

“The *thrill* when it suddenly went pitch black!”:

Blackout cultures in *A Murder is Announced* and *The Mousetrap*

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The draught from the window caught the flame of the candle. It flickered and went out... (*And Then There Were None*, 1939)¹

The plunge into darkness is something of a gift to the crime novelist. Dating back at least as far as Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764) and thus to the very origins of Gothic fiction, the *topos* of the darkness-plunge reliably evokes a thrill of sensation, beckoning the imagination to do its worst. When a sputtering candle is snuffed out in the draughty passage of a Gothic castle or faulty lamps darken a remote country house, the reader feels an accompanying sense of foreboding. More pragmatically, the plunge into darkness provides the crime novelist or dramatist with a convenient plot device. When all the lights go out agency is obscured and the hand that wields the murder weapon is concealed. Imagination is heightened but perception confounded as the killer strikes under cover of darkness.

Unsurprisingly, Agatha Christie’s crime fiction sports many of these darkness-plunges both on paper and on stage. *Black Coffee* (1930), *And Then There Were None* (1939), *Sparkling Cyanide* (1946), *The Mousetrap* (1952), and *They Do It with Mirrors* (1952) are just some of the texts in which the trope occurs. Yet what compels attention in a study of Christie at war is the way in which the motif takes on a deepened and shifting significance in the novelist’s

¹ I am indebted to Dr Emma Plaskitt and Dr Matthew Pearson for flagging up myriad instances of the darkness-plunge in Gothic novels and Christie corpus respectively.

post-war works. No longer confined to recalling Gothic literary tradition, the darkness-plunge in post-Second World War Christie also confronts the traumatic memory of wartime blackouts and the threats that accompanied them. As we shall see with reference to *A Murder is Announced* (1950) and *The Mousetrap* (1952), Christie's development of the motif moves to reclaim individual agency and moral responsibility after the long years of state-imposed blackout. This chapter will briefly sketch the historical context of the Second World War blackouts, and review the literary origins and development of the darkness-plunge, before exploring Christie's playful yet subtle reimagining of the motif and its meanings.

Christie and blackout culture

When exploring the darkness-plunge in Christie's work it is salutary to remember that during the novelist's long writing career, the state twice immersed the entirety of her insular reading public in darkness.² Sporadically in the Great War, and then concerted between 1939 and 1945, government regulations blacked out both town and city, the painted and boarded windows, thick curtains and dimmed car headlamps all designed to thwart the aerial navigation of enemy bombers. Christie was herself displaced and blacked out alongside her readership. With the outbreak of war, the holiday home Christie shared with husband Max Mallowan, Greenway House, was to become a refuge for child evacuees, its owners relocating to London so that Max could serve in the Home Guard and Christie could work at University College Hospital by day, and continue writing by night (Curran 309). Christie was thus located in an embattled London from an early stage of the blitz, living first in Half Moon Street, then Park Place "with noisy sessions of bombs going off all around us" (Osborne 155) before a move to a house in Sheffield Terrace. When this property was promptly bombed out Christie was to relocate once again, this time to Lawn Road in Hampstead, close to the Heath.

² The lesser-known blackouts of the First World War are documented by Ian Castle's *The First Blitz: Bombing London in the First World War* (Oxford: Osprey, 2015).

From this besieged position Christie had ample opportunity to reflect on the contradictory proposition the wartime blackout extended to civil society. While ostensibly offering shelter and protection, blackout equally exposed the populace to other forms of risk, opening up, as one commentator has said “new wartime spaces of transgression, danger, and tension’ (Wiggam 237).³

First, there was a greatly heightened risk of pedestrian trips, falls and other accidents while navigating the darkened streets and skirting the lampposts and sandbags: “roads which people could have sworn they knew intimately became impenetrable mysteries” (Ziegler 68). Add the motor car to the equation, its single headlamp dimmed in line with regulations, and the perils were exacerbated. As early as October 1940, a dismayed House of Commons learned that the number of road deaths from traffic accidents had already doubled from the previous year (Wiggam 223); for a period in December 1940 there were forty fatal road traffic accidents recorded in London every day (Ziegler 68). Public zeal to enforce the blackout also led to further risks. Conflicts would arise when citizens resisted the dictates of Air Raid Patrol (ARP) wardens or, conversely, when members of the public took the law into their own hands to enforce blackout regulations on the non-compliant. Even public-spirited initiatives to “put that light out” could lead to disaster: when Metropolitan Police Constable George Southworth gamely scaled a drainpipe to the fourth floor of a Harley Street address to extinguish the sole light burning in the window, he slipped and fell to his death, another untallied casualty of the blackout (Ziegler 70).

