

Chapter 5

Self-Reflexive Meta-Narratives

The self-reflexive meta-narrative emerging in an age of a rising risk society accentuates a new form of aesthetics. Written in this age, many Christie's interwar and postwar detective stories seemingly present an "*aesthetic dimension of reflexivity*"¹ by criticizing not just some cultural phenomenon in a social background and but also the novel writing in a literary tradition. This self-conscious and self-reflexive writings can characterize a social discourse of reflexive modernization. Scott Lash observes that "[m]odern critical theory has been criticized for presupposing a utopian 'metanarrative' of social change" (112) because this sort of "utopian" theory always ends with a determined and totalized conclusion. To him, a new kind of critical theory emerges in an age of high modernity and in an impending risk society. It can be regarded as a "dystopian" metanarrative of social change that is foregrounded "in the framework of 'reflexive modernity'" (110) without an authorial conclusion. In wake of Lash's thought, literary metanarrative can not sever its coalescence with its social background. This metanarrative, therefore, may complicatedly contain both social background and literary background, which are interconnected with each other. More noteworthy, a new spatiotemporal significance can also be found in these two backgrounds of Christie's novels.

Christie's detective writing can evince a sort of meta-narrative, a self-reflexive and self-conscious narrative in a higher narrative frame which criticizes a totalized and authorial "script" of a dominant social reality. Her meta-narrative in her novels can be examined in two aspects: a social background of a risk society and a literary

¹ This term is from Scott Lash's "Reflexivity and Its Doubles: Structures, Aesthetics, Community" in *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Ulrich Beck et al. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994. p. 111. In this book, Scott Lash, Anthony Giddens, and Ulrich Beck make comments on one another's theoretical thinking.

background of meta-fictional writings. Metafiction scholars such as Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh, basing upon their discussion of Agatha Christie's writing traits, regard her as one of the metafiction writers.² The narrative writing of novel cannot be separated from the novel's social background. According to Raymond Williams, cultural factors like industrialization and capitalism in Great Britain "are reflected in fiction" (Williams, 1989, 43). To him, the British novels cannot be separated from their affiliation with the social reality that has kept changing in a long revolution of social reality since 1840.³ Both Hutcheon and Waugh have also noticed the close tie of the new kind of metafiction to its social background.⁴ Viewed as a metafiction writer by Hutcheon and Waugh, Christie actually becomes a forerunner of a metafiction writer who punctuates an interconnection between metafiction and its social reality in her postwar novels, which contain a social background of a risk society characterizing a social discourse of a double-edged and reflexive modernity. This chapter will examine Christie's literary meta-narrative in the framework of a risk society and prove that her novels render a deep self consciousness of writing itself.

Metafiction emerged in 1950s and came to prominence in 1960s.⁵ It is usually known as a world-wide movement of new novel-writings. With a self-referential,

² Hutcheon, in discussing Christie's *And Then There Were None*, deems that this text of the detective novel functions as *mise en abyme* (a French term referring to a sort of frame story, in which the main narrative contains, in a "meta" level, the aspects of this frame story) that calls the reader's attention to the self-reflexive consciousness of the narrative of a murder mystery in this novel. Waugh also argues that some Christie's novels reveal self-referential consciousness of reader's experience of reading popular detective novels. See Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. New York: Methuen, 1984. pp. 72-3. Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1984. pp. 81-2.

³ See Raymond Williams' "Long Revolution." in Ed. Bob Ashley. *Reading Popular Narrative: A Source Book*. London: Leicester UP, 1989.

⁴ Waugh sees metafiction as an artifact which poses questions about the relationship between fiction and (social) reality. Hutcheon views metafiction as a "realist" novel which redefines the relationship between literature and history (of social realism). For this reason, they both observe the link between metafiction and its social reality. See Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London: Leicester UP, 1989; and Hutcheon's *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London: Routledge, 1988.

⁵ In the 1950s, several French novelists, like Allan Robert-Grillet and Claude Simon, write the so-called "Nouveau Roman," starting this new fiction-writing. In the 1960s, this new trend of writing spreads to U.S.A, U.K and finally the whole world.

parodic, and intertextual device, metafictional writing characterizes a sense of uncertainty and a discourse of reflexive modernity. That is, metafiction presents a reflexive consciousness of the past and traditional narrative but simultaneously transpires a meta-narrative by criticizing this master narrative and by creating a different and “reformed” application of it.

If Hutcheon and Waugh put the meta-narrative mainly in literary discussions, Ulrich Beck endows meta-narrative mostly with a social significance. He stresses that “meta-narratives are useful for the purpose of understanding the complex and ambivalent ‘nature’ of risk in the world risk we live in” (Beck, 2000, 212). This Beckian meta-narrative, like Lash’s “dystopian metanarrative” of social change, emanates a reflexive consciousness of social masses by means of interrogating the master narrative of a dominant institution. This authorial bureaucracy enacts a modernizing process of rational and disciplinary control and finally provokes its *script of modernity* to “be rewritten, redefined and reinvented” (Ibid.) by a higher script in a meta-level.

Viewed in this perspective, the prominence of metafictional writing seems to resonate with the Beckian meta-narrative in a rising risk society. Put in a social scope, this metafictional writing can be regarded as one type of reflexive meta-narratives in a social background of a risk society. Thus, the literary works written in the postwar period corresponds with a feature of meta-narrative, and they are called metafiction by literary critics like Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh. The metafiction novelist’s writing⁶ in a postwar age seemingly echoes the trend of the Beckian meta-narrative in

⁶ According to Hutcheon and Waugh, the writing of metafiction in postwar era is a global trend. In their discussion, the main metafiction writers include John Barth and Donald Barthelme in U.S.A, John Hawkes, John Fowles and Doris Lessing in U.K, Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco in Italy, Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, and many others. Though usually categorized as a detective novelist or pop fiction writer, Agatha Christie is also regarded as a metafiction writer by both Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh due to the feature of meta-narrative in some of her postwar detective novels. See Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. New York: Methuen, 1984. Patricia

an age of high development of modernity.

As observed before, Christie's detective novels, especially written in the postwar era, records the social changes in a risk society caused mainly by industrialization and prevalence of capitalism. Her characters in her novels embody the social masses who voice the discontent or critique of social changes. Under the impact of the meta-narrative in a risk society and a metafictional writing in a literary tradition, Christie's detective novels present two sorts of meta-narrative: one is the meta-narrative of criticizing everyday life in a social background and the other, the meta-narrative writing commenting on the tradition of detective writing in a literary background. Both of the two backgrounds in Christie's novels correspond to Beckian meta-narrative of social unrest by revealing a sense of uncertainty toward the novel's fictional world and the social reality registered in her novels.

The social reality dominated by a modernizing process of industrialization plays an essential role which causes cultural dynamics and social changes in Christie's interwar and postwar England. In several novels, like *A Murder Is Announced* (1950), *Mrs. McGinty's Death* (1952), *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), *Pale House* (1961), and *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), mentioned in this chapter, Christie uses her characters as her own personae to criticize or comment on some social phenomenon within the framework of a rising post-industrialized risk society. Her self-reflexive and critical perspective of a social reality forms her meta-narrative in a social background. She elaborates upon her metafictional and "intertextual" writings of detective stories as her meta-narrative in a literary background.

