

The Gothic Executioner in Golden Age Mysteries

Katherine Ebury
University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

Abstract

A subset of Golden Age crime writing was focused on a fear of the ghostly figure of the executioner; in narratives including Paul Lancaster's *The Executioner's Axe* (1928), John Dickson Carr's *The Plague Court Murders* (1934), and Eric Harding's *Behold! The Executioner!* (1939), the crime is committed by a perpetrator who poses as the ghost of an executioner from a previous era. While each story of haunting is ultimately fully explained away, these narratives are also embedded in objects and landscapes that have powerful psychological and historic symbolism. Both Carr's and Harding's crime novels are successful as horror narratives, with a genuinely fearful atmosphere created before the conventional revelation that these serial murders were not in fact wrought by supernatural means. Ultimately, these interwar novels express, in different ways, a distaste for the practice of capital punishment, as well as highlighting the way that sensational, psychological force for these crime narratives is generated by the aura of violence surrounding the death penalty. These neglected narratives are precursors of Agatha Christie's more famous later novel *And Then There Were None* (1939).

*

In this article, I will explore a subset of Golden Age crime writing which was haunted by the figure of the executioner, reflecting a twentieth-century fascination with execution culture. In interwar crime narratives including Paul Lancaster's *The Executioner's Axe* (1928), John Dickson Carr's *The Plague Court Murders* (1934) (published under the pseudonym Carter Dickson), and Eric Harding's *Behold! The Executioner!* (1939), grisly murders are apparently committed by the ghost of an executioner from a previous era. While each story of haunting is ultimately fully explained away, with a living perpetrator identified as deliberately posing as an executioner, these narratives are deeply embedded in objects and landscapes that have powerful psychological and historic symbolism. In Lancaster's earlier and slighter novel, a perpetrator commits an accidental murder while dressed as a medieval headsman at a masked ball, while the body of the victim is mutilated in a way that reflects on the executioner's trade. The 1930s novels that follow Lancaster have an even darker atmosphere, with more credible scenes of haunting. Carr's *The Plague Court Murders* features the murder of a medium who is trying to exorcize the ghost of the seventeenth-century executioner, Louis Playge, and who is apparently killed by the ghost himself. Similarly, in *Behold! The Executioner!*, an ancestral house and rural landscape are haunted by the Malloway family, who were cursed after a feudal lord usurped the role of executioner, with the murder weapon an original headsman's axe passed down from this transgression. These details ensure that both Carr's and Harding's novels are successful as horror narratives, as well as crime fiction, with a genuinely fearful atmosphere created before the conventional revelation that these serial murders were not in fact wrought by supernatural means. Further, in the case of Carr and Harding, the true perpetrator is finally found to be, revealingly, a police officer, queering this skeptical presentation of the justice of capital punishment still further. These neglected narratives, I will eventually show, are precursors of Agatha Christie's more famous later novel *And Then There Were None* (1939).

Lizzie Seal has described a changing picture of consent for and opposition to the death penalty in twentieth-century British culture with a few flashpoints that were directly connected to the figure of the executioner. By the twentieth century the

public's ability to witness and to know the death penalty had rapidly declined due to increased governmental restriction and secrecy around capital punishment, making the executioner and the condemned man alike the targets of intensified popular mystery and fascination. Volumes of executioners' memoirs were widely sold across the century, with, after the end of the public death penalty in 1868, people directly seeking knowledge of capital punishment through this means (Ebury 89-116). Newspaper coverage of the death penalty also often centered the executioner as a celebrity figure (Seal, "Albert," *passim*). Within this coverage, as the twentieth century wore on and the impact of psychology was felt on attitudes to crime and punishment, the figure of the executioner became more problematic from the point of view of a wider public, with his violent work for the state suspected to arise from individual pathology.¹ For example, Sigmund Freud's follower Theodor Reik, in *The Unknown Murderer* (1932), offered similar explanations for both psychological impulses to commit crime and for society's retributive impulse, making the actions of the murderer and the executioner (and even the judge) appear equivalent. Reik had earlier professed on behalf of Freud, in "View on Capital Punishment" (1926), that psychoanalysis is "an opponent of murder, whether committed by the individual as a crime or by the state in its retaliation," deliberately collapsing the distinction between the actions of the murderer and the executioner (474). Similarly, within psychoanalysis there was also greater recognition of the executioner's potential to be traumatized by his work.

As Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace have noted in exploring Gothic in the early twentieth century, "the emergence of psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century was already foreshadowed in the Gothic's own images of perversion, transgression and the forbidden. . . . Psychoanalysis, in other words, has the aura of the Gothic about it" (4). Therefore, within a popular culture understanding of the psychology of the executioner, two contrasting but related stories arise, in which the executioner is either haunted by ghosts or threatens to become one himself, with both narratives expressive of the guilt caused by capital punishment. Indeed, as early as 1899, Amos Lunt, a former executioner at San Quentin Prison, had to be institutionalized after believing that he was being haunted by the ghosts of the men he had executed. Several follow up articles considered guilt as the primary cause of his illness ("Haunted"; "The Haunting"; "The Slow Passing"). Similarly, narratives about John Ellis' life, work, and death continued to be contested as a way of considering the traumatic effect of the death penalty as long as capital punishment existed in Britain. For example, a large government file from 1956 is about the likely psychological effect of Edith Thompson's execution on Ellis and other witnesses, considering (but rejecting) the idea of this execution as the cause of his suicide (National Archives). With Ellis, the connection between ghosts and the executioner in popular culture is different than in Lunt's case: while both Lunt and Ellis were haunted by their actions and their experience casts a shadow over public debates about the death penalty, Ellis was converted into a more literal ghost, believed to haunt Strangeways Prison (now H. M. Prison Manchester), as well as his former hairdressing business at 413 Oldham Road, Rochdale. In these popular narratives from both America and Britain, Lunt and Ellis are associated with botched executions, with mental illness, and with haunting. Seal also discusses the persona of "The Haunted Hangman" as an important part of

¹ I explore many of these ideas in *Modern Literature and the Death Penalty, 1890-1950*. For a full account of the integration of psychoanalysis into legal practice, as well as missed opportunities for best practice, see Anne C. Dailey's *Law and the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective* (2017). To examine the period after World War II, which the interwar books I examine lead up to, consult Michal Shapira's study *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (2013).

the twentieth-century executioner's cultural reception ("Albert Pierrepoint" 93-96). In examining historical accounts Seal naturally confines herself to psychological ghostly memories, in which the executioner was depicted as haunted by his past, but in examining Golden Age fiction I am able to consider the narrative function of the ghosts of executioners, which enter these narratives as credible literal apparitions before being dissolved, exorcized, and rendered metaphorical by each denouement.

The cultural association of the executioner and ghosts also reflects anxiety that the executioner might be analogous to the murderer, as I will examine in the literary narratives that emerge from this context. Owen Davies and Francesca Matteoni argue that, in earlier centuries, "the ghosts of executed murderers were far less numerous, it would appear, than their victims" (86). But within modern literature, the ghosts of murderers did in fact become far more central to death penalty narratives. In ghost stories from the 1910s and 1920s, such as those of Edward Frederic Benson, the executed man appears to be the most common type of ghost represented, with the suicide a close second. In a range of ghost stories from across his career, including "The Confession of Charles Linkworth" (1912), "The House with the Brick Kiln" (1912), "The Gardener" (1923), and "The Hanging of Alfred Wadham" (1934), Benson depicts the gothic death penalty through representations of executed capital offenders continuing to haunt either the space in which their crime was committed or places and people connected with their execution. Seal notes the translation of the fear of the murderer into fear of the executioner in media accounts of meeting hangmen such as Pierrepoint, as some journalists reflected on "reactions that bore traces of gothic horror," including shuddering when shaking hands (88). Indeed, as Freud suggested in exploring connections between ritual punishment and murder in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), the taboo of killing might easily transfer onto the person who performed the execution, arguing that "the temporary or permanent isolation of the professional executioner, which has persisted to the present day, may belong in this connection" (41). These different forms of Gothic affect in relation to the death penalty filter into Golden Age narratives by Lancaster, Carr, and Harding, in which ghostly executioners are, first literally and then symbolically, associated with the murder of the living. These authors add to and intensify folk myths, traditions, and beliefs that had always existed around capital punishment, as their fictions seek to compensate for a lack of experience of the reality of capital punishment by blurring genres, making the death penalty, and even murder, transcendental, symbolic, theatrical, unreal, or fantastic. This emphasis on the mind of the murderer or executioner, as well as a deliberate blurring of the two, is in keeping with a greater psychological subtlety identified in the Golden Age form by Stefano Serafini, who has explored the genre blurring of the "clue puzzle" detective novel with a modernist, psychoanalytically-inflected engagement with the sensational techniques of the psychological thriller ("The Ghost" 20-30). The mixing of genres found in these interwar authors is similar to that described in an earlier stage of the form by Michelle Miranda, who writes that

While Gothic fiction and detective fiction are distinctly different in style and form, Poe and Doyle were instrumental in linking the two, often through the combination of horror and reasoning. Both Poe and Doyle took cues from their own periods in history to isolate existing social anxieties to cause both fear and relief within the same tale of mystery—fear of the unknown clarified by the use of reasoning and logic, sometimes at the hands of the narrator-turned-investigator and other times at the hands of the detective. (2)

Critics such as Maurizio Ascari and Peter Garrett have also explored the roots of the separate gothic, horror, crime, and detective novels within their inextricable melding within nineteenth-century sensation fiction. Recently, Serafini has also examined, in relation to other novels by Carr, the way that “interwar novels subversively hybridize with a variety of different literary forms, particularly the gothic” (“Murder, Mayhem, and Madness” 24).

