

The destruction of the idyll: Linda Castillo's and Jodi Picoult's Amish crime fiction

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Abstract:

The present article discusses recent developments in American crime fiction, namely the so-called Amish mysteries by Linda Castillo and Jodi Picoult. The aim is to show that although Castillo's and Picoult's fiction has been termed ethnic crime writing, the way these writers make use of the Amish setting does not serve the primarily educational purpose of raising awareness of a specific ethnic group as was the case with the older generation of ethnic crime writers (such as Tony Hillerman and P.L. Gaus). Employing Bakhtin's idyllic chronotope (a concept most often critically applied to classic works¹ but shown here as a versatile instrument for discussing genre literature as well) as a point of reference, the paper further analyses how the narratives invoke this familiar spatial model and initiate its violation. It is argued that the writers' narrative strategies serve to achieve the sharpest contrast between the idyllic place of love, family and labour and the hideous crimes committed there, implying that idyllic rurality is either too fragile to be attainable or that its existence is a mere deception.

Introduction

Triggered by the successful 1985 crime thriller movie *Witness*, genre literature's interest in the Amish community and lifestyle seems to have boomed² in the past two decades. Apart from the so-called bonnet romances which typically feature a love story between an Amish and a non-Amish character, certain counties of Ohio and Pennsylvania have recently become the settings for crime fiction as well.

The traditional setting of American crime fiction is urban, or, more precisely, metropolitan. The private eyes of the American hardboiled school typically steered along the hot and dangerous streets of Los Angeles, and big cities became the staple setting for American

crime fiction for almost half a century. Since the late 1970s, however, there has been a greater diversification of American crime-fiction settings, from provincial cities to towns, even to wilderness locations. One reason is certainly the constant need for authors of crime fiction to find new ways of applying the genre's formula in order to keep readers attracted.

Another reason for the diversification is the fact that some authors have discovered that crime fiction can be successfully used for didactic purposes. This is especially true of ethnic crime fiction in which wells of cultural, historical and geographical information are conveyed along with thrilling plots. Yet despite such a heavy extra-literary load, these novels are (often international) best-sellers. This can partly be explained by Gina and Andrew MacDonald's assertion that "non-mainstream detectives explore cultural difference and act as links between cultures, interpreting each to each. Minority to mainstream, mainstream to minority" (MacDonald, 1999, p. 60), and thus readers of ethnic crime fiction may feel that they are being provided such cultural links. This capacity for "intercultural mediation" was pointed out as early as 1985 by Bill Pronzini and Martin Greenberg in their introduction to the anthology of crime stories *The Ethnic Detective*, where they claimed that ethnic crime fiction "provides an economical and comfortable form of geographical and cultural tourism" (Pronzini and Greenberg, 1985, p. 3). Based on the comments published on reader's websites such as Goodreads, it is often this interest in unknown or less-known cultures and far-away places that inspires many readers to select titles of ethnic crime fiction.

The Amish mystery in the context of American ethnic crime fiction

In its beginnings, ethnic crime fiction was often motivated by the desire of the authors to raise public awareness about the respective ethnic groups in an accessible, entertaining way. We can name Tony Hillerman, one of the founders of the ethnic subgenre and its great master, who situated his novels (written between 1970-2006) in the Navajo Reservation and filled them with Southwestern Native American lore.³ He employed the format of the police procedural and made his protagonists members of the Navajo Nation Police (formerly Navajo Tribal Police). Such a strategy allowed him to present the Navajo culture from an insider's perspective and to incorporate ethnographic information and comparisons between Navaho and white cultures.

Similarly, Paul L. Gaus, one of the first writers to set crime fiction among the Amish (beginning in 1999), wanted to inform the public truthfully about this community,⁴ as he believed that "Amish people are the most peaceful, generous, and loving groups of people" he had met (Pelsue, 2010, no pagination). Although he has some critical comments regarding their lifestyle and the way they interpret the Bible literally, and although he admits he could never

live like one, he admires them and attempts to embody his admiration into his novels. Interestingly enough, prior to writing, Gaus had consulted his plans with Hillerman and received advice and encouragement from him. No wonder the *Christian Science Monitor* interview with Gaus was subtitled “Tony Hillerman of the Amish.” Unlike Hillerman’s use of the police procedural, Gaus made his protagonist a private consultant but, contrary to typical PI crime fiction, Gaus’s works are not hardboiled. He himself describes them as “tempered, reasoned, quiet, thoughtful – all things other than spectacle” (Pelsue, 2010, no pagination). We will show how the two writers selected for our analysis – Linda Castillo and Jodi Picoult – attempt to achieve precisely the opposite, i.e. how they aim at creating spectacle.

