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## Murder She Rewrote: Redefining the Female Presence in Crime Fiction

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### Writing Process

Brainstorming was first and foremost. Several ideas and possibilities for my final research paper came to me over a course of about a month before I finally settled on my topic. The next step was a brief outline that helped me visualize the setup for my final product. Formulating a list of unusual and powerful vocabulary was something that I sought out to do for this paper, so I ended up including a list at the end of my outline. My next step was to develop a research proposal, and this ended up being a condensed version of what ended up to be my paper. The next step, and what I saw as the most important step, was gathering scholarly articles as research sources. This took several days, and as I found articles, I took annotations and highlighted valuable quotes. Simultaneously, I drafted an annotated bibliography, something that I found extremely useful when constructing my final paper. After writing several drafts, I used peer edits and family recommendations to make revisions.

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# Murder She Rewrote: Redefining the Female Presence in Crime Fiction

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*Claire Snider*

Crime fiction is the fiction of social history. Societies get the crimes they deserve. — Denise Mina

In her statement above, Denise Mina overtly defines crime fiction and asserts a relationship between the genre and social history, the history of social structure and groups of people. Mina's words can be open to an interpretation that crime fiction is therefore related to social ideologies, including society's abhorrent beliefs about gender stereotypes and sexuality. Could it be true that such a seemingly benign genre reinforces some of the repugnant ideologies that have plagued society's modern culture as Mina suggests? Is there any detective series that could revalorize this genre's presence within society today and in the future? M. C. Beaton's *Agatha Raisin* arguably disabuses society of the delusion that males and females should fit into preordained molds created for them by a rigid society and of the delusion that sexuality has only one definition. By weaving subtle but radical notions into this soft-boiled detective series' script and plot, this television show offers a progressive stance in the otherwise stagnant realm of crime fiction. *Agatha Raisin* might be the *tabula rasa* for the crime fiction genre if this premise is true. *Agatha Raisin* eschews these repugnant ideologies by delineating the female presence and female body in crime fiction positively and offering visual counterexamples to these ideologies. Through these counterexamples and the mere exposure effect, this television program could affect social culture and inspire radical change.

*Agatha Raisin* provides a progressive female presence for viewers by challenging women's roles with an eccentric female lead. This television show's main character and sleuth is a woman, which strays from the recurring presence of the stereotypical aggressive male detective or power-hungry police officer found in other detective programs. This male dominance within crime fiction is a

monopolizing presence that assumes women cannot grasp the proverbial reigns of situations involving murder, crime, and violence. A lack of a strong female presence within crime fiction is worrisome and begs the question as to why this female presence is such a rarity in popular crime fiction. The female presence that does make it on-screen is restricted and lacks representation as the subject, as the shows attempt to shelter these females from danger and violence (Meldrum 202). This lack of representation “has ... been central to the feminist study of film and television representations in which women have been seen simultaneously absent as subjects of discourse and overpresent as bodies/images” (Thornham 75). *Agatha Raisin* rebels against this recurring lack of a robust female subject and the disproportionate representation of a strong female presence by providing the audience with one female lead who is not commodified or punished for challenging the social roles and gender stereotypes of her world.

*Agatha Raisin*'s female lead challenges the typical female presence in detective shows. This female presence frequently lacks any sense of independence and intellect and is merely seen as an “other” (Meldrum 202). It is also often a source of sexual desire and tension for the male characters and the audience (Meldrum). Claire Meldrum predicates that:

This othering oscillates between a scopophilic and fetishistic presentation of the inert female body as an object of sexual display and/or sexual violence or paternalistic chivalry that seeks to ‘protect’ the female by excluding them from the realities of the investigation and the social ills depicted by the programs. (202)

The female presence in *Agatha Raisin* is quite the opposite, and Agatha herself supports this. Agatha overtly secures her position as the villages’ visceral but likewise logical sleuth, solving the countless murders that strike terror within the wholesome village she calls home. She remedies the harmful situations her pristine village faces and restores homeostasis to the townsfolk. Repeatedly, Agatha faces danger alone or with her team of sidekicks to catch the murderer and solve the crime. Often, she is the one to interpellate the perfidious murderers, uncovering the dark reasons why they committed the crimes. There is no feasible way in which Agatha could not be seen as the lead and head-detective, shattering the notion that the “other” is strictly for the female presence. She makes the show; she is the show. If anything, the “other” could be her male counterparts. However, because of how the male and female characters unite to solve the crimes, it would be reckless to perceive the male presence as insignificant. This show is a

paradigm that the female and male presence should be equally respected and valued in detective programs.