If the great tradition of detective writing can stand for the consequence of a modernizing process, Christie presents a double-edged feature of modernity in both conforming to and questioning about this great tradition. Then, this "parodic echoing

of the past” (Hutcheon, 1986-7, 204) functions as “a kind of self-reflexive discourse [(that)] is always inextricably bound to social discourse” (Ibid.). More relevantly, Christie’s self-reflexive and metafictional writing cannot be severed from its social reality under the impact of high-industrialization, due to the fact that an author’s perception of a risk social reality may affect his/her perspective of writing literary work, and an author’s writing of literary work may also uncover a socio-cultural trend that formulates this writing style; this hereafter substantiates the interconnection of social significance and literary tradition in the meta-narrative of Christie’s works.

The social reality in Christie’s postwar works characterizes features of a risk society. In wake of Beck’s perspective, the meta-narrative can “reinvent” alternative visions from social masses’ critical consciousness of a traditional and “historicized” *grand narrative*.⁷ This Lyotardian *grand narrative* can be viewed as a literary “script” affected by the “background” of a society in the first phase of a totalized and homogenized modernity (the industrial society) which is accompanied by a “meta-script” influenced by the background of a society in the second phase of reflexive modernity (the risk society). If this writing which narrates the dominance of a traditional and socio-cultural value can resemble a *grand narrative*, Christie’s self-reflexive and critical writings of the postwar society can serve as meta-narratives that interrogate the *grand narrative* in a higher “meta” level and creates a sense of uncertainty without an ultimate conclusion.

More important, this non-totalized meta-narrative, affiliating with one of Lyotardian multiple “little” narratives, may represent a contingent and particular narrative “event” in a fragmentation of time. If a dominant *grand narrative* can bear

⁷ The “grand narrative” is a Jean-François Lyotard’s term, which refers to multiple “little (petit) narratives” that are homogenized and totalized into one master and dominant “grand narrative.” In this *grand narrative*, the difference and particularity of various “little narratives” are eradicated and are absorbed into the universal sameness of the “traditional” and “historicized” *grand narrative*. See Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1984.

the significance of a totalizing and historicizing process in which various narratives become chronologically unified and universalized, a meta-narrative may mark a sense of double-edged ambiguity by its conforming to the tradition of a dominant narrative but simultaneously by its attempting to create something different from this tradition with an alternative vision.

Linda Hutcheon, in discussing the feature of meta-narrative found in this kind of novel, regards it as a novel “projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts the specificity and particularity of the individual past event” (Hutcheon, 1988, 221). Put simply, she observes that this kind of meta-narrative writing “recalls the past and recontextualize it” (Hutcheon, 1986-7, 201). This illuminates a parodic and intertextual practice of the past event on the present narrative and consequently produces an effect of the “presentness of the past” (Hutcheon, 1986-7, 203) that challenges the disciplinary and normalized conception of a chronological and progressive time as well as blurs the distinction of historical past and present.

This new perspective of time is different from David Harvey’s rational measurement of “time.” To Harvey, the time in an age of industrialization designates a universal mode of “historical” time and implicates a disciplinary control of rational modernity under the impact of industrialization and prevalence of capitalism. Hence, Hutcheon’s perception of the “specific and particular” time, to some extents, can be linked to Benjamin’s *Messianic time*,⁸ especially when the meta-narrative writing is in the social background of an industrialized and capitalistic society. As already noticed in Chapter Four, the *Messianic time* refers to a static state and inconsistent fragments of the progressive and continuous *historical time*. Seen in Hutcheon’s

⁸ Benjamin also gives another expression for the *Messianic time*, calling it “the time of now,” which means the progressive and chronological time loses its function of “historicization.” The totality of “historical time” begins to fall into fragmentary contingency of “time of now” without the linear order of past-present-future. See his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illumination*. Trans by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1986. pp. 253-67.

viewpoint, this new temporal significance, the “hybridity” of the past and the present creates a new but particular aesthetics of artistic vision both in architecture⁹ and in literature. In literature, the parodic practice of conventional narratives and intertextual writings of other literary works “[mark] both continuity and change, both authority and transgression” (Hutcheon, 1986-7, 204) of the great literary tradition. Christie’s novels, especially written in 1950s and 1960s, contain a meta-narrative with a new perspective of historical time. Due to her using of a lot of parodic and intertextual writing that are feature with both a “past/authorial” and a “present/transgressive” narrative of a great literary tradition, the traditional sense of “history” in her novels with a linear and progressive time, is suspended by an ambiguous “hybridity” of the past and the present. Besides this new temporal significance, in this kind of metafiction, a new spatial setting, an ambiguous “rural-urban” hybridity, forms a society background of urbanization in Christie’s works. More precisely, Christie’s meta-narrative writings emanate a new spatiotemporal significance, which interrogates the rational measurement of space and time in the social background of her early industrialized England.

Her meta-narrative does not merely exhibit its social significance but also discloses a literary tradition of detective writings as well as her parodic and intertextual employment of her predecessors’ literary writings. These parodic and intertextual writings resonate with some features of metafiction. Metafiction writers often utilize a literary device of putting a detective novelist who tries to solve out puzzles and enigmas within a novel. Nevertheless, a detective writer, like what Christie does, posits a detective novelist into his/her detective novel stresses more this literary device of metafictional writing which is applied to the writing of so-called

⁹ See Hutcheon’s discussion of some features of postmodern architecture in “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History.” *Cultural Critique* 5 (Winter), 1986-7. 179-207.

“meta-detective-fiction.”¹⁰ Hutcheon argues that the metafiction is “based on the general pattern of the puzzle or the enigma” as self-conscious literary form with a presence of detective-story writer within the story itself (1984, 31). Viewed in this perspective, Christie resembles a metafiction writer by self-projecting her own persona, also a female detective novelist called Mrs. Oliver, making comment on detective writings and the role of an author in her contemporary society.

Patricia Waugh points out that writers of metafictional novel “employ parody self-consciously” (Waugh 13) by mocking a dominant literary tradition. Her discussion of metafictional writing also highlights a parodic utilization of various literary norms as a literary strategy, which “deliberately sets itself up to break [(literary)] norms that have become conventionalized” (Waugh 65). Compared with Hutcheon’s perspective of metafiction, Waugh’s one lays more stress on metafiction writer’s self-reflexive and self-referential consciousness of writing a fiction or of “a commentary on the practice of writing fiction” (Waugh 95).

Nevertheless, both Hutcheon and Waugh suggest in their books that Agatha Christie’s meta-narratives in her novels are associated with the novel’s social background and literary one. For this reason, the discussion of Christie’s metafictional writing should be also put into the discussion of her social reality presented in her works; and vice versa, the exploration of Christie’s meta-narrative of social changes cannot avoid being related to the literary tradition revealed in her metafictional writing.

¹⁰ Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, a series of novel including *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1986), is usually classified as a meta-detective-fiction. Auster actually uses the element of a detective story in this “detective novel about detective novel.” The meta-detective-fiction (or alternatively called metaphysical detective fiction or [anti-detective fiction](#)) is often similar to a gumshoe detective story in describing a detective’s tracing a mysterious person in big city streets and finally questioning his own identity when he sees his “double”—his another “half.” Although written almost fifty years earlier, Christie, the author of serial novels of Mrs. Oliver, should be only taken as a forerunner of writing meta-detective-fiction because her novels, unlike Auster’s, rarely stress on the postmodern issue of “searching for and questioning about someone’s or his/her own identity.”

