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# **The Spinster Detective**

**A comparison between Maisie Dobbs and the women detectives  
of the Golden Age**

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## Introduction

The interwar period saw the emergence of what today is known as ‘The Golden Age of Detective Fiction’. The detective novels of this period were characterised by their clue-based mysteries and intellectual games between the author and reader. During this period a Detection Club, consisting of well-known detective authors, agreed upon a number of rules in which a writer of detective fiction should operate. The ‘clue-puzzle’ was the most vital rule, and from these clues both the detective and the reader should be able to draw rational conclusions. Rules around the detective, the crime, the criminal and the setting were also legislated, which served to make the Golden Age a very distinct sub-genre within crime fiction (Knight 85-88, Young 2006, 1).

It was during this era that the spinster detective rose in popularity on the fictional stage. Previously the majority of detectives had been male, and women’s roles were often that of victims or villains, but rarely the main protagonists. Women authors had to find a way to introduce a female detective that would not threaten the male dominated territory, and here the harmless old spinster was seen as the perfect solution. Innocent-looking but clever spinster detectives like Dorothy L. Sayers’ Miss Climpson and Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple were introduced and taken to heart by the English readership, and opened up the way for a whole new kind of detective fiction.

The First World War played a big role in the spinster detective’s success. In pre-war society, women had few rights and lived very restricted lives. The unmarried woman had an even lower social status; not only was she a woman, she had also failed to fulfill her natural duties as a wife and a mother. But the war provided an opportunity for women to prove themselves, which led to many great changes for the female population. In addition, the fact that hundreds of thousands of men had been lost in the war, and that there were an estimated two million ‘surplus’ women in Britain all helped raise the status of the unmarried woman. All this together paved the way for the spinster detective to begin her operation.

In 2003, the contemporary author Jacqueline Winspear made an attempt to reproduce the era of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction by creating her own spinster detective: Maisie Dobbs. Winspear captures the era well by letting each Maisie Dobbs

case have a connection to the Great War, and her novels give a vivid image of interwar Britain. Although the novels are well written and seemingly captures the period well, Winspear dares to do what the classic writers did not - she lets an attractive, well-educated single woman in her early thirties be the main character.

The purpose of this essay is to see whether Winspear has managed to recreate the Golden Age of Detective fiction through her Maisie Dobbs' novels. A comparison between Miss Marple, Miss Climpson, Maisie Dobbs and Sayers' more modern female character Harriet Vane will be conducted, as well as an analysis of the settings in order to see how well the interwar period in Britain is portrayed.

## Historical Background

In order to understand the significance of the female detective in the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, there has to be an understanding of the cultural shift that took place in Britain around the First World War. In Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1930), the spinster detective Miss Climpson describes the changes as follows:

In the old days, an *unmarried* woman arriving *alone* at *midnight* with a *suitcase* would hardly have been considered *respectable* - what a wonderful difference one finds today! I am *grateful* to have lived to see such changes, because whatever old-fashioned people may say about the greater *decorum* and *modesty* of women in Queen Victoria's time, those who can remember the old conditions know how *difficult* and *humiliating* they were (190).

After the First World War, the social environment in Britain had changed and for the female population, there were many new doors of opportunities. Shortly after the war, a first step towards female suffrage resulted in the right to vote for women over thirty, and not long thereafter, women were admitted full membership at universities and gained access to what previously had been exclusively male professions (Taylor 166, Graves 46). Robert Graves describes this as a time when women were legally recognised and finally seen as morally responsible persons (48).

Although the war was the turning point for this cultural shift, the woman's independence debate was far from new. Feminist movements like the Suffragettes had for years fought violently for women's equal rights, and to them the war offered "an unprecedented occasion to demonstrate the woman's vital role safeguarding the future of the British nation" (De Vries 76). Women saw their opportunity to join the war effort by filling the vacant work positions while the men were out on the battlefields (Taylor 38). In 1914, almost six out of nineteen million women over the age of ten in Britain were employed, and filled the empty spaces within industry, domestic service and commerce. During the war, this number increased to 7.3 million working women. For many middle-class women the war offered them their first opportunity to work outside the home (Beauman 16-18).

