

Silence is Golden: John William Bobin's Sylvia Silence and the Emergence of the British Girl Detective in Golden Age Crime Fiction

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Abstract: Sylvia Silence is a little-known figure today. Created by story-paper writer John William Bobin under the pseudonym Katherine Greenhalgh, she appeared in the Amalgamated Press story paper *Schoolgirls' Weekly* in a series of detective narratives from 1922 to 1924 in the early years of the Golden Age of crime fiction. Despite her relative obscurity, however, Sylvia played an important role in the development of the girl detective tradition in juvenile fiction, predating famous American girl detective Nancy Drew by several years. This article explores Sylvia's emergence from the Victorian and Edwardian tradition of the financially motivated professional or personally motivated amateur female detective and that of Holmesian genius prominent in the Amalgamated Press boys' story papers into a new detective model for the Golden Age of crime fiction. The article identifies the Golden Age characteristics of Sylvia Silence, particularly those she shares with a much more famous Golden Age female detective, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, and draws links between the spinster detective and the girl detective. In particular, it considers why Golden Age crime fiction was a suitable form for the girl detective tradition to develop and thrive within.

Keywords: Golden Age detective fiction, girl detective, Sylvia Silence, Miss Marple, Nancy Drew, John William Bobin, Agatha Christie

The Female Detective Before Sylvia Silence

The female detective in crime fiction has a long history, dating back to the 1860s with Mrs Paschal in William Stephen Haywards' *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1864) and 'Mrs Gladden' in Andrew Forrester Jr's *The Female Detective* (1864). Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan observe that these two women "took up detective work as an escape from the dreadful alternative of genteel poverty" (15). Indeed, many other fictional female investigators of the long nineteenth century followed suit, taking up the role of professional private detective or police agent for financial reasons. Whilst Golden Age crime fiction – a term used here, as Susan Rowland does, "to denote the major form of crime fiction 1918–45" ("The 'Classical' Model" 117) in the clue-puzzle mode – saw a proliferation of more empowered and independent female detectives,¹ the pre-Golden Age female detective was considerably more restricted. In the absence of a male protector and provider, pre-Golden Age women were often forced to rely on their own innate detective skills in order to survive, either for financial reasons or from a personal desire to acquit a male relative who had been unjustly accused of a crime. Valeria Woodville in Wilkie Collins' *The Law and the Lady* (1875) is a good example of the latter, as she attempts to prove her husband innocent of the murder of his first wife. Furthermore, as Adrienne E. Gavin observes, "Those female sleuths who work to restore masculine honor, and those who are young and attractive, generally cease detecting once they solve their cases or marry." (258) Frequently, therefore, early female investigators in crime fiction step into the detective role, an apparently masculine trade, as a temporary means to an end, a way to restore patriarchal norms where possible, either through the acquittal of a male relative or, indirectly, through finding a husband in the course of their investigations. Even Anna Katharine Green's

wealthy seventeen-year-old society-girl detective, Violet Strange, who appears in *The Golden Slipper and Other Problems for Violet Strange* (1915), fits this pattern: she is secretly earning money to support her widowed older sister who was disowned by their father when she defied him to marry a poor artist and, having succeeded in supporting her sister, Violet gives up her detective work and marries one of her clients.

Whilst Frances A. Dellacava and Madeline H. Engel suggest that “Violet Strange became a model for Nancy Drew and other young sleuths who appealed to teenage and young adult readers” (169), the Violet Strange stories are not aimed at the prepubescent and early adolescent audience of the *Nancy Drew* series. Replete with scandal and several violent murders, these stories are not suitable fare for a young audience. Violet may begin the series as a “girl” detective, but she ends it as a woman and a wife. This is not the case for her British girl detective counterpart, Sylvia Silence, created by John William Bobin under the pen name of “Katherine Greenhalgh” (a name no doubt inspired by Anna Katharine Green),² who, when she makes her debut in *Schoolgirls’ Weekly* in 1922, looks set for a long-term detective career. Whilst she was undoubtedly influenced by the female detectives who came before her, Sylvia evolves within a different form – the juvenile story paper – and for a younger audience than the detectives discussed so far. As a girl protagonist in what Penny Tinkler identifies as an “elementary schoolgirl paper” (47), Sylvia Silence does not need to concern herself with marriage and motherhood. She has been gifted eternal girlhood and, in this privileged role, the freedom to develop a more permanent detective identity.

The Girl Detective in Juvenile Story Papers

Detectives became popular fare in Alfred Harmsworth's juvenile story papers following the success of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. The detectives who appeared here from the 1890s to 1930s were adult, middle-class Holmesian private detectives who took on street-urchin boy assistants. There are a few female detective figures present within the boys' story papers although, usually, they are young women rather than girls. In the Sexton Blake series, G. H. Teed created Yvonne Cartier in 1913 and she appeared in stories in the *Union Jack* until 1926. Craig and Cadogan assert that Yvonne, a glamorous Australian woman in her early twenties, enters the series "intent on a campaign of vengeance against a group of powerful enemies", determined to destroy the men who have defrauded her family and causes her mother to die of grief (74). In this way, she fits the pattern of earlier female detectives who are personally motivated to undertake investigative work but, unlike many of them, she continues her detective work beyond the completion of her personal vengeance and works as an assistant to Blake.