Pale Horse (1961), written by Christie in an age of a high development of industrialization, not only registers a meta-narrative of social changes but also discloses the writer's self-consciousness of writing a detective fiction. This novel evinces Christie's meta-narrative both in a social background and in a literary background through two characters: a historian who proposes a new perspective of human history and a new perception of the radical changes of the social reality under the industrialization process as well as a female detective writer who frequently makes comments on her own writing of detective stories and criticizes the conventions of detective writings.

In *Pale Horse*, Mrs. Oliver, one of Christie's recurrent characters described as a middle-aged female detective writer, is believed to be a caricature and an authorial persona of Christie herself. In fact, Mrs. Oliver is not just "introduced for purpose of comic relief" (Fitzgibbon 52); she becomes Christie's mouthpiece who frequently points out the detective writer's predicament and questions of the "grand" narrative of a literary tradition.

A historian called Mark Easterbrook is another major character in this novel, who acts as a gumshoe detective following murder suspect in foggy and disorienting urban London streets and criticizing the grand narrative of a dominant social order as a radical historian. He, knowing well the "grand narrative" of human history but sarcastically stating a historical standpoint of a "dangerous" (1) life, actually produces a meta-narrative of social change in a rising risk society. In the beginning of this novel, Mark unfolds his critical perspective of history, saying "[w]hoever had said 'History is bunk' (Henry Ford?) had been absolutely right" (2).¹¹ Henry Ford, the founder of

¹¹ The source of the words "history is bunk" is from the interview of Henry Ford in *Chicago Tribune*, May 25th, 1916. The original quotation is following: "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we made today." See more information, please check the following Internet website. Available FTP: www.quotationspage.com/quote/24950.html

the Ford Motor Company, indeed breaks the “historical” tradition in paving the way for modern assembly lines used in massive industrial productions and starts a revolution in manufacturing industry. Since then, the “Fordist” massive productions become a global creed “espoused” by capitalists all over the world including those in England. Ford’s assembly lines for industrial manufacture (see foot note number 5 in Chapter Four) radically change the history of traditional way of production and enhance the rationalization of the clock time in factory with a technological advancement. Mark’s mentioning Ford’s notion of history reveals Christie’s new perspective of history in a new social reality and an anxiety of a disciplinary and rational control in everyday life.

The social masses’ rising anxiety about a new industrialized social reality is adumbrated by Mark’s statement when he comments on technological advancement in an age of a high development of industrialization:

The intimidating angry scream of jet planes as they across the sky, the slow menacing rumble of a tube train approaching through its tunnel; the heavy road transport that shakes the very foundations of your house. . . even the minor domestic noises of today, beneficial in action through they may be, yet carry a kind of alert. The dishwasher, the refrigerators, the pressure cookers, the whining vacuum cleaners. “Be careful,” They all seem to say. “I am a genie harnessed to your service, but if your control of me fails . . .” (1)

The modern transportation means and electrical appliances mark the advanced development of industrialization and enable the everyday life in a social reality to be “subjected to the demand to make human living situations controllable by instrumental rationality” (Beck, 1994, 10). Christie also notices that the high development of mechanical advancement may cause a backfire and consequently

turns the industrial society into what Beck calls a rising uncontrollable “risk society.”¹² To her, this rational and scientific development should be taken a sign of alert because the advancement of modern technology can someday mean harnessed genies’ striking back when they go out of control.

Mark actually manifests the fact that the “new technique, “like the computer” (he also calls it “electric brain”) (211), threatens to “take the placement of men eventually” (Ibid.). He believes that he lives in a “dangerous world” (1), concluding that “perhaps, not only great natural forces, but the work of our hands may destroy it” (212). Hence, this sci-fi undertone seems to foretell that the progression of human history will be undermined by highly industrialized technologies created by human’s own hands. To Christie, the high technologies foreground a double-edged feature in characterizing, on one hand, a systematized and rationalized knowledge for improving human life, and latently producing, on the other hand, an uncontrollable “risk” of destroying human civilization. More precisely, Christie intends to evince her anxious and critical attitude toward the hazardous aspects of rational and scientific knowledge especially in a high-industrialized society.

Everyday life in an industrialized and capitalistic society is featured with a rationalized and systematized process that turns everything into the measurable (by abstraction of number or of monetary value). The social reality renders everything to be examined in a rational and systematical perspective. In *Pale Horse*, even the practice of witchcraft and crime of murder, which are usually considered as non-rational deeds, are turned into a systematical and organized enterprise. One of the “witches,” who stays in a rural guest house called Pale Horse, tries to persuade Mark

¹² Beck’s discussion of risk society is not limited to a new conception of [historical “time” that may foretell social changes](#) in an age of the high development of industrialization. He focuses, too, on new conception of “space” demonstrated in transnational economics (capital circulation) and multinational organizations in coping with the problem such as nuclear weapons and terrorist’s scheme that undermine the stability of national economics and politics. Some Christie’s novels written mainly about espionage in her older age are actually concerned about these issues.

into regarding their belief in superstition as a rational “truth.” She tells Mark:

You can't explain away everything as superstition, or fear, or religious bigotry. There are elemental truths and elemental powers. There always have been. There always will be. (78)

More notable, the other two witches in *Pale Horse* even inform Mark that they organize a “Sorcerers [(Company)] Limited” (80), implicitly suggesting that they can be hired for murder with their invincible and magic power. Actually, these three “witches”¹³ are secretly employed by a bigger underground corporation which makes profit by “organized murder” (168). That is, if a person wants someone to die, this “murder” corporation can make the death happen only after this person pays money for it. This non-rational crime and witchcraft are encapsulated into a modernizing process of rational systematization, which is redolent with the undertone of utilitarianism in an industrialized and capitalistic society.

Yet, due to a rapid progression of industrialization and a high development of technology that provoke shortened time and shrunk space, the rational function of traditional clock time and linearity of historical perspective become more and more disorienting.” This tradition-breaking sense of historical time is asserted by the historian Mark Easterbrook. As a historian, he seeks to adopt a new perspective, rather than a chronological and progressive viewpoint, of history in seeing history as an arbitrary determination of judgment. To him, the historical “events” do not have one ultimate and absolute conclusion. He tells inspector Lejeune, the police officer who investigates the organized murder in *Pale Horse*, that “the science tomorrow is the supernatural of today” (173). In light of his words, the distinction between rational

¹³ These three witches implicitly respond to Shakespeare’s ones in *Macbeth*, whose witchcraft in the beginning of this play creates a supernatural and irrational atmosphere that suggests an uncertain state of a human fate and of a rational world. As Shakespeare provides readers with an ambiguous witchcraft scene, Christie seems to attempt to employ these three witches in *Pale Horse* to highlight the questioning about the distinction between the rational and the non-rational.

science and supernatural mystery is not absolute and binary. That is, the rational and scientific knowledge does not symbolize progressive advancement, and the supernatural cult is far from a kind of old-fashioned retrogression.