*Agatha Raisin* challenges the hegemony and gender stereotypes constructed by modern society. Agatha possesses typical hegemonic masculine traits in how she can confront danger, violence, and murder. Nevertheless, the show makes it a point to not only focus on her murder-solving abilities. From the beginning of the series, it is evident that Agatha is a PR marketing whiz who is not only at the top of the corporate ladder but is also surrounded by colleagues who possess great veneration for her. This adulation for her character bolsters Agatha to continue to strive for the success she seeks, likewise reinforcing additional hegemonic masculine traits she possesses, including assertiveness, a go-getter attitude, and leadership. She is the epitome of success in her PR marketing niche, which is a significant achievement for any individual, especially in London, the hub of marketing and advertising. In season three, Agatha purchases her own detective agency and is at the top of her line of work. Agatha asserts that she has the capacity, intellect, and tenacity to be the best of the best of whatever career choice she chooses. Likewise, her success does not draw others away, but instead, her charisma and tenacity draw others to her. Throughout the series, she builds new, lasting relationships and secures a strong line of support. This social acceptance of such a powerful and professionally successful female positively reinforces her character. Though she is a success and professional in her line of work, this does not stop Agatha from possessing a multitude of other traits and passions, which sets her apart as a quirky and eccentric woman. One of those passions is fashion, and visually, Agatha stands out amongst other characters by how she dresses. She adorns herself with attire of vibrant colors, daring prints, and avant-garde flares, drawing the viewers' eyes. Her style exemplifies her feminine side. And although Agatha does involve herself, "with [typically feminine] interpersonal roles involved with romance, family, and friends" (Lauzen, et al.), she does not restrict herself to these roles. Also, Agatha's dominant and assertive presence is secured by her femininity, indicating the uniting of her hegemonic feminine and masculine traits.

Sue Thornham offers an interesting angle to the female presence in detective shows by asserting that women who challenge the social norms, gender stereotypes, and expectations of how a woman should act are "spectacles" (Thornham 80). Mary Ann Doane adds to this notion:

There is always a certain excessiveness, a difficulty associated with women who appropriate the gaze, who insist upon looking ... [The] intellectual woman looks and analyzes. In usurping the gaze,

she poses a threat to an entire system of representation. It is as if the woman had forcefully moved to the other side of the specular. (qtd. in Thornham)

Agatha is a spectacle not only in the way in which she dresses but also through her distinct position on the corporate ladder and ability to solve a murder faster than the all-male police force. Though she solves crime partly through instinct, she is analytical and precise in how she goes about solving the murders. Agatha puts together storyboards of the crimes that link suspects to specific events and evidence. She logically connects clues to situations to crack the case wide open, adding to her being a spectacle. Although Agatha is a spectacle on-screen, she is not the kind of spectacle that upholds a negative connotation. Instead, it is the amalgamation of her avant-garde style, matchless charisma, intellect, and professional successes that yield her to be such a spectacle and a progressive one at that. She offers change to the convention of crime fiction that women are merely a rabble of unintellectual and professionally stagnant individuals. Agatha makes a point of self-representation and idealization through her work and fashion, and she is not a sexualized object to the viewers.

Furthermore, this amalgamation of traits allows the viewer to sense her charismatic and quirky personality while simultaneously taking her seriously, which is often true of her male counterparts in other detective shows. This combination of respect and interest towards Agatha by the viewer is part of what makes her a decisive female lead. The union of Agatha's traits and ability to adapt and succeed in her career endeavors also challenges the ideology that women should stick to mundane tasks and never climb the corporate ladder. *Agatha Raisin* shows that women can be successful both in their professional lives and in their social lives, which is revolutionary in crime fiction. Furthermore, Agatha's character sheds light on the fallacy that women must fit the preordained molds created by society.

