

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**‘HOW ARE YOU GETTING ON WITH YOUR FORGETTING?’ –
CLASS, GENDER AND MEMORY IN GOLDEN AGE CRIME FICTION
BY WOMEN**

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Debrecen, 2018.

Focus and Objectives

The aim of the present dissertation is to revise the dynamics of nostalgia and memory in Golden Age crime fiction produced by leading female authors, Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Josephine Tey in the hope of proving that these texts actively engaged with the social and cultural upheavals of their times and played a significant role in the memory politics of the period between the 1920s and 50s. Recent criticism has shown that Golden Age crime fiction, although it had been pejoratively labelled as escapist literature, played a significant role in negotiating issues of class, gender and war traumas in the aftermath of World War I. In his influential 1972 essay “Novel and Narrative”, Frank Kermode set out to follow up the claim that, unlike highbrow literature, crime fiction is formula fiction written in accordance with a set of rules, and therefore devoid of any serious “content.” His analysis of Bentley’s *Trent’s Last Case* (1913) – a precursor to Golden Age fiction – was one of the first memorable examples of a new kind of reading of texts belonging to popular genres. He argued that the processing of hermeneutic material, which dominates crime plots, inevitably produces some cultural content behind the formula pattern during the reading activity.

Kermode’s argument can be seen as the precursor of the recent critical tendency to read popular literature with a view to unravelling the ideological and cultural presuppositions that govern the deeper layers of their organization. The vivid academic interest which started around the 1990s focussed not only on classical whodunits but the whole corpus of middlebrow literature which Golden Age crime fiction is traditionally seen as a part of. Nicola Humble’s *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950*, is clear evidence that such a rereading of the feminine middlebrow, which is “clearly a product of the inter-war years” (3), can justify and reinforce assumptions similar to those of Kermode. Her claim that the feminine middlebrow played an essential role in the renegotiation of new class and gender identities in the period from the 1920s to the 1950s was an important step in the critical revision of the middlebrow writers of the age. She also points out that the rise of the middlebrow cannot be separated from the crisis of the middle class(es) after the war and that it is exactly in the women’s middlebrow novel that one can have a thorough understanding of what it means to be middle class. Also, the social and cultural upheaval after the war resulted in a more introspective attitude and an obsession with the past arising from nostalgic longing. Most of the studies on middlebrow literature between the 1920s and the 1950s have memory, nostalgia, gender, middle-class anxieties and the myths of Englishness in their focus, claiming that these texts adopt an elegiac

tone lamenting the lost hegemony of the upper-middle classes due to the appearance of the new, modern middle classes after the Great War.

My approach took inspiration from Alison Light's concept of conservative modernity, expounded in her *Forever England* (1991), which sees not only Golden Age crime fiction but the whole of middlebrow literature from a new perspective, describing it as Janus-faced in its ability to look backwards and forwards. In Light's reading, the conservatism of these writers – she includes Agatha Christie in her survey – is very different from what previous critics had supposed. She claims that these writers did not identify uncritically with pre-1918 values, their conservatism was more to be understood through their “traumatised relation to modernity” (10) and a radical response to it. My other source was Susan Rowland's *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* (2001), in which she also observes that, while Golden Age authors embrace social conservatism, they “are not nostalgic for the social mores of the Victorian era” (40); in fact, they treat nostalgic longing with irony and playfulness. Her remarks are undoubtedly grounded on Light's notion which she applies to all the four queens of crime to see how their novels reflect on the urge to maintain pre-war values. Some of her observations, like the one on the fragility and incoherence of certain symbols such as the country-house, are thought-provoking and relevant to a rereading of the genre even though she fails to follow them up. Her analysis of the literary representation of nostalgic longing in the Golden Age is an important step towards a more detailed analysis of the role of memory and nostalgia, which she basically leaves untouched. Even though a version of nostalgic escapism is not far from Golden Age authors, the novels discussed in the present dissertation present a more complex set of attitudes: these novels, although many of them might be said to embody escapist cultural nostalgia, are also critical of a memory politics based on nostalgia, frequently staging the fatal consequences of the bracketing of the present which such a nostalgic attitude entails. This is precisely what the present dissertation undertakes: to explore some of the cultural implications, ambiguities and tensions of Golden Age crime fiction, focusing on issues of cultural memory and nostalgia as they are implicated in and interact with issues of class and gender. I show that the ambiguities of Golden Age crime fiction originate in the conjuncture of two types of nostalgia – restorative and reflective – that Svetlana Boym described in her *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). Further, I suggest that the workings of nostalgia and memory in Golden Age crime fiction cannot be explored without an investigation of the psychological and cultural investment in particular places. The conscious planning of what and how to remember triggers the dynamics of memory and forgetting which, as I argue, turns the genre itself into a *lieu de mémoire* of middle-class memory. This term was coined by Pierre Nora, who uses it as the pivot of an overarching