As if these sources of peril were not dire enough, the blackouts would also provide cover for a range of criminal and nefarious activities. Black-market trading, looting and theft all

³ Wiggam’s offers an exhaustive comparison of blackout culture in both Britain and Germany and this chapter is much indebted to its findings.

increased significantly during the metropolitan and provincial blackouts: for this was the era of “spivs, deserters and racketeers” as Donald Thomas’s study of the period puts it.

Illustrative headlines from the provincial press of the time report “Guardsmen’s Blackout Theft: Young Woman’s Pluck” (*Wiltshire Times and Trowbridge Advertiser* 1942); “Blackout Theft: Youths who Snatched Bag at Seaforth” (*Liverpool Echo* 1939); and “Nottingham Man for Trial Charged with Blackout Raid and Theft” (*Nottingham Journal*, 1939). And in the dark, murder is easy. The *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* relates a “Murder in the Black-out” in Edinburgh in 1939; *The Lincolnshire Echo* proclaims the “Blackout Murder” of a police constable in 1940; while the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* recounts the “Police Hunt in Bus Stop Black-out Murder” in 1942.

Christie’s own circle was by no means untouched by blackout crime. The cosy London premises of the Detection Club (of which Christie was a founding member and future president) were broken into by thieves under cover of darkness (Edwards 405), and in early 1942, its Soho environs were prowled by serviceman and serial killer Gordon Frederick Cummins, nicknamed “the blackout Ripper”. Mercifully, Cummins exercised a shorter reign of terror than the Victorian killer after whom he was named but sensational press reports exploited the connection and inspired at least two B-movies boasting a “blackout Ripper”, the 1943 film *A Night for Crime* and a late entry in the Basil Rathbone Sherlock Holmes series, *The Woman in Green* (1945).⁴ Even the memoirs of the Scotland Yard Inspector who ran Cummins to ground shared this melodramatic tone, telling of a benighted London in fear of the lone killer:

Not since those panic-ridden days in 1888, when Jack the Ripper was abroad in the East End, had London known such a reign of terror as that which existed in this war-

⁴ An influence can also be detected in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) which features non-fatal but nonetheless sinister blackout assaults on young women in Canterbury, their hair being covered with glue by a mystery assailant.

time February, when night after night, death – fiendish, revolting, and gruesome – came to four unsuspecting women in the heart of the Metropolis. (Cherrill 186)⁵

Cummins’s crimes epitomised the threats of the blackout: those same air raid shelters which were designed to provide safe haven from aerial bombardment could equally be places of vulnerability to other perils and threats. The “rowdyism and drunkenness” which, according to the contemporaneous press, would sometimes break out in air raid shelters were as nothing compared to the harm awaiting 40 year-old Evelyn Hamilton, Cummins’s first known victim, her body discovered in a public air-raid shelter in Marylebone in February 1942.⁶

Thus blackout Britain was a contradictory place; “its role in protecting the safety of the community had profound implications for the sense of personal security” (Wiggam 194). Retreating behind curtains or below stairs, or hastening into the darkness of public air raid shelters might afford relative safety from the skies but there were other sources of danger close by. Moreover, the strictures of blackout culture severely curtailed the individual agency of the populace, effectively limiting free movement and showing “how the technology of war could alter the relationship between the state and the citizen” (Wiggam 237). Civilians were doubly disempowered: to be safeguarded from the sky-borne threat they must embrace a state-imposed confinement in darkness or venture out to navigate a darkened city, exposed to a whole host of perils.

Literary associations of the darkness-plunge

Before exploring how Christie’s fiction reflects and then challenges this wartime inheritance in her use of the darkness-plunge, it is necessary to look back briefly to the earliest literary

⁵ HO 144/21659 collates the main Home Office documentation on the Cummins case.