For practical reasons, women war-workers had abandoned the stiff corsets that were then mandatory for girls above the age of thirteen. The long skirts of previous periods were exchanged for shorter ones, and the short haircut which had been adopted by women land-workers during the war became very popular. The clothing of the female munition worker inspired a new universal fashion with the boyish figure as the new ideal, in contrast to the pre-war hourglass figure (Graves 39). The new hairstyle and fashion were the outward sign of women's new freedom.

When the war finally was over, women were no longer seen as patriots serving their country and were therefore expected to return home and vacate their positions for the returning soldiers. But many women had grown used to a new lifestyle of financial independence and did not want to give up their jobs to the men in need of work (Beauman 76). Yet, with pressure from the Trade Union, women were dismissed from their positions within engineering, printing and transport work and munition factories without any unemployment benefits (Graves 44-45).

For young women who were demobilized after the war, their obvious path to security would be that of marriage. However, finding a husband had become an even greater challenge. Already before the war there had been an excess of women in Britain, and with the multitude of war casualties the disparity worsened. A quarter of a million men had been killed on the battlefields, and another million and a half were permanently incapacitated by injuries sustained (Taylor 38). The 1921 Census revealed that there was a prospect of two million 'surplus' women in Britain, women who due to shortage of men fit for marriage would never marry or have children (Joannon 176). According to the author Virginia Nicholson, a headmistress at

Bournemouth High School for Girls in southern England announced to her pupils in 1917 that only one out of ten of them would marry because of the scarcity of male suitors. She continued her speech by saying: “You will have to make it in the world as best you can” (20). Many of the young women coming of age during the war had to face this new reality. Instead of finding fulfilment through marriage and children, they had no choice but to become self-sufficient. These surplus women undoubtedly played a big part towards women’s emancipation, even though at the time it was rarely used as an argument (Taylor 166).

The spinster women, who had earlier been seen as exceptions and failures for not fulfilling their natural destiny of marriage and motherhood (Lewis 4), were now a large group in society. The fact that many women had lost their fiancés and husbands in the war made their situation far more respectable than the pure failure of not finding a man, which meant women were no longer ostracized for remaining single. For many of those who had lost dear ones in the war, it was difficult to find a living man with ‘the golden qualities of the dead’, and since a life in spinsterhood had become more accepted and less humiliating, many women chose to remain single (Beauman 36). Although many women had lost their jobs immediately after the war, the interwar period also led to many new opportunities for work and education. Being a spinster did not longer mean a life in solitude, and many could probably agree with the young headmistress Sarah Burton’s exclamation in *South Riding*: “I was born to be a spinster, and by God, I’m going to spin” (Holtby 61) At the same time as the spinster woman gained more respect in real life, she also became a prominent figure within fiction.

## The Spinster Detective of The Golden Age

After the First World War, the public’s desire for light entertainment helped the detective genre thrive, and it was soon developed into what today is known as The Golden Age of Detective Fiction. It was during this time that two of the most famous writers of detective fiction came into prominence: Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. Even though Christie and Sayers were among an increasing number of female writers in Britain (Beauman 6), they both started off with creating male detectives.

Christie published her first story about the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot in 1920 and Sayers introduced the well-spoken English aristocrat Lord Peter Wimsey as her main detective in 1923. According to Maureen T. Reddy, women knew that they would reach a larger audience by creating male protagonists rather than female ones, especially within crime fiction which tended to value the traditionally masculine and conservative (5-6).

Women writers of the Golden Age who wanted to create a female detective were caught in what Birgitta Berglund describes as a Catch 22-situation: If they created a women who did not retain her feminine attributes, she would be accused of being unwomanly, and if she did, she would be accused of being unprofessional (144). But in the third Lord Peter Wimsey Mystery, *Unnatural Death* (1927), Sayers found a solution to the female sleuth problem by adding an unexpected person to Lord Peter's investigation crew: Miss Katherine Climpson.

Miss Climpson is an elderly spinster who is employed by Lord Peter to investigate newspaper advertisements in order to discover suspicious offers that would take advantage of vulnerable women and poor people. Lord Peter has realised that with her unfashionable clothing and grey hair, Miss Climpson would be able to make inquiries where a man would be out of place. He explains: "I send a lady with a long woolly jumper on knitting needles and jingly things around her neck. Of course she asks questions - everyone expects it. Nobody is surprised. Nobody is alarmed" (30).

