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Rebekah Olsen

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Honors Thesis

“I—I CAN’T TALK ABOUT THINGS”: THE TRAGEDY OF POST-WWII  
CIVILIAN MASCULINITY IN AGATHA CHRISTIE’S  
*TAKEN AT THE FLOOD*

by  
Rebekah Olsen

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment  
of graduation requirements for University Honors

English Department  
Brigham Young University  
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Advisor: Jamie Horrocks

Honors Coordinator: Aaron Eastley

## ABSTRACT

“I—I CAN’T TALK ABOUT THINGS”: THE TRAGEDY OF POST-WWII  
CIVILIAN MASCULINITY IN AGATHA CHRISTIE’S  
*TAKEN AT THE FLOOD*

Rebekah Olsen

Department of English

Bachelor of Arts

This thesis examines the ways in which Agatha Christie’s *Taken at the Flood* serves to illustrate the fragility and ultimate destabilization of masculinity immediately following WWII. Christie illustrates this break by comparing two men, David Hunter and Rowley Cloade who represent types of men in Britain’s postwar landscape. Throughout the text, David Hunter is framed as a dangerous and dreadful young man, serving as a representation of post-war fears about demobbed soldiers attacking young women. However, the story really revolves around the civilian trauma that Rowley Cloade has sustained through his wartime role as a farmer, which comes from repression and leads to violence. This manifests especially when he is triggered by the mention of Johnny, his best friend he lost in the war, and the potential loss of Lynn, his long-term fiancée who appropriates many of his masculine characteristics. These triggering events result in bursts of violence, and yet, at the end of the story, Rowley is exonerated, forgiven by the characters and possibly by Christie, because his violence is perceived as stemming from his inability to express his civilian trauma within the strictures of masculinity.

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## I. Introduction

“Careless talk costs lives.” “To be well dressed in wartime is worse than bad form—it’s unpatriotic.” These statements and many others, invented by the British Ministry of Information and popularized in widespread posters during World War II, emphasize how even the most basic, everyday actions of civilian life, such as speaking to friends or getting dressed for work, were permeated by the war. Among ration cards, refugees, and air raids, civilians were intended to carry on as if all was well on the western front. However, both civilians and soldiers struggled with deep loss, grief, and fear, outcomes that chased British civilians into the post-war landscape. Such trauma is recorded everywhere in the canon of British literature, with writers like Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and T. S. Eliot creating well-known examinations of British life during and after World War II. However, no author sold more copies and entered more homes of British civilians than the decidedly lowbrow queen of the murder mystery: Agatha Christie.

Christie was well familiar with the struggles facing post-war London. Her role as a wartime civilian in London was important to her writing, just as her role as a Volunteer Aid Detachment nurse and pharmacist in her hometown of Torquay during WWI shaped her earlier writing, defined as it is by characters who are reeling from Britain’s loss of empire and the traditional tropes of the shell-shocked soldier. By WWII, although a well-known author by this time, Christie moved from her home in Greenway—a home that had been opened to soldiers and evacuees—and joined her husband Max in London (Morgan 226). There, she renewed her training at University College Hospital, London, and worked regular hours at the dispensary in a home that was the only building on the

street to survive a bombing (Thorpe). Christie also took a course in Air Raid precautions and moved three more times in London to avoid “bombs all round [her] whistling down” (Morgan 226). She knew that many traditions, identities, and expectations were buried in the rubble of the Blitz—and she knew she wanted to write about them.

Although Christie is not often considered as a war writer by the general public, in part because of her frequent refusal to situate her plots in time, many of her novels deal with WWI and WWII and their aftermath. In *Death in the Clouds* (1935), for example, she shows the danger of demobbed soldiers capable of doing exactly what they are trained to do: kill with impunity. However, her novels are often sympathetic to the returned soldier as well, emphasizing the disorientation of returning to a battered and war-torn country. This is the case for Alexander Cust in *The ABC Murders*, who is accused of murders he cannot remember committing because of epileptic blackouts that occur as a result of his military service. What Christie recognized most of all, however, is that post-WWII Britain is feeding off of a “crisis of masculinity,” occurring in conjunction with a crisis in national identity, that started during WWI and had been building for the nation and its men after WWII.

If “masculine identity and national identity mutually inform each other,” it is no surprise that such a global crisis as WWII created a seismic shift in expectations of masculinity (Horlacher 2). One of the most visible effects of this crisis was the widening, and increasingly antagonistic, gulf between domestic masculinity and militant prowess. Although this divide has been felt throughout history, it was exacerbated by “the contrast between men’s wartime experiences and civilian life” (Horlacher 8). Communities like Britain that had earlier promoted a militant masculinity as patriotic had a vested interest

in encouraging domestic masculinity immediately after the War because the alternative was having a militant population of Angry Young Men loose in the country, wreaking havoc on comfortable, traditional British life. But although civilians often wanted to gloss over the effects of the war on their boys coming home and to assume that the switch from war front to homefront could be instantly and completely effected, warfare had created in returned soldiers a sense of fearlessness, loss, and nihilism, which often led to violent outbursts and which, in turn, created a strong sense of fear among British civilians.

The murder mystery genre, and specifically Agatha Christie's contributions to it, was exceptionally well-equipped to deal with the problems faced by civilians trying to unpick the social fall-out of a crisis of this magnitude. Edmond Wilson, in his rather peevish article in the October 1944 edition of *The New Yorker*, tries to understand why so many intellectual people are delighted by detective fiction and concludes, "in the two decades between the great wars, [detective fiction has] become more popular than ever before. . . . The world during those years was ridden by an all-pervasive feeling of guilt and by a fear of impending disaster which it seemed hopeless to try to avert because it never seemed conclusively possible to pin down the responsibility" (Wilson). Wilson decides that detective fiction is so satisfying because the murderer is always brought to justice, and when that happens, "the murderer is spotted, and—relief!—he is not, after all, a person like you or me. He is a villain . . . and he has been caught by . . . the supercilious and omniscient detective, who knows exactly how to fix the guilt" (Wilson). Wilson's conviction that having a murderer brought to justice is the satisfying element of a murder mystery further complicates this post-war text, in which some murderers are villains who



are sent away to be hanged, and others are not, which is a situation that more closely mimics the actuality of war and post-war justice.