historical framework, speaking about the adverse way in which modernity affected traditional social cohesion, including forms of memory. My dissertation explores how Golden Age fiction creates *lieux de mémoire* while at the same time exploring the workings of such sites of memory, both endorsing and critiquing the claim that such sites can resurrect the past and create the impression of a timeless existence through certain symbols, like the gentleman detective, the female gentleman, as well as various types of houses (i.e. country houses, Victorian dwellings), that also furnish stages where the search for a mythical essence of Englishness may unfold. Finally, it is one of the presuppositions behind the argument that treating the genre itself as a *lieu de mémoire* sheds light on a new aspect which has never been considered. The claim that Golden Age authors experimented with the narrative form of the genre by disregarding or even eliminating several of the compulsory elements is not new in itself but, on the basis of the reading undertaken here, it seems that the way these writers undermine the rules of the narrative pattern is inseparable from their deconstruction of the nostalgic milieu. Just as these novels keep pretending that they are classical detective stories on the surface, they also pretend they approve of the conservatism to hold on to pre-war values. Yet, the rigidity originating from both the narrative structure and nostalgic longing is also criticised and, occasionally, even refuted in them.

Methods

As my dissertation is interdisciplinary in its approach, its theoretical background is situated at the intersection of several critical discourses: cultural studies, memory studies, spatial studies, gender studies and, naturally, the ever growing body of work on crime fiction. My general approach is primarily inspired by historical and theoretical approaches to crime fiction and by the young discipline of memory studies. Due to the rise of cultural studies in the past two decades, Golden Age crime fiction has also received sustained critical interest. The rereading of the genre allowed critics like Stephen Knight, Gill Plain, Charles J. Rzepka, Ernest Mandel, and even the critic P.D. James – a contemporary queen of crime – to move away from the traditional focus on the structure of classical crime fiction, introducing questions of society, gender, race, colonialism and sexuality.

To unravel the anxieties and ambiguities that surround the recreation of a mythical England that the selected novels describe after the Great War, I apply theories of nostalgia and memory. For the discussion of nostalgic longing, I draw upon Svetlana Boym's two different

types of nostalgia – restorative and reflexive – to reflect on the authors’ ambiguous approach to the evocation of the past. Since some of the novels analysed here delineate the nostalgic atmosphere as oppressive and unbearable, the symptoms of pathological nostalgia as explained in Robert Hemming’s *Modern Nostalgia* are also helpful in discussing the memory politics of this body of fiction. Nostalgic longing triggers off practices of memory to recapture milieus remote from the present, and Golden Age crime fiction exploits images, symbols or artefacts along which it reconstructs the past. I approach this process through Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* only to show that the reconstruction of the past from the present through particular symbols of national identity is both a sign of trauma and the source of frustrations and inhibitions. The obsession to maintain the past implies that the artificial milieu is totally out of time and place. In such cases, the occurrence of crime can be seen as a necessary, even liberating act that finally shatters and destroys the mythical world. Crime, then, does not come from the outside, but appears as a logical consequence of suppressing and bracketing the present. The genre, then, seems to treat critically the nostalgic attitude and the memory politics of the interwar years.