The importance of Golden Age Gothic in the interwar period thus also reflects the way the First World War had catalyzed a craze for ghost stories and the occult, as described by George Johnson and others, but this was also a period in which the principle of the death penalty was intensely explored, especially in Britain, with 1920s debates on the military death penalty eventually leading to the first full debate of civilian capital punishment taking place in 1929.² The level of disquiet about the future of capital punishment is reflected in the Labour Party’s policies during this time, as described by Victor Bailey: in 1927, the Labour Party issued a petition which called capital punishment “a relic of barbarism”; the majority of the Labour leadership was supportive of abolition in the 1928 debate; and at the 1934 party conference, they passed a resolution to abolish the death penalty (305-49). Even though the death penalty was not abolished until much later, the public anxiety I have been exploring about the potentially unbalanced minds of those who would voluntarily become the personnel of execution was eventually codified into penal policy. By the time Syd Dernley started his training as an executioner in the late 1940s, prospective candidates were not only interviewed by the prison governor and subject to a medical and physical fitness test, but they were also vetted as to their psychological health. Dernley reflects in his memoir that the doctor asked him “a few funny questions which were obviously probing my psychological state, to make sure I was not a pervert trying to get his thrills with the government’s help” (30). I argue that all three of the interwar narratives that I highlight here as precursors of Christie’s *And Then There Were None* revisit traditional genre mixing because of this historical context, exploring fears and fantasies around the usurpation of the role of the executioner and reflecting on the nature of trauma and the psychology of killing.

Moving now into direct analysis of each text, I will focus first on the earliest novel I have chosen to discuss, Paul Lancaster’s 1928 *The Executioner’s Axe*. Lancaster was the author of a series of now neglected Golden Age novels with a Gothic atmosphere, including *The Disappearance of Norman Langdale* (1928) and *The Jolly Roger Mystery* (1928), and not much is known about the man himself. In this novel, the victim, Rosalie Storm, is robbed and murdered during a fancy-dress party she is hosting; Rosalie’s body is also mutilated after death to allow the theft of further jewels. An executioner’s axe is found in the room with Rosalie’s body. This clue points to the film actor, Terry O’Neill, Rosalie’s former fiancé, who had crashed her party in the costume of a medieval executioner. Before the murder, O’Neill had discussed with his friends his plan to spook Rosalie through his presence at the party, even wanting to go as far as to stage a mock robbery. Lancaster’s detective, Frank Lanning, has an instinct that O’Neill is innocent, because of the extreme violence of the crime and because the executioner’s axe may have been planted, but this is eventually proven wrong. O’Neill did accidentally murder Rosalie by grabbing her throat when she confronted him, although it is eventually proven she actually died of shock and heart failure; her body was then mutilated by a real jewel thief, Rosalie’s estranged husband Carey Bellairs.

² See Katherine Ebury, “The Legacy of World War I Court Martial in Interwar Death Penalty Writing” in *Modern Literature and the Death Penalty, 1890-1950* (171-95).

O'Neill was kidnapped by Bellairs, who wanted to recover the other jewels that O'Neill stole, which prevented him from coming forward. Once located, O'Neill quickly confesses and commits suicide to escape the death penalty—because of his kidnapping by Bellairs, he is unaware that Rosalie's death was caused by heart failure and that he would be facing only a manslaughter charge.

These are the surface details of Lancaster's story, but it is important to recognize the symbolic depth of how, throughout the investigation, a masked executioner dressed in blood red stalks through the narrative, a fearsome figure, who is too obvious a murderer to be recognized as such. In the outline of his initial plan to scare Rosalie, O'Neill had highlighted the violent history invoked by his choice of costume:

“I'd go as a medieval headsman, and they always wore masks.”

“That's a ridiculous idea,” she replied. “They wore bright red, didn't they? Or was it black?”

“Red it was. To save the expense of the cleaners after every execution.” (18-19)

O'Neill's historical inaccuracy—there is no evidence that the medieval executioner was routinely masked or hooded nor that he wore red—reflects his unconscious fantasy of violence and thus foreshadows his attack on Rosalie. Further, the nature of the violence within the narrative, first strangulation and then posthumous desecration of the body with the executioner's axe, reflects the use of hanging and beheading as traditional execution methods. The last words of the novel, as well as its title, emphasize the overarching importance of the Gothic symbolism of the medieval executioner—the executioner's axe is indeed the central clue, as Lancaster's detective reflects: “For all the time I might have spotted that the clue which pointed first and last to Terence O'Neill was the Executioner's Axe” (288).