Of course, what makes Christie's novels different is that the villain is, in almost all of her most challenging pieces, "a person like you or me." In *Taken at the Flood*, Christie's 1948 novel that specifically examines the return of the WWII soldier to rural Britain, the villain of the plot is not a villain at all, nor is he one of the demobbed soldiers whom British civilians believed posed a real threat. Instead, he is a broken and traumatized civilian whom the reader and the characters want to let off, in part because he seems like such a nice young man. Because Christie's works are unique to her wartime experience as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse in her hometown of Torquay, and later in London, she presents a perspective that is often underrepresented. "In their simultaneous exposure and refusal of pain," Christie's novels "offer an oblique negotiation of post-traumatic states that British culture was singularly ill-equipped to acknowledge," argues Gill Plain (2). And as a sharp observer of human nature, Christie looks into the experience of masculine civilian war trauma. Christie would have seen a soldier's trauma as a nurse tending to wounded male soldiers, but she also would have seen and felt the trauma of being a nurse and a typical citizen caught up in something so much bigger and more impossible than she recognized. While the trauma of soldiers is often addressed, the trauma of being a civilian, especially a civilian man, in WWII is one that more often goes unheralded in most other contemporary post-WWII British fiction.

Although many British writers failed to recognize the potential trauma experienced by civilian men, the men who did not go to war sometimes became profound sufferers of civilian trauma. Because this trauma went largely acknowledged, however, it

was met with far less sympathy, and British male civilians had little space to express their grief. The plight of the “domestic man” during war is that his suffering must be mentioned only obliquely. Anything more than that threatens to displace the returned soldier as both the hero and victim in the national narrative. There is “a rough equivalence between the strictures of wartime masculinity and the Second World War constructions of Englishness and Britishness,” Sonya Rose reminds readers; British men of this generation, veterans or not, were in many ways defined in terms of the war (Rose 177). The crisis of masculinity was tied to a national crisis, and as the two got conflated, they became representative of each other. The fate of these young men was, essentially, representative of the fate of England.

Christie’s *Taken at the Flood*, unique in her oeuvre for being set firmly in time (during Britain’s reconstruction after WWII), is a profound example of the post-war masculinity crisis experienced by British men. It emphasizes the variant masculinities at play in post-war Britain and uses its popular literary form to identify the feeling of danger constantly present in a community in which both “warrior” and “domestic” types of masculinity are in conflict. *Taken at the Flood* contains two male leads, both of whom are violently, dangerously unpredictable, but readers only discover this at the end of the novel. David Hunter, a reckless returned soldier, seems to be the greater threat to the other characters. However, it’s quiet, slow Rowley Cloade, the man who remains home to run a farm during the war, who encapsulates the actual threat. Described by his fiancée as “affectionate, unemotional, painstakingly given to understatement” (37 in my copy), Rowley is, in fact, shattered by the competing pressures of unacknowledged grief and emasculation. Thus it is “Rowley Stay-at-home” (36) who turns out to pose real danger to

the British society depicted in *Taken at the Flood*. Through him, readers see the way in which Britain was left, post-war, choosing between unstable young men who fought in the war and carry the trauma of combat, and the ones who did not and carry the trauma of civilian wartime experience. In Christie's novel, Britain's options are bleak because not even the reliable, domestic model of masculinity is stable enough to reconstruct a nation. The nature of the post-WWII crisis of masculinity represented in *Taken at the Flood* is best represented by a close look at the contours of the all-too-typically tortuous plot of a Christie novel.

## II. "A Dreadful Young Man!": David Hunter

The plot of *Taken at the Flood* is convoluted, as all of Christie's plots are. *Taken at the Flood* falls under Christie's Poirot umbrella, and it follows the economic challenges of an extended family in post-war life. Wealthy Gordon Cloade, the eldest brother and thus the Cloade family patriarch, is killed suddenly in a bombing of his London apartment during the Blitz, leaving behind his (much-younger) widow, Rosaleen, and Rosaleen's brother, David Hunter. Gordon's younger brothers and sisters (Rosaleen's in-laws) are left in dire financial straits upon his death, and the stress of this trickles down to their adult children (Gordon's nieces and nephews). One of these nephews was killed in the war, and one remained home to run his successful farm. Gordon's niece, Lynn, served in the Wrens, and when she returns home at the beginning of the novel, she attempts to pick up her engagement with her farming cousin Rowley (who had badly wanted to serve and only missed his chance by a coin toss that resulted in his best friend going to war instead, and being killed). Lynn finds, to her dismay, that excitement is sorely lacking after the chaos of the continent. But excitement is soon to come through

the daring and rakish Hunter, who arrives in Warmesley Vale (after living with Rosaleen in London following a wartime injury and discharge from service), introduces himself to the Cloade family, and strikes up an intense flirtation with Lynn.

David Hunter is jealously guarding his sister, Rosaleen, from the machinations of the Cloade siblings, who were all counting on Gordon to finance various ventures before his death. Hunter has a good reason for doing so, readers soon learn. To keep Gordon's considerable estate from falling to Rosaleen, one of the family members asks a cousin to pretend to be Rosaleen's long-lost first husband, who was missing and presumed dead in South Africa, in order to blackmail Hunter and Rosaleen for money, or else to prove that Rosaleen's marriage to Gordon was bigamous (disqualifying her from inheriting the Cloade fortune). This mysterious stranger (going by the pseudonym "Enoch Arden") turns up dead shortly after arriving in Warmesley Vale and setting the blackmail scheme in motion. Hunter, the intended blackmailee, is suspected of the murder and arrested, and a Major who used to be a friend of Rosaleen's real first husband is bribed to say that the dead body *is* that of Rosaleen's first husband. Sadly, the Major feels so guilty over lying under oath that he then commits suicide. Finally, Rosaleen nears a nervous breakdown and fatally overdoses on sleeping medication. Thus three deaths (which appear to be a murder, a suicide, and an accident, respectively) call Poirot into action.