Miss Climpson was soon followed by Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple, who had her first novel-length appearance in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930). In the little sleepy village of St Mary Head, Miss Marple is able to solve the mystery behind the murder of Colonel Protheroe. The first glimpse we get of Miss Marple, is when the vicar's wife tells her husband that among some other old ladies she is inviting that "terrible Miss Marple" for tea. When the vicar replies that he rather likes Miss Marple and her sense of humour, his wife gives her reason for dislike: "She's the worst cat in the village...and she always knows every single thing that happens - and draws the worst inferences from it" (5). The vicar's wife soon learns to appreciate Miss Marple, but as a matter of fact every word she says is true, and Christie uses this image to her advantage. By letting Miss Marple be the stereotypical old maid who knows everything about everyone and who constantly collects new information from her surroundings as she is bird-watching or working in her garden, Christie creates an

unexpected detective who deceives people, not least the criminal, by her innocent appearance. As Maureen T. Reddy writes, Miss Marple tends to solve her crimes by a combination of intuition and intrusiveness, or “specialized knowledge” as Miss Marple herself calls it. Her strongest weapon is her lifelong study of human nature, which by another name could simply be called ‘gossip’. Because of this she sees things that others do not (19-20). In *The Murder at The Vicarage* the vicar himself reflects on Miss Marple and says that “[t]here is no detective in England equal to a spinster lady of uncertain age with plenty of time on her hands” (24).

By using the stereotype of older unmarried woman, Sayers and Christie are able to introduce women detectives that are feminine without being sexually attractive and who are therefore not threatening to the male authority. These are women who are expected to be gossipy and nosy, but whom other people still find endearing and harmless, women whom people rarely notice but who themselves notice a great deal (Remilien 101). Miss Climpson and Miss Marple are the same type of character, even though Miss Marple operates in a small village setting in contrast to Miss Climpson who works in the busy London environment.

Both Miss Marple and Miss Climpson are portrayed as elderly: Miss Marple as a fragile-looking white-haired woman with a gentle appealing manner (*Murder at the Vicarage* 10, 49) and Miss Climpson as a thin middle-aged woman with iron-grey hair, a sharp sallow face and a very vivacious manner (*Unnatural Death* 26). They also have in common that they are both active church people. In *Strong Poison* (1930), Miss Climpson shows extraordinary strength as a member of the jury during a court case, and explains to Lord Peter that her endurance comes from her religious training of fasting. He later describes her to his friends as “[a] tough, thin, elderly woman with a sound digestion and a militant High-Church conscience of remarkable staying-power” (41-43).

Another significant trait of the two spinsters is their old-fashioned clothing. In *Unnatural Death*, there is a detailed description of Miss Climpson’s outfit:

She wore a neat, dark coat and skirt, a high-necked blouse and a long gold neck chain with a variety of small ornaments dangling from it at intervals, and her iron-grey hair was dressed under a net, in the style fashionable in the reign of the late King Edward (26)



Miss Marple is also recognised by her old-fashioned clothing, and the old-fashioned and unworldly impression it gives is often to her benefit, since people are fooled by her appearance and do not recognize her for the sharp sleuth she is. *In The Body in the Library* (1942), she partakes in an interrogation where the police try to find information by interviewing a handful of teenage girls. Miss Marple seats herself in the office corner and the girls hardly notice her presence. If they did, they would most likely assume that she was another witness to be questioned, like themselves (181). When Miss Marple later asks to speak to one of the girls in private, it is obvious that the spinster's harmless and familiar appearance makes the frightened girl feel more comfortable, which results in her revealing the story that she would not tell the police officer (180-186).

The spinster detective of the Golden Age became a huge success, and the authors used her to their advantage. Through the mouth of an old maid, they were able to get away with social criticism that from a younger, more attractive woman would have been perceived as provocative. Berglund puts it: "It could be said that the writers who use this kind of character are playing a double game: they make use of a traditional female stereotype - the ridiculous old maid - in order to subvert it and explode it" (145).