Mark's alternative view of history may resemble Linda Hutcheon's perception of the "historiographic" meta-narrative.¹⁴ He begins to view each happening event as an accidental particularity and contingency without being "chronicalized" or "historicized" into a historical fact through an ultimate and arbitrary judgment. The distinction, stated by Linda Hutcheon, between "historical events and historical facts that is one shared by many historians" (1988, 122) can help us better understand Mark's "historicity." According to her, the historical documents serve as signs of events, which the historian transmutes into facts, as in "historiographic" metafiction. The main difference between historical events and historical facts lies in the fact that the former remains fragmentary and untouched by historian's organizing process, but the latter does not. Mark's contingent and fragmentary viewpoint of human history blatantly shapes a meta-narrative, or a critical consciousness, of an organized historicity.

Viewed in Hutcheon's light, an author can analogically resemble a historian in weaving fragmentary events (the plot) into one organized and ultimate fact (the story). To her, the metafictional writing is a narrative concerning the historian/author's reflexive awareness of the *script of modernity* in which the events are pieced together into one organizing fact. This "modernized script" foregrounds a "grand narrative" but concomitantly produces a critical meta-narrative of this "grand narrative" in a higher narrative level.

¹⁴ Hutcheon often discusses postmodern novels with the thematic issue of dealing with historical events. She calls them "postmodern historiographic metafiction," in which, the progressive and chronological perspective of historicized time has been critically interrogated. This associates her discussion of metafiction with a new sense of historical time in an age of high-industrialization. See her *A Poetic of Postmodern: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

This double-edged inscribing and undermining functionality of the historiographic meta-narrative is closely to a social discourse of reflexive modernity. The organized inscribing of the historical “events” into historical “facts” can be viewed as the first phase of the modernization in forming a totalized narrative. This first phase of modernized and “grand” narrative is always accompanied by the second phase of a contingent and synchronic meta-narrative that “undermines” the coherence and consistence of this totalized and “grand” narrative.

The metafictional writing does not only indicate a “reflexive awareness” but also “a projection of the authorial self” (Ommundsen 15). Situated in a double-edged and reflexive phase of modernizing process in a rising risk society, the rational “authorial self” is no longer sustainable; henceforth, the authorial self expresses a metafictional narrative in his/her literary works, responding to a “meta-narrative” under the impact of the socio-cultural dynamic at that time.

Using Mrs. Oliver as a detective writer’s persona, Christie indeed harbors an alternative and critical perspective of her social reality, projecting a consciousness of an authorial self’s own writing process of detective novel in a detective novel. Besides a literary critic stating her prospect of writing detective novel, Mrs. Oliver often serves as Christie’s mouthpiece to narrate social changes. She, in many novels, always acts as a story-teller and “an author,” who sometimes appears as a social critic making comments on the radical changes in her social reality. Since the first appearance of Mrs. Oliver in *Cards on the Table* (1936) as “one of the foremost writers of detective and other sensational stories” (8), she has continued to reappear at least six other novels, including *Mrs. McGinty’s Death* (1952), *Dead Man’s Folly* (1956), *Pale Horse* (1961), *Third Girl* (1966), *Hallowe’en Party* (1969), and *Elephant Can Remember*

(1972).¹⁵

Written in an age of social change caused by a high development of industrialization and capitalism, Christie's novels unavoidably demonstrate a new perception of social reality, especially the new perception of time and history like those displayed in *Pale Horse*. The shifting perspective of time can be further exemplified in various ways of solving crimes between a male detective and a female sleuth. The male's way of rational ratiocination can connote a systematizing and organizing process of putting fragmentary clues into a chronological order or an accurate time sequence. Yet, the female way of intuitive perception implicates a spontaneous and contingent perspective of discerning truth.¹⁶ In several Christie's detective novels, woman's intuition seems to triumph over man's rationality in investigating crimes.

In *Cards on the Table*, Mrs. Oliver seldom makes remarks on her detective writing, yet she takes rebuttal against male detective (including Poirot) and police sergeants by suggesting a feminine view of "sudden perception of truth" (*Folly* 38) for pinning down a real murderer. Mrs. Oliver, articulating that "my instincts never lie" (*Table* 25), seems to put emphasis on woman's intuitive perception, which, to her, is a better way of solving murdering mystery when it is compared with man's rational ratiocination. She even responds to her detective partner and police friend by asserting that England will be greatly different "if a woman were the head of Scotland Yard" (*Table* 8, this Mrs. Oliver's "slogan" is also repetitively mentioned in *Folly* 179 and *Death* 86). The Scotland Yard never has a female leader¹⁷ in Christie's

¹⁵ These seven novels about Mrs. Oliver will be frequently quoted in this chapter; thus, the last word of the novel title will be used to stand for the whole novel title. *Table* refers to *Cards on the Table*, *Death* for *Mrs. McGinty's Death*, *Folly* for *Dead Man's Folly*, *Horse* for *Pale Horse*, *Girl* for *Third Girl*, *Party* for *Hallowe'en Party* and finally *Remember* for *Elephant Can Remember*.

¹⁶ Besides Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, Miss Jane Marple, in many Christie's detective works, is another figure who often pins down the real murderer with her "sudden" perception of truth.

¹⁷ Actually, Scotland Yard never has a female leader until February 2003; it appointed the first ever

contemporary time, so an alternative perspective of regarding a woman as the head of Scotland Yard forecasts a new possible social value and a trend of social change.

In discussing detective novels, Scott McCracken argues that the detective's way of pinning down the truth is characterized by "the [(male's)] rational-scientific and the [(female's)] intuitive-artistic" (66). Examined in this bipolarity approach, this artistic feminine standpoint of perceiving truth can make a possible differentiation from the rigidity of patriarchal official way of seeking truth, rendering a change of social multitudes' standpoint. This woman's contingent and intuitive manner of viewing things may subvert man's innate and traditional point of view but achieves a new artistic aesthetics.

To Benjamin, a momentary perception of essence of things in a fleeting of time can create artistic aesthetics and alternative perspective. Mrs. Oliver's intuitive way of detection even affects the male amateur sleuth Hercule Poirot, who finally believes that "[w]ith the eyes of the mind one can see more than with the eyes of the body" (*Table 226*); the eyes of the body suggest the limited "vision" of physical naked eyes that fail to find out the murderer. The eyes of the "mind" further signify a spontaneous perception of the real murderer in a fleeting of time. Poirot, trying to seeing things from his "eyes of mind," agrees with the opinion of an extravagant collector of artistic works—Mr. Shaitana, who says to him that "murder can be an art! A murderer can be an artist" (*Table 5*). This "artistic point of view" (*Table 4*) of crime insinuates a critical awareness of the conventional aesthetics performed by official and disciplinary law that views crime as "a matter of routine" (*Ibid.*).

The critique of daily routine and disciplinary life experience characterizes a meta-narrative that records a reflexive "script" of modernizing process in a social

woman to head a Special Branch, an elite police unit responsible for Britain's national security and the fight against terrorism. See the source *European Intelligence Wire* (published on December 1, 2003) from the [Internet website](http://www.guardian.co.uk/gender/story/0,11812,893129,00.html). Available FTP: www.guardian.co.uk/gender/story/0,11812,893129,00.html

reality. In *Hallowe'en Party*, Mrs. Oliver is not just described as a detective writer; she also appears to be a social critic, “[thinking] about such subjects as student unrest, socialism, girl’s clothing, should sex be permissive, and many other things that are no concern of hers” (*Party* 96).