Results

The research carried out in the dissertation has led to the following results:

In my dissertation, I have argued that while Alison Light and Susan Rowland argue that Golden Age authors undermine traditional conservative ideology and the nostalgic tendency, they do not discuss this phenomenon through the dynamics of memory and nostalgia. I suggested that this novel approach could not only extend our understanding of the Janus-faced quality of the genre, but would allow one to explore more thoroughly Rowland’s suggestion, which she failed to follow up, concerning the ambiguities and controversies of nostalgic longing and remembering the past. To justify my point, I introduced Boym’s dichotomy of restorative and reflective nostalgia, and examined how these writers reflect on the urge to recreate a lost England from pieces of recollections. This mythical England is evoked through sites of memory, or as Pierre Nora put it, *lieux de mémoire* which transform organic recollection into a strenuous effort which requires external support. The novels of Allingham, Sayers and Tey show that the memory world constructed out of the desire to return home and find a stable identity is treated by them with criticism and irony, and the sites created to keep

or reconstruct what is lost are constantly eroded in the present. Finally, I proposed that a certain parallel could be traced between how Golden Age authors played with the narrative pattern to incorporate new elements and the way they related both to the obsession with the past and to the rapid changes of the present. My inquiry reinforces the findings of recent studies of Golden Age crime fiction in the sense that this body of fiction, far from being frozen into its timeless puzzle pattern, was truly contemporary, with a capacity to reflect on the controversies of a changing culture and society in the interwar period regarding class, gender and memory. Reading the fiction of the three writers as a *lieu de mémoire* of middle-class memory has not only revealed that the genre played an important part in the memory politics of the age but has also created the possibility to examine the extent to which these writers were critical of escapist nostalgia. Although in some of the novels sites of memory, like Black Dudley in Allingham's *The Crime at Black Dudley* or the Manor of the Pagets in her *Mystery Mile*, are destroyed or corrupted by the intrusion of the outside world, in others, the exact opposite happens: the memory worlds are destroyed from inside, by the moribundity of the nostalgic impulses that maintain them as we have seen in Allingham's *Police at the Funeral* and *Hide My Eyes*. All the three writers stage the symptoms of mental disorders, frustrations and repressions which originate in living or having to live in an artificial milieu or in the unconscious repetition of certain behavioural patterns; thus, crime is no longer an intrusion from the contemporary world into a normal and orderly microcosm but an outcome of these psychological disturbances.

Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers and Josephine Tey frequently broke the rules of the detective formula and sought ways to mix it with other genres, producing a great diversity of plot types, themes and styles. As a result, the strict boundaries of the pattern became blurred, allowing for the appearance of unorthodox elements like the detective who falls in love and marries his ideal partner, or the replacement of murder with suicide, accident or offences like false accusations or poison pen letters. Memory sites dissolve in the same way as the traditional formulaic elements, and these deviations from the norm are rooted in the texts' engagement with contemporary issues like the post-war stage of the gender crisis, middle-class anxieties and the traumas of the war. Although there is a wide spectrum of *lieux de mémoire* in which the collective memory of the nation or a class is trying to embody itself, I have considered the ones which recur in all the three writers. My analysis has mainly focused on locations, such as the countryside and small historic towns, diverse types of dwellings, like the country house, Victorian and suburban homes, everyday rituals, and two figures: the gentleman detective and the female gentleman.