While Christie is more conservative in her books, with plots often strictly focused on the clue-puzzle, Sayers involves some social criticism in her works. In *Strong Poison*, she uses Miss Climpson as a mouthpiece to communicate her opinions about the need of proper jobs for women. In the following passage, Miss Climpson has advanced to being in charge of the undercover typing bureau owned by Lord Peter Wimsey, and Sayers describes the work environment:

All the employees were women - mostly elderly, but a few still young and attractive - and if the private register in the steel safe had been consulted, it would have been seen that all these women were of the class unkindly known as 'superfluous'. There were spinsters with small fixed incomes, or no incomes at all; widows without family; women deserted by peripatetic husbands and living on a restricted alimony, who, previous to their engagement with Miss Climpson, had no resources but bridge and boarding-house gossip. There were retired and disappointed school-teachers; out-of-work actresses, courageous people who had failed with hat shops and tea parlours;

and even a few Bright Young Things, for whom the cocktail party and the nightclub had grown boring (54).

In her book, Sayers drew attention to this group of older, unmarried women and the reality of their situation. Suzie Remilien points out that Sayers through Miss Climpson and the typing bureau illustrated a way that a group of women such as this could be useful in a society where they were undervalued (100).

On the publication of *Murder at The Vicarage*, Sayers wrote in a letter to Christie: “Dear old tabbies are the only kind of female detective” (Quoted from Berglund 144). However, the 1920s was a time when women became more publicly visible and outspoken, and three years after introducing Miss Climpson, Sayers created another female character: Miss Harriet Vane.

In contrast to the elderly spinster detective, Miss Vane is only 28 years old at her first appearance in *Strong Poison*, and instead of being part of Lord Peter’s investigation crew, she is the suspect in a murder case in which Lord Peter and Miss Climpson work for her acquittal. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, women’s major role within crime fiction had often previously been either that of villain or victim (Roth 119). But by letting Miss Vane be the suspected perpetrator who is proved innocent, Sayers made an attempt to develop the character of a younger, more modern woman within crime fiction.

While Miss Climpson and Miss Marple are fruits of the old Victorian society, Harriet Vane’s life is a result of the changes for women that took place after the First World War. She is a strong and independent Oxford graduate who has made career as a detective novelist. Laurel Young describes her as “[a] woman of distinction, intelligence and strong clear emotions, but without conventional beauty” (Young 2005, 43). Although she is not portrayed as beautiful, there is something remarkable about Harriet that gets people’s attention. Lord Peter immediately falls in love with her, and even proposes to her while she is still in prison accused of murdering her former lover, who she had also lived together with without being married. Even though Harriet’s reputation most likely would have benefited from accepting such a proposal, she refuses to marry Lord Peter out of self-respect.

Even after Harriet Vane is cleared from the accusations of murder in *Strong Poison*, she continues to appear in Sayers’ works and Lord Peter continues to propose to her. A few years after Harriet’s first appearance, Sayers decided to make her the

main character in *Gaudy Night* (1930), which is a novel set in the academic world. During a visit to a Gaudy Dinner for old students in Oxford, Harriet receives a couple of uncomfortable messages that she at first thinks has a connection to her own life. Some time later, Harriet is summoned by the college Dean, who asks her to solve the mystery behind the 'poison pen' and the threatening messages that lately have appeared all around the woman's college. Harriet spends a few months on the university premises, which gives Sayers the opportunity to not only write a clue puzzle, but a novel about academic women as well as women's situation in society. It is considered to be an early feminist crime novel (Reddy 12), but even though Harriet's prominent role is a clear progress towards the female character development, Lord Peter is the one who solves the mystery in the end, and by the end of the novel Harriet also leaves her spinsterhood behind and accepts his offer of marriage.

## Maisie Dobbs - The Detective

In 2003, Jacqueline Winspear published *Maisie Dobbs: A Novel*, the first in line of many Maisie Dobbs Mysteries. Like the famous women detectives of the Golden Age, Maisie Dobbs is also a spinster, although quite a bit younger than Miss Climpson and Miss Marple. On her first fictional appearance in the spring of 1929, the 32-year-old Maisie has just opened her own investigation business in London after the retirement of her teacher and mentor Maurice Blanche. She is aware that it might be difficult for her to find clients because of her gender, but through Mr Blanche's connections, she is able to start building her own reputation.