Christie’s self-awareness of a writer’s critical attitude toward the social issue, as in the case of Mrs. Oliver, can echo a meta-narrative in a social background of a rising risk society. Examined in a literary background, the features of “meta-detective-fiction” in her writings are mainly detected by her employing parody and intertextuality to mock her predecessors’ and sometime even her own detective works. In *Third Girl*, Poirot becomes a literary critic writing “an analysis of great writers of detective fiction” (1), “[speaking] scathingly of Edgar Alan Poe” and “[complaining] of lack of method or order in the romantic outpouring of Wilkie Collins” (*Ibid.*). In *The Clocks*, he even criticizes the tales of Sherlock Holmes, saying that they “are in reality far-fetched, full of fallacies and most artificially contrived” (124-5). To him, Sherlock Holme’s “curious incident of the dog in the night”¹⁸ (*Table* 77) turns into a joke in *Cards on the Table*. In *Elephant Can Remember*, the allusion of “Sherlock Holmes and the dog who did nothing at nighttime” (66) is parodically used again to mock a murdered victim’s dog. But, this dog ironically inspires nothing to Poirot. In *Mrs. McGinty’s Dead*, Poirot is even mocked by other characters who call him “[t]he Sherlock Holmes Kind [(with)] deerstalkers and violins and all that” (87), tracing only “[c]igarette ash and footprint” (31). Using Poirot as a contrast to Holmes, Christie criticizes her predecessors’ detective writing and conventional cliché they employed.

¹⁸ The “curious incident of the dog in the night” becomes a device of cliché used by many detective novelists, including Agatha Christie. This allusion is originally from a short detective story--“Silver Blaze” in one of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes’ serial stories. It is a dog without howling at night that inspires Holmes to break a stealing case of a racing horse called “Silver Blaze.” The reason why the dog does not make noise at night is that there is no stranger there and that the dog “knows” the person who steals the horse.

Her sarcastic critique of the cliché and conventions of detective writings can be discerned by her using of a parodic effect in self-referential meta-narratives. Christie self-consciously mocks her own characters in her detective writings, especially the Belgian amateur detective—Hercule Poirot. In *Cards on the Table*, Mrs. Oliver talks about her creation of a foreigner detective called Sven Hjerson in her detective novel. Imitating Christie, Oliver duplicates the Belgian detective Poirot in her works. Sixteen years later in 1952, Christie's Mrs. Oliver continues to talk about her fictional detective Sven Hjerson in another novel, *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*. Robin Upward, Mrs. Oliver's collaborator who adopts her novel into a dramatic play,¹⁹ remarks that Oliver's Hjerson is the “*box office*” (109) for promoting the sale of her detective stories. Upward even imparts his concept to Mrs. Oliver that the village they stay in can inspire her writing of next detective novel (Christie's self-consciousness in writing *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*), proposing that she can put her fictional detective Sven Hjerson into the setting of a rural guest house as the “real” detective Poirot does. This author's self-consciousness of using the *mise en abyme* device befuddles reader's perception of narrative frame and sequentially creates a “metafictional gesture of frame-breaking”²⁰ narrative structure.

This parodic and reflexive narrative about Hercule Poirot is further disclosed by Christie's self-reflexive writing about getting tired of her long-spanning Belgian detective hero Poirot just as Mrs. Oliver is growing repulsive of her Finn sleuth Sven Hjerson. Earl F. Bargainnier points out the resemblance between the writer and the character in Christie's works, reciting that “just as Christie tired of Poirot, so does Mrs.

¹⁹ Christie actually collaborates with [several](#) dramatists in adopting some of her novels featuring the detective Poirot into dramas, which are played all over England. Her most successful play is *Mousetrap* (1952), which is actually based on her short radio play—*Three Blind Mice* (1947), [which becomes the most-running play in theatrical performance in the world.](#)

²⁰ This term is originally from Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987. pp.197-8. In discussing postmodern metafictional novels, McHale coins this term. He notices that the metafictional authors in their writing process occupies an ontological level superior to his/her world; by breaking the frame around his/her world, these authors foreground their own superior reality.

Oliver of Hjerson.” In *Mrs. McGinty’s Dead*, Mrs. Oliver actually expresses her strong repulsion against Sven Hjerson, the detective she creates by herself, and her intention to “murder” him in her own novel. She tells Upward:

I must have been mad! Why a Finn when I know nothing about Finland? Why a vegetarian? Why all idiotic mannerisms he’s got . . . you’ve got someone like that maddening Sven Hjerson tied to you for life. And people even write and say how fond you must be of him. Fond of him? If I met that bony gangling vegetable eating Finn in real life, I’d do a better murder than I’ve ever invented. (*Dead* 137)

Using the words “idiotic,” she must have been getting tired of and extremely disgusting her eccentric and vegetarian detective for long. Moreover, she may “murder” this fictional character if he really comes to her real life. In *Cards on the Table*, Mrs. Oliver has already told superintendent Battle: “I only regret one thing, making my detective a Finn. I don’t really know anything about Finns” (57).

Although she creates Poirot as a great foreign detective, she almost knows nothing about his nationality—Belgium. Oliver’s words, to a larger degree, point out Christie’s concern about her own creation of her detective. Upward’s response seems to state the author Christie’s self-reflexive and metafictional intention:

You know, Ariadne, that might be rather a marvelous idea. A real Sven Hjerson—and *you* murder him. You might make a Swan Song book of it—to be published after your death. (Ibid.)

Likewise, Christie gradually gets bored of her Poirot and “kills” him off in the novel *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case* (1946),²¹ which is posthumously published as her swan

²¹ In this novel, Poirot exerts a “personal” justice by “executing” a perfect murderer who actually does not commit any crime. Soon after this “execution,” Poirot also commits suicide by shooting himself. Thus, Christie gets rid of Poirot in this novel that records his last case. See the discussion of the novel in Chapter [Two](#).

song book in 1976 after her death.

However, her publishers and fans expect more series books featured with Poirot the master detective. Hence, if she had killed off Poirot before her death, she would have “lost a major revenue source and been forced to endure adverse publicity and constant fan pressure to resurrect him” (Knepper 70). Torn between the reader’s response and her authorial autonomy in a changing social trend, Christie reveals a self-reflexive and parodic writing of her writing predicament in her own novels and signals her writer’s block in her writing process. In *Mrs. McGinty’s Dead*, Mrs. Oliver talks about the contingent and fleeting inspiration of writing fiction to Poirot, saying “[u]nless I get a rough sketch of my idea jotted down, it will go” (206). In *Pale Horse*, Mrs. Oliver whines out her writer’s block to the historian Mark Easterbrook:

I ’m too busy writing or rather worrying because I can’t write. That’s really the most tiresome thing about writing—though everything is tiresome really, except the one moment when you get what you think is going to be wonderful idea, and can hardly wait to begin. (13)

To Mrs. Oliver, a writer’s lacking of inspiration is the most tiresome thing. She believes, “[w]riting’s not particularly enjoyable. It’s a hard work like everything else” (*Table 127*). Oliver’s feeling distressed evinces Christie’s writing predicament in facing reader’s and publisher’s expectation.