1. The investigation of country houses has shown that, while these buildings can provide the illusion of aristocratic grandeur or a sense of antiquity, as the one in Allingham's *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929) does, they are also perfect scenes for criminal acts, murder or other kinds of violence. These great dwellings that are supposed to recreate the illusion of an edenic state become haunted houses, indicating the fragility of the memory world they ought to sustain. While the countryside is still usually associated with innocence in these novels, the houses and even the land are already contaminated by the intrusion of the present, usually represented by characters driven by monetary interests, like in Allingham's *Sweet Danger* (1933) or *Traitor's Purse* (1941). Family secrets which keep coming to the surface are also reasons for crime inside the walls of the mansions, as in *Mystery Mile* (1930) and *Police at the Funeral* (1931). This latter novel by Allingham, whose books portray a particularly diverse range of houses, describes the psychological disorders, even madness, stemming from an obsession with the past. In a gothic ambience, the past which the house is supposed to preserve haunts the characters and transforms the whole place into a nightmare. The suppression of the present and an eccentric insistence on the Victorian past lead to the decline of the Faradays along with their fading relics. Allingham's post-Second World War novel, *Hide My Eyes* (1958), relocates the nostalgic atmosphere into a suburban house converted into a museum of 'curios' saved from the pre-war years. Although the house as a museum is an ironic allegory of a nation wrapped up in its own past to escape war traumas, economic crisis and the loss of the colonies, the fact that the building burns down is also a silent acknowledgement that the past is irretrievable. The house called 'The Franchise' in Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948) is doomed to the same fate. Just like the culprit who pretends to be a different person, the Franchise is also fake despite its appearance. Its architectural features, thoroughly studied by the gentleman detective, reveal it as the unsuccessful copy of the original and thus disqualify it as a heritage piece. Sayers's Victorian house in *The Documents in the Case* (1930) is also a prison-like dwelling whose captive is the young wife of the owner. While the house itself is not the focus of the novel, it becomes the seat of the kind of middle-class respectability that frustrates its inhabitants on an everyday basis.

2. Similarly to the 'great good place', the gentleman detective is also summoned to evoke the past and maintain stability in a chaotic present. Nevertheless, the gentleman detective as a site of memory is equally ambiguous and tends to complicate the interwar memory rather than resolving it. This chapter discusses the significance of the gentleman in the cultural heritage of England, tracing the process through which he had come to epitomize the masculine ideal and English identity through the centuries. Golden Age fiction portrays him as a fairly

attenuated version of the traditional gentleman figure, but someone who still carries the potential to reclaim his earlier image. This is what Allingham and Sayers illustrate through Campion and Wimsey. The fact that they are aristocrats serving justice and enforcing order evokes a distant, even chivalric past, while their idiosyncratic eccentricities and war experiences distance them from their traditional image. Tey's novel represents a different facet of the engagement with the cultural and memorial function of the gentleman detective: the figure of Blair represents the Victorian's annexation of the gentleman ideal, turning it into a moral category. The novels show that the gentleman detective as a site of memory is able to nourish the illusion that the past is retrievable, but his figure, rooted in the post-war era, can also extinguish such fantasies with equal ease. Also, his contamination by criminality and his unexpected competence in the post-war world represent him as a dynamic and modern figure, who, despite his ability to embody permanence, erodes his own mythical image.

2. Golden Age of crime fiction reflected on the prevailing anxieties over the woman question. The interwar years witnessed a more radical break with the past regarding women's professional career, financial independence and sexual freedom, all of which were characteristic of the New Woman, a contested figure since her first appearance. She returns in the selected texts as a split character, a symptom of the tensions and controversies still surrounding the woman question. These Golden Age writers create a negative New Woman type who is endowed with monstrous traits and can easily become a villain. This character is usually of humble origins, lacks strong moral principles and is occasionally even biologically determined as, for instance, in *The Franchise Affair*. The bad woman, however, is always contrasted with a more positive New Woman figure, who – following Melissa Schaub – I am referring to in the dissertation as the female gentleman. Although Allingham's gender agenda is ambiguous and hardly anything is known about Tey's attitudes, they seem to agree on the consequences of emancipating the 'wrong type of female'. The female villain becomes a rather distorted image of the emancipated woman, who tends to undermine the principles of the female gentleman ideal. Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938) and Tey's *The Franchise Affair* both criticize young and sexually liberated women, questioning whether women's emancipation can be successful or even desirable if it leads to what they see as such deviancies. Sayers' epistolary novel, *The Documents in the Case*, also contrasts women of different social status and opportunities. These include the educated New Woman, a sexually repressed hysterical spinster and an urban housewife who is the main focus of the text. As opposed to Allingham and Tey, Sayers does not represent her villain, Margaret Harrison, as an inherently evil person, but investigates the possible causes that can transform a young and energetic