Unlike Paul Gaus, who intentionally writes about the Amish in order to educate and who is deeply enchanted with spiritual aspects of their lifestyle, Linda Castillo and Jodi Picoult do not set their novels in Amish country primarily for didactic purposes. In order to explain the distinction, the authors’ backgrounds need to be mentioned. Both Castillo and Picoult are best-selling commercial writers who make their living through writing (unlike Gaus, who was a university professor of chemistry). Linda Castillo writes series of thrillers and crime novels as well as romances. Jodi Picoult, who currently has some 14 million copies in print (Yabroff, 2009, no pagination) writes novels usually centring on a hot ethical issue. Both writers publish with major publishing houses (unlike Gaus who originally published with his *alma mater* university press, only later with Penguin). Quite typically for contemporary popular fiction writers, Castillo and Picoult have their own websites and active fandoms. As Jennie Yabroff reports in her 2009 *Newsweek* article, Picoult’s fans are mostly young females and to them, Picoult is more than a writer, she is “a goddess” with whom they discuss not only books, but also a whole range of even very personal issues (Yabroff, 2009, no pagination).

It is therefore fair to assume that the Amish environment is for both authors, largely, a setting exotic enough to draw marketable attention. Castillo basically admits this when she says that she was “intrigued by the idea of writing a crime novel set among the Amish” and wanted to “explore this hidden world” (Castillo, 2017, no pagination). The Amish cultural background is presented with a certain degree of realism, as both authors engage in extensive research prior to writing. While Picoult has so far set only one novel in Amish country, Linda Castillo has created a crime novel series with Chief of Police Kate Burkholder as the series’ protagonist.

In terms of genre, Castillo’s series is a police procedural in which the investigation is conducted by a team of police professionals. On the other hand, Jodi Picoult’s novel is harder to classify, as her *Plain Truth* oscillates between a mystery and legal drama, even including an element of ghost story. There is a crime to be investigated, which is done, in the book’s opening,

by the police. However, the centre of attention soon shifts to defence attorney Eleanor (Ellie) Hathaway and her defence of the crime's sole suspect – an Amish teenager accused of killing her new-born baby.

Setting a crime novel among the Amish presents a unique set of problems. One of these is the problem of authenticity, as the Amish try to keep their distance from mainstream society and as pacifists generally do not enter law enforcement. Therefore, a “standard” FBI agent or other professional investigator is equally an outsider to the Amish community as are the readers themselves, and thus such a character would not be able to provide the necessary intercultural connection and function as a trustworthy mediator as is typical for an ethnic crime fiction protagonist.

Castillo, however, manages to negotiate the tricky line between the insider/outsider status of her protagonist by making Kate ex-Amish, born in the very town where she later becomes Chief of Police. Although Kate was raised Amish, she left her community in the aftermath of a traumatic event. As a teenager, she was raped, and in the course of the act she killed the perpetrator in self-defence. However, since the rapist was Amish, Kate's father decided not to call the police but to conceal it all instead, believing that in this way he was protecting the Amish settlement. The trauma of the violent crime and her family's reaction to it caused Kate to lose not only her innocence and trust, but also her “faith in both God and family” (Castillo, 2009, p. 54). She left the Amish church and later went to study criminal justice, as a result of which she was officially exiled from the Amish community. Thus, while Kate intimately knows the world of the Amish, she is seen by them as an outsider, a stranger, “a foreigner trespassing on sacred ground” (ibid). Kate is therefore a character in a liminal position situated in-between two cultures (i.e. Amish and American, which the Amish call “English”). This narrative strategy allows Castillo to present Kate as a reliable source of information on the Amish on the one hand, and as a believable member of the police force on the other.

Jodi Picoult's strategy is different. She also makes her protagonist somewhat familiar with the Amish, as Ellie used to spend her childhood summers in Paradise in the Lancaster area, which has a large Amish settlement. Ellie's aunt is formerly Amish, shunned by her community because she married a non-Amish man. Nevertheless, in order to provide an even more authentic glimpse into the lives of the Amish, Picoult makes Ellie a sort of limited temporary insider by situating her as a legal supervisor in the suspected girl's household as part of stringent bail conditions.