More in the mode of the girl detective is Nelson Lee's assistant, Eileen Dare, created by Edwy Searles Brookes and appearing in the *Nelson Lee Library* from 1916–17. On her debut in "Nelson Lee's Lady Assistant; or The Case of the Girl Detective" (1916), Eileen is "not quite twenty, and [. . .] a small, dainty girl" (Brookes 7). When her father is falsely convicted of being a spy and dies of heart failure the night before his scheduled execution date, Eileen determines to bring down "the Combine" – the group of men responsible for her father's conviction – and vows that "not a single man shall escape my vengeance!" (39). Eileen thwarts the members of the Combine, one by one, with the help of Nelson Lee and Nipper. In her final story, "Eileen Dare's Triumph!" (1917), she brings down the prime plotter, Haverfield, and in a subplot rescues a pilot whom she agrees to marry at the conclusion of the narrative. Like so many female sleuths

before her, Eileen Dare gives up detective work once she has completed her personal mission of vengeance and justice in the name of a male relative and then swiftly exchanges the role of detective for that of wife. Even in the boys' story papers, it seems, the girl detective cannot escape her fate of growing up and, thus, growing out of the detective role.

Sylvia Silence, who emerges during the early years of the Golden Age of crime fiction, is more firmly categorised as a girl detective than Eileen Dare is. Eileen's uncertain status, as she oscillates between girlhood and womanhood, is apparent in the contradictory title of her first story, "Nelson Lee's *Lady* Assistant; or The Case of the *Girl* Detective" (my emphasis), as well as in her description as "not quite twenty", which suggests early womanhood, coupled with her physical description as "a small, dainty girl", which indicates youth. When Sylvia appears in "The Case of the Missing Pendant" in the first issue of *Schoolgirls' Weekly* in October 1922, her girlhood status is more clearly defined than that of Eileen and, crucially, remains so throughout her run in this story paper. In fact, Sylvia's initial description points towards some of the significant ways in which she differs from female detectives in the boys' story papers:

a young girl sat before a roller desk, busily writing in a leather-bound volume. She was just over fifteen, and had but recently left school. She was slender and winsome, and possessed a wealth of bronze-brown hair.

Her eyes were a deep blue and fringed with long, dark lashes and usually they were sparking with humour and the joy of life. Just now, however, they were serious as she plied her pen. (Greenhalgh 7)

Sylvia is younger than any of her female counterparts in boys' papers – at fifteen, she is closer to the age of the readers of *Schoolgirls' Weekly*. Whilst her appearance is emphasised and idealised, it is not fetishized as it is in the fulsome physical descriptions of girl detectives such as Eileen

Dare, who is lauded as “one of the prettiest girls in the whole of England”, with “deep brown eyes [. . .] full of wonderful charm”, “a sweet little mouth, with rich, delicately-formed lips”, teeth “like a set of pearls” and “lithe and supple” limbs (Brookes, “Lady Assistant” 7–8). In boys’ story papers, the girl detective is there to be looked at – on first meeting Eileen, Nelson Lee is “forced to stare almost to the point of rudeness” whilst Nipper is caught “gazing at the girl with open admiration” (Brookes “Lady Assistant” 16); in girls’ story papers, she is there to be looked up to. Sylvia’s eyes might be sparkling, but she is much more than a pretty face as she educates herself in the detective role by studying one of her detective father’s reference books.

In some respects, Sylvia fits the Holmesian detective mode that dominated the boys’ story papers. Like Holmes, Sylvia is adept at shadowing, disguise and undercover work. In “Sylvia Silence’s Loss”, we are informed that “[w]hen it came to shadowing work, Sylvia Silence had few equals” (Greenhalgh 377). Sylvia makes use of a wardrobe of disguises to transform herself into a mill girl, a scullery-maid, a shop girl and an old spinster in various cases for the sake of undercover work. Sylvia possesses several Holmesian skills but, like Tinker and Nipper, she is actually an assistant to the adult Holmesian private detective. In fact, readers are first introduced to Michael Silence, “one of the busiest and most celebrated private detectives in Oldcastle” through the “strains of a violin”, which he is in the habit of playing at the conclusion of his cases (Greenhalgh, “Missing Pendant” 7).

However, despite identifying herself as Michael Silence’s assistant on several occasions, Sylvia is distinguished from her boy counterparts by her level of status and freedom in the detective role. Whilst Nipper, Tinker and their ilk are street urchins, rescued from the slums by their middle-class masters and trained up as assistants, Sylvia is the middle-class offspring of the adult investigator and ‘his right hand’ (Greenhalgh, “Missing Pendant” 7) and thus has a closer

bond with the private detective and greater status and influence within his household. Notably, Sylvia is the heroine of her own series and Michael Silence is a somewhat peripheral figure. Sylvia does work for her father on occasion. In “The Mystery of the Lace Gown” (1924), for example, Michael sends her to investigate the theft of a lace dress worth sixty pounds when he himself is called away on a forgery case “by which the Central Bank has been swindled out of one hundred and five thousand pounds” (Greenhalgh 107). Sylvia explains to her client that, at such times, “I always attend to the smaller cases” (107). In another instance, Michael and Sylvia stumble across an international criminal and Sylvia offers to trail him because her father would be recognised if he took on the job himself. However, she is quick to point out that “You are not sending me, father. I am volunteering to go.” (Greenhalgh, “Purple Charm!” 808).

