals and with whom the fault lies for their crimes:

"We think with horror now of the day we burned witches. I believe the day will come when we will shudder to think that we ever hanged criminals...Right and

²¹² We see particularly dramatic examples in *Styles*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and *Death on the Nile*. In *Murder on the Links* and several other novels, the reader learns the full scope of the case when Poirot explains the details to Hastings in private.

²¹³ All murderers believe to some extent their right to impose their will on others. While much of the time the reader is not meant to sympathize, Christie creates several sympathetic murderers, most famously the twelve family members in *The Murder on the Orient Express* avenging the kidnapping and murder of their child and the four related deaths.

²¹⁴ In *Styles*, Poirot wrestles with his decision to withhold information from the police, allowing a man he knows to be innocent to stand trial; he does so to play matchmaker and mend the man's marriage.

wrong—I'm not at all sure that there's any such thing. Suppose it's all a question of glandular secretion—and you get your murderer...I believe the time will come when we'll be horrified to think of the long centuries in which we've punished people for disease.”²¹⁵

This admission of ignorance of guilt, innocence, and its causes parallels Sayers' discussion of the psychology of shell-shock and Wimsey wrestling with the same questions. It also mirrors the ethics of war and justice alluded to more subtly in Tolkien's work, when Gandalf cautions Frodo: “Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the wise cannot see all ends.”²¹⁶ Tolkien did not, however, write detective fiction, so he could avoid the moral complexities of criminal justice, while Christie and Sayers wrestled more closely with these questions, responding with a moral, rather than a practical, order.

The political ideas that each author ingrained in their work represent their vision for a post-war world, but they remain deeply personal, as evidence of the fears, resentments, and hopes that each encountered throughout their lives, but particularly when watching their country stumble through a war of a hitherto unknown level of destruction. Fantasy and detective fiction might appear to differ most significantly in the political, but in fact the core philosophies of the four authors exhibit significant agreement. Their common crisis of faith in political institutions and distaste for industrial modernity manifested in their work in different ways—through Romantic ideals and ecocentrism, glorification of the reluctant leader and the monarchy, brilliant detectives implementing their own rule of law in a world self-consciously doubtful of the existence of perfect justice, or paternalistic but significant inter-class friendships and households holding together an idealized class hierarchy.

²¹⁵ Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage*, 182-183.

²¹⁶ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 69.

Conclusion

Sayers, Christie, Tolkien, and Lewis not only stand as four giants in the field of popular literature, but also represent an unexpected bridge of commonality amid the deep and bitter divides of British interwar society. The overlaps in their common experiences of loss and disillusionment, and their parallel, though not always productive, responses to those experiences are significant in understanding the ways that their entire identity, not merely gender and veteran status, impact their responses to the war. We have seen significant overlaps in their responses to the crisis in gender roles, to the use of their respective escapist genres and their craft to address the trauma of their wartime experiences, and their attitudes towards the political in the wake of the thorough destruction of World War I. Although differences in their identities and lived experiences fundamentally shaped their beliefs, attitudes towards the war, and their literary work, such differences do not explain the totality of their manner of reckoning with the war and its impact on their world. In a moment of deep divide, the four authors, two on each side of the gender and combat divide, shared more in their vision for a post-war future and how to get there than we might have expected.

The historiography of World War I is extensive and dynamic, continually evolving in argument, sources, and scope, including in the renewed focus on the war during the recent centennial. Understanding the enduring impact of the war requires dissecting myriad trails of evidence, from the physical evidence of environmental impact and the memorials that remain ubiquitous in Europe and around the world, to the political legacy of the League of Nations, to the influences on colonial, military, gender, medical, and nearly every other field of history. In seeking to understand the impact an event as unprecedentedly widely felt as World War I had upon individuals, works of literature reveal what is seldom discussed in official documents.

Lewis claimed that “any work which has ever produced intense and ecstatic delight in anyone” may be considered “good literature.”²¹⁷ While this thesis makes no claim with regards to the literary merit of these works, both their literary and cultural impact is undeniable. The cultural relevance of these authors’ works has only grown in the years since they were written. The millions who continue to read them and the fandoms that have sprung up around these authors’ works speak to the enduring resonance of their worlds and characters.

Lewis and Tolkien remain perhaps the two most-read founders of the genre of high fantasy, which in turn remains a cornerstone of popular culture, though its locus of production has shifted to the United States.²¹⁸ As a central cultural referent, not only in the direct impact of the books and inspired films and TV series, and all aspects of their respective fandoms, but also in inspiring the next generations of fantasy literature and content, from *Harry Potter* to *Game of Thrones*, the establishment of the genre represents a vastly underappreciated aspect of World War I’s impact on modern culture.²¹⁹ The standards and norms Lewis and Tolkien set remain defining characteristics of high fantasy, especially those of the reluctant hero, meaningful

²¹⁷ C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *On Stories, and Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 124, quoted in Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 63.

²¹⁸ For more on the historiography of speculative fiction (high fantasy, science fiction, urban fantasy, horror, etc.), see: Brian W. Aldiss and David Wingrove, *The Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Victor-Lollancz Ltd, 1986); Farah Mendlesohn, *A Short History of Fantasy* (Faringdon, England: Libri Publishing, 2012); Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (New York: Modern Library, 2005), especially the essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature”; Jamie Williamson, *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²¹⁹ We note especially the three live-action film adaptations of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005), *Prince Caspian* (2008), and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010)), though TV live (1967) and animated (1979) adaptations were also created. Tolkien’s work has enjoyed even more commercial success in adaptations, including the blockbuster film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by Peter Jackson in the early 2000’s and a subsequent trilogy adaptation of *The Hobbit* by the same director. Radio and animated adaptations, as well as a musical and a musical parody, were also produced. There are also over 150,000 works of fanfiction on the two most popular fanfiction sites (AO3 and Fanfiction.net) making it the fourth most popular literature fandom on both sites. *The Chronicles of Narnia* boasts more than 20,000 fanfiction works on the two sites and remains at around the 10th most written-in fandom.

sacrifice, ecocentrism, the medieval aesthetic, and the tension inherent in creating a story that is at once fantastical and otherworldly and yet feels real and conveys truths that matter.

Detective fiction has similarly permeated modern culture, and its modern form owes much to the Queens of Crime of the interwar period Golden Age.²²⁰ The mere fact that Christie remains the most widely sold author of all time behind only Shakespeare and the Bible is proof of her cultural impact. The return of murder mysteries to the big screen and especially the recent proliferations of Christie film adaptations speak to the enduring appeal of her stories and her brilliance of plot.²²¹ While Sayers' detective novels have not enjoyed the same level of commercial success, she retains a devoted fanbase as well as active scholarly societies.²²² The broader prevalence of detective fiction, TV, movies, and even true crime documentaries as leisure and escapist media is reminiscent of the reckoning with the idea of justice, assurances of a single truth, and the establishment of an escapist experience within the framework of our recognizable reality that readers just a century ago sought. It is thus significant in its own right that the lives of these four authors were deeply impacted by their experiences in World War I, as in this way the war continues to have a profound impact on our everyday lives.

²²⁰ For more on the history of the detective fiction genre, see: Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Viking Penguin, 1985); Laura E. Nym Mayhall and Elizabeth Prevost, eds. *British Murder Mysteries, 1880-1965: Facts and Fictions* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). P. D. James, *Talking about Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2009); Martin Priestman, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521803993>.

²²¹ In particular, Kenneth Branagh's three Christie adaptations in the last six years, with more to come.

²²² See in particular: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society: <https://www.sayers.org.uk>.

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