The Amish farmland in crime fiction

Just as the reasons for and approaches to incorporating an ethnic dimension in crime fiction differ in various ethnic crime fiction writers, so does the rendering of the place the ethnic community inhabits. In accordance with Gaus's didactic goal is his primary focus on the depiction of the Amish community, especially on their religion and the lifestyle resulting from the religious framework.⁵ On the other hand, attention devoted to the place the Amish live in is minimal. Kyle Schlabach's review of Gaus's fiction points out that his descriptions of physical settings "are all true to their actual locations in real life" (Schlabach, 2020, p. 2) and in fact, in their striving for authenticity they lack poetic quality. They simply set the stage for the unfolding of the novels' plots and serve both to slow down the pace of the narratives as well as to authenticate them by being geographically precise. In an attempt to be as accurate as possible, some descriptions resemble driving directions⁶ rather than literary renderings of place. David Geherin explains Gaus's lack of landscape descriptions as simply the result of the reality of the country itself because "[t]here is nothing particularly picturesque about the northern Ohio landscape that might evoke lyrical flights of fancy. It's as colorless as the Amish people" (Geherin, 2014, p. 119).

However, Castillo and Picoult employ the Amish farmland setting in a more literary fashion despite its lack of picturesqueness. Both writers skilfully evoke the familiar spatial model of the idyllic countryside and incorporate various aspects of the idyllic as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in his concept of the idyllic chronotope. Indeed, the farmland of Holmes County, Ohio, and the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, settled almost three hundred years ago by the insular Amish community – an Anabaptist group of Swiss and Alsatian origin emphasizing religion, simple living, hard work and family ties while rejecting many modern conveniences and technological advancements – seems to be an almost perfect embodiment of the idyllic chronotope as characterized by Bakhtin.

As a critical tool, the chronotope stands for the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84) as well as for the way in which various patterns of time-space characterize specific literary genres. For Bakhtin, spatial descriptions in narratives are important because they make time "palpable and visible" and narrative events become tangible (ibid, p. 250). Thus, the chronotope actually becomes the driving force of the plot and this study will attempt to show how, in fact, various aspects of the narratives combine together to structure one particular type of time-space, namely the idyllic chronotope.

Mikhail Bakhtin defined the idyllic chronotope by "[t]he unity of the life of generations," "by the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which

this life, in all its events, is inseparable” (ibid, p. 225). This unity of place in the life of generations “also contributes in an essential way to the creation of the cyclic rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll” (ibid). Further, in the idyllic chronotope, the relationship to place results in the creation of a little spatial world “limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world” (ibid). This is the specific situation the Amish actually strive for – they want to live separate from the rest of the world. But while Gaus ponders this separateness both in terms of its theological grounding (or lack thereof due to a misleadingly literal interpretation of Biblical texts) and its current feasibility, Castillo and Picoult highlight it as a feature of the idyllic.

The writers are well aware of the idyllic potential of their setting even if they term it instead as “bucolic.” Nevertheless, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* offers the expression as a synonym for idyllic. Castillo uses “bucolic” in a magazine article to describe the Amish Holmes County (2017, no pagination), while Picoult makes it part of her protagonist’s thoughts when she perceives the farm as quiet, peaceful and bucolic (2017, p. 66).

In the novels, descriptions of the farms and the landscape do not appear very frequently (they are, after all, plot-driven crime novels) but whenever they occur, they purposefully evoke the idyllic. In the opening of Castillo’s *Sworn to Silence*, a description of the Amish farm emphasizes the simplicity and tidiness of the place:

The lane curves left and a white clapboard farmhouse looms into view. Like most Amish farms in the area, the house is plain but well kept. A split-rail fence separates the back yard from a chicken coop and pen. I see a nicely-shaped cherry tree that will bear fruit in the spring. Beyond, a large barn, grain silo and windmill stand in silhouette against the predawn sky. (2009, p. 19)

The life of hard work is further suggested by the fact that the windows glow with a lantern light well before five o’clock in the morning, as the family is already getting ready to feed the cattle. Upon entering the farmhouse kitchen, the protagonist Kate becomes aware of the typical smells of the Amish breakfast of coffee, cornmeal and pork. She also registers the smell of kerosene which reminds her of her own childhood. In the farmhouse, the present event of a family breakfast is the same as breakfasts were on an Amish farm during Kate’s childhood. The timeline becomes blurred, implying that the Amish lifestyle hardly changes from one generation to the next, an effect which emphasizes the circular, cyclic movement of time in the idyll.