Throughout *Maisie Dobbs: A Novel*, Maisie's own story is revealed alongside the mystery, which helps the reader understand her journey to becoming a detective. Maisie was born and raised in southeast London, but had to go into domestic service after her mother's death at the age of thirteen. She had a deep desire to continue her education, but her circumstances forced her to refuse the scholarship she had earned. However, it was her thirst for knowledge that made her new employer, Lady Rowan, take her under her wing. Lady Rowan, who was a well-known London suffragette, saw her chance to help the young girl by connecting her with her friend Dr Maurice

Blanche. Together with Maurice, Maisie was able, alongside her work as a housemaid, to build the foundation of an education that later provided her with a scholarship to Girton College in Cambridge. When the First World War broke out, Maisie postponed her studies, lied about her age and trained to become a nurse, something that took her to the battlefields in France. In a shell attack, Maisie lost her beloved Simon, while she was able to escape with only a nearly invisible scar in the hairline. Although she was deeply affected by the war, she finished her studies in Cambridge and was subsequently taken on as an investigation apprentice by Maurice Blanche (68-201).

Maisie is described as a tall and slender woman with good bearing, remarkable midnight blue eyes and a smooth voice. Although she is often assumed to belong to a higher social class, people notice something different about her. The newspaper man in the beginning of *Maisie Dobbs: A Novel* points out the familiar way Maisie speaks to him (4), and thereby recognises one of her greatest strengths throughout the novels. She has a way of making people of all classes feel comfortable around her and is extremely good at reading people, which is a fruit of her studies in psychology. In *Messenger of Truth* (2006), the aristocrat mother of a victim breaks down in tears in front of Maisie and later tells her: “This is quite unusual for me, you know. I have barely met you, yet already I feel as if I am here with someone I have known for a long time (100).

Throughout the books, it is common for Maisie to listen to her inner voice, something she learnt from Maurice’s friend Khan, a Buddhist monk who also has taught her the art of meditation. Maisie, who is already portrayed as quite a solitary person, values her time alone in meditation. She has been taught that the silencing of the mind is important for listening to one’s inner voice and she therefore often sits down with legs crossed on a cushion on the floor in a quiet room or takes a walk alone along the river. She has a conviction that truth will make itself known if she allows it to speak to her, and very often Maisie tends to solve a case with a combination of common sense and intuition.

One of Maisie’s demands as she takes on an investigation is that she also takes responsibility for the well-being of those involved. In *Birds of a Feather* (2005) she clarifies to a father who wants to find his runaway daughter that if she is to take on his case, she must have his commitment to further conversation once the young woman is found (15). Even though Winspear does not give it much attention, it is mentioned

that Maisie also offers help in psychological matters through what we today would call therapy. In the situation described above, Maisie continues to regularly meet up with the father and the daughter after the case is solved. In *Messenger of Truth* Maisie explains to her client: “My work does not end when a solution to a given case is found, or the grain of information sought is discovered. It ends only when those affected by my work are at peace with the outcome” (287). As part of this process, Maisie also wishes to personally lay a case to rest by visiting each place in connection to it after an investigation is completed.

While the spinster detectives of the Golden Age are gifted amateur detectives, Maisie Dobbs is a professional detective who has her own office and her own assistant: Billy Beale. Although Billy does not have an academic education, he proves himself a valuable asset in each book, and constantly grows under Maisie’s supervision. Maisie markets herself as: M. Dobbs, Psychologist and Investigator, and even though she sometimes is seen as competition, it is not uncommon that she is consulted by Scotland Yard as an expert in delicate matters. Detective Inspector Stratton even tells a potential client that “Miss Dobbs has certain skills, certain...methods, that seem to bear fruit” (*Messenger of Truth* 3), and describes her as a woman who is honest and who knows her business. Although Christie’s Miss Marple’s ability also is admired by certain members of the Scotland Yard, she is never seen as more than a gifted amateur. By letting Maisie be recognised as a professional detective, Winspear raises the bar in what can be expected by a woman interwar detective.