John Barth labels this writer’s predicament as “the exhaustion” (162). This author’s “exhausting” of writing idea may correspond with Habermas’s argumentation about how the originally creative avant-garde in an age of high-modernity becomes “exhausted,” namely loses its creativity, thanks to its being overtly rationalized and regulated as “banal” and disciplinary practices of everyday life. As mentioned previously in this study, Habermas argues that all creative and artistic concepts or techniques, though continually expanding, are supposedly no longer creative and are

gradually turning “exhausted.” Accordingly, this notion of “exhaustion” in an age of late modernity is aptly applied to the literary discussion of meta-narrative techniques at that time, which chiefly contain the examination of a writer’s self-consciousness of his falling short of inspiration.

Exhausting writing material and lacking inspiration, some of the postwar writers, including Agatha Christie, seek to look for inspiring idea from the past literary idea and tradition. This parodic echoing of the past idea and tradition in the present text, to use Hutcheon’s words, “recontextualizes” the literary form of the past in a new context. Seen in this light, the metafiction writer may employ this device of intertextuality—*borrowing* idea from other past literary texts—to create something differential from the past literary tradition. The using of parody and intertextuality coincides with the subversive nature in reflexive modernity—following a (literary) tradition but creating something discriminative from it.

Christie frequently uses a literary device of intertextuality in her works. In the beginning of *Cards on the Table*, Mr. Shaitana invites several friends, including Colonel Race, Superintendent Battle,²² Mrs. Oliver, and Hercule Poirot, to his house for card games. These four amateur sleuths have appeared in several novels yet never have a chance to meet one another. Christie “synchronically” puts them together into one novel, employing an intertextual technique in which “old” characters in past novels are “recontextualized” as the “present” ones but in a context of a new novel. This hybridity of “the past” and the “present” in a current context of a new novel can enable readers to feel befuddled, subverting readers’ original cognition of their familiar characters in those novels they had read in the past.

This present “recontextualization” of the “past” disrupts the chronologically

²² Colonel Race and Superintendent Battle are Christie’s amateur detectives who occasionally show up in her several novels.

historical time and further creates a *mise-en-abyme* narrative-framing structure which blurs the reader's telling the fiction from the reality when they read this ambiguous narrative framework with a synchronically temporal perspective. In *The Body in the Library* (1942), Christie even puts her own name along with her other contemporary detective writers. A little boy, who is a detective-novel fan, talks to a police man near a crime scene of murder, saying:

“Do you like detective stories? I do. I read them all and I’ve got autographs from Dorothy Sayers and *Agatha Christie* and Dickson Carr and H. C. Bailey.”

(70 emphasis mine)

Writing her own name into her own detective novel, Christie's explicitly projects her own authorial self in a detective-writing process. She intends to frame her detective story in a *mise-en-abyme* narrative-framing structure. She resembles other writers of detective-story-within-the-detective-story²³ when she creates a hybridity of the past and the present, or fiction and reality. This meta-narrative reveals an author's sense of uncertainty toward his/her writing predicament (in the aspect of literary tradition) and, to a larger extent, toward his/her risk society background (in the aspect of social significance). In Christie's meta-detective-writing, the social background of a changeable social reality and the literary background of a dubious narrative structure are interconnected with each other, together producing a sense of uncertainty. More noteworthy, her meta-narratives reveal a new temporal perspective: the social masses' rising perception of a synchronically historical time in a social background and the parodic-writing hybridity of past tradition and present invention in a literary background.

In addition to the differential temporal perspective, the meta-narrative in

²³ The gumshoe detective novel is often with an urban setting. These gumshoe detective novelists include Paul Auster (*New York Trilogy*), Thomas Pynchon (*Crying of Lot 49*), Italo Calvino (*If on a Winter Night a Traveler*), and many others.

Christie's novel, like *Third Girl*, displays as well an alternative spatial perspective in the novel's literary tradition and its social significance. In *Third Girl*, a sense of spatial uncertainty is perceived by Mrs. Oliver, Christie's authorial self in disguise, when she seeks to look for inspiration by personally tracing a murder suspect in big city streets like what a detective does in a gumshoe detective story, which highlights a theme of detective's following mysterious person in an urbanized social reality:²⁴

I write books. I write detective stories . . . , I'd just got to the point in my book where I was following somebody. I mean my hero was following someone and I thought to myself . . . , I've read a lot of books where people do follow other people, and I wonder if it was easy as it seems to be in some people's books or if it was entirely impossible as it seemed in other people's books. (96)

Oliver's repetitive mentioning of "other people's books" and "following someone" connotes Christie's undertone of intertextuality and her doubt about the writing conventions of "gumshoes" detective novels. In fact, Christie puts the convention of gumshoes detective's tracing an unknown person in urban city streets into her story; Mrs. Oliver, the detective novelist and amateur detective, follows a murder suspect, but she finally finds out that she is totally lost "[r]ight in the middle of London, where she "[finds] how difficult it was to trail anybody" (154). Seen in this light, Oliver steps into an uncertainty world permeated by disorienting city streets in a peripheral area of an urban city. Christie eminently uses the parody of gumshoes-detective stories convention and bewildered Oliver to underscore a return of spatial uncertainty and a sense of strangeness toward a regulating spatial development of an urbanizing process. This "non-civilized" space resembles a primeval forest without being

²⁴ The gumshoes detective story is probably originated from Poe's short story—"The Man of the Crowd," in which a recuperated patient secretly observes and follows a mysterious person in big city streets, but he finally knows nothing about this "man of the crowd."

assimilated into an urban space, baffling Mrs. Oliver the amateur gumshoe detective.

She tells Poirot:

“[T]hey were queer little streets and rather sort of broken-down places, and sheds and open spaces being cleared for building—oh, I don’t know, I can’t explain it. . . then suddenly you find you’re in a jungle or somewhere quite different.” (154-5)

The urban jungle of the city London under massive constructions indicates a consequence of high-industrialization and an authorial self’s (Mrs. Oliver’s/Christie’s) baffling perception toward either the mystery of gumshoes detective story or the spatial changes of urban landscape. These labyrinthine city streets in an ambiguous “rurban” area signify an undeveloped “wilderness” hidden within a well-planned and civilized urban space in an urbanized society. To Mrs. Oliver, this peripheral area in an urban space befuddles her spatial practice. She resembles a perplexed detective hero losing his sense of direction within a dark corner of a big city in a detective novel—one of the literary conventions of metaphysical detective novel.

More crucially, viewing that this difficult and uncertain tracing of a suspect is “just like a game” (154), Mrs. Oliver may resemble a gumshoes detective situated in a playful world of metaphysical detective novels,²⁵ puzzled by a sense of spatial uncertainty toward an urban city and failing to solve a mystery. Christie’s depiction of a person’s being lost in a disorienting urban space spotlights both the social

²⁵ Stefano Tani is the earliest critic who coins the term metaphysical detective novel. To Tani, the writer of metaphysical detective novel keeps reminding the readers that what they are reading is only fiction and that the writer is a conjurer in this magic game, which has no reality but the fictional game. See *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction*. South Illinois UP, 1984. pp.114-5. Later in 1990s, Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney regard metaphysical detective story as a text that parodies and subverts traditional detective story tradition. See their *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999. pp.1-2. All these critics put the metaphysical detective novels into the discussion of meta-level and frame-breaking narrative structure. Moreover, the detectives in this kind of novel are often involved in a process of searching their own identity, but they are usually in vain and get confused more than ever about their own identity.

background of an ambiguous urbanizing process in an industrialized society and the literary background of a meta-detective novel setting in a later development of detective writings.