⁶ ‘Free Fights in Raid Shelters’, *Daily Mirror* - Friday 30 August 1940. A recent account of the case is provided by Simon Read in *The Blackout Murders* (London: The Cromwell Press, 2008).

associations of the motif. As we have seen, the motif inheres in the very roots of Gothic fiction, appearing at a moment of high drama in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) when the imperilled protagonist flees from her patriarchal oppressor through subterranean caverns: "she approached the door that had been opened; but a sudden gust of wind that met her at the door extinguished her lamp, and left her in total darkness" (91). Here, the darkness-plunge signifies a physical and moral vulnerability while also evoking the inner state of the heroine. An equally signature Gothic text, Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) develops the trope further, now casting a male protagonist into darkness: "he found himself in a narrow passage; but as he turned to pursue it, the damp vapours curled round him and extinguished the light" (54). Invariably, the light goes out at the end of a sentence or paragraph. It is the climactic moment – the fulfilment of a dreaded inevitability and the moment of catastrophe for the protagonist. It is the reader's cue to gasp with anticipation of whatever will happen next.

The darkness-plunge soon became a signature of Gothic tradition, its currency as stock motif confirmed by Austen's parody *Northanger Abbey* (1817) where the romance-reading heroine creeps about the chambers of the eponymous abbey, determined to find something sensational:

The dimness of the light her candle emitted made her turn to it with alarm [. . .]
Alas! It was snuffed and extinguished in one. A lamp could not have expired with more awful effect. Catherine, for a few moments, was motionless with horror. It was done completely; not a remnant of light in the wick could give hope to the rekindling breath. Darkness impenetrable and immovable filled the room. A violent gust of wind, rising with sudden fury, added fresh horror to the moment. Catherine trembled from head to foot. (123-4)

From this point, the perpetuation of the motif into nineteenth-century sensation fiction such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859), and subsequently into ghost stories was assured. Perhaps its apotheosis is H.G. Wells's ghost story "The Red Room" (1896) where a daredevil narrator keeps vigil in a castle's haunted room and finds that the only thing to fear in the darkness really is fear itself:

I turned to where the flames were still dancing between the glowing coals and splashing red reflections upon the furniture; made two steps toward the grate, and incontinently the flames dwindled and vanished, the glow vanished, the reflections rushed together and disappeared, and as I thrust the candle between the bars darkness closed upon me like the shutting of an eye, wrapped about me in a stifling embrace, sealed my vision, and crushed the last vestiges of reason from my brain. (178)⁷

Reflections of blackout culture

From Gothic novels to ghost stories then, the darkness-plunge was a well-established literary trope before ever the crime novelists of the Golden Age began to exploit its atmosphere and plot-utility. Christie's own early uses of the motif, as in the early Poirot play *Black Coffee* (1930), make full use of these aspects. In this early outing for the Belgian detective, the onstage blackout is built into the diegesis of the narrative: the lights are extinguished so that a thief can return a stolen document under amnesty – though in the event a murder is committed under the cover of the darkness. A decade later, reflections of blackout culture begin to make their presence felt. We find them, for example, in the novel and subsequent stage play of *And Then There Were None* (1939; 1943), where Vera roams the upper rooms of Mr Owen's murder mansion with a single candle for illumination:

⁷ Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* perpetuates the trope in the modern ghost story when protagonist Arthur Kipps is plunged into darkness in remote Eel Marsh House: "No light came on. The torch had broken" (167).

She made a step forward. The draught from the window caught the flame of the candle. It flickered and went out...

In the dark she was suddenly afraid...