Despite Agatha's intellect and efforts to logically solve the murder, *Agatha Raisin* has not escaped the flaw of contamination that often permeates crime fiction. In this sense, contamination is anything that strays from the classic, ideal murder mystery based *entirely* on logic (Plain 5). In this ideal murder mystery, there is a crime and an analytical detective, unattached to all social culture and ideologies, who solves the case in an indisputable manner (3). Thus, it is impossible to say that *Agatha Raisin* is a definitive source of ratiocinative crime fiction, which would be ideal (5). This contamination is not detrimental to the series but instead can affect the dominance and authority of certain ideologies within society. Contamination of a series comes in many forms, such as love

entanglements (5). Such love entanglements are one of the most prominent causes of contamination in *Agatha Raisin*. Although Agatha is a striking success on her own, this does not prevent her from desiring a romantic relationship. Throughout the series, there is a recurring love triangle between Agatha and two potential male suitors—James Lacey and Sir Charles Fraith. Turmoil results from the decisions Agatha must make when choosing between these two men. Though there is conflict, this does not terminate the support that these characters provide Agatha. Arguably, both of these men are feminized, as they never portray brute force in trying to steal Agatha’s heart and refrain from challenging one another for the woman they both love. There is only respect and veneration for Agatha. Both James and Charles work together with Agatha in the attempt to solve the crimes. This source of contamination, along with Agatha’s fascinating union of hegemonic masculine and feminine traits, is progressive, and “perhaps [such] contamination can be seen as a strategic weapon deployed by the *other* to challenge the hegemony of established power” (8, emphasis added). Furthermore, “to contaminate is also to communicate, and crime fiction communicates the deepest fears and anxieties that underpin our society” (14). Some of those “deepest fears and anxieties” include the masculinizing of women and the feminizing of men. What *Agatha Raisin* asserts is that combining typical hegemonic masculine and feminine traits should not be feared and seen as destructive; instead, such a union should strengthen the characters and make them more dynamic individuals.

*Agatha Raisin* is immensely progressive in its portrayal of the female body. This show is a soft-boiled detective series rather than a hard-boiled series. Being soft-boiled means *Agatha Raisin* tends not to focus on the grizzly gore, drugs, and extreme violence often found in hard-boiled detective series. Instead, it possesses a lighter tone and does not take up much screen time to portray the victims’ mutilated bodies. Furthermore, in *Agatha Raisin*, the victims are not favored to be one sex over another. Instead, the victims evenly represent females and males, which contradicts the general belief that females are more likely to be victims than males. Based on the episodes that have been available on the streaming service Acorn TV, eleven of the victims have been male, and ten of the victims have been female. In the episode “As the Pig Turns (part two),” Agatha’s best friend and colleague, Roy Silver, is kidnapped, once again showing that males are just as likely to be victims as females.

*Agatha Raisin* is a stark counterexample to two shows that Claire Meldrum investigates—*Ripper Street* and *Copper*. In her article, Meldrum vividly describes the utter disrespect that the male detectives and police have for the mutilated victims, mostly females (206). Not only are these females murdered, but their

bodies are objectified and treated in a way that dehumanizes the woman (206). Meldrum asserts that through these two detective shows, “the depictions of the female body at the crime scene and during the forensic examination exude a scopophilic and fetishistic presentation of the inert female body as an object of sexual display, with the forensic examination by male doctors...” (206). Furthermore, Meldrum describes that the female presence and female body in these two detective shows are merely placeholders for these shows’ sexual interest that bend to the virility of men (206). The females are either the fetishistic object, the victim who is brutally murdered and raped, or a prostitute shunned by the rest of society (206). Furthermore, this manufactured sexualized nature of the female body “is equated as being directly responsible for her death or near-death experience” (206). This theme of blaming the victim is extremely dangerous, not only for the storyline of these fictional mystery programs but also in real-life. *Agatha Raisin* pushes boundaries by steering clear of blaming the victim, delineating the female body in a positive manner that secures her presence and usefulness in the show to be more than a source of sexual desire, and by taking the attention away from the physical bodies of the victims. *Agatha Raisin* possesses the vitality that is absent in those other desiccated detective shows.