The most notable example of Sylvia working for her father is in “The Mystery of the Three Towers” series in which, in a similar mode to the boys’ detective school story, Sylvia is sent to St Hilda’s to pose as a schoolgirl whilst investigating the mystery of a missing girl. However, unlike Nipper, Tinker and company in their undercover schoolboy mysteries, Sylvia is not distracted by the trappings of the school story. In girls’ school stories, secret societies were rife,³ and Sylvia, on her journey to St Hilda’s school, neatly sidesteps the ambush laid for her by the schoolgirl secret society, “the White Robes”, ensuring that they become victims of their own prank. She goes on to solve the mystery of the missing girl within the first episode, “The Locked Chamber”, but remains at the school for four further episodes in order to solve a much more tantalising mystery of a hidden figure and a secret passageway which she stumbles upon whilst investigating the original case at her father’s behest.

Sylvia Silence is influenced by her story-paper predecessors, and the Holmesian tradition, but she deviates in key ways. Although she is an assistant to an adult private detective and has

some training in this field, she has considerably more independence, prominence and authority than her boy assistant counterparts. She is not bound to her “master” in the same way that they are and, despite her professional training, many of her cases fall into a more amateur mode. She possesses a freedom which is lacking in the earlier female detective and boys’ story paper detective traditions from which she evolved. It is through drawing upon the characteristics of the newly emerging Golden Age detective tradition that Sylvia is able to develop into a more independent and accessible detective heroine.

Sylvia Silence as a Golden Age Girl Detective 1: Motivations

Golden Age detective fiction is frequently defined by a set of plot conventions including, as Stephen Knight notes, murder as the central crime, an enclosed setting, with most examples “set among the comfortable upper-middle-class (only rarely aristocratic) country settings”, a murder victim with “some wealth and authority”, and a cast of suspects who are “relatives or close associates” of the victim and who are all concealing something which ensures that they remain under suspicion (*Crime Fiction* 86). At the level of plot, the Sylvia Silence stories bear little resemblance to this Golden Age model. The crimes are less violent and serious than murder, the pool of suspects is limited and the settings and social class of the characters are varied. Sylvia’s narratives are more in line with the Holmes stories and, more specifically, their action-packed boy equivalents in the Amalgamated Press story papers than with the Golden Age mode in this respect. It is in Sylvia’s representation as a detective – particularly the methodologies she employs and her motivations for undertaking detective work – that she becomes a product of the Golden Age.

Knight posits that, in Golden Age crime fiction, “[b]ecause crucial information comes through knowledge associated with a female sphere, the detective model is significantly feminised” (“The Golden Age” 82). Rowland takes this further, arguing that Golden Age crime writers hold up Sherlock Holmes “as a mode of implacable male heroism” against which “they place more empathetically vulnerable detectives” (“The ‘Classical’ Model” 118). She suggests that:

the loss of Holmesian confidence democratises the form and allows the puzzle genre to become something the reader is invited to enter on more equal terms. The detective remains ahead (usually) but his efforts are imitable and his evidence is proffered to the reader. (*From Agatha Christie* 19)

Gone is the untouchable genius who withholds evidence from the inferior sidekick, police detective and reader alike.⁴ He is replaced by “more empathetically vulnerable detectives” who, whilst often eccentric, are more accessible to readers. In line with Ronald Knox’s “Decalogue”, one of the defining characteristics of Golden Age crime fiction is that “the reader is given access to all the same clues and information as the detective” (Worthington 115) and, by extension, that they “can now actually stand in for the detective”, potentially solving the mystery ahead of them (Knight, *Crime Fiction* 87). The Sylvia Silence stories take this notion of accessibility a step further by creating a detective heroine to whom her target audience can easily relate in terms of her motivations for undertaking detective work and her status in society (as a mere girl), and whose methodologies they can follow and, potentially, emulate.

If the detective fiction of the 1880s to the 1910s was dominated by male detective geniuses, and when female detectives did appear, they usually adopted this role temporarily and