“Don’t be a fool,’ Vera Claythorne urged herself. It’s all right. The others are downstairs. All four of them. There’s no one in the room. There can’t be. You’re imagining things my girl.’ (179)

The stage adaptation of 1943, written and performed to blackout audiences, deepens this sense of the physical and moral panic associated with total darkness. Exclaiming “Why can’t we have some light?” and flagging her lack of agency while roaming the darkened house, Vera continues:

It’s awful in the dark. You don’t know where you are. You don’t know where anyone is. (66)

Such reflections on darkness must surely have resonated for contemporaneous readers and audiences, certainly with those who watched the stage-play from a darkened auditorium in the knowledge that at the play’s end they must navigate the blacked-out city on their precipitous journey home. Indeed, Vera’s self-talk in the novelised version, and her blind panic in the dramatized version are paralleled suggestively in the contemporaneous account of one Irene Byers, who recounts losing her way outside London’s Central Telegraph Office at the height of the blackout:

I stood still, panic-stricken, then said firmly over and over again to myself, “I know this street absolutely well – don’t be such an ass – walk forward quietly and you will come to Newgate Street. [. . .] But I felt damp with perspiration and quite exhausted. (Ziegler 68)

In Vera's and Byers' accounts alike, the perceived loss of agency and sense of disempowerment and disorientation are emphatically the same.

Blackout subcultures and the darkness-plunge

If these instances of the darkness-plunge show the classic motif overlaid with associations of wartime blackouts, the early post-war texts *A Murder is Announced* and *The Mousetrap* involve a more complex deployment of the motif. This time, Christie enacts the gradual reassertion of individual agency after the years of state-imposed darkness – the power of just one person to put out the lights. This reassertion of agency plays out against a surprising context, a now largely forgotten blackout subculture involving play and parlour-games. This subculture, attested by sources in the wartime press, offers a ludic response to enemy action and enforced darkness. Through imagination and in play, it turns the threat of militarised murder from the skies into an innocuous domestic game of murder in the dark.

It is, after all, a parlour game that the readers of the *North Benham News and Chipping Cleghorn Gazette* are expecting after reading the celebrated notice that opens *A Murder is Announced*:

A murder is announced and will take place on Friday, October 29th, at Little Paddocks, at 6:30 p.m. Friends accept this, the only intimation. (5)

The intimation for the villagers is one of game-play. Edmund Swettenham, Colonel Easterbrook and Bunch Harmon all read the notice as announcing a game of “wink murder”:

[S]omebody's the victim and somebody else is a detective – and then they turn the lights out and someone taps you on the shoulder and then you scream and lie down and sham dead. (10)

[...]

One person's the murderer, nobody knows who. Lights out. Murderer chooses his victim. The victim has to count to twenty before he screams. (11)

[...]

I don't really like games that happen in the dark. They frighten me, and I do hope I shan't be the one who's murdered. If someone suddenly puts a hand on my shoulder and whispers, "You're dead," I know my heart will give such a big bump that perhaps it really *might* kill me! (13)

Surprisingly, this taste for wink-murder and murder-themed parlour games appears to have been actively nurtured during the blackouts of the Second World War. Replete as the documentary sources are with blackout injunctions, air raids notices and casualty lists, they also include surprising evidence that wartime blackouts were sometimes perceived as opportunities for play, and parlour-games – for “an imaginative response to the darkness” (Wiggam 200). Thus, scattered amongst the 1940s press headlines of bomb-damage and casualties we also find signs that behind those blackout curtains and boarded windows of wartime Britain, parlour games were sometimes in full swing. Morale-boosting notices and advertisements pepper the provincial press of the war years, assuring readers that “there are blackouts and blackouts”, inviting them to join in “card games for the long black-out nights” or to gather to enjoy “light, warmth, music, games, refreshments and everything to dispel the

miseries of a town in darkness”.⁸ Some of this game-play would be on an apt theme. The assembled parties would sometimes play rounds of “wink murder” or “murder in the dark” – a parlour game whose precise origins are difficult to fix but which appears to have been codified, as we might expect, during the “Golden Age” of detective fiction.⁹ A 1930 summary of the game’s rules in *The Sketch* would appear to be one of the earliest examples:

Murder is the game which has succeeded auction and contract as Society’s latest indoor sport. In the following article, Mr. Rupert Grayson, Murder expert and detective-story writer, describes “ways” and method of play, so that our readers may enjoy a round of Murder after dinner. There are people who enjoy counting the shudders in life. The simple game of “Murder in the Dark” is innocently thrilling.¹⁰

In *A Murder is Announced*, Christie invokes this “innocently thrilling”, ludic memory of blackout subculture alongside the wider array of wartime allusions and memories noted by Curran: “The shadow of rationing and bartering, deserters and foreign ‘help’, ration books and identity cards hovers over the book” (487).¹¹ This ludic subculture informs the manner in which the participants gather at Little Paddocks, the country house, for what they assume will be a game of murder in the dark. They are indeed plunged into darkness as expected, but in the event, an intruder brandishing a torch and, they assume, a weapon, holds the party up at gunpoint before he is mysteriously and fatally shot by an unseen hand.