In *Pray for Silence*, a very similar wording is used to describe another Amish farm: “Ahead, a massive barn and silo stood in silhouette against the pre-dawn sky. The postcard perfect farm was the last place [the officer] expected any kind of trouble” (2010, p. 6). The local police officer further reflects on his experience in law enforcement in the town, and he highlights its idyllic peacefulness and order because, as he puts it: “Aside from a few minor infractions – like that time two teenage boys got caught racing their buggies down Main Street – the Amish were damn near perfect citizens” (ibid). Elsewhere, the fictional town of Painters Mill is described as “an idyllic town” (Castillo, 2009, p. 56). It is the outsider Kate, who is aware of friction existing between the Amish and non-Amish populations of the town. Nevertheless, no frictions are reported to exist within the Amish community.

As Bakhtin characterizes it, in the idyllic, individuals are seen as existing in a harmonious relationship with nature. The descriptions of the landscape in both Castillo’s and Picoult’s works evoke this harmony by stressing the beauty of the worked land, its fertility and the sustainability of Amish farm work. Because Amish farms are mainly family farms and do not use heavy machinery, there is no mention of any environmental harm. For example, Castillo describes a human-made pond near the town as well situated in its environment and surrounded by greenery and fields. It is seen as beautiful with “a greenbelt thick with trees” (2010, p. 224) along the creek, but especially because of the fertile fields surrounding it: “To the west is a cornfield. On the north side a hay field is hip-high with alfalfa. To the south the yellow-green carpet of a soybean field stretches as far as the eye can see” (ibid).

Compared to cornucopia, a vegetable garden attached to the Amish farmland is similarly described as abundant with crops, with all kinds of produce meticulously enumerated (ibid, p. 322). Although the protagonist sees the place in the fall, she is sure of a spring strawberry harvest since in the idyllic Amish farmland, time moves in seasonal cycles, and thus based on her childhood experience with Amish farming she can accurately make such predictions.

In Picoult’s *Plain Truth*, the rendition of the Amish farm in which the plot is set similarly evokes both the notions of fertility and of beauty with special attention paid to “a kaleidoscope of color” as well as the smells of “the sweat of horses, honeysuckle, the rich tang of overturned earth” (2017, p. 54). Descriptions of the farmland emphasize the harmony between the natural world and the world of humans, with nature echoing or underlining the mood of the characters. Thus, for example when a young Amish couple goes for a walk, Picoult highlights the fact that they are perfect for each other by evoking a sense of harmony with their surroundings. Nature itself seems to create both the stage and the soundtrack for their rendezvous as the couple walks

“to the symphony of wind racing through trees and birds lighting on branches, of owls calling to mice and dew silvering the webs of spiders” (ibid, p. 411).

In Castillo’s fiction, even the Chief of Police’s home, unlike the usually tiny and messy apartments of city cops, evokes the idyllic, as it is an old house with “hardwood floors and the original tiles” surrounded by a large green yard shaded by “several black walnut trees” (2010, p. 292).

The cyclic rhythmicalness of life that Bakhtin considered typical for the idyllic chronotope is stressed many times in the novels. This feeling is created not only by the changing of seasons and the farm work that follows this cycle, but also by the cycle of individual lives repeated in every generation in very much the same way. Castillo’s protagonist is well aware that if she had not left the Amish community, her life path would have resembled that of her mother and of her grandmother (ibid, p. 304).

The strong accent on community and family (rather than on the individual) also ranks among the features of the idyllic. This is often manifested in communal activities, including meals. For example, Castillo refers to a family dinner as a very special, blissful time after “chores are done,” the day is cooling off and every member of the family “is looking forward to the evening meal, conversation, prayer and rest” (2010, p. 313-4). Picoult creates a similar image of the relaxed communal atmosphere surrounding a family dinner. After saying grace, the family eats together while sharing reports on how the day has been spent and discussing various matters of farm and family life. The narrative emphasizes that the evening the family spends together is not only a time to eat, but above all a time to share and laugh together (2017, p. 68).