Christie leads readers to assume that Hunter the daring ex-serviceman is the villainous murderer. And he is responsible for death in the story—but not the deaths you'd expect. Poirot deduces that Hunter has killed Rosaleen (who is not his sister but is, in reality, a parlor-maid that Hunter convinced to masquerade as Rosaleen in the aftermath of her death in the bombing in order to retain Rosaleen's claim to the Cloade

fortune). To readers' surprise, it turns out that steady, dependable Rowley Cloade accidentally killed "Enoch Arden" during a violent confrontation, shoving him into the sharp edge of a fire grate and then attempting to frame Hunter for the murder. Rowley is also responsible for bullying the Major into his false identification of the body, thereby contributing to that man's suicide, and before this is discovered, he nearly kills his fiancée Lynn as well, when she tells him she loves Hunter. Rowley is not, however, required to pay for any of these actions. David Hunter is instead sent to hang at the end of the story (for the poisoning of Rosaleen), while Rowley, cleared of all charges by the selective truth-telling of Poirot, looks forward to a life spent with Lynn.

Readers shed no tears over the fate of David Hunter, who is characterized by Christie as "not our sort" from the outset of *Taken at the Flood* (35). David Hunter comes out of a long tradition of dangerous but capable young men. The "soldier-hero" construction of masculinity has been around for as long as the classical tradition; Achilles is a typical example of this type, with his reckless skill and divine luck or protection. Graham Dawson writes that the idea of the soldier-hero has been "one of the most durable and powerful forms of idealized masculinity within Western cultural traditions since the time of the ancient Greeks" (1). This type of masculinity is associated with quick action, intrepid conduct, and decisive violence. Not surprisingly, the first time Christie introduces David Hunter, a gossipy Major is telling the story of Gordon Cloade's demise and David Hunter's miraculous hardiness in the bombing: "the wife's brother—ex-Commando fellow—he preferred his own comfortable bedroom on the first floor—and by Jove, he escaped with a few bruises" (Christie 8). Christie intends the Major's statements to frame reader opinions about David Hunter early on in terms of his

relationship with his sister, Rosaleen (“the wife”, and his relationship with the military (“ex-Commando”) Both of these associations are signifiers that Christie’s postwar readers would have been quick to understand, beginning with the term “commando.”

The use of “commando” helps establish David Hunter firmly in the soldier-hero masculinity. “Commando” was both a new and an old term in WWII vernacular, when it became the standard term for Special Service soldiers in the British army. It is actually an Afrikaans/Portuguese word and was used during the Boer Wars by Britain to signify a cohort of elite fighters (Dobbie 81). The term was revived in 1940, reportedly by Winston Churchill, but in truth by Lieutenant-Colonel D.W. Clarke, Royal Artillery (Saunders 4). It was, however, an aptly chosen designation. It communicated all the original prestige of those successful Boer War fighters, because, as Elliott Dobbie writes in his examination of the word, “the very qualities which contributed so much to the effectiveness of the Boer commandos—tactical mobility, individual ruggedness, and initiative, knowledge of the terrain to be fought over—are the ones which have been emphasized in the training of the Special Service troops in [World War II]” (85). Hunter’s classification as not only an ex-soldier but also an “ex-Commando” emphasizes his skills in fighting. It’s the modern-day equivalent of acknowledging that he was “special forces” and is used to explain how, in a bombing that caused four casualties, he survived with only a couple of bruises. Hunter embodies a traditional soldier-hero construct here: competent, careless of personal safety, and ridiculously lucky.

However, something that Christie’s original readers would also have been aware of, although modern readers might not pick up on it as easily, is the fear inspired by the David Hunter-type of masculinity. After WWII, these returned soldiers were sometimes

perceived as a threat to the community—careless, cold, and endlessly self-interested.

Although this perspective is not often found in the papers, “strict censorship of the press limited the expression of these civilian fears to personal diaries, literature, and film” (Bell 270). The British public sensed an inherent danger in sending men away to war, training and rewarding them for killing, and then welcoming them back to the homefront where their jobs had been taken by the girls they left behind. Some men adjusted well to post-war life, but a lot of men (especially in Christie’s novels like *And Then There Were None* or *Death In The Clouds*) did not. They had learned that they had the power to take life, and they were willing to do it again for personal gain, or even just for sadism’s sake. Hunter turning out to be a murderer in *Taken by the Flood* would not have surprised anyone, because of men like Gordon Cummins.

Gordon Cummins, also known as “the Blackout ripper” or “the Wartime ripper” was a notorious British serial killer in the early 1940s (Read). Over a six-day period in 1942, Cummins murdered four women and attempted to murder two more during the government-imposed blackouts. These murders, notoriously brutal and at the peak of WWII, instilled a sense of fear in the British public, in part because of Cummin’s career as a leading aircraftman in the Royal Air Force. The women he murdered were primarily sex workers for servicemen, and at the time of his conviction he had no criminal record, nor did he have a history of violence. It took a lot for any news to break through the stranglehold that war news held on the papers and the wartime censorship of material that could generate panic, but ghastly, gruesome quadruple murders perpetrated by actively-serving military men did burst through. And Gordon Cummins was not the only famous

active-duty service member murderer from this time period. So on the homefront, people were conflating violence with soldiers—even Britain’s own boys.