For a Golden Age mystery, Lancaster also dwells more than usual on the way that a murder investigation will lead to the death penalty, with frequent and direct discussion of hanging as the criminal's natural fate once caught, reflecting a true narrative preoccupation with the death penalty, in keeping with the historical context I have outlined where the interwar period included a significant push towards abolition. Examples of this frank discourse about hanging includes “to try and discover sufficient evidence of guilt to hang one man” (115); “to put the rope round the neck of another” (115); “had set a trap to get him hanged for a murder” (129); “to risk being hanged by the neck” (131); and “one can't let a man swing” (284). This inability to imagine a less violent outcome to a murder investigation leads to O'Neill's suicide, even though the Chief Constable reflects very belatedly that “it's a pity, for it wouldn't have been a hanging matter” (285). While, in contrast with the next two narratives I will discuss, characters in Lancaster's novel do not quite believe, except in the first shock of the crime, that the costume party has literally been haunted by a ghostly executioner, the way that the actor O'Neill takes on this role and invokes this historical violence leads to both Rosalie's death and his own. Similarly, while the occult and Gothic aspects latent in Lancaster's *The Executioner's Axe* will be amplified in the following narratives by Carr and Harding, the robbery motive explored here will also form a consistent thread, as historical and supernatural themes are weaponized by Golden Age crime writers and their criminals to distract from material and earthly incentives to murder in the 1930s context.

While Lancaster's Gothic crime novel was critically neglected even on its reception, the crime novelist and critic E. R. Punshon, in reviewing another book by

John Dickson Carr, his *The Burning Court* (1937), noted how Carr had developed an important recent trend for “Murder and the Supernatural” within the Golden Age:

In the detective novel [an] emphasis on the abnormal is specially marked, since the crime with which it necessarily deals must remain apart from ordinary experience. How daring, then, is that writer who to the strangeness and the rarity of murder adds the sheer incredibility of the supernatural? This feat, this welding into one coherent whole of the terror of deliberate murder, of the horror of traffic with the unseen, Mr. Dickson Carr attempts with a high degree of success in his new book. (6)

Reviews of *The Plague Court Murders*, Carr’s first novel under the pseudonym of Carter Dickson and his first featuring one of his major detectives Sir Henry Merrivale, note the author’s “Stevensonian” quality and his “pleasantly nasty mind” (Anderson 1934 15) and call it “a genuine baffler, placed in an eerie, ghostly setting” (Cuppy 17). While most of these critics primarily conceptualize the novel as a locked room mystery, Will Cuppy particularly emphasizes the novel’s effectiveness as a psychological thriller because of its historical and occult components: “This thickly atmospheric work provides a sure and pleasant means of giving yourself the jumps . . . for those who wish to be scared on every page” (17). Similarly, Dorothy L. Sayers noted that “the atmosphere of grotesque horror surrounding this person’s murder . . . is really well done” and recommended the book to people who “like being deliciously frightened” (9). This positive reaction slightly contrasts with the interwar critical reception outlined by Serafini, in which “gothic and sensational components—horror, violence, and thrills—were inevitably dismissed” (“Murder, Mayhem, and Madness” 24); it does seem that Carr had a receptive contemporary audience.

The fear in *The Plague Court Murders* is located in the eponymous house, the London home of the Halliday family, which has been abandoned after appearing to be haunted by the fictional seventeenth-century executioner Louis Playge. The novel combines the Golden Age locked room mystery with the ghost story genre, as it opens with Dean Halliday asking the narrator, Ken Blake, “to spend the night in a haunted house” (5). Halliday wants Blake to witness an attempted exorcism, but that night a murder will be committed instead. The victim is Roger Darworth, ostensibly a psychoanalyst, psychic researcher, and exorcist, but also, as we will learn by the denouement, a social climber, a fraudster, a bigamist, and a murderer. He is killed while locked inside the stone shed that Playge supposedly haunts, to which no one else has access, and no footsteps are visible in the mud outside the door. While Darworth is a fake, Carr proves that the painful history of capital punishment surrounding Plague Court is genuine, introducing archival letters into the narrative for the detective (and reader) to assess. These letters reflect on how the house was cursed after the cruel executioner Playge, the brother of the steward, died of the Plague on the premises and was secretly buried in the grounds to conceal the presence of the disease in the family. The ghost of Playge was first seen the very night of his burial, “clinging to the door like a great flattened bat, and trying to force the door with his awl” (75). Since that time, Halliday’s family have suffered from mental illness, trauma, and suicide. Darworth’s murder, committed during the attempted exorcism, uses the very dagger Playge used to draw and quarter those he executed, which had previously been stolen from a mock condemned cell in The Museum of Old London. Another witness is later killed with the same dagger. The detail of these archival documents and the museum exhibition reflect the way cultural memory of a more extreme form of the death penalty was preserved in the 1930s, affecting people’s view of the punishment in their own day.