woman into a potential criminal. Margaret's marriage to a much older man who is obsessed with respectability and Victorian traditions deprives her of agency and of the opportunity to pursue her personal ambitions. Sayers, however, is careful to maintain the balance, partly by counterpointing this relationship with one based on equality, and partly by indirectly criticizing men, regardless of their profession and social status, who retain old-fashioned ideas about women – like the professional writer, Munting, who is shown to be no less prejudiced about women than the husband whom he criticises for his pettiness and lack of creativity. Although Sayers seems to treat Mrs Harrison's self-dramatization as a victim with a great deal of scepticism, she also attempts to show how a young wife confined to the house all day becomes paralyzed due to her husband's tyranny, assuming different roles and finding solace and excitement in a love affair that leads to the murder of the husband.

4. As opposed to the villainous woman, the female gentleman embodies all the virtues that the previous one lacks. These female protagonists are usually represented as forward-looking in gender politics and backward-looking in class politics, and, similarly to the gentleman detective, they are able to reconcile the past and the present. The investigation of this memory figure drew upon Melissa Schaub's study which argues that the character's most essential traits correspond to those of a gentleman, which enables her to be the detective's ideal partner. I have indicated that Schaub's categories are not necessarily helpful in classifying these characters and sometimes tend to be a little too restrictive. Relying on Megan Hoffman's monograph on female characters in Golden Age crime fiction, I attempted to fuse the two approaches – those of Schaub and Hoffman – to investigate the female heroines in the work of these three writers. In Sayers and Allingham, my analysis focused more on the female gentleman as a bridge figure whose marriage to the gentleman detective does not only restore him to his masculinity but portrays the woman embedded in the pastoral idyll of the English landscape. Their decision to accept traditional femininity also suggests that they are willing to create a home for their traumatized (war) heroes, reinforcing the female gentleman's role in the recreation of the stability and security of pre-war England. I read Tey's Marion Sharpe as an alternative version of the female gentleman, someone who does not satisfy some of Schaub's criteria, including the chronological, but embodies the type in many important ways, warranting the extension of the relevance of the category beyond the Second World War. I have argued that, though there are important differences between Marion on the one hand and Sayers' Harriet and Allingham's Amanda on the other in terms of class and professional career, which she practically lacks, she is honest and honourable and has very strong moral principles. She liberates herself from the obligation to marry despite the gentleman detective's proposal. On the one hand, her refusal

portrays her as a truly modern woman who is determined to follow her own principles. On the other, it also indicates the female gentleman's role in creating a world for the detective who also acknowledges that he cannot recapture a bygone world.



Registry number: DEENK/309/2018.PL
Subject: PhD Publikációs Lista

Candidate: Renáta Zsámba
Neptun ID: KUXIL5
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literature

List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Zsámba, R.:** Figures of Memory: The Gentleman Detective.
In: Trauma és válság a századfordulón Irodalom, művészet, filozófia. Ed.: Loboczky János, Kúspér Judit, Eszterházi Károly Főiskola Líceum Kiadó, Eger, 1-8, 2015. ISBN: 9786155621178
2. **Zsámba, R.:** "How are you getting on with your forgetting?": the Past and the Present in Margery Allingham's and Josephine Tey's crime fiction.
In: Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English. Ed.: Ruttkay Veronika, Gárdos Bálint, L'Harmattan, Budapest, 367-380, 2014. ISBN: 9789632369433

Foreign language international book chapters (1)

3. **Zsámba, R.:** Haunted in the Suburbs: Forms of Representing Evil in Dorothy L. Sayers' The Documents in the Case.
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Other journal articles (1)

4. **Zsámba, R.:** Evil Rides on the Bus: Space and Female Identities in Margery Allingham's and Josephine Tey's Crime Novels.
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List of other publications

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5. **Zsámber, R.:** Albert Campion: Margery Allingham.

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Other journal articles (3)

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8. **Zsámber, R.:** Szocialista krimi kapitalista díszletekkel: Linda és a nyolcvanas évek.

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The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of Web of Science, Scopus and Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) databases.

14 September, 2018