Christie’s characterization of David Hunter very much fits into this risky soldier-hero world, a world in which his military service is met by distrust in the small village of Warmesley Vale and he is seen as dangerous, especially to women. He has aspersions cast on his character by Lynn’s mother, who re-tells the gossip that David and Rosaleen may be masquerading as siblings when they may actually be lovers (Christie 65). The Superintendent investigating the Enoch Arden murder admits that he “endorsed the common opinion that Mrs Gordon Cloade ‘wasn’t a lady,’ and that Mrs. Gordon Cloade’s brother was one of those young firebrand Commandos who, though they had had their uses in time of war, were to be looked at askance in peacetime” (Christie 104). The use of the word “commandos” here again is interesting, solidifying the fact that Hunter is a skilled fighter, but that the skill doesn’t come with accompanying respect. It instead is accompanied by a dose of skepticism towards the young man. Christie is also drawing class distinctions here, making clear what kinds of masculinity are useful and acceptable in different spheres. Although the soldier-hero is appropriate for the battlefield, spoken of with approval by Major Porter in the opening scene which takes place in 1944, being a “young firebrand Commando” is less acceptable in times of peace, when the rich are supposed to be gentlemen of leisure, rather than driven by social ambition.

Nevertheless, Christie makes it clear in the text that the general milieu against David Hunter comes more from his ex-Commando status and his way with women than any imminent threat he poses to the community’s physical safety—in fact their distrust of him comes as much from their trauma as from his own. After he is arrested for the Enoch



Arden murder, his former Brigadier comes down to Warmesley Vale to see what he can do. However, Lynn's recounting of that exchange also suggests that even the Brigadier is unsure if David is guilty. Lynn says of her conversation, "He's been telling me about David, how incredibly daring he was. He said David was one of the bravest people he'd ever had under him. And yet, you know, M. Poirot, in spite of all he said and his praise, I had the feeling that he wasn't sure, not absolutely sure that David hadn't done this!" (Christie 190). Lynn is feeling the inherent danger of the soldier-hero construction, and she understands that even men who have served with David aren't sure that he wouldn't commit murder under the right circumstances. The convoluted nature of Lynn's feelings is mimicked in Christie's writing—the double negative "not absolutely sure that David hadn't done this" creates enough room for doubt that it's impossible to truly tell whether or not David is innocent. The reasonable doubt, so critical for any courtroom, has been created in Lynn's mind, and she can't decide whether she is more enamored with David's "daring" and "bravery" or more frightened of what he might have done. When Hercule Poirot asks if she is sure that David is innocent, Lynn responds with a "crooked, rather pathetic smile," and says, "No—you see, I've never trusted David. *Can* you love someone you don't trust?" (Christie 190). This personal mistrust of David Hunter is not unique to Lynn—the village, Rowley, and the Superintendent all express it as quickly as possible. These expressions of mistrust focus primarily on Hunter's status as a Commando in the army rather than his clear control over Rosaleen or his greed, both of which are also almost instantly visible. The fact that his critics emphasize his military history demonstrates a fascinating inversion of the soldier-hero construct: a soldier-villain masculinity.

Ultimately, Christie allows the social mistrust of David Hunter to be vindicated, validating post war fears about dangerous, social-climbing demobbed soldiers. Hunter is discovered to be not only a murderer but also the architect of the long con that forced one of the Cloade's housemaids to masquerade as Rosaleen Cloade after her death in the bombing. This plot twist—a character using the Blitz to disguise a death—has its roots in a popular news item from the Blitz as well. In 1941, Harry Dobkin murdered his estranged wife in London and buried her in the rubble of a blitzed building, knowing full well that when her body was discovered, there would be little way to recognize her and to determine that she had been murdered, rather than a victim of the air raid (Bell). Dobkin was caught over a year later, thanks to improving forensic techniques, but the case raised a significant question about the likelihood of such crimes in the uncertainty and fear of WWII London (Bell). Hunter, in a variation on this theme, has stolen a ridiculous amount of money from his dead brother-in-law and forced a young woman to go along with his scheme for *years*, mostly by scaring her into it. Characters' suspicions that Hunter is a “*dreadful* young man!” are thus justified (Christie 22).

Christie cultivates this suspicion throughout *Taken by the Flood*, barely giving readers a chance to wonder if Hunter did it, even before it becomes clear in the novel what, exactly, was done. It's not a matter of *if*, it's a matter of *how*. Relatively early on, we get a glimpse of what Hunter is capable of in a scene in which he scares Rosaleen into compliance. As she says that what they've done is wicked, Hunter begins planning ways to extricate them from the *crisis du jour* (blackmail) and the narration reads:

He stopped, his eyes became dreamy, far away. Behind them his mind worked, considering and rejecting possibilities. Then he laughed. It was a gay reckless laugh.

There were men, now dead, who would have recognized it. . . . It was the laugh of a man going into action on a hazardous and dangerous enterprise. There was enjoyment in it and defiance. (Christie 83)

The terror of a man like David Hunter is that he is both thoughtful and reckless. He is experienced enough to “conside[r] and rejec[t] possibilities” but also to laugh in the face of the people he has harmed through his scheme. His laugh is “gay” and “reckless” showing that he gets real joy from his plotting and deception. At the moment in the story, Hunter’s plan is to foil a blackmailer, not to commit murder, but the enjoyment he gets from it is linked to the enjoyment he gets from war. Not only is he going to hurt someone, but he is also going to enjoy it. And when Christie tells us that there are “men, now dead, who would have recognized [the laugh]” it’s impossible to tell whether those would have been other commandos or victims of Hunter’s state-sanctioned killing as a commando. Christie has made it clear that even if he is not responsible for murder at this point in the novel, David Hunter is a killer and a danger to British society. He seems to deserve the sentence he receives when he does, finally, kill Rosaleen: death by hanging. However, more terrifying in this text is the other killer, a man who will cause the death of two people yet be neither tried nor convicted by a jury: Rowley Cloade.