As mentioned earlier, the popular interest in the Amish can be linked to Peter Weir’s 1985 movie *Witness*. In his analysis of the film, John McGowan suggests that until a certain turning point the work operates on “the simple dichotomies drawn between modern and Amish cultures” (McGowan, 1986, p. 36). Both Picoult’s and Castillo’s novels use the same strategy of contrasting the modern and the traditional Amish lifestyles. The Amish way of life represents the lost idyll since neither of the protagonists can become an integral part of it – Kate has been shunned by the community, and Ellie was an outsider from the beginning. Kate often recollects her Amish childhood with a strong sense of nostalgia. Similarly, Picoult’s protagonist Ellie finds herself longing for the ideal of the peaceful and meaningful farm life. These emotions form another typical aspect of the idyllic.

The contrast between the modern and the Amish cultures is naturally most striking when it comes to technical equipment and modern appliances. There is no electricity, no internet

connection, no cell phones, no TV, no microwave ovens, no vacuum cleaners, etc. in Amish households. The difference is also shown, for example, by the pace of everyday life. While rushing to her law enforcement job, Castillo's protagonist recollects how slow-paced and peaceful her former Amish life had once been. Back then, she not only had "no concept of urgency" but life was simple and easily predictable (Castillo, 2010, p. 304).

Similarly, Picoult's protagonist, after some time spent on the Amish farm, begins to appreciate the slowed pace of the Amish and feels that the hurried professional life in the city has taken a great toll on her life. She is for example astonished to find herself enjoying a ride in a buggy, realizing that she has never before really paid attention to her surroundings. When driving a car, the world just "whizzed by" but when Ellie rides in a buggy, the world "unrolls" and she observes its beauty "in wonder" (Picoult, 2017, p. 77). Thus Picoult's novel, similarly to Castillo's, draws a contrast between the idyllic rural Amish world and hurried urban life.

Another contrast is shown in the purposefulness of Amish life and the modern concept of professional life. The young defence attorney Ellie, a successful lawyer soon to become a senior partner, has no time for family. In her professional life, she is not necessarily concerned with justice but with winning cases. On top of that, her work as an attorney is unbalanced because it exercises only her mind, not her body (ibid, p. 242), whereas work on a farm exercises both. While the hard work on the Amish farm is presented as fundamentally meaningful and spiritually grounded, Ellie's hard work in her career in law is seen as senseless and unethical as well as highly individualistic. On the other hand, the Amish work communally, helping each other selflessly as one of the most memorable bucolic scenes connected with work in the *Witness* movie – the barn raising – attests. Picoult also makes use of a barn raising, structuring it in fact very similarly to the film, equally highlighting the efficiency of the division of work along gender lines (while men do the carpentry work, the women cook and socialize), the companionship, the joy of sharing. Ellie even calls it "magic" (ibid, p. 252) and is particularly struck by the sense of community and selfless help, things she does not encounter in her work life. Thus, although Ellie finds it at first very difficult to adapt to the Amish rural lifestyle, after several months she begins to worry, on the contrary, how she is going to re-adapt to her city life. She is aware that she will miss the quiet, the peace, the singing of the birds and smells of flowers as well as the community, i.e. the sharing, the mutual support, the communal life (ibid, p. 260).

Ellie's urban world of law professionals as well as Kate's world of law enforcement represent what Bakhtin characterizes as the modern world where "people are out of contact with

each other, egoistically sealed off from each other, greedily practical” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 234). This world threatens to take the idyllic over and to destroy it.

The destruction of the idyll

As Bakhtin points out, the destruction of the idyll became “one of the fundamental themes of literature” (ibid, p. 233) during the times when the pre-industrial world was gradually being replaced by the industrial one. It may come as a surprise that such a theme still occurs in fiction of the early 21st century when the western world on the whole, has been completely transformed to the post-industrial. However, in post-industrial society Amish settlements form islands of the pre-industrial world, which strives to remain as such by separating itself from its surroundings, for example by refusing to be connected to the outside by electricity, telephone or TV. Driving buggies and working the soil, the Amish embody for our contemporary imagination the lost world of the pre-industrial unity with the land and with each other, the nostalgic longing for the lost past, the myth of idyllic rurality.