Still, as in Lancaster's novel, the most powerful manifestation of this memory is in the figure of the executioner himself.

Darworth's staged exorcism is turned against him—he had wished to draw out the violent history of the house to turn Halliday's wealthy fiancée against the planned marriage in hopes of marrying her himself, as she has developed an attraction to his (fake) occult powers. His plot extended to stealing the knife from the museum, planning to be superficially wounded by it. But in fact his true wife, Glenda, an actress who had been posing as "Joseph," Darworth's child medium, and pretending to have an intellectual disability, seized control of the plot to kill her husband. Although Darworth remains inside the locked room throughout and Glenda did not enter the space, because of his wife's past career as a circus performer she was able to climb the walls surrounding the courtyard and shoot him through the roof with a silencer and, in a more unbelievable detail, with dissolving bullets. Glenda believed that her husband would murder her and replace her with Halliday's fiancée, just as he had killed his previous wife when he married her, and she wished to inherit the proceeds of their different frauds and thefts. The lack of traces of a human presence and the executioner's knife found by the body would be enough to make it look like "a ghost-murder," particularly when Glenda's accomplice was one of the investigating police officers.

As the reader will gather from the intricacy of my summary of the solution to Carr's mystery, in this narrative the ghost of the executioner Louis Playge is only exorcized with great difficulty by the laborious "rational" explanation provided by the detective. As Serafini explains, Carr's work features "a conflict between two competing systems of value, modernity and gothicism, in which the detective narrative has the duty to identify, contain, and expel the physical and psychological threats activated by the gothic story" ("Murder, Mayhem, and Madness" 30). But we feel the strain as he does so. As Sayers wisely puts it in her review of the novel, "Like all 'sealed chamber' mysteries, this one has a solution that takes a good deal of swallowing and demands a good deal of long-winded explanation at the end: that is the drawback of all plots of this type" (9). We must add to the difficulties of the locked room mystery, the challenges of dispelling the supernatural elements of the plot, as we might after all be more convinced by the executioner's ghost than by the detective's explanation. This is in direct contrast to Lancaster's novel, in which the explanation, that it was the obvious culprit, an outsider dressed as an executioner, was deceptively simple. It is also noteworthy that both Lancaster's and Carr's murderers are members of the acting profession, reflecting the way the novels play on the theatrical, sensational nature of capital punishment. As in the last words of *The Executioner's Axe* ("the clue . . . was the Executioner's Axe"), the closing words of Carr's novel center the executioner figure and his equality with the murderer—after Glenda is murdered in the grounds of Plague Court, having killed her policeman accomplice while resisting arrest, Carr's detective Sir Henry Merrivale asserts calmly, "She died in the right place, son. She and Louis Playge—they both belong there" (312).

While *The Plague Court Murders* was Carr's first novel under the Carter Dickson pseudonym, Eric Harding's *Behold! The Executioner!* (1939) seems to have genuinely been a first novel, part of a Hutchinson series aiming to discover new talent in crime writing. This may have been Harding's first and only novel, unless he adopted a new pseudonym. Harding's title is punctuated differently across the various adverts for and reviews of the novel, but no one faithfully reproduces his original double exclamation mark; Harding's unusual choice reflects the sensational tone and content of his narrative and the way the novel bridges the crime and horror genres, following the trend for "Murder and the Supernatural" previously explored in relation to Carr.

Suggesting a degree of self-awareness on his part, Harding's novel's title also alludes to a popular song from Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *The Mikado* (1885), "Behold the Lord High Executioner," and there are elements of dark comedy within his plot. The original reviewers classed the novel's genre as a thriller, describing it as "a thriller for those who like mystery and horror to tread traditional paths" (Gurdon and Gurdon) and "a sturdy, doomed village blood-curdler about a series of murders committed by ye olde headsman's axe" (Richardson 5 Nov. 1939).