out of necessity rather than by choice, the Golden Age opened up the detective role to a broader range of characters. Several of the best-known were eccentric gentlemen detectives, such as Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey, Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Alleyn and Margery Allingham's Albert Campion, with Christie's feminised foreigner, Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, offering a variant on this model. Also present, however, were a range of recurring female detectives who were more representative of the growing female audience of crime fiction in the interwar period.⁵ Prominent here were Sayers' Miss Katharine Alexandra Climpson and Harriet Vane (later Lady Wimsey) and Christie's Tuppence Cowley (later Tuppence Beresford) and Miss Jane Marple. These figures have significantly more freedom and independence than their pre-Golden Age female counterparts. Whilst Harriet Vane and Tuppence Cowley are the closest of these detectives to Sylvia Silence in age, it is actually the Golden Age spinster detective with whom Sylvia has more in common. At either end of the spectrum – considered to be too old or too young to be of use – Golden Age crime fiction creates a space for both of these marginalised figures. When discussing his employment of spinster detective Miss Climpson, a seemingly “superfluous” woman, in *Unnatural Death* (1927) Wimsey muses, “I think it’s much kinder to give them an outlet than to make fun of them in books” (Sayers 36) and, moreover, he suggests that, through her engagement in detective work, “so-called superfluity is agreeable and usefully disposed of” (Sayers 43). The Golden Age offers a space in which feminine, traditionally disempowered and marginalised detective figures can thrive and it is in this climate of inclusivity that the girl detective is able to develop as an independent investigator rather than a mere assistant to a male Holmesian genius. Moreover, whilst Tuppence and Harriet’s routes into detective work are rather dramatic and somewhat romanticised, Sylvia’s forays into detection, as

with those of the spinster detectives to whom I will draw connections, are less sensational and more quotidian in nature.

In terms of her apparent ordinariness and relatability for her readers, Sylvia perhaps has most in common with Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple, who first appears in the short story "The Tuesday Night Club" in *The Royal Magazine* in December 1927, some five years after Sylvia Silence's creation.⁶ Both Sylvia and Miss Marple differ from their pre-Golden Age female detective counterparts in their motivations for detective work and the status that this bestows upon them. Miss Marple is an amateur detective but, whilst earlier female amateur detectives were personally motivated – usually forced into the detective role to acquit or avenge a male relative – Miss Marple chooses to undertake detective work for her own amusement. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Miss Marple explains:

living alone as I do, in a rather out of the way part of the world, one has to have a hobby. There is, of course, woolwork, and Guides, and Welfare, and sketching, but my hobby is—and always has been—Human Nature. So varied—and so very fascinating. (Christie 212)

As Adrienne Gavin asserts, Miss Marple has "an inquisitive nature", and this is a clear driving force behind her investigations, but she also has "moral force", which she brings to bear on her cases (263). As Marple famously observes, "There is a great deal of wickedness in village life" (Christie, *Thirteen Problems* 55), and she is determined to root it out. The idea that crime and immorality are rife in ordinary life is a common theme of Golden Age detective fiction and this opens up infinite possibilities for both the readers and detectives of this subgenre. John Scaggs suggests that "[b]y identifying the threat to the social order as coming from within, Golden Age

fiction emphasises the necessity, embodied in the figure of Miss Marple, of a society that maintains the social order through self-surveillance” (46). With crime around every corner and wickedness thriving even amongst the most unassuming members of the community comes the opportunity for the nosy spinster, the curious girl and, indeed, readers themselves, to step up to become moral guardians of their threatened communities.

Whilst Sylvia possesses professional status as daughter of and assistant to a famous private detective, her cases are predominantly amateur in that they often occur independently of her father’s detective business, she frequently falls into these cases by chance (just as Miss Marple happens to witness some key scenes surrounding a murder in her own village in *The Murder at the Vicarage*) and is not paid for her investigations. Sylvia’s motivations for taking up cases are the same as Miss Marple’s: curiosity and moral drive. Sylvia’s curiosity frequently gets the better of her. In “The Mysterious Fisher-Girl” (1922), Sylvia’s interest is piqued by the suspicious behaviour of a fisherman and his daughter and their hasty concealment of the contents of their boat from Sylvia’s prying eyes. Sylvia is bursting with questions: “What had the oilskin contained? Sylvia wondered. Had it concealed some description of contraband? In other words, were the apparent fisherman and the rather pretty, dark-haired girl in reality smugglers?” (Greenhalgh 4). Sylvia, who is on holiday with her father and thus not working a case, determines to satisfy her curiosity. Despite her professional status, detection is also something of a hobby for Sylvia, as it is for Marple.

Like Marple, too, Sylvia is motivated by moral impulses. In her first story, for example, Sylvia stumbles upon a case when she is taking a shortcut home:

To her ears had floated the sounds of someone sobbing bitterly, and Sylvia, as she turned her head in that direction, wondered whom it could be.

Some impulse prompted her to find out. (Greenhalgh, “Missing Pendant” 7)

Sylvia’s impulse stems from both her curiosity and her desire to help those in need. The figure in distress is local girl Mildred Renwick, who has lost a jade necklace given to her by her wealthy Aunt Jessica, and which her aunt recently forbade her to sell when Mildred asked permission to do so in a bid to ease her father’s money troubles. Mildred is worried that her aunt will think that she has defied her and, as a result, will withdraw her offer to pay for Mildred to go to boarding school. It transpires that the thief is Mildred’s jealous cousin, Edna, who hopes that her aunt will pay for her to go to boarding school in place of Mildred. When Sylvia discovers the truth, Edna locks her in a mill, determined to keep her out of the way until Aunt Jessica’s visit is over, but Sylvia has strong motivations to escape: “Edna deserved to be shown up, and Sylvia determined that even if she took great risks, she would get back to the Renwicks’ home in time to clear Mildred – clear Bessie” (10). Sylvia is a champion of the deserving poor – ensuring that they become the beneficiaries of their rich relatives or employers and protecting them from the unscrupulous social climbers who would threaten to take their place. This is a pattern that recurs throughout the series⁷ and also becomes a staple of the more famous *Nancy Drew* mysteries in the 1930s. This begins with the first novel, *The Secret of the Old Clock* (1930), where Nancy determines to disinherit the vulgar, nouveau-riche Tophams by discovering Josiah Crowley’s hidden will, which names his much more deserving and impoverished cousins as his primary beneficiaries.