As the narratives discussed here are crime novels, the destruction of the idyll is brought about by crimes. Both writers thus show that even the peaceful, idyllic Amish community is not immune to the ills of the modern world, such as crime. Despite the Amish tendency to exist separately from the post-industrial world that surrounds them, that world interferes with theirs, intrudes upon it and might invoke its collapse. Crime is shown as a fatal, destructive force and its impact is much stronger in a small, closely-knit community, as David Geherin also points out in the introduction to his survey *Small Towns in Recent American Crime Fiction*. Geherin identifies one of the consequences of the American crime fiction move away from large urban areas as “the most noteworthy” – the fact that crime stories have achieved a humanized dimension again. “When the intimacy of community replaces the anonymity of the urban jungle, violence packs a bigger punch” and it affects the relationships among the small-town inhabitants “in a way crime in a large city doesn’t” (Geherin, 2014, p. 2). Thus, while we are more likely to accept crime as part of life in a metropolis, it is unexpected to encounter it in the idyllic countryside inhabited by religious, peaceful people.

Both writers attempt to increase the impact of crimes committed in the Amish setting. Picoult does so by centring the novel on a neonaticide, including its ethical and legal ramifications. Castillo emphasizes the horrors of crime by carefully recording the protagonist’s emotional response to these acts. Emotionally charged, even heart-breaking scenes are not very typical within the crime fiction formula, but Castillo uses them rather frequently. Awareness of and sensitivity towards the impact of crime is identified by Stephen Knight in his history of the

genre as a major feature of the female investigator. Knight claims that unlike her male counterparts, the female detective has “a substantial empathy with victims of crime” (Knight, 2010, p. 168). Nevertheless, Castillo seems to use the empathy rather to highlight Kate’s personal involvement in the life of the community and to emphasize the impact of the destruction of the idyll crimes cause than her gender. Thus, upon observing the body of a victim, Kate admits: “My perspective is not clinical, but one of outrage, sadness and disbelief that something this unspeakable could happen in my town, a place where people should be safe” (Castillo, 2010, p. 44). Elsewhere, Kate is presented as almost unable to bear witness to the loss a family of a crime victim suffers:

The sounds that erupt from [the victim’s father’s] mouth reminds me that not all Amish are stoic. They are human beings, and the loss of a child begets unbearable pain. His cry of outrage and grief goes through me like cold steel. [...] I think of the trip this grieving couple must make to the morgue. I think of the questions they’ll ask and how unbearably painful it will be to answer. (Castillo, 2009, pp. 191-2)

Kate’s sensitive response to the body of a murder victim is contrasted with the professional detachment of another officer. The narrator explains that the officer is not equally moved because “he doesn’t know the kindness that was inside Ellen Augspurger’s heart” and he “doesn’t know the innate goodness of the Amish” in the same way Kate does (Castillo, 2009, p. 192). Kate is aware that being so emotionally involved in her cases is not what is expected of her as a professional investigator when she admits that she must fight back tears: “I’m alarmed when tears threaten. They are a female cop’s worst enemy” (Castillo, 2010, p. 261).

The high level of sensitivity with which Castillo endows her protagonist prompted the *New York Times* reviewer Marilyn Stasio to observe critically that Kate is “a competent if sentimental cop” (Stasio, 2011, no pagination). However, the uncharacteristically emotional reactions form another factor contributing to the notion of the tragic loss of the idyll.

To make the impact of the destruction of the idyllic even more striking, the crimes which shatter it are not “simple” crimes of passion. Instead, in *Sworn to Silence*, a serial killer rapes and slowly tortures his young female victims until he finally murders them by exsanguination. In *Pray for Silence*, an entire Amish family of seven is brutally slaughtered on their farm. Because the Amish believe strongly in chastity, the crimes Castillo situates there have the additional feature of sexual psychopathy to make the destruction of the idyll complete.

Therefore, Castillo’s series is no cosy mystery series. In fact, the same objection Stephen Knight voiced about Ed McBain’s novels applies to Castillo’s as well. Knight criticized McBain

for his use of “descriptive detail approach[ing] sado-masochism” and for “approach[ing] the pornography of violence in his fondness for close-ups of a woman’s body bruised and torn” (Knight, 2010, p. 159). Castillo similarly dwells on graphic detailed descriptions of the tortured and sexually assaulted Amish female bodies as if the innocent, peaceful, unarmed Amish simply make perfect victims. Nevertheless, they might just as well stand for the fragility of the idyll.

Conclusion

This analysis has attempted to illustrate how both Castillo and Picoult create the image of the Amish farmland in accordance with what Bakhtin identifies as aspects of the idyllic chronotope. And just as Bakhtin points out that the idyllic chronotope is often combined with the theme of the destruction of the idyll, both writers shatter the idyllic image their narratives introduce.