Broadly speaking, a metaphysical detective novel is similar to a meta-detective-fiction, which often characterizes a hide-and-seek game between the gumshoes detective and his target tracing person especially in an urban city setting. By employing a literary device of narrative frame-breaking and metafictional structure, Christie offers a meta-level game oscillating between fiction and reality in her meta-detective-works. This issue of an uncertain division between the false and the genuine corresponds to Patricia Waugh's argument about the questioning nature in metafiction. Waugh defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). What Waugh emphasizes in her discussion of metafictional writing is a sense of uncertainty caused by a confusion of frame-breaking narrative, which is often without a clear distinction between the fictional world the author creates and the social reality the reader perceives.

This effect of uncertainty between the fictional world and the reality can be exhibited in a "murder game" planned by Mrs. Oliver. In *Dead Man's Folly*, she meticulously arranges a "murder hunt" to seek a murderer in a fête. Mrs. Oliver is proud of designing this game;²⁶ she tells Poirot,

"Well, there'll be a Victim, of course, And Clues. And Suspects. All rather *conventional*—you know, the Vamp and the Blackmailer and the

²⁶ Christie originally plans to kill off Poirot in the 1946 novel *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*. Her publisher and fans presses her to keep writing Poirot's series books. Nevertheless, from then on, her postwar works featured with the detective Poirot is often accompanied by the detective writer Mrs. Oliver. Readers are no more impressed solely by one master detective, and they are also drew attention to Mrs. Oliver.

Young Lovers and the Sinister Bulter and so on. Half crown to enter and you get shown the first Clue and you've got to find the Victim and the Weapon and say Whodunnit and the Motive. And there are Prizes."

(8 emphasis mine)

She obviously knows well the conventions of murder cases in many *whodunnit* stories and is glad to bring the old and past conventional murder into a new context. Yet, much to her surprise, the false victim in this murder game finally turns out to be a real victim of a real murder case. Mrs. Oliver's murder game produces an ambiguous effect; is this a game with a make-believe victim in a real murder case, or a murder case with a real victim in a make-believe murder case? The question strikes an ambiguous distinction between fiction and reality.

This sense of ambiguity toward a life experience in metafiction, in Waugh's argument, characterizes "a play world" (Ibid.) oscillating between "fiction and reality," which interests metafictional writers. What is important, she regards the "play as a form of escapism" (Ibid.) from the "assimilation" of the framework of everyday world. A person's embracing this escapism may harbor his self-reflexive and interrogative stance of criticizing the rational construction of the everyday world in a higher "meta" level of a narrative structure. Thus, Christie's playful use of "murder game" in a murder case, an approach to bring together literary background and social background, symbolizes an insecure state or a critical awareness of the disciplinary practices of everyday life.

The so-called interwar and postwar metafictional writers,²⁷ who use the detective story plot as a literary device, like to juxtapose a solemn murder with a

²⁷ According to Hutcheon's exploration, apart from Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Ellery Queen are the two other metafictional detective writers in Golden Age (interwar and postwar period) who put detective novelist in their own detective novels and view murder as a playful game. See Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. New York: Methuen, 1984. pp. 72-3.

playful game. Christie was one of them to start the outset of this kind of metafictional writing in 1950s. Besides the game of “murder hunt” in *Dead Man’s Folly*, some murders in several Christie’s detective novels are also associated with game. They are card games in *Cards on the Table*, in which Mr. Shaitana is murdered when he plays bridges with his friends; in *Mrs. McGinty’s Dead*, the death of Mrs. McGinty just responds a child’s game called “Mrs. McGinty’s dead;” in *Hallowe’en Party*, the game of bobbing for apple in a bucket full of water in a Hallowe’en party turns out to be a murderer’s scheme to drown a teenaged girl.

The theme of the confusion between fiction and reality is further illustrated in *A Murder Is Announced* (1950). In this novel, Christie presents a murder which is “announced” with a specific date and place on newspaper in a local village. This finally bewilders these villagers’ sense of telling fiction from reality. To most locals in this rural village, this murder announcement in the newspaper column seems to be a playful “Murder Game” (4-5). A local young man even infers the way how to play this game:

“Somebody’s the victim and somebody else is a detective—and then they turn the lights out and somebody tap you on the shoulder and then you scream and lie down and sham dead.” (5)

Like what happens in *Dead Man’s Folly*, the “Murder Game” in *A Murder Is Announced* later becomes a real murder case. When several villagers come together in evening to Ms. Blacklock’s home—the scene of “impending” murder according to this announcement—to anticipate a murder game and have funs, they are all frightened by the sudden darkness caused by a lights-out; a man is found murdered soon after the lights come to the drawing-room again. Thus, “a game [is] no more a game” (*A Murder Is Announced* 25); it turns the cozy drawing-room into a disordered “pandemonium” (*Ibid.*) because everyone becomes panic and is almost out of his

rational mind.

If visual image is the priority that organizes a person's sensible understanding of the world, the sudden darkness, the vanishing vision, and a sequential human subject's losing spatial perception in this novel may signify that the forming of rational knowledge returns to a "zero" state.²⁸ The word "pandemonium" implies a chaotic and non-rational state, in which the binary distinctions in everyday life are threatened to become ambiguous and uncertain. To Waugh, this funny and playful game functions as a fictional and fantastic world, and becomes "merged" with the "historical world."²⁹ Both of the *fictional* world and the *historical* world juxtapose each other and constitute an everyday life reality (Waugh 38).

Christie employs many metafictional writing devices, including self-referential parody, intertextuality, and games-playing to shape her critical attitude toward the everyday life in a social reality. She, in many aspects, becomes a metafiction writer. Like other metafiction writers, Christie endows too her metafictional writing with a social significance, a social background of a postwar risk society. The rising risk society challenges the disciplinary and normalizing control of rationality, reversing the hierarchical structure of social reality. The age of a risk society is mainly featured with a high development of an industrializing process. The industrialization improves the economic situation of the masses and promote their ability to consumption; then a cultural industry "[arising] spontaneously from the masses themselves," "[fusing] the old and familiar into a new quality" (Adorno 43).³⁰ The once debased popular

²⁸ This episode in *A Murder Is Announced* may resemble, after almost 40 years, the "dark room" motif in Paul Auster's *The Locked Room* (1986), a typical metaphysical detective novel, in which the main characters get totally lost and helpless in a dark room. This symbolically signifies the construction of human recognition and of rational knowledge (including the linguistic competence) returns to its original and quasi-prelapsarian state without being normalized and systematized. For this reason, this "dark-room" motif reveals an interrogation of the modernizing process of rational knowledge.

²⁹ The historical world, in Waugh's perspective, suggests a life dominated by a normalizing reality through a historicizing and systematizing process of constructing rational knowledge.