⁸ ‘Card games for the long black-out nights’, *Newcastle Journal*, Tuesday 10 October 1939; ‘There are Black-outs & Black-outs’, *Skegness Standard*, Wednesday 11 October 1939.

⁹ Given the well documented Victorian taste for sensation fiction, penny dreadfuls and true crime, we might expect “murder in the dark” to be of earlier origin but Patrick Beaver’s exhaustive review of Victorian parlour games unearths no game more sinister than “Cat and Mouse” (*Victorian Parlor Games*, 1974).

¹⁰ *The Sketch*, Wednesday 28 May 1930.

¹¹ The notebook entries for *A Murder is Announced* reveal that a competing setting for the novel was at one point the London address of 20 Ennerly Park. The relocation to the country setting of Chipping Cleghorn in no way diminishes the memory of blitz and blackout- blackout conditions, which were enforced equally on town and country; the haphazard jettisoning of bombs by returning enemy bombers meant villagers could know the effects of bomb damage as well as their urban counterparts.

An array of blackout and post-war allusions attends this murder in the dark. The absence of a fire in the Little Paddocks grate is attributed to fuel rationing; house-servant and wartime refugee Mitzi screams “like a siren” after the murder; and the entire episode puts former Air Raid Patrol warden Hinch in mind of her “A.R.P. days”. Reliving the gunshots, Mrs Harmon avers, “I don’t like bangs’ (60) while Mrs Swettenham eschews the more obvious wartime simile to liken the “real bullets, just whistling past our ears” to “the Commandos in the war” (56).

These evocations of the “innocently thrilling” ludic subculture sit side-by-side with more traumatic wartime memories such as Miss Marple’s recollection of “a fly-bomb in London – splinters of glass everywhere” (184) and Mitzi’s traumatised account of the fate of her brother in war-torn Europe, curtailed by Inspector Craddock who refuses to have this wartime memory brought too close to home:

“Ach, Gott in Himmel, the blood! It is not the first time I have seen blood. My little brother - I see him killed before my eyes – I see blood in the street – people shot, dying, I –“

“Yes,” said Inspector Craddock. “Thank you very much.” (48).

This instinct to repress and forget the privations of blitz and blackout are central to the novel’s plot. The intruder at Little Paddocks is revealed to be Swiss national Rudi Scherz, one of the few individuals aware that householder Miss Blacklock is an imposter, younger sister Charlotte having assumed the identity and estate of elder sister Letitia who died in Switzerland. The deception which blackmailer Scherz has threatened to uncover, has been

made possible by the years of blackout and blitz.¹² It is only because of the six years of wartime darkness and destruction of old ties, photographs and documentary records that Charlotte is able to practise her deception and impersonate her sister to gain an inheritance – a stake for which she will commit the commit of Scherz and subsequently two of the villagers.¹³ Inspector Craddock muses on how such frauds and assumed identities have increased since the war – with identities “borrowed from people who had met sudden death by ‘incidents’ in the cities” (87). Indeed, Charlotte could be said to embody this invidious legacy of wartime blackout and blitz, her very name flagging the association. Suggestively, at the novel’s end, Bunch Harmon uses the definite article to refer to Charlotte as “The Blacklock”.