Maisie’s experiences in the First World War play an important part in her work. The aching scar in her hairline is usually a sign of her intuition, and the cases she gets involved in often have a connection to the Great War. As a matter of fact, Maisie’s whole character is affected by the war. In *Maisie Dobbs: A Novel*, Maisie takes off her shoes and rubs her feet and realises that her feet still feel the cold and wet filth and blood of France, “[f]eet that hadn’t felt warm in twelve years, since 1917” (7). Her work as a nurse during the war has also had a big influence on her character and her work. In *Pardonable Lies* (2006), Maisie is summoned by Scotland Yard to talk to a young girl who is the suspect in a murder case. The girl has refused to speak to anyone in the Police, but when Maisie comes and begins to wash the girl clean from dirt, just like she had done to wounded soldiers in the war, the girl starts to talk (5-6). Maurice Blanche’s works of wisdom had taught her to be judicious in using

her body to comfort another person, “[f]or you may extinguish the freedom that the person feels to be able to share a sadness” (*Maisie Dobbs: A Novel* 58). And just like Maisie gains the young girl’s trust, she is able to gain trust by many others through her way to see and care for people.

In similarity to many other young women at the time, Maisie lost the man she loved in the war. Even though there are men who wish to court her, she has until the end of the fourth book decided to remain a spinster. Just like Nicola Beauman wrote about all the women after the Great War who had the attitude that no living man could have ‘the golden qualities of the dead’ (36), Maisie cannot feel the same way for any other man as she did for Simon Lynch. Although he did not physically die in the war, his brain was badly injured in a shell attack, and he spends the rest of his days in a convalescence home outside of London, without recognising anything around him. In the beginning of *Maisie Dobbs: A Novel*, it is made clear that Maisie endeavours to keep her memories in a safe place in her heart, to be taken out only when she allows it (7). However, since many of her cases have connections with the war, they force her to face her own memories and emotions. In *Pardonable Lies*, Maisie, who for a long time has tried to cover her memories through hard work, goes back to France to meet the reality and to try ‘slay her dragons’ (256-265).

Outwardly Maisie is seen as a modern and attractive woman who is university educated, owns her own business, lives alone in her own apartment and drives around in a motorcar. The readers, however, get to follow her struggles to fit into her new role as a modern businesswoman. One important issue is that of clothing. In contrast to Miss Climpson and Miss Marple, Maisie is considered a well-dressed young woman, but since her poor upbringing never has allowed her to indulge in fashion, she prefers to dress rather plainly. In *Messenger of Truth*, one of Maisie’s clients describes her clothing as a stylish ensemble, but one marked by comfort rather than fashion (10). On the insistence of Lady Rowan, Maisie agrees to purchase clothing which is more appealing to important customers, even though she is a little ashamed of the expenditure (*Birds of a Feather* 55). Her best friend Priscilla also constantly encourages Maisie to take a step further and to follow the new trends of the 1920s, and her influence inspires Maisie to sometimes even wear trousers, which she admits still is quite rare for women (*Messenger of Truth* 191). When in *Birds of a Feather* she finally takes courage to cut her hair in a fashionable bob, she begins to show a great resemblance to Dorothy L. Sayers’ character Harriet Vane.

Not only is Maisie the same age as Harriet, she is also a university graduate and a self-supporting career woman. While Maisie is a professional investigator, Harriet is a successful writer of detective fiction. Both the women also live alone in their own flats in London, and both drive their own cars. In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers does not only write a clue-puzzle, but allows the reader to get to know Harriet, in a similar way to how the reader gets to know the character of Maisie Dobbs. Although the similarities are many, Harriet never becomes the main investigator in Sayers' novels. Even in *Gaudy Night*, where she is the protagonist, Lord Peter comes in as the final authority in the end. Harriet thus never quite makes it as a detective although she is a valuable asset in Lord Peter's investigations. It is almost as if Maisie Dobbs is a fulfilment of the sleuth Harriet Vane could have been, but that the interwar period was not quite ready for.

While the writers of the Golden Age struggled to create a female detective who could be feminine without being provocative, Wainspear is not trapped in their Catch 22-situation. As a modern author, she is able to create a woman detective who is operating in the interwar period, but who does not have to play by the same social rules. In contrast to the old, harmless spinster detectives, Maisie is a young and attractive sleuth who is educated, confident and independent. It is as if Wainspear endows Maisie with qualities that even a modern woman can aspire to, not just a role unusual for the era. With the liberty of writing for a modern readership, Wainspear can make a strong female lead who represents the very edge of change in society.