Despite similarities both superficial and deep with Carr's tone and subject matter—both novels feature supernatural elements, a narrative about capital punishment, a family curse, a love interest, a character with an intellectual disability, and a policeman culprit—Harding's novel was generally less positively received, perhaps because of its explicit framing as a first novel: for Maurice Richardson, the plot is "exciting" but he still classes it "among the sort of books one finds in a furnished house in Station Road sandwiching a history of the Salvation Army" (5 Nov. 1939), while for J. E. and J. R. Gurdon, "the book as a whole promises capital successors when Mr. Harding has had time to develop his technique." In the arch reference to "ye olde headsman's axe," Richardson also signals the way the trope of the executioner's ghost had already become clichéd, while the Gurdons similarly feel the Gothic conceit is too obvious, as shown by their reference to "traditional paths," noting that Harding's narrative "would make the flesh creep more effectively if its purpose were concealed with a smoother subtlety" (61).

In *Behold! The Executioner!*, the main character and detective figure John Tarlton, a businessman who has suffered a nervous breakdown, has traveled to Malloway Village to recuperate in a friend's country cottage. On arrival, he is hit with an immediate foreboding that he has made a mistake, as his nervous disorder makes him look at the village's inhabitants and geography as a place that "was made for murder" (7). Tarlton dreams presciently of an executioner's axe, the key symbol of the novel, his first night in the village, "a heavy bladed axe, and the edge was sticky and red" (20). The local vicar explains to Tarlton that his violent feelings of revulsion against the place are not after all sourced in his illness, but rather reflect the violent history of the ruling family that the village is named after, the "Mad Malloways." After Tarlton's housekeeper is murdered, the Rector explains that the executioner's axe from Tarlton's dream is part of a legend about this ancestral family. The Lord of Manor, Guy Malloway, had ordered the unjust execution without trial of a defiant village girl, and when the retainer who served as an executioner refused, Guy Malloway "snatched the weapon from him and shouting in a fearful voice, 'Behold! The Executioner!' severed her head with a savage blow" (87). Guy Malloway's use of summary justice and identification with the executioner means that all his family will be cursed to "wield the axe," in short, to become murderers. This axe becomes "The Malloway Axe" from Tarlton's dream, and murders have indeed been committed with it; Malloway Manor is abandoned by its twentieth-century occupants, who had emigrated to Australia in order to outrun the curse. Indeed, we see a similar eugenic and historical concern to Carr's narrative where the Halliday family home was cursed by their symbolic connection to the executioner. In Harding's narrative, four brutal murders are swiftly committed with the executioner's axe. These crimes appear at first to be supernatural but are eventually revealed to be the product of a powerful identification with the Malloway legend in a symbolic, rather than literal, haunting. These crimes are "either the work of a maniac or a very clever criminal" (95); in fact, we eventually learn that the culprit, the local policeman Constable Jowitt, begins his crime spree to hide a sophisticated art theft from Malloway Manor. However, his use of extreme violence and the excessive pleasure he takes in masquerading as an executioner reflect his

ancestry as an illegitimate scion of the Malloway family, “tainted with the smouldering madness that has distinguished every generation of the family” (302). After a certain number of murders, Harding implies that Jowitt becomes “murder mad” and would have killed anyone (300). At the end of the narrative, the supernatural, historical, and psychological symbolism of the Malloway axe is brought under control, as it is converted into merely “Exhibit B” in a criminal trial, while Tarlton’s love interest in the village also turns out to be a member of the Australian branch of the Malloway family, reflecting the way that he felt it was his fate to investigate these crimes and break the curse (300). A full exorcism of the executioner’s ghost will be consolidated by marriage between Tarlton and this Malloway girl. Harding’s novel, therefore, like *The Executioner’s Axe* and *The Plague Court Murders*, is about Gothic fears and fantasies around the usurpation of the role of the executioner. As in Carr’s novel, the idea that a culprit who “had a kink” and who combines the murderer, the executioner, and the policeman would undoubtedly be especially unsettling for a contemporary audience (297).

As I explained at the outset of this essay, in outlining these Golden Age narratives from Lancaster, Carr, and Harding, exploring the fears and fantasies of a transcendent, violent justice in which a ghostly executioner runs amok, I am also outlining the lineage of Agatha Christie’s more famous bestselling novel *And Then There Were None* (1939), which has the same narrative features. Contemporary reviewers noticed its absence of detection, and its emphasis on the “incredible,” the “impossible” (Anderson 1940), and the “baleful” in a narrative that is “so full of shocks” (Richardson 3 Dec. 1939). Just as we have seen in *The Executioner’s Axe*, *The Plague Court Murders*, and *Behold! The Executioner!*, Christie’s *And Then There Were None* shows a similar engagement with the hybrid form of an “explained supernatural” narrative which combines traditional crime writing with the thriller and horror genres. Christie also expresses the same interwar anxiety about the future of capital punishment, given the psychological and social harms. In Christie’s novel, the mysterious Mr. U. N. Owen has invited a set of murderers who have previously escaped justice to an island where he will punish them. Here, too, the figure of the ghostly executioner is central: the mystery of the disembodied “voice” of U. N. Owen played on the gramophone to accuse these criminals and sentence them to death is mysterious and unresolved beyond the epilogue that comprises the police investigation, until a further appendix is produced comprising a confession by a character we thought had already died.