Yet however sinister the goings on in Miss Blacklock’s sitting room (it is Charlotte who has fused the lights; it is she who has fired the fatal shot at Rudi Scherz), this ludic, parlour-game version of blackout involves only a temporary vulnerability and restriction of agency for the assembled guests. We have moved on from the years of state-imposed darkness and mass vulnerability of the populace. Once the crime is committed, game players of sufficient wit and insight will be able to penetrate the darkness. For Hinch prompted to reconstruct the scene in her mind – “She wasn’t *there!*” – or for Miss Marple noting the significance of a frayed lamp cord, the parlour game can be played out to a normative end. Likewise, when the lights go out at Little Paddocks, the darkness is no imposed by the unseen hand of the state but by a sole hand flicking the light switch or fusing the Dresden china lamp. The darkness that falls is not as deep or as abiding; the forces unleashed not as universally deadly or unceasing. Instead of a faceless enemy state prosecuting a campaign of murder from the

¹² Likewise, the plot of *Taken at the Flood* (1948), is set in motion by the fate of the wealthy Gordon Cloade, killed instantly when his house on Campden Hill is bombed *Taken at The Flood*, (London: Pan, 1948), as Rebecca Mills discusses elsewhere in this volume.

¹³ Other subtle allusions to the Blitz (and this time to Allied air attacks) include mention of the provenance of the crucial shepherd and shepherdess lamps: they are made from Dresden china (p.128).

skies, just one malefactor is at work, with us in this very room, playing the parlour game by the familiar rules.

A Murder is Announced thus seems to offer rapprochement between the competing conceptions of blackout culture bequeathed by the Second World War. On the one hand, the dark days of blackout have enabled the shifting of identities, the perpetration of fraud and the masquerade of imposters preying on a public immersed in darkness. On the other, the evocation of the ludic, game-playing subculture of blackout enables a normative outcome and the unmasking of “the Blacklock”, offering reassurance that when the lights go out in 1950s Britain, it is within the individual’s power to find illumination and restored safety.

“Parlour games!”

As brief coda, a look at *The Mousetrap* shows how Christie played out the same pattern, at much the same time, upon the London stage. In the archetypal murder-house setting of Monkswell Manor (a name evocative of the Gothic origins of the darkness-plunge motif), the lighting and dimming of lamps is safely within the purview of the occupants. Landlady Mollie lights the lamps and “wall brackets” twice in Act One, Trotter dims them before the “reconstruction” in Act Two and of course, the hand of the killer extinguishes them before the murder of Mrs Boyle: “*A hand shows through the open doorway and clicks the light switch. The lights suddenly go out*” (326). Again, while there is evocation of blackout and blitz and the disruption that they bring, not least in Trotter’s speech to Mollie:

You’d be surprised, Mrs Ralston, if you knew how many cases like yours we get.

Especially since the war. Homes broken up and families dead. [. . .] There aren’t any backgrounds nowadays. (338)

the ludic, “innocently thrilling” subculture of parlour-game ultimately predominates:

TROTTER: This isn't a game, sir.

CHRISTOPHER: Isn't it? Now there I think you are wrong. It is a *game* – to somebody. (357)

“Parlour games!” exclaims Paravincini when the trap is set. And indeed, in *The Mousetrap* as in *A Murder is Announced*, the ludic elements are as pronounced as the element of mystery, bringing post-war reassurance that individual vulnerability in the face of just one malefactor is a much more welcome, even comforting, proposition than mass vulnerability in the face of wartime enemy action.

Conclusion: Murder in the Dark

In *A Murder is Announced* and *The Mousetrap* then, Christie confronts the legacy of blackout and blitz. She adapts the long-established darkness-plunge motif as a locus for post-war reassertion of individual agency amidst shared memories of trauma and mass vulnerability. Indeed, Christie's treatment of the motif offers a modest but rewarding insight into the socio-literary function of post-war crime fiction and indicates something of the deeper significance of the perceived “cosiness” of Christie's post-war narratives. Just as the notion of murder as puzzle could offer a hermeneutic of pattern and order to the post-war reading public, so in Christie's hands the specific motif of the darkness-plunge is tamed and called back from the darkest associations of blackout and blitz to become something more ludic and even comforting. When the lights go out at Little Paddocks or Monkswell Manor we are no longer at the mercy of the immobilising darkness of a state at war, but threatened by just one criminal, close at hand, whose steps can ultimately be retraced, whose crimes can be unravelled.

Given all this subtle and allusive light-snuffing, the tribute paid by the St Martin's and Savoy Theatres on the night of Christie's 1976 passing is not only poignant but apt. For a full hour, both theatres dimmed their lights.

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