## Maisie Dobbs - The Stories

In the Maisie Dobbs Mysteries, Wainspear does not only write clue puzzles, she also gives a historical account to the interwar period in Britain. In contrast to many of the writers in the Detection Club of the Golden Age, who tried to produce light fiction to distract their readers from the aftermath of the Great War (Young 2006, 4), each Maisie Dobbs Mystery deals with issues caused by the war.

The first mystery, *Maisie Dobbs: A Novel*, is set in the spring of 1929. Maisie has just opened her own business and is contacted by a man who wants to find out about his wife's secret whereabouts. Although he is surprised to find out that M.

Dobbs is a woman, he employs her for the mission. As she follows the wife, Maisie finds out that the secret trips are to a cemetery and to a gravestone with the Christian name 'Vincent' as the sole inscription. The name, which is a mystery in itself, leads Maisie to a farm that functions as a recreation centre for wounded ex-soldiers. Under the supervision of the charismatic leader Adam Jenkins, the wounded men have found a place of shelter where they can live normal lives without frightening people with their deformed faces or missing body parts. As Maisie looks into the visibly healthy organisation, though, she realises that there is a high rate of suicide among those men who have indicated that they would like to leave the farm. Maisie connects the situation to Adam Jenkins' position during the war, where he had been forced to punish deserters of his own regiment. She realises that there are psychological wounds that have never healed, and that the disillusionment of what is past and the present has led to a continuous execution of innocent men.

Through this story, Winspear explains the situation for deeply wounded soldiers who returned after the Great War. She points out that many of them had gone out to war as heroes, but returned as cripples and highlights the healing process that many had to go through to come to terms with their new appearance. Alongside this post-war story, she also uses Maisie's own story to describe the war and all the young women who joined the war effort as nurses, ambulance drivers and munition factory workers.

In the second Maisie Dobbs Mystery, *Birds of a Feather*, Maisie faces another World War One dilemma. On the quest to find the missing daughter of a successful businessman, Maisie stumbles upon the mystery of three murdered women who all used to belong to the same friendship group during the war. It turns out that the murdered women, as well as the missing daughter, were all part of 'The Order of the White Feather', an organisation that recruited young girls to hand out white feathers to young men with the purpose to challenge them to enlist as soldiers. Winspear shows how the white feather - a symbol for cowardice - provoked many men to go to war, men who would not necessarily have gone otherwise. By including a real organisation in her fictional content, Winspear is able to throw light on a very controversial historical event.

In *Pardonable Lies*, Winspear takes the opportunity to describe the uncertainty of death experienced by many people who never got to bid farewell to their loved ones. Maisie is summoned by a man to find out the circumstances of his son's death



during the war. The man's wife, who was convinced that their son is still alive, made her husband promise on her deathbed that he would find out the truth about the situation. As Maisie takes on the case, she encounters a world of spiritualism and psychics, and the massive influence it had over bereaved people during and after the war. In similarity to Miss Climpson, who even uses the means of a psychic to get certain information in *Strong Poison*, Maisie expresses contempt for those who in this way tried to take advantage of vulnerable people.

In this book, Maisie goes to France to find out the truth about her client's son. As she digs into the case, she discovers a connection to the secret service, which gives Winspear the chance to not only give vivid descriptions of the battlefields, but also a more complex image of the war. In addition, Winspear describes a number of situations where people have taken advantage of their less-fortunate outcome in the war. During her investigation she encounters an uprising politician who misleads people into thinking that he is disabled. Although his legs have recovered from the war, he has realised that he can play on people's sympathy and gain more votes by pretending that he is bound to a wheelchair. Another situation is her client's son, who has used his assumed death in order to change his identity and escape his responsibilities in England. During this trip to France, Maisie gets an understanding for the the constant partying that went on after the war for people to cover their pain of loss and to forget all the terrible things that had happened.