The moral focus of Sylvia’s cases fits with Tinkler’s observations about elementary schoolgirl papers that focused on “portraits of heroines as detectives, circus performers and

actresses [which] were glamorous and far removed from the labour market”. Tinkler notes that “[w]hilst these stories offered excitement and glamour, readers were expected to emulate the heroine’s model behaviour, not her career” (92–93). In Sylvia’s stories, therefore, it is not her profession that counts, but her moral motivations. Like Marple, she is intent on exposing the world’s wickedness and protecting the innocent, and in doing so, she acts more as an altruistic amateur than a professional private detective. Sylvia’s cases typically conclude with the heartfelt thanks and praise of those deserving members of the community whom she rescues, such as the fisher-girl and fisherman whom she restores to their rightful place as heirs to a fortune in “The Mysterious Fisher-Girl”:

We have been terribly poor, but we shall be poor no longer, for my aunt and uncle will have to gi’ oop the fleet, which was never really theirs. But ’tis you we owe all our good fortune, an’ we shall never forget Sylvia Silence! (Greenhalgh 6)⁸

Such scenes soon become a staple of Golden Age girl detective fiction, particularly in the *Nancy Drew* mysteries where, in addition, Nancy is frequently offered a reward for her efforts. In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, for example, Nancy is presented with an antique clock by those deserving poor members of the community whom she has raised to their rightful place. This is a particularly fitting reward as it is the very clock which led her to discover the missing will that brought about the rightful resolution of the case (Keene 179).

There is a similar, if perhaps subtler, emphasis on the detective’s role in restoring social order in the Marple stories. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, for example, the narrative continues beyond the trial of the guilty parties, Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe, to detail the reunion of Lettice Protheroe with her dying mother, Mrs Lestrangle, Miss Cram’s determination to seek out a legitimate secretarial position and Griselda Clement’s aim to embrace a more

domestic role as she learns that she is to become a mother (Christie 244–47). For many early female detectives, detection is a necessary evil. For detectives such as Sylvia Silence, Miss Marple and Nancy Drew, by contrast, it is a choice. For them, the detective role is neither a profession nor a route to personal vengeance or justice. Instead, it is a calling. Rather than merely solving intellectual puzzles, these interested amateurs restore equilibrium to the communities in which they detect. They thus become heroines of the domestic realm, more admirable and relevant for their female readers than the bored detective genius or the desperate or vengeful female detective of an earlier age. The girl detective, in particular, quickly becomes a role model for her young and impressionable readers.

Sylvia Silence as a Golden Age Girl Detective 2: Methodologies

The girl detective and the spinster detective of the Golden Age also share investigative methodologies which ensure that both they and their cases are accessible to readers. Merja Makinen asserts that “Miss Marple is the village insider, conversant with all the community” and that she uses this position to her advantage, relying on gossip as her “main way of collecting facts that will rid society of its disruptive villain” (421, 423). In *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), Marple emphasises the value of gossip early in the narrative, declaring “I daresay idle tittle-tattle is very wrong and unkind, but it is so often true, isn’t it?” (Christie 15) and she uses her position as a woman, a spinster and a member of the local community to gather vital information from her neighbours without arousing suspicion. For example, after witnessing Miss Cram enter the woods with a suitcase, Miss Marple is determined to discover her secrets and, to this end, invites Miss Cram over to see her garden:

“Is she fond of gardens?” asked Griselda.

“I don’t think so,” said Miss Marple with a faint smile. “But it makes a very useful excuse for talk, don’t you think?” (164)

Sylvia, too, uses gossip to her advantage and has ways of making people talk. In “Link by Link!” (1923), Sylvia uses such methods on an estate agent when she is trying to discover the history of the building currently rented by St Hilda’s school, where she is investigating a mystery:

Sylvia now resorted to a little of what her famous father called “pumping.”