By the end of the novel proper, all the characters introduced by Christie have been “executed” by this unseen hand, with no suspects remaining. The police are baffled, and despite their practical concerns of motives and times of death, resort to supernatural language: “They *were* executed. U. N. Owen accomplished his task. And somehow or other he spirited himself off that island into thin air” (279). The narrative therefore needs an extra text, in a final appendix of confession by the “hanging judge” Judge Wargrave, who explains how he faked his own death and committed the murders before committing suicide, to lay to rest the suspicion of supernatural agency (36). As J. C. Bernthal argues,

The postscript encourages readers, already frustrated in expectations surrounding the novel’s resolution, to consider how a gross perversion of legal justice might have been necessary to expunge threats that are woven into respectable British society. The law—the current state of authority and security—is not enough. (34)

While I agree with Bernthal's reading, Wargrave's usurpation of the executioner's function is ultimately central to a horror narrative, rather than part of a fantasy of a more powerful justice.

Just as in Carr's and Harding's earlier narratives, where we found policemen culprits behind the ghost, Wargrave is adjacent to the law, which makes him susceptible to usurping the state's power to kill. In his confession Wargrave describes how he felt constrained by the reality of his role in administering justice. He reflects that "For some years past I have been aware of a change within myself, a lessening of control—a desire to act instead of to judge. I have wanted—let me admit it frankly—to *commit murder myself*" (287). Once he receives a terminal diagnosis, he chooses victims who are murderers themselves and acts on this desire to kill by performing the role of a ghostly executioner. Reik claims in *The Unknown Murderer* that narcissistic and sadistic impulses are often the basis of legal judgements, especially in capital cases, arguing that "the authorities of the law prefer judicial murder to anything that may compromise them" (161). Discussing the reluctance of most judges to admit a miscarriage of justice due to the "principle of the omnipotence of thought," alongside unconscious guilt and narcissism, Reik suggests that faced with ambiguity, judges construct an unassailable belief that they understand what really happened, adjusting the facts in directing the jury: "he is, like a god, reshaping reality according to his will" (158-59). Christie appears to share Reik's diagnosis in constructing her narrative. Much earlier, within the main narrative, the character of Philip Lombard had explicitly conceptualized Wargrave as a type of the executioner: "he's played God Almighty for a good many months every year . . . and it's possible that his brain might snap and he might want to go one step farther and be Executioner and Judge Extraordinary" (169), while Vera Claythorne highlights the Gothic, supernatural flavor of their experience shared by those apparently victimized by ghosts in the earlier narratives I have been exploring: "I read a story once—about two judges that came to a small American town—from the Supreme Court. They administered justice—Absolute Justice. *Because—they didn't come from this world at all . . .*" (253). Finally, as I have previously shown in relation to the earlier texts, Christie's engagement with a fashion for the "explained supernatural" in *And Then There Were None* might also make narrative closure hard to obtain. Just as Sayers had reflected on Carr's novel that his solution "takes a good deal of swallowing and demands a good deal of long-winded explanation at the end," so too even positive reviewers such as Isaac Anderson and Maurice Richardson wrote that *And Then There Were None* "is a tall story, to be sure, but it could have happened" (1940) and that the plot is "highly artificial" (3 Dec. 1939).

Alison Light has argued that "if one were looking for a text which offered a symbolic landscape for the fears and desires of respectable England in 1939," Christie's novel "ought to appear alongside those more usually selected" (98). Drawing on the context of public fascination with the executioner in the early twentieth century, as explored by historians such as Lizzie Seal, and a crisis in capital punishment during the interwar period, in this essay I have highlighted how the topography of that "symbolic landscape" responds to earlier diagnoses of the death penalty's transcendent but appalling function in this society, through a focus on the figure of the otherworldly executioner. Culprits in these narratives are often figures of the law (policemen, judges) or theatrical figures (actors) who highlight the excessive, spectacular quality of the violence within justice and its power to act on the imagination and the unconscious mind. Ultimately, as E. S. Burt claims, it is only "the haunted subject who can question the mad dictum of the state that one death can ever be equivalent to another" (181). These authors express, in different ways, an anxiety about the practice of capital punishment, as well as highlighting the way that Golden