### **III. “Good old stay-at-home Rowley”: Rowley Cloade**

Although David is built up as a threat throughout *Taken at the Flood*, Christie uses him to misdirect her readers from the real perpetrator of two of the three deaths in the novel, and the scapegoat for all of England’s collective trauma, Rowley Cloade. Rowley is characterized as the good-looking, safe farmer who had to stay home to help with the food production aspect of the war, while his dearest friend was killed in combat,

and his fiancée, Lynn, went abroad with Women's Royal Naval Service (known colloquially as the Wrens) to live a life of adventure during the war years. In contrast to Lynn and David, Rowley seems to fit the domestic model of masculinity exactly. He is slow, solid, and safe. He understands fair play and all the social conventions of his time, and he attempts to follow them without deviation, even though the metrics that he uses can seem bizarre. Jessica Meyer writes of the polarity that exists between the domestic man and the soldier-hero, emphasizing that, while the adventuresome, exciting soldier-hero type of masculinity appealed to many during the postwar era, "the power of the domestic roles of men as providers and protectors remained strong" (6). Meyer identifies the "potential for conflict between these two identities, the domestic and the martial," one that definitely plays out on the page as Hunter and Rowley struggle for control of both the Cloade fortune and Lynn herself (12). However, although Rowley seems solid and dependable, he proves throughout the course of the novel that he is a real threat to the community, a fact that goes unaddressed because his trauma also goes unaddressed.

Although he is reliable, Rowley's lack of a war record creates complicated perceptions of him in the text, perceptions that relate to Christie's own wartime experience witnessing both civilian and soldier trauma. Lynn and Rowley's Aunt Kathie tells Poirot that "Rowley, of course, is a splendid person, but possibly—well, a little dull," which has been the reader's carefully constructed perception of him all along (Christie 155). Throughout *Taken by the Flood*, Lynn talks about Rowley as a safe option, albeit a boring one. For example, Lynn introduces Rowley into the narrative by ruminating that if she married him, she would no doubt have "a good life with him—not exciting" (Christie 19). Lynn's Aunt Kathie later says to Poirot, "Rowley, you see, has

been here on his farm all through the war—oh, quite rightly, of course—I mean the Government wanted him to—that side of it is quite all right—not white feathers or things like that as they did in the Boer War—but what I mean is, it’s made him rather limited in his ideas” (Christie 155). The scatter-brained nature of this confession, replete with dashes and mitigating language, does not mask the fact that there is something defensive in the ways that the Cloades talk about Rowley. Despite Aunt Kathie’s repeated assurances that it’s “quite all right” for Rowley to have been released from the draft in order to help feed insular Britain, there’s still a sense that as a healthy, young man, he should have been fighting on the front lines while Lynn sent him off with a handkerchief wave at the train station. The fact that it didn’t happen that way seems, from the defensive way Kathie is talking, to have caused no small amount of stir and gossip in Warmasley Vale.

The fact that Rowley doesn’t fight in the war makes him an untraditional character, considering most war literature focuses on those who did not avoid conscription, but he was not anomalous in his time. Conscription came for every man between the ages of 18 and 41 in 1939, but there were various exemptions, and even at the peak of the war, there was still a 2:1 ratio of men staying home who were either unfit for service or performing skilled labor in a civilian capacity, compared to men in the armed forces (Pattinson 710). According to the U. K. Parliament, skilled labor included “key industries and jobs such as baking, farming, medicine, and engineering” (U. K. Parliament). However, there were also programs such as the “Land Girls” set up, whereby urban women were moved to a farm in a rural community and taught agricultural skills, thus allowing a man to trade his plowshare for a gun. The fact that

Lynn does not take this approach is remarkable enough that Poirot even comments on it:

“You could have worked, could you not, as a land girl, here in Warmesley Vale?”

(Christie 189). Lynn’s choice to go into the Wrens makes her seem much more active in comparison with Rowley’s inactivity, and this once again makes the point that Rowley is a man with a limited amount of power in this society, in large part because he didn’t fight. However, that doesn’t mean that Rowley isn’t dangerous. The risk associated with Rowley doesn’t come from his cockiness or bravery—it comes from his insecurity and his often frightening moral code.

And, in fairness to Rowley, staying home to farm was not his first choice either, but rather a choice that was taken from him, like so many choices were, during the war years. Rowley originally intended to serve, but Christie tells us early on in the book that he and his best friend Johnnie tossed a coin over who would stay behind to mind the farm and who would go abroad to fight. The very next lines read, “[Johnnie] had been killed almost at once - in Norway. All through the years of war Rowley had never been more than a mile or two from home” (Christie 38). This perceived distance from Johnnie’s death is covering up deep civilian trauma, partially linked to a complete lack of control over his future. Unlike David and Lynn, veterans who don’t talk about the friends or freedom they have lost, it seems to be all Rowley thinks about. From Christie’s oblique references to Johnnie, it’s clear that Rowley deeply grieves the death of his friend—when Lynn first brings Johnnie up, their conversation reads: “‘Rowley,’ she hesitated, ‘did you *mind*—I mean—Johnnie—’ His cold level gaze threw her back on herself. ‘Let’s leave Johnnie out of it! The war’s over—and I’ve been lucky.’ ‘Lucky, you mean’—she paused doubtfully—‘not to have had to—to go?’ ‘Wonderful luck, don’t you think so?’ . . . his

voice was smooth with hard edges” (Christie 38). This refusal to even talk about Johnnie, who, because of the luck of the draw, died in Rowley’s place, hints at deep, lasting hurt. Although he comes across to Lynn as “cold” “level” and “smooth,” the underlying language of “thr[owing] her back” and “hard edges” mingled with his obviously fake cheer show that Rowley is grieving deeply, but doesn’t have the language or competence to address his pain, and so he instead represses this grief and guilt. Later on, Lynn brings up Johnnie again, saying “bitterly: ‘Oh, I know! If only Johnnie hadn't been killed -’” to which Rowley shouts, “Leave Johnnie out of it! Don't talk about that!” Lynn is astonished at this display of emotion, and Christie exacerbates this anger with a physical description: “His face was red and congested. He seemed beside himself with rage” (Christie 64). This explosive reaction illustrates just how close to the surface Rowley’s trauma is, and just how angry it can make him.