³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno embraces a negative comment on the popular culture of the masses, thinking that the "standardization" of the cultural industry of popular culture is a sort of anti-enlightenment

literature of the masses seems to be “recontextualized” in a new and emergent culture of a risk society, threatening the dominant position of a high-brow literature or artistic form. The novelists, especially pop fiction writers in this new social-cultural trend, do not rely solely on their authorial autonomy in writing their works; rather, the masses’ responses become their primary concern.

Under a trend of social change dominated by the prevalence of capitalism, most of the social masses improve their living circumstance because of the national economic growth caused mainly by capitalists’ investment and taxes recollected from them. Besides, this industrializing expansion and its consequential advanced development of “information technologies,” including industrial printing, radio, and cinema, make possible an “emergent mass culture” (McCracken 21). This emergent culture may characterize social masses’ gradual concern about their pastime, like reading pop fictions, in this new trend of an industrialized and capitalistic society. Readers of popular novels begin to address their opinions directly to publishers and even write to the author of the books they read. With increasing pop-fiction readers in a new social reality, publishers profit a lot from popular writers’ bestsellers.

As a bestseller writer, Christie expresses an author’s self-consciousness in writing pop fictions. This meta-consciousness of writing popular fictions not merely designates its literary background but also exhibits its social background of mass culture at that time. Raymond Williams argues that industrialization and capitalism have gradually drawn dominant culture trend to the social masses since 1840.³¹ More precisely, the contemporary novelists since 1840 have recorded more and more life of the masses into their novels. The writing trend of appeasing the masses in an

creating “false consciousness,” which may impede “the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves.” See his “Cultural Industry Reconsidered” in *Reading Popular Narrative: A Source Book*. Ed. Bob Ashley. London: Leicester UP, 1989. pp. 43-8.

³¹ See his “Long Revolution” in *Reading Popular Narrative: A Source Book*. Ed. Bob Ashley. London: Leicester UP, 1989. pp. 39-43.

industrialized and capitalistic society culminates again in an era of postwar economic revival with the popularity of pop fictions.

Popular with her detective works, Christie is aware that it is important to deal with readers' responses to and expectations of her writings. She writes this problem into her works such as in *The Clocks*.³² Miss Martindale, a former secretary to a well-known thriller writer, tells detective inspector Hardcastle about the modern reader's response to pop fiction writer; she says:

In old days the public didn't really mind much about accuracy, but nowadays readers take it upon themselves to write to authors on every possible occasion, pointing out flaws. (35)

The sale of an author's works becomes more and more interrelated with readers' response in Christie's England. In this new socio-cultural reality, the author needs to take readers' opinions into her writing consideration. Christie understands the importance of reader's role in the pop trend of reading pop fiction. In *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*, one of Mrs. Oliver's novel fans tells her:

“You'll be the lady from London that writes the murder books? Three of them I've got here now in Penguins.” (111)

This “Penguins” explicitly refers to the Penguin Books,³³ the publisher which often offers massive paperback books about popular literature, including thriller, romance, sci-fi and detective novel, in a cheaper price. Mrs. Oliver (probably also Christie herself) is self-reflexively conscious of the fact that her novels are bestsellers, so she

³² Although Mrs. Oliver does not appear in *The Clocks*, Christie “intertextually” puts her in this novel. The secret agent Colin Lamb mentioned that one of the signed photographs of thriller writers collected by Miss Martindale, the thriller fiction fan, is Ariadne Oliver. See *The Clocks* (1963), New York: Berkley Book, 2000. p. 31.

³³ Penguin Books is a British publisher founded in 1935 by Allen Lane. Lane's idea was to provide quality writing cheaply, for the same price as a pack of cigarettes. He also wanted them to be sold not only in bookshops but in train stations, general stores and corner shops. Most of the books are published in paperback. To be sure, Christie's world-wide popular series-novels indeed have the Penguin books edition. For more information, please check the following Internet website. Available FTP:en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penguin_books

can get a great deal of money from the market. In *Cards on the Table*, Mrs. Oliver is confident of getting lots of money by novel-selling, saying that “ I can only keep going by repeating over and over to myself the amount of money I might get for my next serial rights” (127). However, the publisher takes away most of the profit of her novel-selling. To this, she complains to Poirot in *Mrs. McGinty’s Dead*:

“My books bring me in quite enough money—that is to say the
bloodsuckers take the most of it, and if I made more, they’d take more, so
I don’t overstrain myself. (85)

The “bloodsucker” refers to the speculative publisher who solely aims to profit more money from the publishing business. The publisher, in this sense, resembles a Marxian “vampire-like” capitalist³⁴ who tends to exploit writer/laborer’s “use value” and becomes a “bloodsucker.” Christie actually presents, in a higher “meta” level, a writer’s predicament in a social reality dominated by the prevalence of capitalism in an industrial society.

Her metafictional writing suggests her familiarity with the past literary tradition of detective writing and her critical attitudes toward this tradition. But, to view her meta-narrative in a literary background is not sufficient enough to cover an overall discussion of her writing; instead, her writing should also be examined in its social significance of an age of reflexive modernity at that time, which, according to Ulrich Beck, characterizes a reflexive awareness of a modernizing (normalizing and disciplinary) process of constructing rational and scientific knowledge. Therefore, the double-edged narrative of metafictional writing, which conforms to but simultaneously deviates from a “grand” and master narrative, can be viewed as a

³⁴ Karl Marx employs a “gothic” metaphor by suggesting the capitalist as a “bloodsucker.” He mentions that “Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.” See his *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin Books. 1990.

social/literary discourse of reflexive modernity.

In this chapter, the social background of a changing social reality and the literary background of a meta-fictional writing in Christie's detective novels constitute a meta-narrative that transpires both "repetitive" and "differential" writing of a "grand" and conventional narrative. This reflexive perspective of the modernization also echoes Linda Hutcheon's concept of "repetitively" putting the past and conventional tradition in a present context. This "differentially" creates an alternative vision of viewing everyday life when social masses' conception is under the impact of a Beckian meta-narrative of social changes and cultural dynamics in a rising risk society.

A new kind of "time-space compression" in Christie's postwar England empowers social masses to originate new perspectives from a traditional and historical social reality. More important, an ambivalent prospect of time and space is revealed in the discussion of the social background of social changes (with a differential perception of historical "time" as well as with a disorienting sense of urban "space") and the literary background of metafictional writings (with an ambiguous temporality of the past literary convention and the present invention as well as with a labyrinthine spatiality in metaphysical detective novels) in Christie's postwar novels. These new aspects of spatio-temporal practices in everyday life give rise to cultural dynamics and form a trend of social change, exposing the complexity of a social reality.

The final chapter, the conclusion, will focus on the issue of a rising risk society presented in Christie's works. In her detective stories, she depicts the rising and emergent culture of a risk society. Yet, the portrayal of social changes in a risk society culminates in her espionage novels, her alternative treatment of detective stories by adding secret agents and underground organizations into a detective story setting. This

chapter examines how the transnational capitalism and multinational organizations deteriorate the innate border of a nation state, and how the new technology of nuclear weapon and gene biology pose a threat to human life in a rising risk society of her contemporary England.