“Is it true the place was occupied by an Indian gentleman before the school had it?” she inquired innocently. “Perhaps he was the owner, and would be able to tell me, if he lives near here and I could see him?” (Greenhalgh 161)

“Pumping” turns out to be a very successful trick for Sylvia, as she pretends to be in-the-know by fabricating an apparent fact and waiting for it to be corrected.⁹ She uses this technique again later in the story when she identifies a likely candidate, “a busy body, who might know everyone’s business and be ready to talk about it” (161): ““This neighbourhood has changed very much since the old Lady Stanstead died,’ Sylvia remarked, speaking as if she might have known the district before coming to the school.” (161) The garrulous shopkeeper is quick to give her a history of the Stanstead family. By posing as a local, Sylvia can utilise local gossip to gain valuable information about her case.¹⁰ Miss Climpson uses this same process when Wimsey sends her to glean some information about Miss Whittaker from her neighbours in *Unnatural Death*, following his orders to “find some good gossip lady living in the neighbourhood and just get her to talk in a natural way” (Sayers 39). As a newcomer to the community, Miss Climpson poses as a house hunter and hints that she has heard talk that Miss Whittaker might be selling her house. Her efforts are rewarded with information about Miss Whittaker from her neighbours and an introduction to the woman herself (54). Lord Peter Wimsey, in fact, emphasises the advantage

of sending Miss Climpson to ask questions for him: “I send a lady with a long, woolly jumper on knitting-needles and jingly things round her neck. Of course she asks questions—everybody expects it. Nobody is surprised. Nobody is alarmed.” (43) While male detectives such as Wimsey and Poirot also rely on gossip as part of their detective methodology, they are more visible figures – particularly Poirot as a foreigner – and cannot embed themselves in village life in quite the same way as Miss Climpson, Miss Marple or, indeed, Sylvia Silence.

Like her spinster equivalents, Sylvia is able to fit in wherever she goes. When on holiday in Devon, for example, the girl with whom she is staying laments: “Oh, Miss Silence, how I wish I could be as popular as you. [. . .] I still envy you a little when I think of how easily you win your way into people’s hearts.” (Greenhalgh, “Sylvia Silence’s Loss” 371) and, when Sylvia is undercover at St Hilda’s school in “The Locked Chamber”, she quickly wins the approval of her fellow pupils to the extent that, by the end of her first day, “it is safe to say that she was one of the most popular girls amongst the party” (Greenhalgh 69). Sylvia is quick to use these connections to her advantage. In “The Purple Charm!”, when Sylvia confronts Winnie Turner over her theft of a valuable necklace, Winnie responds:

“I—I did take it, but it was only so that the man who was posing as a waiter should not be able to steal it,” she went on. “Oh, may I tell you everything? I feel, somehow, that you—are good and kind, and that you will help me.” (Greenhalgh 814)

Sylvia invites confidences, even on short acquaintance, and so she, like Marple and Climpson, becomes an “insider, conversant with the community” (Makinen 421), even when she is new to it. This insider status is also something that becomes an important part of Nancy Drew’s detective identity and methodology. The mysteries alternate between those set in and around Nancy’s home town of River Heights, where she is already a notable member of the community

on account of her father's reputation as a lawyer and her own success in detective work, and holiday stories in which she is called to investigate or stumbles across a mystery in less familiar and, often, more exotic settings. The Golden Age figures of the spinster detective and the girl detective are so successful because they are unassuming figures who can easily gain entrance into the enclosed spaces and social worlds in which the crimes usually take place in the clue-puzzle form, and who are able to make social and emotional connections with the communities around which their cases revolve.

As Sarah Martin observes in her psychogeographical reading of *A Murder is Announced* (1950), Miss Marple “becomes an accepted and expected part of the physical environment of the community” and “can blend into the geography effortlessly” (21). She does so, in particular, by “performing what is expected of her” as she enters Chipping Cleghorn – the role of a gossiping old lady, “an infantilized and helpless character”, constructed by the village itself (Martin 26). This performative aspect is also a crucial part of the Golden Age girl detective's arsenal. She uses her status as an “infantilized and helpless character” to her advantage. When Sylvia Silence is undercover at St Hilda's school, for example, she recognises the need to play down the knowledge and experience that she has acquired through detective work when dealing with a suspicious teacher:

In her work the girl had gained an all-round knowledge upon a host of subjects, and it was probably striking Miss Carruthers that Sylvia knew almost as much as she did herself.

Realising this, the girl-detective determined that she would be more careful. To keep up the role she was playing, it would be as well to pretend a certain ignorance now and again. (Greenhalgh “The Sleep Walker” 106)

Sylvia's performances of girlhood innocence and ignorance often leave her criminal foes incredulous and indignant when she gets the better of them. In "The Missing Pendant", the girl thief, Edna, is full of "malignant hatred and amazement. She had never dreamed that Sylvia would run her to earth like this; had never fancied that this slight slip of a girl could use her powers of detective work to such a speedy end!" (Greenhalgh 10) whilst, in "The Cotton Mill Mystery", Mrs Hoffman, the saboteur and German sympathiser, laments "We have been outwitted—and by a slip of a girl!" (Greenhalgh 24). Such responses are echoed throughout the *Nancy Drew* series. In *The Secret of Red Gate Farm* (1931), for example, a counterfeiter who falls prey to the girl detective is similarly incredulous:

"Outwitted—by that snooping kid!" Maurice Hale screamed.