Finally in *Messenger of Truth*, Winspear again triggers the issue of soldiers being killed by their own regiments. When a very successful artist dies just before a big exhibition, Maisie gets involved in order to find out the truth behind his death. During her investigation, she encounters a world of artists and realises that their tasks during the war played an important role to the war effort. The victim, who was a very promising painter, had as a mission to draw sketches from the battlefields, as well as producing war-propaganda posters used to manipulate people to enlist. In one of his war-sketches, Maisie learns about 'LMF' - Low Moral Fibre, the expression used for people who showed weakness during battle, leading to them being killed by their own. In one painting for the exhibition, the artist had portrayed two infantrymen - one English and one German - who found comfort in each other's arms during a cease fire as they were collecting their dead ones. As the British soldier went back to his frontline, his fellow men viewed him as a traitor and murdered him, leaving the inscription LMF on his forehead.

At the same time as Winspear educates her readers with World War One stories, she also explains the situation in England in the early 1930s, the time when Maisie is operating. One recurrent image is the one of the unemployment lines around London that as a consequence of the Great Depression grew longer each day. In *Messenger of Truth*, Maisie observes the situation:

Feeling the anger, and shame, rise again, Maisie tempted her thoughts even more as she watched the exodus out in search of a job. Many of the men limped along, others bore scars on their faces or wore an expression of those embattled to a point where any last vestige of optimism had been lost. These were men - and women - whose country had needed them but who were now without a means to support themselves. They were the forgotten heroes now waging another battle for honour (146)

Maisie's assistant Billy counts himself lucky to have a job, but through Billy and his family, Winspear is able to describe the condition for the poor people in London. In their small two-room house in the East End of London, Billy, his wife and three children are crammed in together with another family of four - all provided for by Billy's wages. Winspear describes an area where the residents live in damp and cramped conditions, with no running water and a constant fetid air coming up from the docks (137). When Billy's two-year-old daughter falls ill with diphtheria, their lack of money prevents them from taking her to the hospital, resulting in the young girl's death. When Maisie has a conversation with a journalist friend who says she has not had inspiration to write since the war, Maisie confronts her by saying: "The war is being waged...only the war is here and now, and it is a war against poverty, against disease and against injustice...you would do well to consider igniting your pen with that for a story!" (*Messenger of Truth* 240).

Through the Maisie Dobbs' Mysteries, Winspear vividly describes the First World War, as well as the interwar period in Britain. Instead of writing pure clue-puzzles, like the classic Golden Age novels, she creates historical pieces of literature with a Golden Age 'touch'. While authors like Sayers involved social criticism, like that of the use for surplus women, in order to bring change to their society, Winspear writes with a different purpose. With a retrospect perspective of history, she educates her readers on a time that has passed and bases her stories on historical facts rather than critical opinions.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to conclude whether Winspear had managed to recreate the Golden Age of Detective Fiction through her Maisie Dobbs' Novels. As my analysis has shown, it is clear that Winspear's purpose has not been to recapture the format of Golden Age fiction. Instead of writing a classic clue-puzzle, she has focused on giving a historical account of the period to modern readers. In order to achieve this, however, she has used the well-known Golden Age concept of the spinster detective.

While the spinster detectives of the Golden Age were created to fit into their society, Winspear, with her retrospect perspective, has been able to create a spinster detective who operates in the interwar period, but who does not have to play by the same social rules. In contrast to the old and harmless amateur detectives Miss Climpson and Miss Marple, Winspear's character carries traits that can inspire a contemporary reader. By letting Maisie Dobbs be young and sexually attractive, as well as educated, confident and independent, she makes a new version of the interwar spinster detective who also is appealing to modern readers.

Although Sayers made an attempt to create a more modern woman detective through Harriet Vane, she never fully allowed her to be the main investigator. However, through Harriet, Sayers began to create a woman detective who Winspear later completed in Maisie Dobbs. While Miss Climpson and Miss Marple belong to a whole different category, Harriet and Maisie represent the same kind of woman, similar in age, appearance, education and social status.

Where Sayers did not have the courage to let Harriet reach her full potential, Maisie embodies the kind of character Sayers surely wished she could have authored.

Even though Winspear did not play by the rules of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, she has without doubt succeeded with her portrayal of the interwar period in Britain. In doing so she has been able to introduce a modern adaptation of the of the spinster detective to a new generation of readers.

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