To add to this show’s progressive nature, Roy Silver, one of Agatha’s closest friends, challenges society’s ideology on sexuality. As an openly gay male, he offers another definition of sexuality. Just as Agatha is successful professionally and socially, Roy is socially accepted for being his true self, unapologetically. The viewer acknowledges not only his own self-acceptance but also the acceptance of his closest acquaintances as well as strangers.

In recent times, television broadcasts programs that range from being ostentatious to egalitarian. Arguably, it is befitting that *Agatha Raisin* should lie more in the egalitarian range. It provides the viewer with counterexamples of society’s rigid ideologies, but it also can change that same society through the mere exposure effect. The mere exposure effect is a psychological phenomenon present within all cultures, despite language barriers and noticeable cultural differences (Ishii 284). It is the phenomenon where the exposure to a stimulus, such as a visual image or sound, causes an individual to prefer that stimulus over another stimulus previously not exposed to them (281).

Furthermore, it means that the longer a stimulus, such as a television show and its visual and sound components, is presented to an individual, the more they will like and enjoy that stimulus (281). The mere exposure effect means that “people sometimes experience the feeling that repeated exposure to something new makes them feel positively towards that object” (280). Additionally, “the ‘mere exposure effect’ occurs even when people do not recognize that they have

been exposed to a stimulus . . . [and] [s]uch daily experience impl[y] that our perception, even if it is an unconscious process, can affect our behavior and preferences” (280). Therefore, the counterexamples present in *Agatha Raisin* offer a visual stimulus to the viewer and exposes them to radical notions such as women progressing on the corporate ladder, broader definitions of sexuality, and a more robust female leading in crime fiction. The danger with many other forms of crime television and other television programs is that they lack these progressive factors found in *Agatha Raisin*. As Signorelli and Kahlenerg predicate, ““Through long-term exposure to television, viewers’ career choices may suffer. . . . The message seems to be that women cannot have higher status and better paying jobs and maintain a successful marriage [and other relationships]”“ (qtd. in Lauzen et al.). As mentioned, Agatha is her own provider, a success in both PR and solving murder mysteries, and likewise adored by her entire village. Her character challenges women’s current, temporal image in crime fiction, a tawdry image of pusillanimity, by offering a new image for women in crime fiction. To add to this point, because “gender is a feature that determines. . . [women’s] working lives, they claim that they cannot challenge the gender bias they face because they rely on reputation and social connections to sustain their careers” (O’Brien 260). Through the aid of television shows such as *Agatha Raisin*, this could change, revolutionizing the lives of millions of women. Furthermore, the mere exposure effect can help society acquiesce to the idea that sexuality has more than one definition, as portrayed by Roy Silver. Television’s imagery can alter and change society’s opinions, especially those opinions on sexuality and the presence of gay characters on screen (“The Relationship Between Television and Culture).

The visual images within *Agatha Raisin* thus have the potential to inspire radical change within society. What helps secure this notion is that “evidence in cultural psychology has suggested that the human psyche, which includes cognitive systems and emotion, is influenced by cultural meanings, norms institutions, and the daily practices of local culture” (Ishii 284). Therefore, it is pertinent for shows such as *Agatha Raisin* to be broadcast on television, a definitive “daily practice” of many cultures. Only through exposure to this detective show, derived from M. C. Beaton’s mystery series, can this show reach the multitude of cultures that make up this world. The dismantling of the repugnant ideologies that have secured their presence in society is possible. There is the possibility of changing viewers’ opinions when it comes to more radical egalitarian notions. Shows such as *Agatha Raisin* are models of progression and are examples upon which other crime fiction should be based. In reference to the beginning epigraph, it is pertinent for crime fiction to shift from reflecting social *history* to reflecting more modern and inclusive beliefs that can help society heal

from the crimes it has endured while simultaneously changing society for the better.

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