The thought seemed to unnerve the man completely. (Keene 172)

These outraged utterances on the part of the criminals at being bested by a mere girl becomes a staple of the *Nancy Drew* formula.¹¹

From their concealed position within the community – "watching while escaping [. . .] surveillance" themselves (Martin 21), detectives such as Sylvia Silence, Miss Marple and Nancy Drew are able to observe the unguarded moments of this community, those instances where the mask slips and the performance becomes visible. They are, thus, placed in the same privileged position as the Golden Age reader of detective fiction, offered a level of access to the guilty community that was not common in pre-Golden Age narratives. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Lawrence Redding asserts that:

If there was anything to be seen yesterday evening Miss Marple saw it. I don't mean anything necessarily connected with the crime—that she would think connected with the

crime. I mean some *outré* or bizarre incident, some simple little happening that might give us a clue to the truth. (Christie 127)

This, in fact, is a key part of Miss Marple's *modus operandi*. In "Ingots for Gold" (*Thirteen Problems*, 1932), for example, Marple identifies the gardener's involvement in the crime through a behavioural slip which indicates that all is not what it seems: "Well, he can't have been a real gardener, can he?" said Miss Marple. "Gardeners don't work on Whit Monday. Everybody knows that. [. . .] It was really that little fact that put me on the right scent." (Christie 44) Sylvia has a similar awakening in "The Mysterious Fisher-Girl", where her suspicions are aroused by the fact that a local fisherman and his daughter return from a night-time fishing expedition with very few fish and a mysterious cargo, claiming that "there were scarcely any fish about last neet", whilst other fishermen return with "a positive horde" (Greenhalgh 3), and uncovers a mystery involving a shipwrecked boat and a hidden will for her troubles.

As active, unsuspected and, thus undetected, members of their communities, both Sylvia and Miss Marple prove themselves to be avid students of human nature. Miss Marple declares that "in a small village, with nothing to distract one, one has such ample opportunity for becoming what I might call proficient in one's study" (Christie, *Vicarage* 212). Sylvia, too, frequently demonstrates herself to be a good judge of character, whether she is determining the "truth and honesty" in the "tear-dimmed eyes" of the wrongly accused (Greenhalgh, "Cotton Mill" 22) or the "insincere and weak" characteristics in the "daintily touched-up and powdered face" of a jewel thief (Greenhalgh, "Mansion" 228). Whilst both detectives have kind hearts, they also have suspicious natures. In her first story, Sylvia asserts that "[i]t is a detective's way to suspect everyone until they are proved innocent" (Greenhalgh, "Missing Pendant" 8), a sentiment which Miss Marple shares in *The Murder at the Vicarage* as she admits that "I always

find it prudent to suspect everybody just a little. What I say is, you really never *know*, do you?” (Christie 129). As experts in human nature, they are able to detect the best and worst in those around them, and their role is to protect the former by dispelling the latter, thus serving the communities into which they are so readily welcomed.

What emerges in this new female amateur detective model, which begins with Sylvia Silence and solidifies with Miss Marple and Nancy Drew, is an investigative figure who inhabits a middle-ground between the dispassionate, intellectually driven Holmesian professional detective, who is highly visible, world-famous and untouchable, and those vulnerable female detectives who are drawn into detective work against their will for financial or personal reasons, frequently have to conceal their detective identity, and usually withdraw from the role once they have achieved their aim. Sylvia Silence and Miss Marple are more sympathetic characters than Sherlock Holmes and company and are perceived to be on a fairly level playing field both with the fictional communities in which they operate and the real-life readers who engage with their investigations, although they are usually still superior to both, if only marginally. Their methods of detection are clear and imitable, their motives relatable. They are represented and generally perceived as being far more ordinary and down-to-earth than their Holmesian predecessors in terms of their status, methodologies and intellect – they are clever, yet their knowledge is more commonplace and more in line with that of the average reader than the esoteric titbits that Holmes acquires.¹² Yet, by identifying what is extraordinary in ordinary human behaviour, they become extraordinary detective heroines within the ordinary world. In their role as amateur detectives who are accepted as part of the communities in which they operate, these Golden Age female sleuths hold a subtle power which is not possessed by earlier female detectives. They have a freedom of choice denied to their predecessors and, whilst they frequently fly under the

radar, their insider status ensures that they can operate more openly than earlier female detectives.

The fact that both the spinster detective and the girl detective are, to some extent, marginalised figures, by their youth and age respectively – and, in Miss Marple’s case, as Scaggs notes, by lying “outside the conservative and patriarchal socio-economic unit of the family” (49) – is undoubtedly part of the reason for their success in the detective role. Megan Hoffman observes that “[t]he years following the First World War brought an intensified focus onto marriage and motherhood as ultimate goals for women” (29). Sylvia Silence, Miss Marple and Nancy Drew are able to pursue their detective exploits long term – Miss Marple for almost forty-five years in Christie’s novels and short stories, Sylvia for only three years in the *Schoolgirls’ Weekly*, yet with no indication in the final story that she is about to give up her detective work any time soon, and Nancy Drew in hundreds of cases over a ninety-year period¹³ – because they are freed from the confines of traditional womanly duties.¹⁴ Hoffman argues that Miss Marple’s amateur status “becomes an advantage in the Miss Marple narratives because it illustrates the potential for activity, purpose and rational thought in elderly spinsters, questioning the stereotype of aged single women as worthless and superfluous” (53). Similarly, the development of the forever-girl detective – one whose stories are aimed at a girl audience and thus does not have to relinquish her girlhood pursuits in favour of marriage and motherhood – in the form of Sylvia Silence and, more successfully in America in the figure of Nancy Drew, enables young female readers to consider that girls, too, have some worth and purpose beyond their role as future fodder for the marriage market. Although Sylvia has a professional detective background and is motivated partly by her desire to follow in her father’s footsteps, she is an amateur detective at heart and it is here that her true power lies.¹⁵ By tapping into Golden Age tropes that became