This repressed anguish is primarily manifest in the relationship between Rowley and Lynn, which bears the brunt of Rowley’s inability to grieve properly, in part because Lynn has returned from the war happy, healthy, and bubbling with excitement, while Johnnie is dead. Rowley doesn’t express any relief that she is home safely, instead seeming to resent her wartime experience which creates a rift between them that seems impossible to heal. When Lynn talks about her adventures, Rowley’s tone is “quiet,” but there is also “something behind those even tones,” something that’s hard to define because “it had never...been easy to know exactly what Rowley was thinking” (Christie 38). Later on in the scene, Rowley comes across as sarcastic and hostile to Lynn’s desires, with calculated, condescending lines like, “But, of course, you service girls will find it hard to settle down at home” which make Lynn flare up (Christie 39). Rowley is

using traditionally masculine language of “settling down” in contrast to “home” which implies there has been a stirring up that previously only men would have had access to before the war.

Rowley’s domesticity also causes angst for Lynn, who resents being made to feel masculine for her wartime service, and thus throws David Hunter’s soldierly masculinity in Rowley’s face. When he tells her that he’s sure she won’t like Rosaleen’s brother, David Hunter, Lynn lashes out, ““You don't know who I like, Rowley, or who I don't! I've seen a lot of the world in the last three years. I—I think my outlook has broadened”” widening the gulf between them (Christie 38). Rowley sees some key differences between himself and his fiancée, but he seems to think if he ignores them, they’ll go away. Lynn thinks to herself in this same, stilted scene, “What a queer topsy-turvy world it was. . . . It used to be the man who went to the wars, the woman who stayed at home. But here the positions were reversed” (Christie 38). She also thinks of Rowley as “unemotional,” although he clearly is uneasy about the power upset in their relationship, and Lynn is “nervous” as she thinks, “Here was Lynn Home-from-the-wars, and here was Rowley Stay-at-home” (Christie 38). For all the talk about what a safe option Rowley is, Rowley at this moment appears fragile, even more liable to unpredictable violence than David Hunter.

Rowley in the text is perfectly identifying the crisis of masculinity that critics have identified coming out of WWI and then again after WWII. Part of the tension of this book lies in Christie’s characterizing Rowley as the classic British type of a land-owning gentleman from old money, emblematic of British-ness, while masculinity in WWII was often more about what men were not than what they were. “Hegemonic masculinity,”



writes Sonya Rose, “was constructed in opposition to both a hyper-masculine Nazi-like image, and to images of emasculated or effeminate men personified by old men and cowardly pacifists” (177). Rowley is hard to place in this context because he certainly doesn’t fit the hyper-masculine image or that of the effeminate man; David Hunter and Poirot fill these contrasting roles in the novel. But Christie is suggesting the idea that just because a man is not hyper-masculine or effeminate does not necessarily mean he is an ideal man. In fact, not knowing where to place oneself, being defined by the absence of certain traits, could be even more dangerous. Rowley is thus better characterized by what Rose calls, “tempered masculinity,” embodying reserve, reason, and an impossible tension between domesticity and masculinity that had become almost standardized in the inter-war period (179). Rowley is one of the “little men” who fit well into the anti-heroic mood of the post-WWI era in Britain, but this construction must now be rearticulated to fit the WWII requirements forced on all the men who stayed home instead of enlisting (Rose 180).

This messiness, or topsy-turviness of post-war masculinity, as Christie puts it, is a result of this “crisis of masculinity.” The editors of *Behind the Lines* write that starting as early as the first World War, soldiers were finding themselves in a “crisis of masculinity” after realizing that “so-called masculine traits are not universal, natural attributes of men” (Higonnet qtd. in Plain 25). The awkwardness of Lynn assuming Rowley’s role in the relationship forces Rowley to acknowledge the fact that he’s been forced to give ground to Lynn in the masculinity department, which hurts his pride. The greater societal crisis, then, is played out on the micro-scale as Rowley and Lynn struggle to redefine their masculinity and femininity, attempting to discover in the process

whether or not they have the same gender expectations for each other. Although Gill Plain's comment that "the patriarchal system . . . stands firm despite the chaos of war" remains true, women continuously claim traditionally male attributes, as Lynn does, demonstrating her fluidity and robbing Rowley of the foundation of his own sense of masculinity (Plain 26). He can't provide for Lynn when she asks for money, and he can't defend her against the predations of David Hunter, leading to his strong feelings of inefficacy. In fact, "displaced through war from the center of his logocentric universe, man [and by extension, Rowley] temporarily becomes the other" (Plain 26). Rowley has clearly maintained the role he was always meant for—he's a farmer—but with everyone else going off to the theater of war, all of a sudden his role is other and he has been left behind, displacing him from the center of his own universe and making him peripheral to his own life.

Thus, unmoored from his foundation of masculinity, Rowley finds himself in a topsy-turvy world where Lynn and Johnnie go off to the warfront while he stays behind as a twist of fate, deprived of choice and tending the cows. Then, Rowley is destabilized as to his place in comparison with the people he grew up around, and tortured by debilitating guilt about the loss of Johnnie—unbalanced like this, Rowley begins to unravel in the text. Although a lot of blame early on is heaped in David Hunter's corner, Rowley has some disconcerting scenes. For example, after a meeting with the pretty, vacuous Rosaleen Cloade to ask for money, Rowley thinks, "There was something appealing about her, she had the same pathetic quality as the little calves he had driven to the butcher that morning. He looked at her as he had looked at them. Poor little devils, he had thought, a pity that they had to be killed" (Christie 68). The comma splice in the first

sentence makes Rowley's disjointed thoughts seem connected, making the reader's mind work overtime to connect Rosaleen to the calves and then to death as Christie forces us to make the same horrifying associations that are coming naturally to Rowley. And, in doing so, she gives us a sense that we should be afraid, not just of David Hunter, the rakishly self-centered commando, but also Rowley Cloade, the solid, deliberate young man who can dispassionately lead calves to slaughter and sees Rosaleen as "appealing" because of the way she reminds him of targets of violence. Rowley is literally becoming a Hunter, because of his trauma as a civilian, and is thinking about butchering Rosaleen as something that could make him feel more masculine, more in control.