In the case of Castillo’s novels, situating crime fiction in the Amish county serves the primary goal of creating the greatest and most shocking contrast. She puts into stark opposition the slow-paced, peaceful rural settlement her protagonist characterizes as “a close-knit community with the foundation built on worship, hard work and family” (Castillo, 2009, p. 20) to the horrendous crimes that happen there. The offences are committed (with the sole exception of Kate’s rapist) by non-Amish characters. Therefore, it is the outside world destroying the Amish idyll. Nevertheless, in each case, the innocent curiosity of the Amish youth with which they meet the non-Amish world unarmed against pretence and foul play initiates a string of tragic events, resulting in the utter destruction of the tranquillity of the place and the innocence of its inhabitants. Castillo seems to suggest that the rural idyll cannot exist alongside the modern world; in its innocence, it is too fragile and vulnerable.

Picoult’s strategy is different. Similarly to the movie *Witness*, which eventually, in the words of McGowan, “meditates on a tripartite schema: the binary opposition plus the counter-culture that exists between the moderns and the Amish” (McGowan, 1986, p. 38), *Plain Truth* also finally shows that not all is so paradisaic in the town of Paradise. For Picoult’s protagonist the choice therefore is not between the Amish pre-industrial idyllic rurality and post-industrial urban America, but lies somewhere else in an alternative combining the best of both worlds. Such an alternative, however, remains to be found, and the novel does not indicate if it is in fact attainable at all. In *Plain Truth*, the destruction of the idyll is also caused by a crime, in a way equally as horrendous as the crimes depicted in Castillo’s novels: the murder of a new-born. However, what makes it truly terrible is the final revelation that the murder was premeditated and committed by an Amish woman. In this way, Picoult casts a grave doubt over all aspects of the Amish culture she had originally pictured as idyllic – the observance of religious rules,

pacifism, family togetherness, all of which are shown as pretence. Even the family is held together at the cost of a murder. Picoult destroys the Amish idyll completely from within. Although the end is supposed to suggest happy second chances to both the defence attorney Ellie and the exonerated suspect, the circumstances make this seem highly improbable. The denouement can be seen either to turn the novel into an artificial exercise in the who-dunnit mode, or Picoult is clearly stating that the idyll never existed in the first place, as from the beginning it had been just an illusion.

Notes:

¹ See for example Bevilacqua, Winifred Farrant. 2004. “‘Let me talk now’: Chronotopes and Discourse in *The Bear*.” In *Journal of the Short Story in English*, vol. 42, pp. 33-59; Buda, Agata. 2020. “The idyllic chronotope in *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy.” In *Ars Aeterna* vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 1-9. However, Chris Pak (2016) in *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press applied the concept to sci-fi literature.

² Dachang Cong (1994) attributes the rising popularity of the Amish (and their generally favourable representation) also to President Bush’s 1989 visit to Lancaster County, where he delivered a speech against drug abuse.

³ For a more detailed discussion on the educational aspects in Hillerman’s crime fiction, see Šárka Bubíková (2016). “Ethnicity and Social Critique in Tony Hillerman’s Crime Fiction.” In *Prague Journal of English Studies* vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 141-157. DOI:10.1515/pjes-2016-0008.

⁴ Here Amish crime fiction is discussed in the context of other ethnic crime fiction although it is a matter of debate whether the Amish can in fact be considered an ethnic group even if they share a language, culture and common ancestry. For the purposes of this paper, we utilize the expression “ethnic” in accordance with Michael Banton as a practical term “identifying a distinctive people with a common culture, evident in their shared history, language and other characteristics” (Banton, 2015, 100). The Amish farmland is similarly identified as an “ethnic landscape” (Cross, 2017) or as an “ethnic settlement” (Kent and Neugebauer, 1990).

⁵ Even the very titles of P.L. Gaus’s Amish mysteries are often biblical references or allusions (for example *Clouds Without Rain* refers to Jude 1:12; *Harmless as Doves* to Matthew 10: 16; *Blood of the Prodigal* to the well-known parable in Luke 15:11-36) and each volume in the series addresses a theological, ethical or existential issue connected to the reference.

⁶ See for example the opening of the fourth chapter of P.L. Gaus *Blood of the Prodigal* (Gaus, 1999, p. 18)

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