fully realised in her more famous female amateur counterparts, Miss Marple and Nancy Drew, Sylvia Silence began to forge a new path for the girl detective.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that the forever-girl detective began to appear and flourish during the Golden Age of crime fiction. She is a figure who is well-suited to the Golden Age democratised mode, where the reader is invited to play detective, and where the detective protagonist is often a marginalised and morally motivated figure who uses quotidian and accessible modes of detection to solve the case and whose success, in the female, amateur form, at least, stems in part from her easy acceptance into the community in which she is investigating. Sylvia herself did not have a long history, but she did establish a firm model for the girl detective, both in her innate qualities – curiosity, moral drive, knowledge of human nature and impeccable social skills – and also in her circumstantial trappings – absent mother, detective father and an animal sidekick. Bobin created two further girl sleuths along the same lines as Sylvia: Lila Lisle in a short serial for *Schoolgirls' Own* in 1930 and Valerie Drew for a series of stories in *Schoolgirls' Weekly* which ran from 1933 to 1939.¹⁶ But it was Valerie's American namesake, Nancy Drew, created by Edward Stratemeyer in 1929 and undoubtedly influenced by Bobin's creations, who achieved the fame and longevity which evaded Bobin's detectives. Yet while Nancy has enjoyed a long and illustrious career of over ninety years, it is her much humbler and less famous counterpart, Sylvia Silence, who deserves credit as the progenitor of the Golden Age girl detective model.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Agatha Christie's Tuppence Cowley (later Beresford) and Jane Marple and Dorothy L. Sayers' Katharine Alexandra Climpson and Harriet Vane.

² Bobin also wrote for the *Sexton Blake Library* and the *Nelson Lee Library* as well as writing for the Amalgamated Press girls' story papers under several female pseudonyms. For further information see Andrew, "John William Bobin", 89–90.

³ Bobin himself authored a secret society serial about a group called the Silent Six in *Schoolgirls' Weekly* in 1932.

⁴ In Ronald Knox's "Decalogue", his ten commandments for detective writers, later taken up by the Detection Club, rule number eight states that "The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader." (Knox 15).

⁵ Heather Worthington notes that "In the wake of the Great War, the previously largely masculine audience for crime fiction had been drastically reduced and the predominantly female post-war readership required a different kind of fiction." (116)

⁶ I have chosen to focus only on the earliest Marple texts, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) and *The Thirteen Problems* (1932), the latter of which incorporates the earlier short story, "The Tuesday Night Club" (1927), as they are published in a time period fairly close to the Sylvia Silence stories and my essay examines the emergence of these figures in the early years of the Golden Age.

⁷ See "The Mysterious Fisher-Girl" (1922), "The Cotton Mill Mystery" (1923) and "The Purple Charm!" (1923) for further examples.

⁸ Similar scenes occur in "The Cotton Mill Mystery", 74, "Broken Bail!", 24, "The Purple Charm!", 816 and "The Secret of the Centre Tower!", 187.

⁹ Wimsey also uses this term to describe Miss Climpson's technique in *Unnatural Death*: "We'll get the invaluable Miss Climpson to pump the girl when they turn up again." (128)

¹⁰ Unlike her boy equivalents, Sylvia is not from London, but from a smaller Northern town, and she frequently travels to enclosed communities for her cases.

¹¹ In these responses, we see the origin point of the *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You* (1969-70) catchphrase, "And I would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for you meddling kids!"

¹² For Dr Watson's assessment of Holmes's knowledge of various subjects, see Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 15-16.

¹³ The original *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* series ran to 175 titles (1930-2003) before being replaced by the *Nancy Drew: Girl Detective* series (47 titles, 2004–12) and a companion *Girl Detective* graphic novel series (24 titles, 2005–10) and then the *Nancy Drew Diaries* (23 titles, 2013–).

¹⁴ Miss Climpson, by contrast, only appears in two novels, *Unnatural Death* (1927) and *Strong Poison* (1930), and is mentioned in a third, *Gaudy Night* (1935). As a spinster detective, Miss Climpson does employ the same techniques as these other marginalised female detectives and enjoys some of the same advantages, but by working for Lord Peter, she intrudes into the professional category and there is the suggestion that, like several of her pre-Golden Age female detective antecedents, she has taken up the role for financial reasons.

¹⁵ Nancy Drew is more explicitly an amateur detective than Sylvia is. She is greatly influenced by her lawyer father and sometimes takes on cases at his behest, but her detective identity is not represented as a profession at any point, although it is clear that she has the ability to make detective work her future profession.

¹⁶ Valerie transferred to *The Schoolgirl* after the cessation of *Schoolgirls' Weekly* in 1939 and made her final appearance in 1940.