Age novels generate sensational, psychological force for their crime narratives through the aura of violence surrounding the history of the death penalty.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Isaac. "New Mystery Stories." *New York Times* (3 June 1934): 15. Web.
- . "New Mystery Stories." *New York Times* (25 Feb. 1940): 86. Web.
- Ascari, Maurizio. *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007. Print.
- Bailey, Victor. "The Shadow of the Gallows: The Death Penalty and the British Labour Government, 1945-51." *Law and History Review* 18.2 (2000): 305-49. Web.
- Bernthal, J. C. "Killing Innocence: Obstructions of Justice in Late-Interwar British Crime Fiction." *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 17.2 (2019): 31-39. Web.
- Burt, E. S. "The Autobiographical Subject and the Death Penalty." *The Oxford Literary Review* 35.2 (2013): 165-87. Web.
- Christie, Agatha. *And Then There Were None*. 1939. New York: Harper, 2011. Print.
- Cuppy, Will. "The Plague Court Murders." *New York Herald Tribune Books* (3 June 1934): 17. Web.
- Dailey, Anne C. *Law and the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2017. Print.
- Davies, Owen, and Francesca Matteoni. *Executing Magic in the Modern Era: Criminal Bodies and the Gallows in Popular Medicine*. Cham: Palgrave, 2017. Print.
- Dernley, Syd with David Newman. *The Hangman's Tale: Memoirs of a Public Executioner*. London: Robert Hale, 1989. Print.
- Dickson, Carter [John Dickson Carr]. *The Plague Court Murders*. 1934. New York: International Polygonics, 1990. Print.
- Ebury, Katherine. *Modern Literature and the Death Penalty, 1890-1950*. Cham: Palgrave, 2021. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*. 1913. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 13. London: Vintage, 2001: 9-164. Print.
- Harding, Eric. *Behold! The Executioner!* London: Hutchinson and Company, 1939. Print.
- Garrett, Peter. "Sensations: Gothic, Horror, Crime Fiction, Detective Fiction." *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*. Ed. Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. 469-84. Print.
- Gurdon, J. E., and J. R. Gurdon. "Thrillers." *The Times Literary Supplement* 3 May 1940: 61. Web.
- "Haunted by Ghosts of Men He Hanged." *San Francisco Call* 86.145 (23 Oct. 1899): 2. Web.
- "The Haunting of Amos Lunt." *San Francisco Call* 87.107 (15 Sept. 1901): 5. Web.
- Johnson, George. *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond: Grappling with Ghosts*. Cham: Palgrave, 2015. Print.
- Lancaster, Paul. *The Executioner's Axe*. London: Stanley Paul & Co, 1928. Print.
- Light, Alison. "Agatha Christie and Conservative Modernity." *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*. London: Routledge, 1991. 61-113. Print.
- Miranda, Michelle. "Reasoning through Madness: The Detective in Gothic Crime Fiction." *Palgrave Communications* 3 (2017): 1-11. Web.
- The National Archives. PCOM 9/1983. Print.
- Punshon, E. R. "Murder and the Supernatural." *The Manchester Guardian* 9 Apr. 1937: 6. Web.

- Reik, Theodor. *The Unknown Murderer*. 1932. *The Compulsion to Confess: On the Psychoanalysis of Crime and Punishment*. New York: Grove Press, 1961. 1-174. Print.
- Reik, Theodor, and Sigmund Freud, “View on Capital Punishment.” 1926. *The Compulsion to Confess: On the Psychoanalysis of Crime and Punishment*. New York: Grove Press, 1961. 469-74. Print.
- Richardson, Maurice. “The Crime Ration.” *The Observer* 5 Nov. 1939: 6. Web.
- . “The Crime Ration.” *The Observer* 3 Dec. 1939: 6. Web.
- Sayers, Dorothy L. “Horror and Quiet Argument.” *The Sunday Times* 17 May 1935: 9. Web.
- Seal, Lizzie. “Albert Pierrepoint and the Cultural Persona of the Twentieth-Century Hangman.” *Crime, Media, Culture* 12.1 (2016): 83-100. Web.
- . *Capital Punishment in Twentieth-Century Britain: Audience, Justice, Memory*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Serafini, Stefano. “‘The Ghost of Dr. Freud Haunts Everything Today’: Criminal Minds in the Golden Age Psychological Thriller.” *Clues: A Journal of Detection*. 37.2 (2019): 20-30. Web.
- . “Murder, Mayhem, and Madness: John Dickson Carr’s Gothic Detective Stories.” *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 38.2 (2020): 23-32. Web.
- Shapira, Michal. *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Print.
- “The Slow Passing of Amos Lunt.” *Sausalito News* 17.31 (13 Aug. 1901): 5. Web.
- Smith, Andrew, and Jeff Wallace. *Gothic Modernisms*. Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2001. Print.