Rowley's repressed rage doesn't just lead to thoughts of violence—it leads to real violence as well, which seems to be the natural outcome of his trauma. In reaction to his fear that his life will be further destabilized and that he will lose his farm through lack of funds, or his fiancée through lack of manliness, his actions cause the death of two men, the Enoch Arden blackmailer, whom Rowley shoves into a marble corner to attempt to teach him a lesson. Rowley, on realizing that he's killed Arden, leaves David Hunter's cigarette case in an attempt to frame Hunter for his own manslaughter. Later, Rowley induces a man to commit suicide, and again destroys all evidence of his own involvement. And Rowley's reasoning kind of makes sense—after all, people have been telling him for years now that there's nothing the matter wrong with him, that, in fact, he's lucky for not having to fight. So, it's not shocking that he chooses to repress the facts of his own guilt in the same way that he's repressing guilt about never being in the war at all.

This trauma and anger build until they finally explode into the climax of the plot, when Rowley, in a fit of rage and distraught by the fracturing of his power, attempts to strangle Lynn to prevent her from going away with David Hunter, saying, “*I’ve killed two people. . . . Do you think I shall stick at killing a third?*” (Christie 206). He’s not trying to kill Lynn because she knows too much, or because she’s discovered he’s not the same person she thought—he’s trying to kill her because she has chosen to leave him, and he cannot bear losing one more person to the masculinity demanded by war, masculinity he doesn’t feel that he can live up to. As she tells him her plans to leave, he reacts physically again in his anger: “He came nearer to her. The blood was welling up in his neck, the veins of his forehead were starting out. That look in his eyes - she had seen it once as she passed a bull in a field. Tossing its head, stamping its foot, slowly lowering its head with the great horns. Goaded to a dull fury, a blind rage” (Christie 205). This “dull fury” and “blind rage” are linked to “blood” and “veins,” medical language that seems reminiscent of battle injuries, except for here they stay restrained, just below the surface of the skin. As Rowley yells at Lynn about his life being hell, and how he refuses to let her go, Lynn rises and retreats, with Christie writing, “This man was not a man any longer, he was a brute beast” (Christie 205). In losing his masculinity without compensating, Rowley has become bestial, at least in Lynn’s eyes. The last words she hears before she passes out, his hands squeezing her throat, are tragic, and yet almost garishly cliché words: “I can’t bear any more” (Christie 206). And he’s right. At this point in the text, Christie is making perfectly clear that his ability to control and repress his trauma has limits. Limits which Rowley has just surpassed in his fury at losing one more thing. Only the dramatic arrival

of Poirot prevents him from killing Lynn, in an attempt to regain control as well as to negate his own feelings of unimportance, shame, and repressed grief.

Although it remains unspoken, it's clear that Poirot and Lynn justify Rowley's crimes because of his lack of a war record and the civilian trauma he feels that he's faced as the "Man She Left Behind Her" (Christie 205). After the crisis of strangulation has passed, he still has all of these pent-up words, fragmented ideas, that he just can't quite reconcile. He says, "I've sometimes thought I'm going mad—perhaps I am a bit mad. First Johnny going—and then the war—I—I can't talk about things but sometimes I'd feel blind with rage—and now Lynn—and this fellow" (Christie 211). Rowley has been taught to equate anger and strong emotion to insanity, compounding his shame, and all these broken-off ideas reflect the brokenness of his internal narrative. Without the war to round out his story, he's not really sure what his story is, creating a desperate need to reclaim his self identity and control in some other way. Tragically, with the backdrop of war looming in the background, the only way Rowley can conceptualize to solve his inner turmoil is violence.

#### **IV. "The wages of sin... are said to be death": the fates of David and Rowley**

Even though the text sets up Rowley and David Hunter as foils of each other, they have something crucial in common: both are killers. However, their punishments do not fit their respective crimes. Christie tries to qualify Rowley's killings, with Rowley telling Lynn that they can't get married, arguing that "It's impossible, Lynn. I've killed two men—murdered them—" and Lynn negating that perspective with ease. "'Rubbish,' cried Lynn. 'Don't be pig-headed and melodramatic. If you have a row with a hulking big man and hit him and he falls down and hits his head on a fender--that isn't murder. It's not

even legally murder” (Christie 219). This justification and a similar one used for negating Major Porter’s ultimate demise serve as the justification of the text as well. After all, Lynn ends up with Rowley, who will never go to jail. Meanwhile, David Hunter will hang for the murder of the girl whom he forced to pretend to be Rosaleen. For Rowley’s contemporaries, this repressed anger is the assumed natural outcome of enforced domesticity and is thus, to both Poirot and Lynn, not Rowley’s fault. If Rowley had been able to serve in the war, rather than sending his best friend as well as his fiancée into danger, he may have come home healthy and whole, but instead, he’s fractured, blind, and almost mad. Poirot exonerates Rowley, saying, “The man you did kill, you killed in a rage—and you did not really *mean* to kill him, I fancy?” (Christie 210). The intention is what matters here, at least to Poirot and Lynn, and although Rowley may have killed the blackmailer, they assume a kind of plea of insanity, that Rowley didn’t know what he was doing.

The problem with this approach is that Rowley truly is more dangerous to the men in the story than the women. He kills the blackmailer Enoch Arden by violently shoving him to the ground, and after provoking the Major to suicide, he tampers with crucial evidence to obscure his guilt. Because of the nature of his crimes, Rowley should be perceived as the threat to civil society that he is and prosecuted. However, Christie suggests that Rowley’s actions are justified because of all that he has lost.

By the end of the story, everyone has glossed over the strangulation of Lynn, except Rowley, who seems to recognize that what he’s done is attempted murder and that without Poirot’s timely intervention, he would have killed Lynn. The fact that Poirot stops Rowley from committing murder in a *deus ex machina* moment, is telling. Rowley

gets a *deus ex machina* moment because Christie seems to believe that he somehow earned it through the extent of his trauma. Poirot, in wrapping up the case and deciding where to assign blame, assumes that he doesn't have malicious intent. However, Lynn, in the immediate wake of the incident says of all three of them sitting around the table, "They sat there, obediently—Rowley the killer; she, his victim; David, the man who loved her" (Christie 208). Lynn, although she eventually rationalizes Rowley's behavior away with Poirot's rationale, acts as though Rowley has already killed her by assigning him the label of "killer" and herself "victim." Lynn senses, perhaps because it is her life in danger, that Rowley is unstable, and did intend to harm her, even if Poirot chooses to see Rowley as merely hot-headed, repressed, and stupidly good in his own, often cognitively dissonant, way.

Christie, through Poirot's intervention, makes it clear that David's crime is fundamentally different. David's murder of Rosaleen is a "carefully premeditated well-thought-out crime" (Christie 215). When Lynn cries in response to Poirot's accusations of Hunter's dastardly deeds, "Is that true, David?" David is "grinning broadly" (Christie 214). David's behavior is completely different from Rowley's. Rowley is erupting all over the place, triggered by his own form of civilian trauma, but David stays cool and collected, seeming to think of the whole thing as a joke. Poirot says of him, "He is an opportunist, he snatches his chance of fortune" and Christie backs that up with all of the times David identifies himself as a gambler (Christie 216). In fact, David's last words in the text are, "Cut it out, man. I'm a gambler—but I know when I've lost the last throw" (Christie 217). Bravado to the last. This is exactly the way that we want our soldier-villain to go out—with a wise-crack and an allusion to the fact he was aspiring to

greatness he never earned. It reinforces the narrative that he is a selfish, self-interested, social climber while Rowley was in the wrong place at the wrong time, feeling the wrong things. Rowley gets a pass, while David gets a noose.

Another attempted justification of the men's disparate fates has to do with forgiven and unforgiven violence against women. David Hunter's crime is really the seduction, manipulation, and finally murder of a poor young Irish housemaid, Eileen Corrigan. He does not mourn his sister's death, nor does he respect his pseudo-sister's life. He takes advantage of women continually because he "had a way with [them]" (Christie 216). In contrast, Rowley doesn't kill Eileen when he has the chance because that's not his type of crime (although he may have thought about it) (Christie 210). The men he killed are, as Lynn says, "fully adult responsible [men] . . . One can't blame anyone else for the things one decides to do with one's eyes open. . . . He was just a weak character" (Christie 219). Rowley's almost-murder of Lynn almost damns him, but Poirot steps in at just the right moment to save Rowley from himself. No one is interested in saving David Hunter, except the women he has taken advantage of, Eileen and Lynn.

All of these allowances and excuses that both Lynn and Poirot use for Rowley's behavior are only necessary if we think about Rowley as representative of England's civilian trauma. In her essay "Tale Engineering: Agatha Christie and the Aftermath of the Second World War," Gill Plain quotes Stephen Knight's contention that "Christie's writing can be seen to exemplify British culture's reticence in recognizing the traumatic impact of the conflict" (2). This critique lacks nuance, however. In *Taken at the Flood*, Christie may not be acknowledging the traumatic impact that the war had on soldiers—a topic that has been pretty well fleshed out by the pens of other authors—but she instead



represents its impact on the civilians. By focusing her attention on the nation of civilians who were left behind, with nothing to do but worry and wait while London was bombed and friends were killed, Christie introduces how civilians came out of the war broken and bitter. Their passive pain, less heralded but just as poignant, is often thought of as feminine pain—the pain of mothers and wives sending their loved ones away to die. But by choosing to channel this pain through Rowley, rather than Lynn, Christie makes the argument that civilian trauma affects men more than they think and that ultimately, the capacity of Britain to move on from the war will be defined by the reaction of the men left behind who, in some cases, are the only men left.

## V. Conclusion

Throughout the course of *Taken at the Flood*, Christie unpicks the various narrative threads surrounding war and masculinity, finally focusing on Rowley Cloade, the traumatized young man who has been silenced by the shame of being a male civilian while everyone else goes off to war. Yet this story isn't as much about Rowley as it is about the deterioration of England's prospects. At the end of the story, Lynn doesn't get to have her daring young ex-commando pick and run off to America with him for a life of future excitement. She has to settle for Rowley, knowing he's violent, and plan a life with him, justifying away his predilection for violence as well as his war-based trauma. Lynn's words to Rowley conclude the novel: "But you see, Rowley, I *do* love you—and you've had such a hell of a time—and I've never, really, *cared* very much for being safe—" (Christie 220). Although she's excusing Rowley's behavior yet again ("you've had such a hell of a time"), Lynn also acknowledges that he is an unsafe option. Fortunately (or unfortunately), she puts little stock in her own personal safety at home,

just as she did in the Wrens; Rowley may attempt to kill her again, but she has “never, really, *cared* very much for being safe.” She picks Rowley partially out of sympathy and partially because he’s available.

England’s options in the wake of World War II were equally limited. The nation had to roll up its sleeves and move forward into the future, knowing that not only its soldiers were broken, but its civilians as well. That parallel between the final, disappointing choice for Lynn and the final, disappointing choice for England to try to find a hopeful future while trapped in a volatile relationship is Agatha Christie’s smart, savvy commentary on England’s state, post-WWII. Although her works rarely accrue critical acclaim, Christie was a writer for the people. She served as a mirror for the anxieties of England, and *Taken at the Flood* is her way of addressing how, after such a total war, no one is left whole. Christie’s manner of addressing the trauma experienced by civilian men reflects national sympathy for the way in which British men are denied space for talking about their grief. By contrasting David Hunter and Rowley Cloade, Christie emphasizes the ways in which the suffering of “domestic men” is swept under the rug so as to keep the returned soldier as the hero of the national narrative, at a high cost to the civilian population.

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